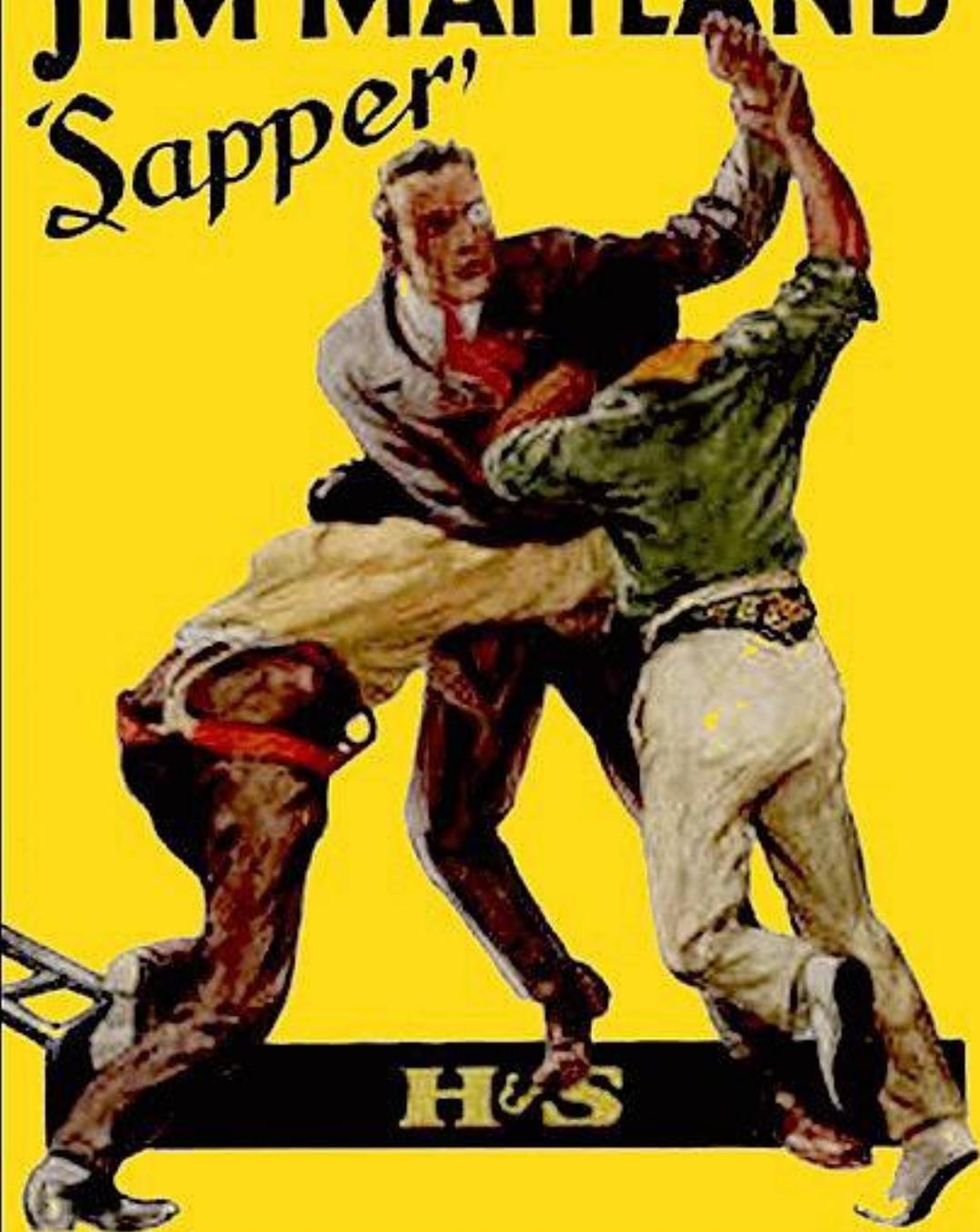


By the author of BULL-DOG DRUMMOND

# JIM MAITLAND

*'Sapper'*



H&S

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BOOKS BY "SAPPER"

(H. C. McNeile)

JIM MAITLAND  
THE DINNER CLUB  
THE BLACK GANG  
BULL-DOG DRUMMOND  
THE MAN IN RATCATCHER  
MUFTI  
THE HUMAN TOUCH  
NO MAN'S LAND  
MEN, WOMEN, AND GUNS  
SERGEANT MICHAEL CASSIDY  
THE LIEUTENANT AND OTHERS

HODDER & STOUGHTON LTD.  
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JIM MAITLAND

BY  
"SAPPER"  
(H. C. McNEILE)

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## Foreword

The first time I heard Jim Maitland's name mentioned was in the bar of a P. and O. We were two days out of Colombo, going East, and when I confessed my complete ignorance of the man a sort of stupefied silence settled on the company.

"You don't know Jim?" murmured an Assam tea-planter. "I thought everyone knew Jim."

"Anyway, if you stay in these parts long you soon will," put in someone else. "And once known--never forgotten."

They fell into reminiscences of old times, and I was well content to listen. Ever and anon Maitland's name was mentioned, and gradually my curiosity was aroused. And when one by one they went off to turn in, leaving me alone with the tea-planter, I asked him point-blank for further details.

He smiled thoughtfully, and took a sip of his whisky and soda.

"Ever been in a brawl, Leyton, with ten men up against you, and only the couch keeping a fellow with a knife in the background from sticking it into your ribs? Well, that's Jim's heaven, though he'd prefer it to be twenty. Ever seen a man shoot the pip out of the ace of diamonds at ten paces? Jim cuts it out by shooting round it at twenty. He's long and thin, and he wears an eyeglass, and rumour has it that once some man laughed at that eyeglass." The tea-planter grinned. "Take my advice and don't--if you meet him. It's not safe. He's got his own peculiar code of morals, and they wouldn't wash with an Anglican bishop. He never forgives and he never forgets--but he'd sell the shirt off his back to help a pal. Who he is and what he is I can't tell you; whether it's his right name even I don't know. And I've never asked; Jim doesn't encourage curiosity."

"Yes--but what's he *do*?" I asked as he finished.

"Do?" echoed the tea-planter. "Why, man, he lives. He lives: he doesn't vegetate like nine out of ten of us have to."

With a short laugh he rose and finished his drink.

"Well--I'm turning in. That's what he does, Leyton--he lives."

The door closed behind him and for a while I sat on thinking. "He lives: he doesn't vegetate." The words were running in my head, though the man to whom they had been applied was only a name to me. Nine out of ten! Ninety-nine out of a hundred would have been nearer the mark.

And since the doings of the one may be of passing interest to the ninety and nine, I have ventured to put on record these random recollections. For Fate decreed that I was to meet Jim Maitland, and eat with him, and drink with him, and fight with him. Fate decreed that the man who was only a name to me should become my greatest friend.

But for those who may read I have one word of warning. By the very nature of things, when a man is a wanderer on the face of the earth, the people he meets are here to-day and gone to-morrow. Maybe paths may touch again: more likely it is that they do not. The bunch with whom one drank at Shanghai and found good fellows one and all, disappear and are no more seen--just lives that crossed for an instant never to touch again. And so it must be in these pages. Across them will flit men and women--only to disappear as suddenly as they came. To-day, as I write, they may be alive; they may be dead--I know not. MacAndrew, the Scotch trader at

Tampico: Count von Tarnim of the Prussian Guard: Colette of the dancing hall in Valparaiso-- where are they? How has life dealt with them? Has Captain James Kelly got his poultry farm in Dorset? No: by Jove! an U-boat got him in the war, and he went down with his flag flying having pot-shots with a rifle at the submarine commander who had shown himself on the conning-tower too soon. And does Jock Macgregor still wander in strange seas cursing the Government for his inadequate pay? As I said before, I know not. Which is why those who may read will not know either.

## I. *Raymond Blair--Drunkard*

You probably do not know the Island of Tampico. I will go further and say you have probably never even heard of the Island of Tampico. And in many ways you are to be pitied. If ever there was a flawless jewel set in a sapphire sea Tampico is that jewel. And because flawless jewels are few and far between the loss is yours.

But on balance you win. For if ever there was a place where soul and body rotted more rapidly and more completely I have yet to find it. That beautiful island, a queen even amongst the glories of the South Seas, contained more vice to the square mile than did ever the slums of a great city. For in any city there is always work to be done; through a portion of the twenty-four hours at least, the human flotsam are given in labour. But in Tampico there was no work to be done, save by the very few who came for a space on business and departed in due course.

In Tampico, where fruit and enough food could be had for the asking, there was no struggle to survive. In fact, no one ever struggled in Tampico save for one thing--drink. Drink could not be had for the asking. Drink had to be paid for in hard cash. And hard cash was not plentiful amongst the derelicts who came to that island, and having come remained till death took them, and another false name was written roughly on a wooden cross to mark the event. Wood is cheap in Tampico, which is why the tombstones in the graveyard of the lost are monotonous to look at. After all, who could be expected to put up the price of a perfectly good bottle of gin in order to erect some fool ornamental stone on the grave of a man who had died of delirium tremens?

It was out of the beaten track of the big liners by many hundred miles: only small boats ever called--boats principally engaged in the fruit trade, with passenger accommodation for six in the first class. For fruit was the particular trade of Tampico; fruit and various tropical products which grew so richly to hand that it was almost unnecessary to pick them. If you waited long enough they fell into your hands. And nobody ever did anything but wait in Tampico, which is why it is so utterly rotten. Even when a lump of ambergris comes ashore--fat and stinking and an Event with a capital E--the fortunate finder does not hurry. True, he may knife the man who tries to steal it, but otherwise his movements are placid. There is a dealer in the town, and ambergris means drink for weeks, or maybe days, according to the capacity for liquid of the finder. The scent upon your dressing-table, my lady, has ambergris in it, though the whale which supplied it is dead, and the man who found it is dead too.

The first time I saw Raymond Blair he had just found a lump of the stuff and was, in consequence, utterly and supremely happy. I'd heard about him from MacAndrew the trader, and I watched him with the pitiful interest a sound man always feels for the down and outer.

"The most hopeless case of all," MacAndrew had said to me in the club the night before. "A brilliantly educated man--Balliol--he told me one evening just before he got insensible. He'll spout classics at you by the yard, and if he's in good form--not more than one bottle inside him--he'll keep a dinner-table in roars of laughter."

"He belongs to the club," I said in some surprise.

MacAndrew shrugged his shoulders.

"It's easier to belong to our club here than the Bachelors' in London. He's got money, you see--quite a bit of money. Comes out every month. And he's educated--a gentleman. And he's a

drunkard. Hopeless, helpless, unredeemable." He filled his pipe thoughtfully. "And though it's a strange thing to say, it's better to keep him drunk. It's all that keeps what little manhood is left in him alive. When he's sober he's dreadful.

"Towards the end of the month always, before the money comes--he isn't a man, he's a crawling, hideous thing. Anything, literally anything will he do to get drink. And there's a Dago swine here who torments him. He loathes him because one night Blair--who was drunk and therefore in good form--put it across the Dago in a battle of words, so that the whole club roared with laughter. And the Dago gets his revenge that way. Why, I've seen him, when Blair has been crawling on the floor--and that's not a figure of speech, mark you, I mean it--crawling on the floor for the price of a drink, make him stand up on a table and recite "Humpty Dumpty," and other nursery rhymes, and then give him a few coppers at the end as a reward. And he's Balliol."

"But can't anything be done?" I asked.

MacAndrew had laughed a little sadly.

"When you've been here a little longer, you won't ask that question."

I was sitting in the window of the club as Raymond Blair came in, and we had the room to ourselves. He had been pointed out to me a few days previously, but he had then been far too drunk to recognise anybody, and from the look he gave me as he crossed the room it was evident that he regarded me as a stranger. I took no notice of him, and after a while he came over and drew up a chair.

"A stranger I think, sir, to our island?"

His voice was cultivated, and he spoke with the faintest suspicion of a drawl.

"I arrived about a week ago," I answered a little abruptly. Somehow or other the thought of this English gentleman standing on a table reciting nursery rhymes at the command of a Dago stuck in my throat. It seemed so utterly despicable, and yet--poor devil, who was I to judge?

"And are you staying long?"

"Probably a month," I said. "It depends."

He nodded portentously, and it was then that I saw he was already drunk.

"A charming island," he remarked, and his hand went out to the bell-push. "We must really have a drink to celebrate your first visit."

"Thank you--not for me!" I answered briefly, and he gave a gentle, tolerant smile.

"As you like," he remarked, with a wave of his hand. "Most new arrivals refuse to drink with me, in a well-meant endeavour to save me from myself. But I'm glad to say it's quite useless--I passed that stage long ago. Such a fatiguing stage, too, when one is struggling uselessly. Far better to drift, my dear sir, far better."

He took a long gulp of the double whisky and soda which the native waiter, without even asking for orders, had placed beside him.

"I am only myself now," he continued gravely, "when I am drunk. I am supplied regularly with money from--er--a business source at home, and I am thereby enabled to be myself with comparative frequency."

It was then, I think, that I realised what an utterly hopeless case he was, but I said nothing and let him ramble on.

"I get it monthly." He was gazing dreamily out of the window, across the water to the white line of surf where the lazy Pacific swell lifted and beat on a great coral reef. "A most prosperous business, though this month the remittance has not arrived. Most strange; most peculiar. The boat came in as usual, but nothing for me. And so you can imagine my feelings of pleasure when I found yesterday afternoon a quite considerable lump of ambergris on the shore. The trouble is that the dealer is such a robber. A scandalous price, sir, he gave me--scandalous. Still, better than nothing. Though I am afraid my less fortunate confrères outside will have to suffer for his miserliness. Charity and liquor both begin at home. It is the one comfort of having the club, one can escape from them."

I glanced into the street, and there I saw his confrères. Five haggard, unshaven human derelicts clustered under the shade of a palm tree, eyeing the door of the club hungrily, wolfishly, waiting for this product of a university to share with them some of the proceeds of his find.

"As you see," he continued affably, "they are not quite qualified for election even to the Tampico club." He dismissed the thought of them with a wave of his hand. "Tell me, sir, does the Thames still glint like a silver-grey streak by Chelsea Bridge as the sun goes down? Do the barges still go chugging past Westminster? Do children still sail boats on the Round Pond back London way?"

And for the life of me I could not speak. Suddenly, with overwhelming force the unutterable pathos of it all had me by the throat, so that I choked and muttered something about smoke going the wrong way. Hopeless, helpless, unredeemable, MacAndrew had said. Aye--but the tragedy of it; the ghastly, fierce tragedy. Back London way----

With wistful eyes he was staring once more over the wonderful blue of the sea, and he seemed to me as a man who saw visions and dreamed dreams. Dreams of the might have been; dreams of a dead past. And then he pulled himself together and ordered another whisky and soda. He was himself once more--Raymond Blair--drunkard and derelict; and as for me, the moment of overwhelming pity had passed.

I was in Tampico--and facts were facts. But it left its mark--that moment: through all that followed the memory of the haunting tragedy in his face stuck to me. Maybe it made me more tolerant than others were: more tolerant certainly than Jim Maitland. For it was in Tampico that I first met Jim, and Blair was the unwitting cause of it.

It must have been a month or five weeks later. The fortnightly boat had just come in, and I intended to leave Tampico in her next day. It was tea-time, and, as I turned into the club, I saw a stranger lounging on the veranda. And because in the outposts of Empire one does not wait for an introduction, I went up to him and spoke. He rose as I reached him, and I noticed that he was very tall.

"I'd better introduce myself," he said with a faint, rather pleasant drawl. "My name is Maitland--Jim Maitland."

I looked at him with suddenly awakened interest. So this was the man of whom the Assam tea-planter had spoken--the celebrated Jim Maitland who lived and didn't vegetate.

"My name is Leyton," I answered, "and I'm glad to meet you. Several strong men had to be

helped to bed a few weeks ago after the shock they got when I said that not only had I never met you, but that I'd actually never heard of you."

He grinned--a slow, lazy grin--and then and there I took to him. And, strange to say, after all these years the memory of him which lives freshest in my mind is the memory of that first evening before I knew him at all.

If I shut my eyes, though it's fifteen years ago, I can still see that immaculately dressed figure--tall, lean and sinewy, the bronzed clean-cut face tanned with years of outdoor life--and clearest of all, the quite unnecessary eyeglass. Of the inward characteristics that went to make up Jim Maitland--of his charm, of his incredible lack of fear, of his great heart, I knew nothing at the time. That knowledge was to come later. On that afternoon in Tampico I saw only the outside man, and, in spite of the eyeglass, I pronounced him good.

"Yes--I know most of the odd corners out here," he said as we sat down, and I rang for a waiter. "Though funnily enough I've never been to Tampico before."

"What's yours?" I said as the waiter appeared.

"Whisky and soda, thanks," he answered, stretching out his long legs in front of him.

"Yes--as I say--I've never been here before. I've just arrived in the boat, and I want to get off in her again to-morrow rather particularly."

A peculiar look, half cynical, half amused, came into his eyes for a moment--a look to the meaning of which I had no clue. And then the amusement and the cynicism changed, I thought, to sadness, but, maybe, I was wrong, and it was only my imagination. Certainly his eyes were expressionless as they met mine over the top of his glass.

"Here's how," he said. "You know this place well?"

"Been here six weeks," I answered. "Going to-morrow myself."

"Six weeks should be enough for you to tell me what I want to know. I joined the *Moldavia* at Port Said, and struck up an acquaintance with a little woman on board. She was all by herself--extraordinarily helpless, never-been-out-of-England before type and all that--and she was coming here. In fact, she's come this afternoon by the boat to join her husband. I gather he's a fruit merchant in Tampico on rather a big scale. Well, when we berthed there was no sign of him on the landing. So I took her up to that shack of an hotel, and started to make inquiries. Couldn't find out anything, so I came along here." He put down his glass suddenly and rose. "Hullo! here she is."

I glanced up and saw a sweet-looking girl coming towards us along the dusty street. Her age may have been about twenty-five, but her wonderful freshness was that of a girl of seventeen. And it seemed to me as if Tampico had vanished, and I was standing in an old English garden with the lilac in full bloom.

"Mr. Leyton," murmured Maitland, and I bowed.

She nodded at me charmingly, and then gave him the sweetest and most beseeching of smiles.

"I couldn't wait in the hotel, Jim," she said. "It's a horrible place."

"The Tampico hotel," I laughed, "is not an hotel but a sports club for the insect world."

She sat down daintily, and I thought of the few leather-skinned products of Tampico. And

then--why, I know not--I glanced at Jim Maitland. And his eyes were fixed on the girl, with that same strange, baffling expression in them that I had noticed before--the expression that in years to come I was destined to see so often. But at the moment I remember thinking that it was, perhaps, as well that he was going by the boat next day. Strange things are apt to happen in the Tampicos of this world--things which are not ordained by the Law and the Prophets.

Then I realised he was speaking, and recalled my wandering attention to the question before the house.

"He can't have got your letter, Sheila. Or, perhaps, he may be away from the island on business."

"Well, I asked everyone at the hotel, after you went out, but they didn't seem to understand," she said a little tremulously.

The man turned to me.

"Mrs. Blair has lost or temporarily mislaid her husband," he remarked whimsically. "A large reward is offered for information as to his whereabouts."

"Blair," I said, puzzled, my mind being busy with the fruit merchants of the place. "Blair! I don't seem to know the name."

"Raymond Blair," she cried, leaning forward. "Surely you must know him."

And for a moment it seemed to me as if the street behind her and everything within my vision turned black. How long I sat there staring at her foolishly I know not--perhaps but the fraction of a second. A kindly Providence has endowed me with a face which has enabled me to win more money at poker than I have lost, and when I heard myself speaking again in a voice I hardly recognised, her face still wore the same little eager, questioning smile.

"How stupid of me," I remarked steadily. "Raymond Blair! Why--of course. The last time I saw him he was going into the interior of the island, and he did say, if I remember aright, that he might be catching the boat which left a fortnight ago."

I felt the eye behind that eyeglass boring into me, and I wouldn't meet it. In an island where if a man sneezes the fact is known by the whole community in half an hour, the whereabouts of a leading member of society are not a matter of vague conjecture. But she didn't know it, poor child--with her English ideas. And I watched the smile fade from her face, to be replaced by a little pitiful questioning look which she turned on Jim Maitland.

"Perhaps I could go to his house," she said doubtfully. "If you could tell me where it is."

And now I was lying desperately, furiously.

"He was going to have it done up," I remarked. "I think, Mrs. Blair, that the best thing to do would be for you to go back to the hotel, while I make inquiries as to where your husband is. If he is away from the island, I think you had better put up with the chaplain's wife until--er--until he returns...."

And it was at that moment that MacAndrew passed by to go into the club and nodded to me.

"Perhaps your friend might know," she hazarded.

There was nothing for it, and I rose and caught MacAndrew by the arm. My grip was not gentle, and, as he swung round, my eyes blazed a message at him.

"Mrs. Blair has come out to join her husband, Mac," I said. "You know--Raymond Blair."

I heard him mutter "God in Heaven," under his breath, but MacAndrew was a poker player himself of no mean repute.

"I have a sort of idea that he sailed on business by the last boat, didn't he?" I continued.

He took his cue.

"I believe he did," he said thoughtfully. "Yes--now you mention it--I believe he did."

And then Jim Maitland began to take a hand.

"I think you had better do what this gentleman suggested, Sheila. I'll take you back to the hotel, and I'll see you get a good room. Then you can lie down and rest for a bit, while we find out for certain where your husband is." He turned to us, and we knew he'd guessed something. "Shall I find you here when I've seen Mrs. Blair back to the hotel?"

"We'll be here," said MacAndrew quietly, and in silence we watched them go up the street. In silence, too, did we wait for his return, save for a brief period when Mac cursed savagely and horribly with no vain repetitions.

"Where is he, Mac?" I said, as he finished.

"In Dutch Joe's gin hell," he answered. "And they're baiting him. He's got no money. Who is the fellow with the pane of glass in his eye?"

"Jim Maitland," I remarked briefly, and MacAndrew whistled.

"So that's Jim Maitland, is it?" he said slowly. "Well, if one-tenth of the yarns I've heard about him are true, there will be murder done to-night. He doesn't like Dagos, I've been told--and that swine who is baiting Blair is half drunk himself." He looked at me shrewdly. "How does Maitland stand with the girl?"

"Don't ask me," I answered. "I know no more than you. They both came in to-day's boat; that's all I can tell you. And, anyway, she's Blair's wife."

MacAndrew grunted, and relapsed once more into silence.

Five minutes later Jim Maitland returned, and strode straight up to us.

"Mrs. Blair is a friend of mine. I don't know her husband from Adam, but I know her. You take me?"

His blue eyes, hard as steel, searched our faces.

"Well, gentlemen, I'm waiting. I don't know what the hell the game is, but your lies, sir"--and he turned on me--"wouldn't have deceived an unweaned child who knew these parts."

And strangely enough I felt no offence.

"I lied right enough," I said heavily. "I lied for her benefit, not yours."

"Why?" snapped Maitland.

"You'd better come and see for yourself," said MacAndrew.

"Then Raymond Blair is on the island," said Maitland slowly.

"He is," returned MacAndrew briefly. "Nothing on God's earth is quite as sure as that."

And in silence he led the way along the dusty street towards the native part of the little town. Once or twice I stole a glance at Jim Maitland's face as he strode along between us, and it was hard and set, almost as if he realised what was in front of him. But he spoke no word during the ten minutes it took us to reach Dutch Joe's gin hell; only a single long drawn "Ah!" came from his lips when he realised our destination.

"Nothing on God's earth is quite as sure as that," repeated MacAndrew grimly, as he flung open the door and we stepped inside.

It came with almost as much of a shock to me as it must have to Jim Maitland. For since that day at the club I had not seen Blair again, and, if Blair drunk was a pitiful sight, Blair sober was a thousand times worse. Almost, in fact, did I fail to recognise him. He was crawling about the floor like a dog and barking, and sometimes the spectators kicked him as he passed, and sometimes they threw him a copper which he clawed at wolfishly.

Leaning over the bar was Dutch Joe, his fat face oozing perspiration and geniality; while, seated at tables round the room, were a dozen or so of the sweepings of every nation--Greeks, English, Germans, Chinamen--temporarily united in the common bond of watching an ex-Balliol man giving an imitation of a dog at the order of a swarthy-looking Dago sitting at a table by himself. It was the Dago who noticed us first, and an ugly sneer appeared on his face. Baiting this drunken sot would prove more interesting in front of three of his own countrymen.

"Thank you, Mr. Blair," he remarked, affably. "A most excellent imitation of a pariah; but then, of course, you would be able to give a good one of such an animal. You will now please stand on the table and recite to us 'Mary had a little lamb.' You will then get this nice shining dollar."

Amidst a shout of half-drunken laughter, Blair, his eyes fixed longingly on the silver coin which the Dago was holding loosely in his hand, proceeded to climb on to one of the tables. He was shaking and quivering; he was a dreadful, terrible sight, but he was spared that final indignity.

I had one brief vision of a man whose nostrils were white, and who wore that very unnecessary eyeglass, going in on that Dago, and then the fighting began. Mercifully for us, Blair, the temporary bond which had united the divers creeds and colours in the room, had subsided foolishly in a corner and was forgotten. The one thing they all understood--a gin-hell fight--had taken his place. And in a gin-hell fight you scrap with the nearest man to you whose nationality is not your own. Wherefore, out of the tail of my eye I saw no less than four fights going on in different parts of that bar, while Dutch Joe, no longer genial, cursed everyone impartially.

It was hot while it lasted, so hot that I had no chance to see what an artist Jim Maitland was till quite the end. I was too busy myself with a greasy Portuguese who tried to knife me. But I got in on the point of his chin, and it was no indifferent blow. He slept, even as a child, and I had leisure to watch the principal event. And I saw Jim do a thing I have never seen before or since. His Dago--the main Blair-baiting Dago--had gone down twice and was snarling like a mad dog. There was murder in his heart, and there would have been murder in that room if he had been fighting anyone else.

Like a flash of light he flung a knife at Maitland, and I heard afterwards that he could skewer a card to the wall at ten paces five times out of six. It was then that Jim did this thing--so quick that my eye scarce followed it. He side-stepped and caught the knife in his right hand by the hilt, and, so it seemed to me, all in the same motion he flung it back. And the next moment it was quivering in the fleshy part of the right arm of that Dago, who was so astounded that he could

do nothing save curse foolishly and pluck at it with his left hand.

"Get out of it," said Jim tersely; "I'll bring Blair."

I got MacAndrew, who was enjoying himself in his own way with an unpleasant-looking Teuton in a corner, and together we made our way to where Maitland had hauled Blair to his feet. We all got round him and then we rushed him through the door out into the sunny street. I was sweating and MacAndrew was breathing hard, but Jim hadn't turned a hair. His eyeglass was still in position, his clothes were as immaculate as ever, and his face wore a faint, satisfied smile.

"Not bad," he remarked quietly. "But it was time to leave. They'll be drawing guns soon."

And even as he spoke, there came the sudden, sharp crack of a revolver from Dutch Joe's gin-hell.

With Jim on one side and me on the other, and MacAndrew pushing behind, we got Raymond Blair along, gibbering foolishly. We took him to MacAndrew's house, and we dropped him in a chair--and then we held a council of war.

"Merciful God!" said Jim, after he'd taken stock of the poor sodden wreck. "How can such things be? This thing--married to that divine girl."

He said the last sentence under his breath, but I heard it, and I saw the look in his eyes and certain vague suspicions of mine were confirmed.

"What are we going to do?" he continued. "She's come out here from England to join her husband whom she hasn't seen for two years. She thinks he's a prosperous fruit trader. And there he is. What are we going to do?"

"He's better when he's drunk," said MacAndrew. "He's almost normal then."

"But, good Lord, man!" cried Jim angrily, "do you propose that he should be kept permanently drunk by his wife?"

"There's the alternative," answered MacAndrew, quietly pointing to the chair.

For a while there was silence, broken only by the mutterings of Blair.

"Why on earth didn't you say he was dead?" Jim swung round on me, and I shrugged my shoulders.

"It might have been better, I admit," I answered. "But think of the complications. And at any moment he might have heaved in sight himself--normal, as MacAndrew says."

And once again there was silence in the room, while Jim Maitland paced up and down smoking furiously. Suddenly he stopped, and I saw he had come to a decision.

"There's only one thing for it," he said. "His wife must know: it's impossible to keep it from her. If we say he's gone on a voyage, she'll wait here till he comes back. If we say he's dead--well, even she will hardly swallow the yarn that we've only discovered the fact since we last saw her. Besides"--he frowned suddenly--"I can't say he's dead. There are reasons."

"Aye," said MacAndrew quietly. "Let's take that for granted."

"She's got to see him at his best, you understand. At his best. And then--if, well--if----" He was staring out of the window, and MacAndrew's eyes and mine met.

"Aye, lad," said the gruff Scotchman gently, "it's the only straight game."

He rose and crossed to a cupboard in the corner, and having opened it he took out a bottle of gin. Without a word he handed it to Blair, and then, signing to us to follow him, he left the room.

"There are things," he said, "on which it is best for a man not to look."

"Will one bottle be enough?" asked Jim Maitland.

"There's plenty more where it came from," answered MacAndrew, and with that we sat down to wait. Five minutes passed; ten--and then we heard the sounds of footsteps coming along the passage. They were comparatively steady, and Jim, who had been standing motionless staring out of the window, swung slowly round as the door opened and Raymond Blair came in. He was still shaky; his face was still grey and lined, but he was sane. He was a man again, as far as in him lay, and in his hand he held an empty bottle of gin.

"I thank you, MacAndrew," he said quietly. "It was badly needed."

And then he saw Jim Maitland, and paused as he realised there was a stranger present.

"Mr. Blair, I believe," remarked Jim in an expressionless voice.

"That is my name," returned the other.

"I have recently arrived from England, Mr. Blair," continued Jim, "and your wife was with me on the boat."

Raymond Blair clutched at the table with a little shaking cry.

"She is at the hotel," went on Jim inexorably, "waiting to see her husband, whom she believes to be a prosperous fruit trader."

I couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor devil--his distress was too pitiful. Even Jim Maitland's eyes softened a little, as bit by bit the rambling, incoherent secrets and degradations of his soul came out.

We heard how he'd lied to her in his letters, writing glowing accounts of the success of his fictitious business; we heard how he'd on one excuse and another prevented her coming out to join him before. And we heard that the money which he'd received each month had not come from any business at home, but from her, out of the small private means she had. And he had pretended he was investing it for her in the island. All that and many other things did we hear as we sat in the darkening room--things which may not be written in black and white.

And then, gradually, a new note crept into his voice--the note of hope. The reason for the non-arrival of the usual remittance was clear now; she had come--his little Sheila. With her at his side he could make a new start; she would help him to fight against his craving. And then at last he fell silent, while MacAndrew lit the lamp on the table beside him. Jim's face, I remember, was in the shadow, but instinctively MacAndrew and I said nothing; it was for that tall, clean-living sportsman to speak first.

And at length we heard his voice quiet and assured.

"You had better come and see her at the hotel now, Mr. Blair. But on one thing I insist. You must tell her what you have told us here to-night, otherwise I shall tell her myself."

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And that was almost the last I ever saw of Raymond Blair. I saw him go to his wife in the hotel; I saw her welcome him with a glad little cry, though even then it seemed to me that her eyes went over his shoulder to Jim. And then, grey and shaking, he went to her room, while the man who had no right there turned on his heel and strode out into the night. And MacAndrew and I had a split whisky and soda, and discussed some futility, being made that way.

An hour later she came down the stairs, and her face made me catch my breath with the pity of it. But she came up to me quite steadily, and we both rose.

"Where is Mr. Maitland?" she said quietly, and at that moment he came in.

And from then on her eyes never left his face; as far as she was concerned MacAndrew and I were non-existent.

"Why did you give him that bottle of gin?" she asked, still in the same quiet voice. "Why did you send my husband to me drunk just after he had recovered from a dose of fever?"

I saw MacAndrew's jaw drop, but it was Jim Maitland I was staring at. After one sudden start of pure amazement, he gave no sign; he just stood there quietly, looking at her with grave, thoughtful eyes.

"I trusted you utterly," she went on. "You were good to me on the boat--and I thought you were my friend. And you presumed--you dared to presume--that you might become more than that. You thought, I suppose, that if I saw Raymond drunk I might leave him in disgust--and that you--Oh! how dared you do such a wicked, wicked thing?"

I opened my mouth to speak, and Jim Maitland's hand gripped my arm like a steel vice. And I saw that he was looking over her head--upstairs. For just a second I caught a glimpse of Raymond Blair, staring at him beseechingly--his hands locked together in agonised entreaty; then the vision vanished, and once more Jim was looking gravely at the girl with a strangely tender expression in his eyes.

For two or three minutes she continued--speaking with cold, biting scorn--and Jim never answered a word. As I said, she seemed to have forgotten our existence; her world consisted at the moment of the poor derelict upstairs and Jim Maitland--the man who had made him drunk. Once MacAndrew did stick in his oar to affirm that it was his gin, and she brushed the remark aside contemptuously. MacAndrew and I were nothing to her; only Jim Maitland counted.

"Have you anything to say--any excuse to make?" she asked at length, and he shook his head.

"You cur," she whispered very low. "Oh, you cur!"

Then without a backward glance she went up to her room like a young queen and we heard the door close. And after a while he turned to us with a little twisted smile on his face.

"It's better so," he said gravely, "much better so."

But MacAndrew was not so easily appeased. His sense of fair play was outraged, and he said as much to Maitland.

"He's lied--yonder swine," he growled. "He's lied to her after his promise to you. She should be told."

The smile vanished from Jim Maitland's lips, and he stared very straight at the Scotchman.

"The man who tells her," he said quietly, "answers for it to me."

And with that he swung out of the hotel.

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Thus ended my first meeting with Jim Maitland. We left in the boat next day, and I saw him leaning over the stern staring at the island till it was but a faint smudge on the horizon. Then he went to his cabin and I saw him no more till the following morning. He sat down at ten o'clock and played poker for six hours without a break: won a hundred and fifty pounds, and rose from the table with the concentrated weariness of all hell in his eyes. And two days later he left the boat.

It was six months before I saw him again. I was up in Nagasaki and he lounged into the bar just before dinner. He greeted me as if we had parted the day before--that was one of his peculiarities--and we took our cocktails outside. And after a while he looked at me with a faint smile.

"Been back to Tampico, Leyton?"

"No," I answered. "Have you?"

"Just come from there." He took out his pocket-book. "There's an additional ornament in the island."

He handed me a photograph, and I stared at it in silence. It was the cemetery with its rows of little wooden crosses. But in the centre rose a big white stone cross, and on the cross was written:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF RAYMOND BLAIR.

"How long ago did it happen?" I asked.

"He lasted three months--and he nearly broke her heart. But she stuck it--and she never complained. MacAndrew told me. And when it was over she went home to England."

"Why don't you go after her?" I said quietly, and Jim Maitland stared at the cherry tree opposite.

"You cur," he said below his breath. "Oh, you cur! Man, I can hear her now. And I'd have given my hopes of Heaven for that girl."

"Then you're a fool," I answered. "Go back to her."

But he shook his head.

"She wouldn't understand, old man; she wouldn't understand. No--I'm a wanderer born and bred: and I shall wander to the end. But it's a funny life sometimes--isn't it?--a damned funny life."

He glanced at his watch. "What about some dinner?"

And it was over the coffee that the conversation took a personal turn. The death of an uncle in England had made me independent, and I was at a loose end. I had half made up my mind to go back home by the States and buy a small property, and Maitland shrugged his shoulders as I said so.

"You'll be able to do all that when you're fifty," he remarked. "Why do it now?"

"What else is there?" I asked.

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"Care to join forces with me?" he said at length. "As I said before I'm a wanderer, and I go whenever and wherever the spirit moves me. But I enjoy life."

It took me one second to decide.

"I'd like it immensely," I said, and he nodded as if pleased.

"Good," he remarked, holding out his hand. "We'll have some fun. There's a tramp going tomorrow for Colombo and the Mediterranean, and the skipper is a pal of mine. We might go in her."

"Where to?" I asked.

"Heaven knows," laughed Jim. "We'll get off when we feel inclined."

"Right you are," I said. "I'll get my kit sent down."

"How much have you got?" he demanded.

"A couple of trunks and a hand grip."

"I'd leave the two trunks and take the grip," he remarked. "A man can go round the world with a spare set of underclothes and a gun, you know."

I suppose I stared at him a little blankly, for he laughed suddenly.

"There's plenty of time for you still to take that property in England, old man."

That night the trunks were dispensed with.

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## II. *The Killing of Baron Stockmar*

We left that tramp at Alexandria--though Heaven knows why. Going up the Red Sea we fully made up our minds to go on in her as far as Gib., and pop over from there to Africa, where Jim assured me that trouble was brewing.

But going through the Canal we changed our minds--or rather Jim did.

"I want to go to Shepheard's," he announced, "and see all the tourists buying genuine Egyptian scarabs. I own shares in the factory that makes them."

So we went to Shepheard's, and when the soul of the capitalist was satisfied with what he saw, we adjourned to the bar to find a chubby-faced youth eating salted almonds and consuming something that tinkled pleasantly in a glass.

"Hullo, Pumpkin," cried Jim cheerfully from the door. "Order two more of the same."

"Jim!" shouted the drinker. "Jim! This is a direct answer from Providence. I would sooner see you at this moment than the shores of England."

"A fiver is the utmost I can manage," remarked Jim gravely. "And in the meantime let me introduce--Dick Leyton--Captain Peddleton--otherwise known as Pumpkin, owing to his extreme slenderness--a Bimbashi of repute."

Peddleton nodded to me, and we all three drew up to the bar.

"Jim," he said earnestly, "one of the Great Ones will be very glad to see you. Are you doing anything in the immediate future?"

"Nothing to write home about," said Jim. "I might take a tram and go out and see the Pyramids by moonlight."

"Dry up," laughed the other.

"My dear boy," answered Jim, "there's a fat woman in the lounge there, wearing five veils, who is going to do it to-night. Surely with such an example----"

"Jim," interrupted the other seriously, "I'm not joking." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's a little Secret Service job south of Khartoum. It won't take long, but you're one of the few men in the world who can do it."

Jim grunted non-committally.

"Will you come up and see the Chief this afternoon?" continued the other, only to break off suddenly and stare at the door. "Good Heavens!" he muttered, "what have we here?"

Coming into the bar was the most unpleasant-looking individual I have ever seen in my life. His height must have been at least six-feet three, and he was broad in proportion. His face seemed set in a permanent scowl, which deepened to a look of positive fury as he saw us staring at him. He possessed a straggling black beard, which did not improve his appearance, and his great arms, abnormally long, terminated in two powerful hands which were so covered with black hair as to be positively repulsive. In short the man looked like a huge gorilla dressed in clothes.

Now, as luck would have it, Jim was nearest to him as he came up to the bar. He had his back turned, and was on the point of resuming his conversation with Peddleton, when the newcomer--either by accident or design--shoved into him heavily, so heavily that Jim, who was

quite unprepared, lurched forward and spilt his drink. But for our subsequent discoveries of the gentleman's character, I would have been inclined to think it was accidental. In view of what we afterwards found out, however, I have not the slightest doubt that the thing was done deliberately. It appeared that he wanted the high stool which was just behind Jim, though there were several others vacant. In fact the bar was empty save for the four of us.

As I say, it was unfortunate, because I would sooner play tricks with a man-eating tiger than with Jim if he gets angry. His face went white and his eyes blazed ominously, then he turned round slowly. And the newcomer was about to sit down. He did, heavily--on the floor. It is an old trick for which I have distinct recollections of having been severely beaten at my preparatory school. Rumour has it that removing a chair just as a person is about to sit down on it is apt to damage that person's spine. And, judging by the way the floor shook, the damage in this case must have been considerable, though it certainly did not produce unconsciousness. In fact, I have witnessed many unpleasant scenes in my life, though the one that followed lives ever in my memory.

The man's face was purple as he got up from the floor, and for a moment or two he stood there plucking at his beard and swallowing hard. His lips were working as if he were trying to speak and could not: his great hairy hands kept clenching and unclenching. And quite motionless, sitting on the stool that had caused the trouble, Jim stared at him through his eyeglass. To all appearances he was as cool as a cucumber, but I noticed the danger signals were out. A little pulse was hammering in his temple, and he was white round the nostrils--a sure sign of trouble with Jim. In fact, in a few seconds the atmosphere that breeds murder had arisen in the bar at Shepherd's Hotel.

"Was it you who pulled my stool away?" asked the man at length in a guttural voice which shook so that we could scarcely hear what he said.

"Was it you who deliberately barged into my back, upset my drink, and failed to apologise?" retorted Jim icily.

And then the man broke loose. Every vestige of self-control left him. He cursed, he swore, he used the foulest language--and all the time Jim watched him unblinkingly. The barman with a terrified look on his face had beckoned to me when it started, and from him I found out the gorilla's name.

"It's Baron Stockmar," he whispered to me, "and he goes mad if he's crossed. For God's sake, sir, get your friend out of it! He ain't a man--the Baron; he's a devil in human form."

And assuredly there was a good deal of truth in what the barman said. This thick-voiced, foul-mouthed brute was not a man--he was a maniac. Many less dangerous cases have been locked up in madhouses for life; men whom no warder would dare to go and see alone. But as to removing Jim, I would as soon have tried to remove a leopard from its kill.

He had put down his drink on the bar beside him and was standing up. His breath was coming a little faster than usual, but his eyes never left the other's face. Not a word had he spoken; not a word did he speak even when the Baron gave up generalities and became personal. And it wasn't until the Baron admitted that it had been no accident but an intentional insult when he entered the bar, and launched into his private opinions of Englishmen in general and Jim in particular, that Jim did anything. Then like everything Jim did, it was clean and decisive, and showed the perfect fighting man that he was.

The Baron's great head was thrust forward, the last foul insult was not cold on his lips, and his two hands were coming up slowly towards Jim, when there came the sharp, crisp noise of two billiard balls meeting. With every atom of weight in his body behind the blow, Jim Maitland struck Baron Stockmar on the point of his jaw--and Jim, at one period of his life, had held the Amateur Heavyweight Championship of Great Britain. And the Baron crumpled up, like a horse that is shot through the brain, and toppled over backwards.

For a moment we stood there watching the heavily breathing, unconscious figure, and then for the first time we realised that an excited and terrified crowd of spectators had thronged in at the door.

"Get him out of here, Leyton," said Peddleton urgently in my ear. "There's going to be trouble over this, and we must get to the Chief at once."

So one on each side of him we formed up, and Jim was grinning.

"I think," he murmured happily, "though I wouldn't swear to it, that I heard his jaw break."

"Come on, Jim, old man," said Peddleton insistently. "There are reasons, very important reasons, which I'll explain as I go along. Oh! yes--you can come back afterwards and finish him off.... Rather."

We dragged him through the crowd at the door, casting longing glances over his shoulder at the man who still lay prostrate on the floor--and we rushed him into the street.

"Confound you!" he said, stopping at the entrance to the hotel. "Why are you taking me away? That swine hasn't apologised yet."

"Doesn't matter, old man," laughed Peddleton. "For the next few hours he'll be too busy wondering whether a horse kicked him in the jaw or not to bother about apologising."

Still arguing and protesting he suffered us to pull him along, and not till we turned into the mess at Kasr-el-Nil, did Peddleton breathe freely again.

"Sit down, Jim," he said, "and get outside a whisky and soda. I want to talk to you for a moment, and then I'm going to take you straight up to the Chief. I didn't realise when that swine first came into the bar who he was. Then I heard what the barman told Leyton. He's a gentleman about whose coming we've been warned. We were told he had a peculiar temper; we were not told that he was a raving maniac. And there are diplomatic reasons, Jim, which render it a little unfortunate that you removed that seat just as he was going to sit down."

"Well, what the deuce did he want to barge me in the back for?" demanded Jim angrily.

"I know, old man--I know," said Peddleton soothingly. "Personally, I've never been so pleased in my life as when you laid the brute out. And from that point of view the Chief will probably want to kiss you. But diplomatically, old man, it is unfortunate."

Peddleton's good-natured face was looking quite worried, and suddenly Jim leant across to him with his wonderful, understanding smile.

"Pumpkin, old boy," he said quietly, "I shall make it absolutely clear to the Chief that it was nothing whatever to do with you. But you wouldn't have had me not hit the blighter?"

"Heaven forbid!" answered the Pumpkin fervently. "I very nearly gave three cheers as you laid him out." He got to his feet. "Look here, Jim, come along and see the Chief, now. Leyton--you

won't mind waiting here, will you? Shout for anything you want."

"Of course," I answered. "Don't worry about me. I shall probably stroll over to Ghezireh."

But though I went over to the Sporting Club, and tried to concentrate on a game of polo, I could not get the extraordinary scene at Shepheard's out of my mind. At the time it had all been so quick, had all seemed so naturally continuous, that one had had no time to wonder. But now, looking back on it at my leisure, the whole thing seemed like a dream--like one of those sudden desert sand storms which rise out of nothing, pass by and are gone.

In an instant murder--raging, hot-blooded murder--had been let loose in an hotel full of the most commonplace tourists. There had been murder in Baron Stockmar's eyes as his hands went out towards Jim; the difference between the blow that stunned him and a bullet through his heart had been small in motive. And the original cause--a push in the back. Intentional--true: a deliberate insult by a foul-mouthed bully. But knowing Jim, as I did, I couldn't disguise from myself the fact that even had it been an accident, the result would have been the same. He was not a man who took kindly to accidents, especially those for which no apology was rendered. And it was just before the last *chukka* finished, while I still felt as mentally confused as ever, that I saw Jim coming towards me.

"Can you leave for Khartoum with me to-night?" he remarked, as he came up.

"I can," I answered. Then my curiosity got the better of me. "What's happened?"

"The Pumpkin was right," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Unofficially the Chief kissed me on both cheeks--so to speak; officially he cursed me into fourteen different heaps. There are certain things I can't tell you, old man--but our friend the gorilla is the accredited agent of a certain government. He has arrived, apparently, on some question of trade concessions in the Sudan, and he is not welcome even officially.

"Unofficially, I believe special prayers are now being offered that his jaw is broken in two places, and that he'll never eat again. He has not endeared himself to anyone in Cairo. But the funny thing is that the job the Pumpkin was actually speaking to me about before the swine came in this morning is concerned directly with the brute. It is to frustrate--this between ourselves--the very thing he has come out to do. And it must be done--unofficially. Hence--me. I have been told unofficially exactly what the Chief wants officially--and I leave to-night." A lazy grin spread over his face. "I gather Baron Carl Stockmar proposes to visit Khartoum in the near future."

"Things become clearer," I murmured. "Jim--the man's mad."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"From quiet inquiries made, Dick--since our little episode in the bar, we have found out that the beggar had been drinking before he came in. And when he gets into the condition of 'drink-taken'--I gather he never gets drunk--he is a very ugly customer. He man-handled a sailor who annoyed him on his *dahabeah* the other night and nearly killed him. And his principal hatred is for the English. I trust most fervently that we shall renew our friendship in Khartoum."

And the grin had faded from his face.

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And now I come to the second and final act of the drama. It is the first time that the facts have been put on paper, though many shrewd guesses as to what occurred were made by officers of

the Royal South Sussex who were quartered at Khartoum. They were interested in the matter--very interested, since it was in their mess that the insult took place. And I can still see that ring of brown-skinned alert men in mess-kit standing motionless in the ante-room, with blazing eyes and clenched fists: I can still hear the C.O.'s quiet word of warning--"Gentlemen."

But one thing I would say at the beginning, if by any chance these words should meet the eye of anyone who was present that night: there can't be many, for the battalion ceased to be a battalion at Festubert in '15. Von Tarnim of the 3rd Regiment of the Prussian Guard was a sahib. He was forced into an invidious position against his will, simply because he was a Prussian officer, and there was no one else to take his place.

But I am jumping ahead. Four weeks after we left Cairo--Jim and I--we returned to Khartoum. On the way through we had dined with the South Sussex, and at dinner Jim had hinted to the Colonel the nature of his business.

The next day we went into the wilds, and of the next three weeks there is nothing to tell. Jim talked to many strange dignified men in their own lingo--and every one of them seemed to know him as an old friend. They suggested sport; they promised us wonderful shooting; but Jim smiled and refused, and pushed on deeper into the desert.

And then came the day when we turned and retraced our steps. The job he had been sent to do was done; the results were locked in Jim's brain. He wasn't communicative, and I didn't ask questions--but there was a pleased twinkle in his eye, and I knew he was satisfied with his work. Only once did he allude to it, and that was the night before we reached Khartoum. "I think, old son," he remarked, "that we have euchred the dear Baron."

Next evening we arrived, and dined quietly at the hotel. And after dinner we strolled over to the South Sussex mess. That the Baron was dining there as an official guest we had no idea; that the Baron had interviewed a tall, stately Prince of the desert during the course of the day, and had met with a suave but perfectly firm refusal to certain propositions he had advanced, we had even less idea. It was the first fruits of Jim's mission, and the immediate result had been to throw the Baron into a white heat of rage. The concessions had not gone a month ago, he roared furiously; how did it happen they had gone now? And the grave Bedouin had shrugged his shoulders and stalked from the room.

The immediate result also was that Baron Stockmar arrived at the South Sussex mess for dinner still in the same mood. From certain non-committal remarks made by the Arab during their interview, he had gathered that the same refusal would meet him from every quarter, and the Baron was not the type of man to take such a thing lying down.

To have failed absolutely in what he had specially decided to do was an unusual experience for him, and his mood at dinner was one of smouldering passion. It was an official invitation, but he made no attempt at even ordinary politeness, and a general desire to sling the swine out of the mess became prevalent before the soup was finished. But one thing the Baron did do with gusto, he punished the excellent South Sussex champagne till even the Colonel--hospitable sportsman though he was--began to look uneasy.

Then came the first unpleasant episode. The cloths were removed; the wine had been passed round, and officers with their glasses untouched were waiting for the toast of "The King."

The Colonel rose and addressed the Vice-President. "Mr. Vice--the King."

"Gentlemen--the King."

Every officer rose--but not so the Baron. I was told all this after by one of the subalterns. There were a few moments of icy silence, while the band-sergeant, his honest face the colour of a beetroot with rage, glared at the offender and kept his band silent. Then the Colonel spoke quietly, and the second-in-command, an officer of choleric temper, plucked feverishly at his collar as if it were choking him.

"We are about to drink the health of our King, Baron Stockmar," said the Colonel. "May I request you to stand up."

The Baron rose. There was something in the ring of furious men who were staring at him that warned even his drink-bemused brain not to go too far. He rose, and the King was played--but the episode did not improve the harmony of the evening.

And it was into this atmosphere that in all ignorance Jim and I blundered later on. The Baron was sitting with his back to us as we came in, drinking his third brandy and soda since dinner, and we neither of us noticed him. All we saw was a bunch of officers looking about as cheerful as a crowd of deaf-mutes, and Jim looked at them in surprise.

"Why so merry and bright?" he cried cheerfully. "Having returned from a most successful trip in the wilds, and seen all my old pals--amongst 'em Mahomet Ali--we've come up to play hunt the slipper."

And Mahomet Ali was the man whom the Baron had seen that afternoon.

He rose from his chair and turned round facing Jim. Whether or not he realised that it was Jim who had forestalled him, I do not know, but on his face was the look of a maniac. What vestige of restraint he had imposed on himself during the evening vanished; for the moment the man was mad. It was the first time he had seen Jim since the episode at Shephard's, and he walked towards him swaying slightly.

"You struck me a little while ago," he said thickly. "Then you ran like a coward and an Englishman. Will this force you to give me the satisfaction one gentleman demands of another?"

And he flung the contents of his glass straight in Jim's face.

A suppressed murmur ran through the ante-room, and it was then that the Colonel's quiet word "Gentlemen" came as a douche of cold water; for passion was running high and ugly, and even the padre was muttering unprintable things under his breath. In fact the only man in the room who seemed completely unmoved was Jim. With exaggerated nonchalance he mopped his face with his handkerchief, then he polished his eyeglass and replaced it.

"Dear me, Colonel," he remarked at length, "I wondered what had become of that gorilla I caught on my trip. But really I can't congratulate you on the manners you've taught it. I shall have to take the coarse brute in hand myself."

With a snarl like a beast the Baron hurled himself at Jim, and for a moment my heart stood still. Immensely powerful though Jim was, at close quarters with this human monstrosity he could not have stood a chance. But once again I'd reckoned without my man. Even as he spoke he had been measuring the distance with his eye, and had moved back a couple of paces. And as Baron Stockmar rushed at him, Jim dived forward and tackled him below the knees. It was a

perfect Rugby tackle, and the Baron's head in falling hit the edge of the piano. And they left him where he lay.

"That is the second time, sir," said Jim to the Colonel. "The world is not big enough for this gentleman."

"Careful, Jim," said the Colonel. "For God's sake don't get yourself into any trouble, old boy."

"You can't go having any fool tricks with revolvers, Jim," said the second-in-command. "Duelling ain't allowed in His Majesty's domain."

"Nevertheless, Tubby, old man," said Jim quietly, "I shall deal with him. Shall we leave it at that? I don't think you had better ask any questions."

And at that moment the Baron staggered to his feet.

"You will hear further from me, sir," he said shakily.

"I should hate to think so," answered Jim coldly. "There's the door."

No one spoke till the sound of his swaying footsteps had died away; then the Colonel again shook his head.

"Jim," he said earnestly, "do, I entreat of you, be careful. You'll put me in such an awful position if...if..."

"Colonel," said Jim quietly, "did you hear what he said?--'Like a coward *and* an Englishman.' Here--in your mess." His voice shook a little; then he went on quietly: "Unfortunately this place is so confoundedly civilised that one has got to be careful, as you say. So if he takes no further steps in the matter, and apologises before you all for his remark, I am prepared to let the matter drop. But otherwise--well, as I said before, you had better ask no questions."

And it was at that moment that the mess-sergeant flung open the door of the ante-room, and ushered in a tall, fair-haired man who held himself stiffly.

"Mr. Maitland," he said, standing by the door.

"That's me," remarked Jim.

"I am Count von Tamim of the 3rd Regiment of the Prussian Guard. I am here on behalf of Baron Stockmar. Is there any gentleman here who is acting for you, and to whom I can speak? I presume you have guessed my mission."

"I certainly have," said the Colonel quietly. "And you must quite understand, Count, that anything in the nature of duelling is strictly forbidden under English law, and that I, as the senior military officer here, flatly forbid it."

Count von Tamim bowed.

"I understand, sir," he answered. "I am to give that message to my principal, am I, Mr. Maitland?"

"You are," said Jim. "And when you've given that message, Mr. Leyton here will be delighted to discuss with you the weather conditions and the prospects of sport a little further up the White Nile."

Count von Tamim bowed again, and the suspicion of a smile hovered round his lips.

"I shall find Mr. Leyton--where?" he asked.

"At the hotel," I answered briefly, and with another stiff bow that included us all, he left the mess.

"Maitland," said the Colonel sternly--and Jim grinned at him.

"There's a spot I know of, Colonel," he remarked, "where the lion shooting is excellent. I feel sure Baron Stockmar would like some to ease his ruffled temper."

And the Colonel began to smile.

"Go away, confound you!" he said, "I don't want to know anything about your shooting."

"But for goodness' sake hit the lion," piped the padre, and as we left the mess they were standing him on his head in the corner for being a bloodthirsty little man.

It was an hour later that Count von Tarnim came up to me in the hotel. Jim had told me his scheme; everything was cut and dried, and it only remained for me to put the details before the Count. From the beginning I had done nothing to dissuade Jim; in the first place I knew it was useless, in the second--well, the scheme appealed to me. Judged by the standards of English country life it was not perhaps all it should have been; but England seemed very far away that night.

"My principal wishes to know when and where he may expect satisfaction," said the Count abruptly.

"Precisely," I answered. "I am not well up in the etiquette of these matters, but I may say at once that my principal is only too ready to grant that satisfaction. But there are certain considerations which he has to bear in mind. As Colonel Latimer told you to-night duelling is forbidden, and any infringement of the law against it would result not only in the survivor--should the duel end fatally--being hanged, but it would also involve Colonel Latimer in grave trouble.

"In those circumstances my principal has decided as follows. He has, I believe, the choice of weapons. He has chosen big-game rifles. He proposes that we should all go ostensibly after lions to some suitable place. He then proposes that your principal and he should take cover as directed by us, and at a given signal, each should regard the other as the lion. Each will proceed to stalk the other until a result takes place. Should that result prove fatal, the survivor, for his own sake, is not likely to talk about it. In addition, both you and I will be in a position to state that the one who loses was mauled and killed by a lion, and the vultures will do the rest. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," said von Tarnim, clicking his heels together. "I will acquaint my principal with what you have said."

With that he left me, to return in ten minutes with the information that the Baron agreed. And then for a moment or two he stared at me irresolutely.

"It is most unorthodox, what I am going to say," he said, with a great deal of hesitation. "I am Baron Stockmar's second, and, therefore, his interests are mine. But he is a peculiar man; his reputation is notorious. And I think it only fair to tell you that he is probably the finest shot in Germany. Moreover, he is quite determined to kill your friend."

He was very stiff about it. I could see the man's decent nature struggling with his scandalised

horror at his own breach of etiquette. And the next moment his horror deepened. Jim, who had come into the room unnoticed, smote him heavily on the back.

"Tell the Baron, with my love," he said earnestly, "that I once slaughtered a sparrow with a catapult."

But though Jim laughed and was his usual self during the two days that we trekked south to the place we had decided on, there was an undercurrent of seriousness beneath his gaiety. He slept, as usual, like a child; I do not believe that for a single instant during the whole time did his pulse quicken by one beat. But he gave me in full the report which I was to render to the Chief in Cairo in case anything happened; also he gave me one or two private commissions to carry out.

And the night before the duel he was a little more silent than usual. I had fixed the final details with von Tarnim; the spot had been duly selected. And it was as I came back that Jim looked up with a lazy smile from oiling his rifle.

"What extraordinary blokes we are," he remarked thoughtfully. "I don't know that it affords me any pleasure to go out and try to kill this bird to-morrow. I *felt* like murdering him in the mess that night, but--now ..."

He returned to his task and shortly after we turned in. And of the two of us I know who slept the worse. I don't think I closed my eyes the whole night.

Even the next morning Jim seemed bored. He told me afterwards that he'd lost interest in the affair and all the smouldering fury in Baron Stockmar's eyes failed to rouse him. He was as immaculate as ever; his eyeglass seemed even more conspicuous, and when I showed him the place we had selected for him, he lounged over as if he was looking for butterflies.

"He means business, Jim," I said urgently. "He's blind mad with rage still."

"Is he?" said Jim indifferently. "Make him shoot the worse."

They were to start when we fired a revolver, and von Tarnim gave the signal as soon as we were both satisfied they were ready. We were standing on a little sandy hummock above the scrub, whence we could see both men though they could not see one another. And then there began the grimmest, most exciting fight that it has ever been my fortune to witness. Von Tarnim beside me was smoking cigarette after cigarette; I was chewing an empty pipe.

Occasionally a shot rang out, but it seemed to me that Jim was taking things too easily. As a *shikar* his name was famous through three continents, but the Baron, despite his bulk, was no mean performer. And once I saw a bullet flatten itself on a stone not an inch from Jim's head.

He was just underneath us at the moment and he drew back quickly. Then he looked at the stone very carefully and I saw his face change. Through my glasses I could see the look of boredom vanish and I breathed a sigh of relief. Something had roused him at last, and the man beside me realised it too, and whistled under his breath. Jim's lethargy had gone; something had happened which had turned him from a bored individual into a grim and ruthless man. At a quick lope he turned and vanished into the scrub. Every now and then we saw him listening intently; every now and then we saw the great figure of the Baron squirming forward, with his head turning from side to side as he peered into the undergrowth. And then suddenly von Tarnim gripped my arm convulsively; the two men were not more than twenty yards apart. A big bush was between them, but we could see them both. And it seemed to us that at that

moment each of them became aware of the other. Like a flash Jim was round the bush, and he fired standing, the fraction of a second before the other man. Then he spun round and sank on his knees, while von Tarnim and I raced towards them.

I raised Jim up in my arms; the Baron had shot him through the shoulder. But it was a dreadful wound, and I stared at it in amazement. Even from such a short range the wound was almost incredible, and suddenly Jim opened his eyes and stared at me.

"He was using dum-dums," he said, and his voice was hard. "The swine was using dum-dums."

A shadow fell on me, and we looked up at Count von Tarnim. He had heard Jim's remark, and his face was stern.

"I apologise in the name of my country," he said with quiet dignity. "My principal cannot."

For the first time I looked at the Baron, and understood. Jim had shot him through the brain.

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And so we came back to Khartoum. It was Count von Tarnim who came with me to see Colonel Latimer the instant we had got Jim stowed in hospital.

"A regrettable accident has taken place, sir," he remarked, with stiff military precision. "Baron Carl Stockmar, while following a lion with Mr. Maitland, was turned on suddenly by the brute. He fired, unfortunately missing the lion and hitting Mr. Maitland in the shoulder. The lion killed him, Mr. Maitland being unable to give any assistance owing to his wound."

The Colonel stared at him in thoughtful silence; the Adjutant stood stiffly by the side of his chair.

"Am I to understand, Count von Tarnim," he said at length, "that that is the information which will be conveyed to the Baron's friends in Germany? Just what you have told me?"

"Exactly that, sir--and nothing more," said the Count.

"Good," answered the Colonel, rising from his chair, and holding out his hand. "The officers of my regiment and I myself will be very pleased if you will dine with us to-night."

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### III. *A Game of Bluff*

It was three months before Jim came out of hospital, and even then his arm was stiff. The expanding bullet had torn the ligaments badly, and for quite a time the doctor had looked grave.

"A long course of electric massage is essential," he said emphatically. "Otherwise I warn you seriously that your arm may remain like that permanently. There's a wonderful new man in Paris: I'll give you his name if you like."

"We might do worse, Dick," remarked Jim. "They tell me that there are worse places."

"Confound you," I said. "What about those two trunks of perfectly good clothes I left in Nagasaki?"

"What about your perfectly good uncle," he laughed, "who has left you all his money? Besides, we shall probably never get as far as Paris--so nothing matters."

We started anyway, and, amazing to relate, in the fullness of time we got there. But we had a little contretemps en route which might have ended very unpleasantly but for Jim. And it bore out in a rather remarkable manner one of his theories on life.

Jim is the least dogmatic man in the world, but there are certain things on which he holds definite opinions--very definite. Some of those opinions are hardly suitable for propagation in a Sunday School: some are--though they are not down in the text books. But they are all worth listening to. And the particular one to which I am alluding is his theory on the matter of Bluff. Moreover, since you can't get through life without bluff, it may be worth while stating it, as I once heard Jim state it to a youngster who asked his advice.

"Bluff, my son, is winning an unlimited jackpot with a queen high hand from a fellow with three aces, and upsetting the table before you can be asked to show your openers. Bluff, my lad, is getting a man with a gun pointed at the pit of your stomach to look the other way for just long enough to allow you to alter the target. Bluff, my boy, is, in short, the art of winning a game with losing cards, and the essence of that art is to play the hand right through as if you held winners without a thought of failure. Not a touch of hesitation, not a moment of doubt."

And if ever there was a case when a game was won with losing cards, the affair at Monte Carlo was it.

When we left Port Said in a home-going P. & O. we never intended going near the place. Paris was our destination via Marseilles, but you never can tell.

Incidentally the purser's humour had something to do with it, if such a great being as the purser has anything to do with arranging the menus. The Gulf of Lyons was at its worst, which means that food should be chosen with care. And to select pork chops for dinner simply shows a fiendish ingenuity not far short of diabolical. In tens and dozens weeping women and frenzied men lurched from the dining saloon, until but a bare score of hardened sinners were left endeavouring to conceal their unseemly mirth.

It was the uncontrolled joy of a very pretty girl sitting two tables away from us that principally attracted our attention. I had noticed an elderly man who had been sitting beside her rise suddenly and depart with a fixed and glassy stare in his eyes. And it being an ill wind in more senses than one, his place had immediately been taken by a boy who moved up from the other end of the table.

We knew the boy slightly--a great youngster by the name of Jack Rawson. He was in cotton at Alexandria--a junior member of one of the big firms, and he was returning to England on business. And after a while Jim turned to me with a faint smile and then looked across again at the pair of them.

"The only story in the world, old man," he remarked, "that is older than sea-sickness."

"Who is the girl?" I asked.

"An Australian, I think. Jack told me her name. Mother is at Nice, and I suppose the bird who fled from the crackling is Father."

We finished our dinner and went above. She was pitching very badly in a long following swell, and for an hour or so we strolled up and down the almost deserted deck. And it wasn't until we were thinking of a nightcap before turning in that we stumbled on Jack Rawson and the girl snugly ensconced in a sheltered corner. We tried to get away unnoticed, but the boy hailed Jim at once.

"Maitland," he cried, "I want to introduce you to Miss Melville, my fiancée."

Jim bowed gravely and smiled.

"My heartiest congratulations," he remarked. "A pork chop is sometimes a godsend, isn't it?"

"Poor old Daddy," said the girl with quick remorse. "I'd forgotten all about him. But I couldn't help laughing, because he always tells everyone he's never been sick in his life. I'd better go and see how he is."

"From my knowledge of the complaint," said Jim, "I don't think he'll thank you. Complete seclusion is generally the victim's one demand of life."

And so she stopped, and for a few minutes we talked. Young Jack, we gathered, was getting out at Marseilles, and going to meet her mother at Nice. Then he was going back overland so as to arrive in London at the same time as he would have done if he'd stuck to the boat. And then the question of his father would crop up. In fact, fathers loomed rather large in the horizon. For the engagement had only been fixed that night, and Mr. Melville was also in ignorance of the devastating effects of pork chops on the young and healthy. Which was where the trouble came in. Would he have sufficiently recovered by the following morning to make it advisable to spring the news on him? Or would he regard it as a mean advantage to have taken while he was otherwise employed? It was undoubtedly a point demanding careful consideration. So much depends on the way these matters are approached.

The girl was dubious. She was convinced that next morning would be fully occupied in listening to his explanations that it was not the rough sea which had caused his indisposition, but that his bit of fish at lunch had been slightly stale. The moment would not be opportune, she was sure. And that being the case, why should Jack suddenly alter his plan of going home by sea, and come to Nice? In fact, what was to be done? How could Jack come to Nice in an easy, natural manner, which should cause no suspicion on the part of her paternal parent, and at the same time allow the news of the engagement to be broken at a more favourable time?

We discussed the knotty point at some length, Jim suddenly settled things in his usual direct way. He and I would also break our journey at Marseilles and go to Nice, or rather to Monte Carlo, and Jack would come with us. It was, as he remarked, part of every man's education to

see the Casino, and more especially the people who frequented it, and since Jack had never seen it, it was high time he did so. If, when he got there, Jack was foolish enough to prefer going over to Nice and sitting in the sunshine with his girl rather than haunting a roulette table, it was a point which hardly arose at that stage of the proceedings.

And with that we left them, cutting short their thanks, and retired to the smoking-room. Half an hour later, as we turned in, I saw them still sitting in their secluded corner, dreaming God's great dream in a world of their own.

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Somewhat needless to state, we did not see much of young Jack during the next three or four days. We lounged about the terrace, and had a mild flutter or two at the tables. But the place irked--irked terribly. It was so intensely, superlatively artificial. And Jim particularly sickened of it.

"By Jove, Dick," he said to me on the fourth night of our stay, "I've seen more primitive sin in my life than most of the people here put together, but I don't believe there's a place in the whole world where quite so much rottenness is concealed beneath a beautiful surface as in Monte."

A lovely French girl strolled by in the company of an elderly swain of puffy aspect, and glanced at Jim as she passed. He looked at her thoughtfully, and then turned to me with a faint shrug.

"I suppose she thinks it's worth it," he remarked. "But what a price to pay! I'm no moralist, but I like things big. Big virtues; big sins if you like. But in this place the only thing that is big is the price."

And then he fell silent and stared over my shoulder. "Hello!" he went on slowly, "here's Jack Rawson. And something has happened."

I turned round and saw the boy coming towards us. He was walking unevenly, and on his face was a look of hopeless despair.

"Well, young fellow," said Jim quietly as he came abreast of us, "what's the worry?"

Jack paused, and seemed to see us for the first time. Then, with a quick shake of his head, he made as if to pass on. But he had only gone a step or two when Jim's hand fell on his shoulder and spun him round.

"Let me go, confound you!" muttered the boy.

"All in good time, old man," said Jim in the same quiet voice. "Just at the moment I think a little talk will clear the air."

He forced Jack to a seat between us, and suddenly put his hand into the boy's coat pocket.

"This won't help, Jack," he said a little sternly, and I saw that he had a small revolver in his hand.

"That's never the way out, except for a coward."

And it was then that the boy broke down, and I caught Jim's eye over the shaking shoulders. It was savage and angry, as if he realised, even then, that we were in the presence of another of those rotten little tragedies which have their breeding ground in those few square miles. Jack pulled himself together after a few seconds and lit a cigarette while we waited in silence. And then bit by bit the whole sordid story came out--as old as the hills and yet perennially new in

every fresh case.

The engagement was all right, we found out, as far as her father and mother were concerned. The only question had been one of money. Her father didn't think that Jack's income was sufficient to allow of matrimony yet; further, he thought that in view of the shortness of their acquaintance a little waiting would be a good thing from every point of view. He wouldn't go so far as to say that if Jack had actually had the money he would have insisted on a long engagement, but since he hadn't, he thought it was much the most satisfactory solution. And it was just after this interview with Mr. Melville that Jack met a very charming Frenchman in a bar at Nice. He was the Comte de St. Enogat, and they had entered into conversation.

It was at this stage of the disclosure that Jim's eye again met mine.

Apparently one cocktail had been followed by another; and then a third and fourth had joined their predecessors. And Jack, drawn on by his new friend's delightful and sympathetic manner, had taken the charming Comte de St. Enogat into his confidence. After four--or was it five?--cocktails the problem was a simple one. The girl's father--a silly old fool--insisted that he should have more money before he could marry his daughter. How was he to get that money quickly and certainly, because any idea of waiting was simply unthinkable? After five--or was it six?--cocktails the solution to the problem was even simpler.

The Comte de St. Enogat, touched to the very core of his French soul by such a wonderful tale of devotion and love, would do for this new friend of his what he had never before done for any human being. Locked in the Comte's heart was a system--*the system--the only* system by which one could with absolute certainty make money gambling. If Jack would come with him that afternoon he would take him to a private gambling place where he guaranteed on his word as a member of the French nobility that Jack would win enough money to snap his fingers at the idiotic father of his lovely fiancée.

And Jim's eyes met mine for the third time.

He lunched at the expense of his new friend--lightly, with a bottle of champagne; and then proceeded in the Comte's powerful Delage to a villa half-way between Nice and Monte Carlo. A charming villa we gathered, where he was introduced to one or two of the Comte's friends. And then after a short while the Comte suggested an adjournment for business. There was roulette in one room, and baccarat in another. Petits-chevaux, poker, and even fan-tan seemed to be legislated for each in their own separate room. But the great point over which Jack was most insistent was the singular charm of everyone he met.

"Quite so," cut in Jim shortly, as he paused. "I'm sure they were. But to come down to more prosaic details--which game did you patronise?"

"Baccarat," said the boy. "The Comte advised it."

"Holy smoke!" muttered Jim. "Baccarat! Yes, I can quite imagine that he did advise it."

"He said it was the easiest to make money at by his system."

"Undoubtedly," answered Jim. "Quite the easiest to make money at--for him. Now, Jack, what did you lose?"

The boy hesitated.

"Out with it," said Jim. "You've been a triple distilled young fool, but there's no good mincing

things now."

"A hundred thousand francs," answered Jack, almost inaudibly, and leaning forward he buried his face in his hands.

Jim raised his eyebrows. A hundred thousand francs was four thousand pounds in those days before currencies went mad, and the same thought came to both of us. Where had young Jack Rawson found four thousand pounds to lose?

"Did you give them a cheque?" asked Jim quietly.

And then, slowly and hesitatingly, the real trouble came out. He hadn't given them a cheque; it wouldn't have been honoured if he had. But he had been entrusted with twenty thousand pounds' worth of bearer bonds in some Egyptian Government security to take home with him and hand over to the head office of the firm in London. Why the matter had been done that way we did not inquire; the mere bald fact stuck out and was sufficient.

Jack Rawson had lost four thousand pounds of money which belonged to his firm, playing baccarat. And since the actual loss was in bearer bonds, not even the replacing of the money could save him from detection. Nothing short of regaining the actual scrip could be of any use. And unless that was done it meant disgrace and ruin for the boy sitting miserably between us.

So much was clear on the face of it, and for a while we sat in silence staring over the bay.

"I was a bit tight," he stammered miserably at length. "Otherwise I wouldn't have been such a darned fool. But he seemed such a good sort, and all I could think of was getting enough to marry Peggy."

And with that he broke down utterly; it meant losing his girl as well.

"When did it happen, Jack?" said Jim quietly.

"This afternoon," answered the boy.

"You'd know the house again?" pursued Jim.

"Only too well," muttered Jack, miserably throwing pebbles into a flower-bed opposite. And then suddenly he straightened up and gripped Jim by the arm.

"Look, Maitland," he cried excitedly, "there's the swine himself! There's the Comte de St. Enogat."

He half rose, but Jim pulled him back.

"Sit down," he said quietly. "Bend forward. Don't let him see you with us. It's that man, is it, in evening clothes, walking with the girl in the scarlet cloak?"

"Yes; that's the blighter," answered the boy.

We watched him as he ascended some steps a few yards to our left, and turned with his companion towards the Casino. He looked, as Jack had said, a charming man--just a typical French aristocrat carrying himself with the assured ease of a man of the *haute monde* in Monte Carlo during the height of the season. The girl with him was laughing at some remark he had just made; he was bending towards her with just the right amount of deference. And after a few moments they both disappeared into the Casino.

Jim thoughtfully lit a cigarette, and sat for a while in silence. Then, as if he had made up his

mind, he rose to his feet and pitched his cigarette away.

"Go back to the hotel," he said curtly, "and turn in. I'll see what I can do."

It was typical of Jim that he added no word of reproach, and at once cut short the stammered thanks of the boy, in whose eyes hope was already beginning to dawn.

"Cut all that out," he remarked. "I don't promise that I'll be able to do anything, but I'll see. Oh! and remember one thing. Should you meet either Leyton or myself to-morrow or at any time with the Comte, you don't know either of us. Don't forget. Now clear off."

For a moment he laid his hands on the boy's shoulders, then he turned him round and pushed him towards the hotel.

"Silly young ass!" he said to me as Rawson disappeared round a corner. "But he's a good boy for all that--a real good boy. And she's a good girl."

"It's a bit of a tough proposition, Jim," I remarked dubiously.

"I don't deny it," he answered. "At the moment I haven't even the glimmering of an idea as to how to set about it. This place may be a sink of iniquity, but anything in the nature of gunwork would render one unpopular. No, it's got to be something more subtle than that, much more subtle. The first thing to do, however, is to cultivate the acquaintance of the Comte de St. Enogat; the second is to go to this house. I think we'd better separate for the time, old man, though we might join up later in the evening. I'll go on into the Casino now--you come in in a few minutes. And then be guided by circumstances. We just know each other, that's all."

With a cheery grin he strolled away, that merry gleam in his eyes which was never absent if an adventure was on the cards. I watched him enter the Casino, and five minutes after I followed him.

I strolled round the rooms casually, but he seemed to have disappeared, and after a while I tried the bar. Sure enough there in a corner was Jim, with a dangerous-looking drink in front of him, the Comte de St. Enogat on one side and the charming girl in the scarlet cloak on the other. And the trio were in a convivial mood.

At least Jim was. Had I been asked to go into a court of law and give evidence on oath as to Jim's condition, I should have said that he was in that happy mood which comes from having drunk enough but not too much. And since Jim, if put to it, could put three hardened toppers in succession under the table drinking them level, it was evident that the game had begun.

As soon as he saw me he hailed me cheerfully.

"Hullo! Leyton, old lad," he cried, "come and join us. A pal of mine, Mademoiselle--also from the ends of the earth."

I bowed to the girl and sat down opposite Jim.

"I've just been telling the Comte--oh! by the way, the Comte de St. Enogat--Mr. Leyton--that I can't stand these rooms here. Too crowded altogether. I like gambling high; I can afford to gamble high. I've gambled in every corner of this little old globe, and there's not much I don't know about it. But I can't stand a crush. Hi! François--or whatever your name is--repeat the dose, my lad."

"And I have just been telling your friend, Mr. Leyton," said the Comte with a charming smile,

"that if he wants a quiet game, with stakes high or low, as he pleases----"

"High for me," interrupted Jim. "I'm not a curate playing halfpenny nap."

The Comte bowed, and his smile broadened.

"No, Mr. Maitland, as a fair judge of men, I guessed that. Well, you can take it from me that you can play as high as you like, in perfect peace and quiet, and not with this crowd round you, if you care to come with Mademoiselle St. Quentin and myself to a villa a few kilometres on the road to Nice. Every form of game you can want is there, run for people exactly like yourself--people who prefer peace and quiet. You can play bridge if you like, or poker, or baccarat, or roulette."

Jim leant across the table to me.

"Leyton," he said, "did you hear that? These guys play poker. What about it?"

He winked deliberately, and the Comte smiled again.

"There are two men there who play poker most nights and rather fancy themselves."

"The devil they do!" grunted Jim. "I'll come and play poker with them."

For a fleeting instant the Comte's eyes met the girl's, then he rose.

"My car is at the door. Will Mr. Leyton come?"

"I'm with you," I said, finishing my drink. "But I warn you that I'm not a gambler like my friend."

"All tastes are catered for, Mr. Leyton," said the girl, speaking for the first time. But I noticed she was watching Jim, as he strolled with the Comte through the rooms towards the entrance. "Is he very wealthy, your friend?"

"Rolls in it," I murmured.

"He looks a very determined sort of person," she remarked.

"He's as peaceful as a lamb," I answered. "A married man with four children."

"I hope he wins," she said. "It's high time those two men the Comte was speaking of lost for a change."

With that we got into the car, and though I don't know about the chauffeur, there were undoubtedly four stout-hearted liars that night who drove out along the road to Nice.

I had no inkling as to what Jim proposed to do; and, as he left me almost at once on arriving at the house and repaired to the poker room with the Comte, I had no opportunity of a private word with him. So I contented myself with a little mild roulette and kept my eyes open.

The whole thing was beautifully done, of that there was no doubt. The champagne was of a first-class vintage and unlimited; the furniture and the whole get-up of the house gave one the idea that everything had been done regardless of expense. There were some twenty people in the roulette room, and though play was high, I could see no suspicion of anything unfair. Nor for that matter at the baccarat table in another room, where I staked a few louis and won. In fact, it struck me that the whole place was what it professed to be--a first-class gambling-house where stakes were high and expenses were paid out of the five-per-cent. *cagnotte*.

My lady in the scarlet cloak, in the intervals of being very charming, pumped me discreetly over

Jim, and I played up along the lines that he had started. It was quite obvious that I was regarded as the necessary encumbrance to the real quarry, and the idea was just what I wanted. Jim was rich, Jim was the gambler--Jim was the fish to be landed. And once or twice I almost laughed as I thought of the particular wolf who had strayed into the fold.

The sheep's clothing was still there two hours later when Jim appeared with the Comte. A cheerful, but somewhat inane grin was on his face, and he stumbled once--very slightly. It was a magnificent imitation of a man who had drunk just a little too much, and once again I saw the Comte's eyes meet my companion's with a hint of triumph in them.

"Cleaned me out, Leyton," cried Jim, slapping the Comte on the back. "Ten thousand francs, my boy--but that's only a bagatelle. To-morrow afternoon we'll begin to play. Now, Comte--you'll lunch with me, and you too, Mademoiselle. I simply insist. Just the four of us, and afterwards we'll come back here. I'll show you to-morrow how poker should be played."

"You had infernal luck, Mr. Maitland," said the Comte politely. "To-morrow you will have your revenge. And lunch--at one?"

"One o'clock. I shall expect you both." He bowed over the girl's hand. "And you shall sit beside me, Mademoiselle, to-morrow afternoon and bring me luck."

The Comte insisted on sending us home in his Delage, and all the way back Jim talked loudly for the benefit of the chauffeur.

It was not until we were in our rooms that the mask dropped, and he was himself again, cool and imperturbable.

"It's crooked, Dick," he said quietly. "They swindled me to-night. I saw 'em of course--the old trick of substituting a similar pack after the cut. They dealt me a flush, and the Comte drew one to threes, and got four eights. I betted as if I hadn't noticed."

"The roulette and baccarat was perfectly straight as far as I could see," I said.

"Probably," he answered. "It's more than likely that for ninety per cent. of the time the thing is straight. It's only when they get hold of a plum that they risk the other. And mark you, it was well done. If I hadn't forgotten more about that sort of stunt than these fellows are ever likely to know, I wouldn't have noticed it."

He was pacing up and down the room thoughtfully, pulling hard at his pipe.

"I can't think what to do, Dick," he cried at length. "Gunwork is out of the question, and the mere statement that someone is cheating, even if you prove it then and there on the spot, is no use when you're up against a gang of them. Righteous indignation: the man would be ostensibly kicked out; one's losses would be refunded. Mark you, it wasn't the Comte who cheated; he wasn't dealing. But the new pack was stacked so that he got the hand. They were all in it--all four of them. I can smell a thing like that better than a cat smells valerian. And it's going to be the same bunch to-morrow. The point is what to do."

He resumed his thoughtful pacing.

"Bluff! Some sort of bluff! But what? How can I bluff that bunch--how can I bluff the Comte into disgorging those bonds?"

And then suddenly he stopped short in his tracks, his eyes blazing.

"I've got it," he almost shouted. "I've got the main idea. Go away, Dick--go to bed. I've got to work out the details."

With that he bundled me unceremoniously out of the room, and when I turned out my light I could still hear him pacing up and down next door. But when I went into his room next morning about half-past ten he had already gone out, and I didn't see him again until he came into the American bar twenty minutes before lunch.

He grinned at me and we sat down in a corner.

"Got it worked out?" I asked.

"I think so, old man," he answered with a faint chuckle. "And it's best for you to know nothing about it until the time comes. But there's one thing you can do for me, with your well-known tact and discretion. If you get an opportunity, let it be known by Mademoiselle that though in normal circumstances I have the disposition necessary to run a babies' crèche, at the same time if I happen to get roused things happen. Hint, old son, at dark doings in strange corners of the globe: corpses littering up rooms--you know."

"Is this part of the plan?" I asked.

"A very necessary part," he answered quietly. "And here, if I mistake not, are our guests."

We met them in the lounge--the Comte suave and debonair, the lady looking even prettier by day than by night--and adjourned at once in to lunch. It was a merry meal, during which Jim accounted for far more than his fair share of the bottle of Veuve Cliquot. I noticed that the Comte drank sparingly, and his companion hardly at all. And they didn't talk very much either; Jim monopolised most of the conversation.

And since of all men in the world Jim talks less about himself than anyone I know, it soon became evident to me that there was some specific object in his mind. He was almost vulgar with his: "I've been there, of course,"--and "I've seen that and done this." But because he had been, and seen, and done, he was also extraordinarily interesting. Especially when he launched at length on to the question of snakes and rare native poisons. He might almost have made a study of them, so extensive was his knowledge, and Mademoiselle St. Quentin shivered audibly.

"You make me quite frightened, Monsieur," she said, taking a sip of champagne. "Just one teeny scratch, you say, and a horrible death. Ugh!"

Jim laughed, and ordered another bottle.

"Such things don't come your way in civilised parts, Mademoiselle," he cried. "It's only we who have lived at the back of beyond who run across them."

"You must have had an interesting life, Mr. Maitland," said the Comte. "A life which many men would not have come through alive."

Jim laughed again.

"Because they don't know the secret of life, Comte."

"And that is?"

"Bluff," Jim drained his glass. "Bluff. Any man can win when he's holding winners, but success only comes to the man who wins with losers. And in life--as in poker--it's bluff that enables you

to do that."

The Comte smiled.

"*Mon Dieu!* Yvonne, we have a formidable opponent this afternoon. I think I had better go to the bank and get some more money."

And so in due course we came once more to the house set so charmingly on the high ground looking over the sea.

Without delay they went indoors, while I followed slowly. As a piece of acting it was superb; almost did he deceive me during the next hour. Not by the quiver of an eyelid did he deviate from the character he had set himself to play--the bluff Colonial with money to lose if necessary, but with money only secondary to the game. I played more as a matter of form than anything else; my whole attention was occupied in what I knew must be coming. And gradually excitement took hold of me till my hand grew a little unsteady and my mouth a trifle dry. If only I had known what to look out for--what to expect!

And then quite suddenly it came. I had noticed nothing, but in an instant the atmosphere of the room changed from quiet suavity to deadly fury. And dominating them all--more furious than any--was Jim.

With a single heave he jerked the dealer from his chair, and there on the seat was the pack of cards for which the stacked pack had just been substituted.

"The same trick as last night, you bunch of sharpers!" he snarled. "Do you think I didn't spot you?" He swung round on the Comte, who, with a livid face, was backing towards the bell. "Stand still, you swine!" he roared, and he seemed to be lashing himself into a worse rage. "I'll show you how I deal with sharpers. You wretched fool--I came prepared for this!"

There was a sudden sharp whistling hiss and a long thorn-like piece of wood hung quivering from the Comte's cheek.

"Put away that gun," he sneered contemptuously, as the Comte produced a revolver. "Don't you understand, you wretched cheat--you're a dead man now. Is it beginning to prick and smart, that cheek of yours? I told you I came from the East, didn't I? And do you know what this is?"

He held out a long wooden tube, and the Comte stared at it fearfully.

"That is the *sumpitan*, or blow-pipe," roared Jim, "used by the Senangs in Malay. And that"--he pointed at the Comte's cheek--"is a poisoned dart." He laughed contemptuously. "You scum--to dare to swindle me, as you swindled that unfortunate boy out of those Egyptian bonds." He plunged his hand into his pocket and produced a small bottle. "There is the antidote, my friend--don't move, or I smash it in the grate. It will add to my pleasure to see you die, watching the bottle that could save you all the time."

And now pandemonium broke loose. Two men dashed to the door, to find themselves looking down the barrel of Jim's revolver.

"I think not," he said pleasantly. "It will only be a quarter of an hour before our friend leaves us--for good. During that brief space we will all stop here."

And then the girl flung herself at me.

"Do something!" she screamed. "He is a savage--a monster! Beg him to save Pierre; he is my husband."

But Jim only laughed.

"*Mon Dieu!* Monsieur," she cried, going down on her knees to him, "I entreat of you to spare him. I love him--you understand; I love him!"

Jim grunted, and lowered his revolver as if in thought.

"He is your husband, is he? Well, get me those Egyptian bonds at once. Is it smarting, Comte? Then you have no time to lose, madame. Hand me those bonds, and I will consider whether I will save this man."

He stood aside and she rushed from the room like a woman distraught. The Comte was moaning in a corner with the two other men bending over him, and Jim caught my eye and winked. And so superb had been his acting, that it was only then, for the first time, that I began to wonder about the *sumpitan* and the poisoned dart. It occurred to me that it had looked much more like an ordinary long wooden cigarette holder.

But at that moment the girl returned. Feverishly she thrust the bonds into his hands, and with maddening deliberation Jim looked through them while she waited in an agony of impatience. At last he thrust them into his pocket, and produced the little bottle.

"Let this be a lesson to you," he snapped. "There is the antidote. See that he drinks it all--at once."

We waited just long enough to see the contents of that bottle go down the Comte's throat; then, on a quick sign from him, we left.

And finding the Delage waiting outside the door, it seemed but fitting that we should use it to take us back to Monte Carlo. We did.

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It was not till much later on that he consented to allay my curiosity. At intervals through the afternoon he had shaken with silent laughter until he had almost driven me insane.

I knew there had been an interview with Jack, and the girl had been there too; a girl who had left with eyes misty with joy and happiness, and a boy who had left almost dazed by his good fortune.

The girl came up to me as I sat reading the paper, and I rose with a smile.

"He's just the most wonderful man in the world, Mr. Leyton," she said, and her voice trembled a little.

"He is that," agreed Jack fervently.

And with that they were gone, and I sat on waiting for Jim.

He came at last, a quiet smile on his face, and we decided it was cocktail time.

"A good bluff that, Dick," he said thoughtfully.

"Darned good!" I agreed. "What had you got on the darts?"

"Some stuff the chemist made up. Quite harmless, but irritates abominably."

And then he started to choke with laughter.

"What's the jest?" I demanded.

"My dear old man," he spluttered, "you haven't got the plum--the supreme gem of the affair. That lies in the antidote."

I looked at him. "What the deuce was the antidote?"

"It came to me in the chemist's shop this morning," he murmured gravely. "All great ideas come suddenly like that. The antidote, Dick, was just half a pint of castor-oil."

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#### IV. *Colette*

From Paris to Valparaiso is a long call, and what started us off in that direction for the life of me I can't remember. I know Jim's shoulder was a much longer job than we anticipated: I also have distinct recollections that Paris may have been partially responsible for the fact.

But that is neither here nor there: at Valparaiso we arrived one fine morning, and at Valparaiso we decided to stay. And in Valparaiso we ran into one of those adventures for which Jim seemed to have a special attraction. They came to him as a nail goes to a magnet, though he always swore he was the most peaceable of men. And, as a matter of fact, he never did look for trouble. It just came, and that saved him the bother.

It came this time right enough, and it nearly cost us both our lives. But since it didn't quite, and moreover was responsible for a magnificent work of art, all was well. It lies before me as I write--that work of art. It consists of a photo of a family group, taken by a local photographer down in Sussex and printed on a picture post card. Sitting on a chair is a girl--a pretty girl with happiness written all over her face, and on her lap are two remarkably healthy-looking infants. Standing behind her is the proud father arrayed in his best clothes, with a collar half an inch too small and an inch and a half too high. The girl's arms are round her babies, and it's only when I look very close that I can notice the difference between those two arms. For the right one was splintered to pieces, and the splintering saved us from death, and the girl from a fate far worse. Though even now, maybe, she hardly realises it, which is just as well.

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The thing happened in MacTavert's bar. Incidentally, it was more than a mere bar; flamboyant notices and flaring lights in the street outside proclaimed it to be a dancing saloon. And even that fell short of the full truth, for Bully MacTavert knew--none better--the principal source of income from sailors just in from a voyage. When a man has taken forty days merely to get a wind-jammer round the Horn, on the top of the rest of the voyage, and has then beaten up the west coast of South America towards Valparaiso, it isn't only drink he wants. When the second officer, with a marlin-spike in his hand as an adjunct to speech, has discharged every possible member of the crew to save the wage-bill while unloading and loading, men are apt to run a bit wild. There's money to burn in their pockets, and when it's finished a crew will be wanted for some other boat. Until then--there are women.

That was MacTavert's principal line. It means a quicker return for your money, and not such a rapid depreciation of stock. Not that MacTavert laid out much money to start with; there are quicker and surer ways into which it is perhaps better not to enter. And MacTavert was a past master in them all. All that may be said is that once a girl was there, God help her! for she was beyond human aid. She was MacTavert's property body and soul, and as such she did his bidding for the price of her keep.

For MacTavert was no believer in letting them have any money. Money makes for independence, and independence was the very last thing he wished to encourage. He fed them, he housed them, he bought them their tawdry finery, because that was a good investment. But money--no; that was his side of the contract. They could be bought like his drink--no credit allowed--and MacTavert pocketed the cash.

Not often does one find a man so completely dead to every sense of human decency as he was. Originally, as his name implied, he was a Scotsman. Just about forty-eight years ago he had first

seen the light of day in a Glasgow slum. There may be kind-hearted people who will say that he never had a chance; maybe he didn't. Born and nurtured in the gutter, at ten years old he was a man in vice, or at any rate, in his knowledge of it. At fifteen he went to sea in the three-masted ship *Celandine*, and Glasgow saw him no more. At thirty he decided that he could do better for himself than seafaring, and, helped by a strong will, an utterly unscrupulous character, and an intimate knowledge of what seamen wanted when they came ashore, he started on his own in Valparaiso.

He began small; perhaps the only Scotch trace left to him save his name was an unusual canniness over money. During those fifteen years while he roamed the seven seas from Newfoundland to Australia, from China to Suez, he managed to save a little out of his pay, which he had banked here and there all over the globe. And when he finally gave up the life and decided on Valparaiso as the scene of his future operations, he found that he had quite a respectable sum he could draw on for capital. He chose Valparaiso because the majority of shipping there is American, and the American sailor gets paid higher. Trifles like that told with MacTavert.

And now, eighteen years later, the small, stuffy saloon in which he had started had grown into a big, garish dancing hall, while its owner, heavy-jowled and gross, looked on his creation with beady eyes and found it good. His *clientèle* remained the same, but many more could be accommodated. And, further, a very lucrative side-show had developed gradually during the last few years. Tourists, anxious, as they put it, to see the sights, were apt to be escorted there by specially-selected touts of his own--people who paid anything up to ten times the regular tariff without a murmur. And MacTavert himself would welcome the poor fools with an expansive smile, which displayed his yellow teeth to the full advantage.

It was one of these touts who approached Jim and me before dinner. We neither of us knew Valparaiso, and we were at a loose end, but that tout had "tout" written altogether too largely all over him. So Jim, with commendable brevity, consigned him to his undoubted future destination, and we turned back towards our hotel for a cocktail before dinner.

And then there occurred one of those things which a man ignores or does not ignore, according to the particular brand he is. When a woman gives a little cry for help, it is as often as not advisable to continue one's stroll and leave matters to the proper authorities to deal with. Ulterior motives have been known to be behind such cries.

Not, however, for Jim. He was perfectly capable of dealing with ulterior motives should they arise, and, until they arose, he was of the brand who emphatically does not ignore. He swung round, and the next instant I was standing alone. And when I came up with him again, the tout who had recently accosted us was struggling impotently in his grasp, and Jim was staring over his head at a girl who was standing on the pavement beyond. She was a pretty little thing, but what struck me most was the look of terror in her eyes as she glanced at the man whom Jim was holding.

"Can I help you in any way?" said Jim, in Spanish. "I thought I heard you call out."

She looked at Jim, and her mouth drooped.

"It doesn't matter," she said, despairingly. "I thought you were English."

Jim smiled.

"I most certainly am," he answered, and the girl's face lit up once more. "I must blame the bad light for failing to see you were too."

And then he looked at the man who was still struggling in his grasp.

"That being the case," he continued, "how comes it that a Dago made you cry out for help? Dagos who do anything so foolish as to molest English girls are simply asking for trouble, aren't they, you repulsive little beast?"

The Dago squirmed and twisted in his hands, and Jim smiled placidly. Then he took him by the collar and the seat of his trousers and fairly slung him across the road. He lay for a moment where he fell; then, with a look of venomous hate on his face, he vanished down the road, and Jim turned back to the girl.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

She was gazing at him in admiration, and then she clapped her hands together.

"Oh, but you're strong!" she said, and her eyes were shining. "That little brute ought to be killed. He's one of MacTavert's men."

"So I gathered," said Jim quietly. "In fact, a little while ago he was suggesting to my friend and me that we should go to MacTavert's place this evening."

The girl shuddered, and once again the look of terror came into her eyes. She began to speak a little breathlessly, touching Jim's arm every now and then with her hand.

"It's an awful place--a ghastly place. And when I saw you, somehow I knew you were English, and I followed you. I thought perhaps you might be able to help me. That's why that little brute tried to interfere and prevent me speaking to you."

"But why should he object to you speaking to us?" said Jim, looking a trifle puzzled. "What has he got to do with you, anyway?"

"I'm in the most dreadful trouble," said the girl, and her lips were trembling. "You see, I'm at MacTavert's."

"You're at MacTavert's?" repeated Jim slowly. "But I don't understand. Why are you at such a place?"

"I was told to go there last night. I had no money, and I met a woman who said she could give me a room, and it didn't matter about paying her. And then I found that it was at this awful dancing saloon."

It was all a little incoherent, and Jim looked at her gravely.

"Then why not go away?" he said at length. "Surely there must be a British chaplain here, or somebody to whom you could apply."

"But I can't find my box, or any of my things." The girl was on the verge of tears. "They've taken them away and hidden them. And I don't know anyone in this horrible town, and I can't speak Spanish."

"I see," said Jim quietly, and his eyes were very gentle. "I see. Well, what do you want me to do?"

"If only I could tell you my story!" she cried. "But it's getting late, and I haven't got time now. I

must get back, or that brute will find out I've gone, and get in a rage. You see, he told me I wasn't to go out unless he said I might. Oh, if you could come to the place to-night, and tell MacTavert you want to dance with me---- That's what I have to do, you see: dance with anyone who wants me to. And then I could tell you. And perhaps you could help me."

She was looking up at Jim through eyes that were swimming with tears, and Jim smiled at her reassuringly.

"All right, kid," he said quietly. "We'll come, and you shall tell us all about it. And then we'll see what we can do."

"Oh, thank you a thousand times!" cried the girl, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "I think I should have drowned myself if I hadn't seen you passing by. You know where it is, don't you? Just down the road there."

"We'll find it," said Jim. "Now you trot along. By the way, what is your name?"

"Colette," said the girl simply, and she gave Jim a look such as a dog gives its master. And then she was gone, flitting like a shadow, through the trees that lined the road.

For a few moments Jim watched her: then he turned to me.

"I may be several sorts of a fool, Dick," he remarked, "but I'll take my oath that wasn't a put-up job. In fact, I'm thinking we may be just in time to prevent a tragedy."

"You'll probably find MacTavert a fairly tough customer," I said, as we strolled back towards the hotel.

Jim grinned. "I like 'em tough. Let's dine."

He was silent during dinner, and it was not until we had nearly finished that he spoke.

"If it's what I think it is, Dick, Mr. MacTavert and I will have words to-night."

And his voice was savage.

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MacTavert's dancing saloon took very little finding. As we entered the doors, the strains of an automatic piano grinding out a waltz met our ears, and for a moment or two we stood just inside watching the scene. It was typical of scores of similar places to be met with in seaports all over the world. A little larger perhaps than the average--apart from that there was nothing to distinguish it from a hundred others. A general reek of perspiring humanity and stale spirits filled the air: the thick haze of tobacco smoke made it almost impossible to see across the room. In the centre, where a space had been left, five or six couples were dancing; around the walls, seated at little tables, were men of every nationality drinking. Every now and then one of them would seize some woman by the waist and solemnly gyrate round the floor in the centre to the strains of the piano. Then the pair would sit down again, and more drink would be ordered; MacTavert expected his girls to increase the liquor consumption.

"Good heavens, Jim!" I muttered in disgust, "what a horrible spot!"

And it was as I spoke that we saw Colette. She was dancing with a big Dago, and her eyes lit up as she saw us.

Jim smiled at her, and at that moment MacTavert himself approached. His shrewd eyes had soon discerned two toffs standing by the door, and he had no intention of letting them escape

if he could help it. He bowed obsequiously, showing his tobacco-stained teeth in an ingratiating smile, and Jim regarded him in silence.

"And what can I do for you gentlemen?" said MacTavert. "There is a good table unoccupied at the other end of the room, and I think I may say that my whisky is good. Or champagne, if you prefer it," he added, hopefully.

"Show us the table," said Jim curtly, and we followed MacTavert across the room.

"Now bring me some whisky," he continued, when we were seated.

"Certainly, sir," returned the other. "And if there is any lady," he continued, with an odious leer, "who takes your fancy--you have merely got to mention the matter to me."

"There is," said Jim quietly. "That girl over there dancing with that Dago. Tell her that my friend and I will be honoured if she will join us at our table."

MacTavert rubbed his hands together; things were progressing altogether to his fancy. Just as there was a special tariff for wines when consumed by visitors like ourselves, so also there was a special tariff for girls.

"Leave it all to me," he remarked, confidentially. "And if"--his voice sank to a whisper--"you would care to smoke a pipe, or possibly----" He paused meaningly.

"I don't go in for opium or coke or any other rotten dope," said Jim shortly. "Get my whisky."

For a moment MacTavert's eyes gleamed angrily; he was not used to being spoken to in such a way. But a second glance at Jim's face decided him that speech on his part would be not only superfluous but unwise, and with a further bow he left us.

We saw him approach the table where Colette was sitting, and speak to her. She rose instantly and followed MacTavert across the room, leaving her late dancing partner scowling furiously. But he said nothing: it was pretty evident that what MacTavert said went in that place. He spoke to her with a kind of savage intensity as she tripped along at his side, and I thought she answered him back. Anyway, a sudden snarl showed on MacTavert's face, and he caught her roughly by the arm, only to pull himself together at once and regain his oily obsequiousness as he reached our table.

"This is Colette, sir," he said, pinching the girl's cheek playfully, and she promptly smacked his face.

"Splendid!" said Jim lazily. "Do it again."

For a moment I thought MacTavert would murder the girl. His great hands shot out towards her, and she shrank back terrified. And then Jim spoke again.

"I ordered whisky, barman."

MacTavert swung round.

"Who the hell are you calling barman?" he snarled. "I'm the owner."

"Are you?" drawled Jim. "How fearfully jolly for all concerned! But it doesn't alter the fact that I ordered whisky."

The veins stood out on MacTavert's neck like whipcord, and his face turned to an ugly red. There was no mistaking the utter contempt in Jim's voice, and MacTavert was not accustomed

to contempt. But he found, as others had found before him, that there was something about this tall, perfectly-dressed individual, with his quite unnecessary eyeglass, which lent force to the old saw concerning discretion being the better part of valour. And after a moment or two he swung round on his heel and slouched over to the bar to get the required drink, while Colette sat down, and Jim laughed.

"He wanted me to make you order champagne," she said, "and I wouldn't. Oh, thank God you've come! It terrifies me, this place--more and more every moment."

With a scowl on his face, MacTavert lurched over to the table and banged down the whisky.

"Four dollars," he grunted.

"Think again," said Jim quietly. "I'm not buying your beastly saloon: merely two glasses of whisky."

"If you don't like the price you can clear out," snarled MacTavert.

"I shall clear out exactly when I please," returned Jim. "In the meantime, there's a dollar for the whisky. And if you don't like the price you can take your poison away and throw it down the sink."

And once again MacTavert retired muttering, with the dollar bill in his great mottled hand. He was being beaten all along the line, and he knew it. He was up against something he couldn't understand--something that left him vaguely frightened, though no power on earth would have extracted such an admission from him.

Drunken sailors, mere strength in any form, he could cope with--had coped with successfully for the whole of his life. But in Jim he had encountered something new, and like most ill-educated men, anything new made him uneasy. It was outside his experience to be calmly and superciliously browbeaten in his own saloon. He relapsed into dark mutterings behind his bar, assuring himself with frequent repetition that if he had any further lip from this damned toff he personally would throw him into the street.

And in the meantime the toff was smiling across the table at a very frightened girl into whose face the colour was slowly coming back.

"My name is Jim," he said quietly, "and his is Dick. So now we all know one another, Colette. And what we want to know is how you came into this unpleasant place. Then, after we've heard that, we must see how we can get you out."

The girl looked at him with shining eyes; to her he seemed the most wonderful man she had ever seen.

"You'll think me such a little fool when I tell you," she whispered miserably; and Jim smiled again.

"We've all of us made idiots of ourselves at one time or another. Tell me, Colette--you're not French, are you--like your name?"

The girl laughed. "No; I'm English." Her voice faltered for a moment. "I come from Sussex; from a little village lying under the South Downs."

Her eyes had filled with tears, and suddenly Jim leant across the table.

"Steady, kid, don't cry. I want to talk to you about that little village. I want to find out how you

came to leave it."

And then, little by little, we heard the whole pitiful tale--not new to those who listen, but bitterly, tragically new to each one who tells. And as we heard it, told falteringly with many a pause, my only coherent wish was to have the throats of some of the men involved between my hands. I left MacTavert to Jim, who was staring at that gentleman with smouldering eyes.

She had run away from home, had the girl who was called Colette. It was dull, and a gentleman had assured her that she would be able to earn big money in London. On the stage, he said--pretty clothes, and jewels and lots of dancing and amusement. So she'd stolen out of the house one night, and gone up to London to an address he had told her of. She had never seen her mother and father again--and for a time, as she came to that part of her story, she fell silent. The automatic piano thumped on in MacTavert's bar, the haze of tobacco smoke grew denser, but all Colette could see was a little cottage, way back in Sussex, with honeysuckle climbing round the windows and a kitchen spotlessly clean. Just home--that's all...

The Dago she had been dancing with lurched by with a snarl, which effaced itself as he caught Jim's eyes fixed on him, and with a little start Colette came back to reality. She was telling us her story--that new and original story--little dreaming how well we knew every line before she spoke it. For the main theme is always the same--only the details differ.

The address in London to which she had gone so hopefully turned out to be a theatrical agency. And there an oily gentleman had taken stock of her, and offered her a job on the spot with a company that was to go on tour in South America. He had assured her that all she required was experience, and that on her return he, personally, would get her an engagement at a West-End theatre. And she swallowed it whole, as hundreds of other unfortunate girls have swallowed it.

Then came the awakening. The company had played for a week in a fifth-rate hall in Valparaiso to find last Saturday night that the manager had decamped with what money there was. They were stranded--penniless, or practically so--in a foreign town, with not a soul to turn to for assistance. The rest we knew already; the woman with the kindly offer of assistance--the woman in MacTavert's pay.

"She seemed so nice," said Colette, miserably, "and then I found myself here."

Once again the poor child's eyes filled with tears; she was paying a big price for her one mistake of foolish vanity in England. And Jim's eyes were very gentle as he looked at her.

"I see, Colette," he said quietly. "I understand. I'm thinking it was very lucky you saw us today."

For a moment he looked at me; how lucky it was I don't think the girl quite realised. A good deal of the innocence of that little Sussex village still remained to Colette.

"And so now," continued Jim cheerfully, "the only thing that remains is to get you away. I don't think we'll bother about your box and things to-night; I'll fix up about them to-morrow morning. We'll just walk out, and I'll find you a room at some hotel."

He smiled as he saw the look of amazed hope on the girl's face--a look which faded almost as quickly as it had come.

"Well--what's troubling you now?" he said.

"I can't, Jim," she cried. "It's wonderful of you to have thought of it--but I can't."

"Why not?" His voice was a little stern.

"There was a missionary here last night," she said, at length. "And he took one of the girls away. And that brute MacTavert's got two men he keeps here. And they threw him into the docks and nearly drowned him."

For a moment Jim looked puzzled; then with ostentatious deliberation he lit a cigarette.

"And you're afraid, Colette, that they will do that to me?"

She nodded. "I couldn't have you hurt for me," she answered. "I'm not worth it."

And Jim was polishing his eyeglass, which had suddenly become a bit misty.

"Thank you, little girl," he said quietly, after a while. "That's awfully sweet of you. But you needn't worry about it, I promise you. Somehow or other, I don't think MacTavert and his pals will throw me or Dick into any dock. And if they do," he went on, with a sudden grin, "I'll guarantee that they will come in with us."

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Come along; we'll go now."

He led the way towards the door, and after a moment's hesitation the girl followed him. And they had got half-way when MacTavert saw them. With a shout of anger he rushed out from behind the bar, and reached the door just ahead of Jim.

"Where are you taking that gel to?" he demanded, barring the way.

Instantly a silence settled on the room; everyone craned forward with zest to see what was going to happen. And Colette, her breath coming in little frightened gasps, covered close to me, while her eyes were fixed on the tall figure of Jim just in front of her.

"In England, MacTavert," he remarked, and every word cut like a knife through the room, "in England you would be flogged with the cat for your method of living. Unfortunately, we are not in England, and so I propose to take the law into my own hands. If you don't get out of my way I shall hit you."

And MacTavert laughed, or rather he bared his yellow teeth in what was intended to be a grin. At last this man was talking the language that he understood, and when that language was talked MacTavert, to do him justice, was no coward.

"You'll hit me, Percy, will you?" he mimicked. "Sure, you frighten me, darling."

A burst of laughter went round the room, which died away in a gasp of astonishment. At one moment MacTavert was standing there leering at Jim--the next he had disappeared. And only the drumming of his feet, which stuck out from under a table that he had overturned in his fall, indicated his position. Not till the drumming ceased did Jim turn and contemplate the room.

"When he takes interest again," he remarked pleasantly, to no one in particular, "you can remind him that I gave him fair warning."

He passed through the door and we followed--no one lifting a finger to prevent us.

"Easy money," said Jim, grinning, "but I think we'll get a move on now. When MacTavert wakes up he won't be full of brotherly love."

We walked quickly away up the street, the girl between us, and as we turned the corner that hid the flaring notice out of sight, I looked back. As far as I could see the street was deserted, and I breathed more freely. At last we reached a small and respectable-looking hotel, and after a brief survey Jim decided it would do. A room was available, and he engaged it for Colette.

"I'll be round in the morning," he said, cutting short her thanks with a smile. "Until then you go to bed and sleep."

We watched her go up the stairs before we left. At the top she turned and waved her hand, and Jim waved back.

"Poor little kid," he said, as we went out into the street. "Thank heaven we were here, and she saw us! Otherwise ..."

He paused suddenly, gripping my arm, and stared across the road.

"Under that tree, Dick," he whispered. "Do you see anything?"

And it seemed to me there was a shadow on the path such as a man might throw. But when we got there and looked about there was nothing. The road was deserted, and at last we turned and retraced our steps towards our own hotel.

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It was eleven o'clock next morning that we returned to the hotel where we had left Colette. And we found she'd gone!

The clerk, in the intervals of picking his teeth, informed us dispassionately that a message had come round for her to the effect that the gentleman with the eyeglass wished her to come at once to his hotel--the Grand. And she'd gone. Apparently her bill had been paid, and he could tell us nothing more. A car had been waiting and she had got in. With which he returned to his teeth, while Jim cursed with marvellous fluency under his breath.

"What a fool I was, Dick! We ought to have taken her to the Grand." We were standing in the sunny street outside the hotel. "That swine MacTavert has got her back."

"What about going to the police?" I suggested.

"Man, we've got no proof," he cried. "And even if we had, the police in a place like this are no more use than a sick headache. We've got to handle this thing ourselves, Dick. Are you on?"

"Of course," I said briefly. "What's the first move?"

"A further conversation with MacTavert," he remarked. "And at once."

The dancing saloon was empty as we turned into it. The reek of stale smoke and spirits was worse than the night before, but it was evidently too early for the habitués to arrive.

"So much the better," said Jim grimly. "It gives us a clear field."

He gave a shout of "Bar!" and after a moment or two MacTavert's evil face appeared through a door. He stared at us for a time in silence; then he pressed an electric bell twice.

"This bar don't open till midday," he remarked at length.

"That's very fortunate," said Jim placidly. "It gives us an hour to break it up in. How is the face this morning?"

"Get out of it!" roared MacTavert, completely losing control of himself.

"Certainly," answered Jim. "The instant that you produce Colette I shall be delighted to go."

But the scoundrel wasn't going to give himself away.

"So you've lost her, have you?" he sneered. "She fooled you nicely last night, didn't she?"

He was leaning over the bar, shaking with laughter.

"You dear little mother's innocent, with your little pane of glass in your eye! I admit you can hit, but you've a lot to learn yet, Percy. Sling him out, boys," he snarled suddenly, "and half-murder him!"

I swung round to see two men creeping on Jim from behind--two men who had entered noiselessly while MacTavert was talking. They were great, powerful brutes, in better condition than MacTavert, and they thought they had a soft thing on. Slinging out a toff with an eyeglass was just pure pleasure--better even than half-drowning a missionary.

It was then I discovered what a wonderful weapon a bottle of French vermouth can be if used skilfully. So did the leading tough. He crashed like a log, with vermouth dripping from his head, and Jim returned the broken bottle to MacTavert.

"A poor fighter," he murmured placidly, though his eyes were very bright and watchful. "Is your other friend going to sling me out?"

But the second man showed no signs of attempting to do anything of the sort. He was muttering to MacTavert behind the bar, and suddenly the latter began to grin.

"There's something up, Jim," I whispered, and he nodded without speaking.

"Well, Percy," said MacTavert, at length, "we've kind of come to the conclusion that you must be powerful fond of that little girl. So out of the kindness of my heart I guess you may take her--if you can. She is through that door there and up the stairs. The room on the right is hers. And, as I say, you may take her--if you can."

The leer had deepened on his face, and Jim was watching him narrowly.

"Not afraid, are you?" sneered MacTavert. "I'll come with you and show you the way."

He slouched over to the door, and we followed him. Jim had his hand in his pocket, and I could see the outline of his gun, but if MacTavert saw it he gave no sign. He led the way up the stairs, and paused at the top waiting for us. And it was then I noticed that the other man had left the bar. It was empty save for the unconscious scoundrel on the floor.

"Here's the room," remarked MacTavert, flinging open the door and leading the way in.

"You infernal swine!" roared Jim, as we saw the terrified girl. She was lashed to a chair and gagged, and in an instant he was beside her undoing the rope, and Colette was free!

"Cover him, Dick!" he ordered briefly, and my gun went into MacTavert's waistcoat. His great, coarse face was within a few inches of mine, but it was the look of triumph in his eyes that warned me of the trap. He was staring at something over my shoulder, and suddenly he gave a great shout of "Now!"

I swung round, like the fool I was, and the next moment he'd knocked my revolver away, and his hands were round my throat. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jim fighting desperately with two men who had sprung through the door, but it wasn't there that the trap lay; it wasn't that which had caused the sudden shout of "Now!"

Coming towards the window from the outside along a flat piece of roof was the man who had been talking to MacTavert downstairs. He had a revolver in his hand, and he was covering Jim through the window--Jim, who was all unconscious of the danger. I strove to shout--to warn him, but MacTavert had got my throat, and it was all I could do to hold my own. And all the time the triumph deepened in MacTavert's eyes.

The two men were being flung all over the place by Jim, but they hung on to him. And steadily they manoeuvred him nearer and nearer to the window. He had his back towards it, and once the man outside raised his revolver, only to drop it again as the three of them spun round, spoiling his shot.

But it couldn't last long, and I put forth one supreme effort to get the better of MacTavert. We crashed, both of us rolling over and over on the floor. And so I didn't see the actual deed by which Colette saved our lives. All I knew was that suddenly we were fighting in darkness, MacTavert and I. I heard dimly the crashing of the window, and the splintering of wooden shutters. Then two shots rang out quite quickly, and the room was light again.

Instinctively MacTavert and I loosened our hold on one another, and got dazedly to our feet. And, save for our heavy breathing and a little sobbing whimper from that wonderful girl, there was silence in the room.

"She closed those wooden shutters," said Jim at length, and his voice was a little dazed. "She closed those wooden shutters, and put her arm where the bar ought to be that bolts them. She hadn't time, I guess, for the bar. And he broke her arm for her."

He looked at the man who had done it--the man who had smashed through the shutters, and fired at him--and he was lying motionless on his face. He looked at Colette, and she had fainted. And then he looked at MacTavert, and his face was terrible to see.

"Get out!" snarled Jim to the two men whom he had been fighting. He slipped his own revolver back in his pocket. "Get out--or I might shoot you, as I shot him."

And the men slunk out, leaving MacTavert alone. For a moment Jim stared at him, and his eyes were hard and merciless. Then without a word he sprang on him, and MacTavert gave a hoarse cry for help. But there was no one to answer it, and Jim laughed gently.

He could have done it by himself, for MacTavert was like a child in his hands. But since I was there to help him it took less time. We lashed him to the bed face down.

"The cat is the proper weapon for MacTavert," Jim remarked, "as I think I told you last night. But since I haven't got one a leather strap must do instead."

And he flogged MacTavert with his leather belt till MacTavert fainted, even as Colette had fainted. Then, with the tenderness of a woman, he picked the girl up in his arms, and carried her down the stairs to the saloon below. It was still empty, and we chartered a passing cab, and got in. It was on the way to a doctor that Colette opened her eyes and looked at him.

"He didn't hurt you, Jim?" she whispered.

And Jim bent and kissed her. I don't think he could quite trust his voice.

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We fixed up a passage for her, and as I said before she has two little Colettes of her own now. But I wonder if she realises....

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## V. *The Fight at Bull Mine Creek*

We first heard the rumour at Sydney three months later, from a man in our hotel. And two nights after he confirmed it: gold had been found at a place called Bull Mine Creek. The wildest stories were flying around: it was going to be a second Klondyke.

There was gold in the river, masses of it. And since easily worked placers are nearly all exhausted, thousands of the old-time miners arrived in force. Deep placer deposits, requiring shaft sinking and therefore capital, are to-day the source of almost all the gold in the world, and the gold-mining industry is a highly organised affair. The wild rushes of the last century are things of the past, though occasionally they still occur. And Bull Mine Creek was one of them.

Exactly why Jim and I went there I don't know. Novelty, perhaps--a new experience; and new experiences were the wine of life to him. We didn't much mind if we made a fortune or not, though we should neither of us have refused it if we had. Incidentally we didn't, and what we did net after expenses had been paid, we handed over to One-eyed Mike, an old scoundrel of repulsive aspect, who had lost his left eye in circumstances we never fully got to the bottom of. He was a remarkable character, was Mike. His nationality varied according to his company--with us he was English, and he appeared to have been in every mining rush during the last thirty years. I think he robbed us right and left, though like the Chinese servant, he took care that nobody else did. And he knew everything there was to know about the game.

He talked about sluice-boxes and riffles in the intervals of telling the most lurid stories I have ever listened to, and for six weeks we camped out by our claim some fifteen miles from the town of Bull Mine Creek.

The town consisted of a few shanties, a store and the hotel. Before the rush it must have been a fairly pleasant little place; within a week of the boom it became a miniature hell on earth. Gambling saloons were opened, and the place was invaded by a horde of blackguards whose sole aim in life was to see that the miner and his gold were soon parted. And in many cases it wasn't a difficult proposition. Unlimited drink, gold to chuck about, and crooked gambling after the drink had taken effect generally produced the desired result, after which the miner returned to his claim with an empty "poke" and a bursting head.

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It was One-eyed Mike who insisted on going down to the town for Christmas. And since he had been going teetotal--or rather confining himself to only one bottle of whisky a day--for some weeks, we felt he deserved a respite. So Jim gave him his share of the proceeds up to date, and on Christmas Eve we all drove into Bull Mine Creek.

Outside the door of the hotel was a buggy drawn by two fine Arabs, around which stood a ring of loungers contemplatively spitting. The horses were tied up to the rail of the veranda, and Jim glanced at them as we drove past.

"A nice pair of cattle," he remarked. "I wonder whom they belong to."

The next moment our own horse stopped suddenly, and then gave a sudden plunge forward. She was not used to having her head nearly pulled off unexpectedly, and Jim was certainly not accustomed to treat an animal in such a way. In some surprise I looked at him, and the expression on his face amazed me. It also decided me against making any comment.

Instead, I looked back and made a further inspection of the owner of the two Arabs, whose

sudden appearance had so upset my companion. He was a tall, good-looking man whose age I put at about thirty. He had a small, fair moustache, and was rather of the pink and white type. So much I saw before we turned the corner and were out of sight. My last glimpse of him was leading his two horses towards the back of the hotel while the ring of loungers still contemplatively spat.

Jim drove on in silence to the shanty where we were putting up. He was frowning thoughtfully, and underneath the beard which he had allowed to grow during the past two months his mouth was set in a straight line. But he said nothing, even after we had put the mare up; and he only nodded curtly at One-eyed Mike's earnest hope that we would raise the roof with him that night. So Mike, fully capable of performing the operation on his own, departed to the hotel to lay the foundation for a forty-eight hour jag.

"Did you see that fellow, Dick?" said Jim at length. "The fellow at the hotel with those two greys?"

"I did," I answered. "Who is he?"

Jim smiled a little grimly.

"He is John James Hildebrand, fifteenth Marquis of Sussex, the eldest son of the Duke of Plumpton."

"All that, is he?" I said. "One rather wonders what John James Hildebrand is doing at Bull Mine Creek."

"One does," agreed Jim. "Excessively so."

And with that he swung on his heel, and I saw him no more for some hours. I wrote two or three long overdue letters, and then having nothing better to do, I strolled along the dusty road to the hotel to get a drink. The place was filling up with the crowd who had come in for Christmas, and the first man I saw was One-eyed Mike. He beckoned to me joyously and I went over to his table.

"There's going to be some fun here to-night, boy!" he cried as I sat down. "There's a dude that calls himself Hildebrand wandering around, and the boys are just crazy to know him better. They want to know if he's real."

So the fifteenth Marquis of Sussex had decided not to advertise the fact.

"What's he doing here, Mike?" I asked.

"Come out to look at some property he's got, so he told the boss here. Taken a room, and wants his dinner served upstairs." Mike began to chuckle again. "Look out; here he is."

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John James Hildebrand had just entered the room from the other end, and I watched him curiously. There was no doubt that Mike's prophecy was going to be fulfilled; the fun had started already. Following close at his heels came half a dozen miners, all gazing at him in rapt awe and admiration. The baiting of John James had begun in earnest.

He halted by the bar, and the miners instantly came to a standstill.

"Boys," shouted the leader, "let us have silence! Mr. Hildebrand is about to consume some liquid refreshment. And the slightest sound might interfere with Mr. Hildebrand's enjoyment."

A dead silence settled on the room, and I wondered how he was going to take it.

"Quite right," he remarked, with a faint, rather pleasant drawl. "Which is why I don't ask you to join me. Six of you--all drinking--would fairly put the lid on."

The leader roared with laughter, and I grinned gently. Quite obviously John James had the right stuff in him.

"I'm dashed if you drink alone, Mr. Hildebrand," cried the leader coming up to the counter. "You drink with me right here."

He shouted for a round, and they formed up on each side of John James.

"I'm not so certain that you are going to have your fun, Mike," I remarked, when suddenly he leant forward and stared at the door which had just swung open.

"Holy Moses!" he muttered. "Here's Pete Cornish. I didn't know he was up these parts."

A sudden cessation of conversation took place as the man who had just come in moved up to the bar. As if he had noticed it, and attributed it to his sudden entry, a faint smile hovered round his lips. His face was almost bloodless, and a great red scar across his right cheek emphasised the pallor. But the most noticeable feature of the man's face was a pair of very light blue eyes which seemed to stare unwinkingly from under his big forehead at the object of his scrutiny. He stooped a little, but even with the stoop he measured over six feet. And the depth of his chest betokened his immense strength.

"Steer clear of him, boy," muttered Mike to me. "I haven't seen him for six years, but I guess he hasn't changed. And he's the devil incarnate, is Pete Cornish. I once saw him break a man's back with his hands alone--across his knees. He's spent fifteen years of his life in prison as it is."

But I wasn't paying much attention to Mike's reminiscences. I was watching Pete Cornish. He came to a standstill just behind John James, and for a moment or two he stood there in silence. It was the miner who had called for drinks who first saw him, and he turned round with a somewhat sickly smile.

"Hullo, Pete!" he said, "will you join us?"

"I will," answered Cornish quietly. "And who is your friend?"

"Hildebrand," returned the other. "This is Pete Cornish."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hildebrand," said Cornish. "And what might you be doing? Prospecting?"

"I've come out to see a property of mine," answered Hildebrand briefly.

The blue eyes never left his face for an instant, even when their owner raised his glass to his lips. There was something baleful in their unblinking intensity, something almost terrifying which the quiet voice and general immobility seemed only to enhance. The man never moved; he merely stared until after a while the other fidgeted a little and turned away. And the faintest flicker of a smile appeared on Cornish's lips.

"I seem to recognise your face, Mr. Hildebrand," he remarked as he put down his empty glass. "In fact, I am sure I do. And so, you will drink with me."

It was not a question; it was a statement, and Hildebrand flushed slightly.

"Thank you, no," he answered. "I don't want anything more to drink at present."

"I said, Mr. Hildebrand, that you would drink with me," said the other gently, and it was then I noticed that five of the original six miners who had lined up at the bar had slipped unostentatiously away. Only the leader remained, and he was shuffling his feet.

"The guy is all right, Pete," he muttered awkwardly. "Guess he may not have the head for our whisky."

The blue eyes temporarily transferred their gaze to the last speaker.

"I'm not quite clear how you come into this matter," remarked Cornish. "I wasn't aware that you were even in the picture."

The miner turned and stammered out something, but Cornish simply ignored his existence.

"Now, Mr. Hildebrand, you will drink a little toast with me," he continued, pushing a glass towards him.

"I have already said that I will not have another, thank you," returned the other icily. "I drink when I like, and with whom I like."

He nodded briefly and turned to leave the bar. But before he had taken two steps Cornish had stretched out a hand and caught him by the arm.

"Will you kindly leave go of my arm?" said Hildebrand quietly, though two ugly red spots had appeared on his face.

"When you have drunk my toast, Mr. Hildebrand; not before."

For a moment John James, fifteenth Marquis of Sussex, stood very still. He was no fool, and he knew that if it came to a scrap he might with luck last exactly one second with the man who held his arm. At the same time he came of a stock to whom the meaning of the word fear was unknown.

"And what is your toast?" he asked at length.

"Damnation to the English--especially their aristocracy," answered the other mildly. "Your glass, Mr. Hildebrand."

The Marquis of Sussex smiled faintly, as he took the glass in his right hand. "Do you play cricket, Mr. Cornish?" he asked.

"I do not," returned the other, looking slightly surprised.

"Because if you had ever fielded at cover point, you would realise that this is a very good return to the wicket keeper."

It was done in one movement like a flash of light, and the heavy glass broke in pieces on Cornish's face. He staggered back a step with a curse, letting go of the other's arm, and without undue hurry, but also without undue pause, John James Hildebrand left the room. For a moment or two I expected Cornish to rush after him, but he didn't. He stood in the centre of the room wiping the whisky from his face. Then, without a word, he too turned and left the bar by the door which led into the street.

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It was the miner by the counter who broke the silence.

"Good for the youngster!" he cried ecstatically. "But, my word, boys! Pete will kill him for that!"

A murmur of assent went round the room, which was stilled by the sudden reappearance of Hildebrand. He stood by the door, and glanced about him; then he smiled.

"Oh! he's gone, has he?" he said cheerfully. "It struck me after I got upstairs that I had left a bit quickly, and that he might think I was afraid of him. But you see, gentlemen--my wife is with me, and one doesn't want to get mixed up in a scrap."

The miner at the counter took a couple of steps forward.

"See here, Mr. Hildebrand," he said earnestly, "you've proved yourself. You've got guts; you've got nerve, and I want to apologise here and now for ragging you. But for God's sake, man, get away out of this! I know Pete Cornish, and I know his reputation, and I tell you straight he'll pretty near kill you for bunging that glass in his face. He ain't a man; he's a blind, mad, roaring devil when he gets going. Get away now--with your wife. Them greys of yours are good for another fifty miles. We'll get you into your trap, won't we, boys?"

A murmur of assent came from the others present, and the man by the door gave a quick smile.

"I thank you, gentlemen," he said, quietly. "But if you imagine that my wife and I are going a fifty-mile drive, or for that matter a fifty-yard one, because some renegade Irishman gets gay, you misunderstand the situation. And while I am at it I must apologise for a small deceit I have practised on you. I'm really Lord Sussex. Hildebrand is a sort of family name."

With another smile he was gone, and a sort of sigh went round the room. And it struck me that the general feeling was voiced by One-eyed Mike as he pessimistically finished the whisky.

"I don't know nothing about Sussex--nor family names," he remarked. "But what I do know is that there's going to be dirty work here to-night, and I guess he's going to be the dirt."

I found Jim at the shanty when I got back. He had shaved, and changed his clothes, and with his feet on the mantelpiece he was reading a month-old newspaper. He glanced up as I came in, and dropped the paper on the floor.

"Anything doing?" he asked.

"Quite a lot," I answered. "Your friend John James Hildebrand has quite distinguished himself."

He listened while I told him what had occurred, and a faint look of surprise crossed his face.

"I didn't know he had it in him," he remarked thoughtfully. "In fact, I have always been under the impression that his principal claim to notoriety lay in the fact that being his father's eldest son, he would in the fullness of time become a duke."

And for, I think, the first time in our friendship I saw Jim Maitland sneer.

"What of it, Jim?" I said. "Why the sarcasm?"

"Nothing, old man," he answered. "At any rate nothing that I care to go into. It's an old story anyway, and I thought it had died in my mind years ago. Only seeing him unexpectedly this evening brought it back--that's all."

"Well, from what I gathered there is every possibility of trouble to-night," I said. "I must say that that man Cornish is quite the ugliest-looking customer I've ever seen. And I didn't like the absolute silence in which he left the bar. If he'd sworn or made a fuss it would have been more natural."

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"John James must fight his own battles."

"He seems quite capable of it," I answered shortly. "But I wish his wife weren't there."

"His wife?" said Jim very slowly. "His wife, did you say?"

"Certainly. Stopping at the hotel with him."

He was staring at me almost dazedly.

"Ruth--at that hotel? Good Heavens! man--she can't be!"

I made no comment on his use of her Christian name.

"He told us so," I answered, "at the same time as he announced who he was."

And now Jim was pacing up and down the room with his hands in his pockets. He was frowning deeply, and every now and then he paused and stared out of the window.

Already some of the boys had begun their celebrations, and occasional shouts of half-drunken laughter came from the street outside.

"The fellow must be mad!" exploded Jim suddenly. "Stark, staring mad to bring her to a place like this on Christmas Eve. Confound it! has he left his nurse in England?"

"It's not the boys I'm worried about, Jim," I said gravely. "They won't hurt a woman even if they are a bit tight. And, anyway, presumably she will stop in her room. It's that man Cornish who frightens me. I tell you the men at that bar dried up like so many frightened puppies as he came in. And he means murder."

Jim laughed contemptuously.

"You've got Cornish on the brain, Dick."

And even as he spoke the door was flung open and One-eyed Mike came in. He had been running and he spoke in gasps.

"Cornish!" he cried. "Pete Cornish! He's raving mad up in the hotel. He's got that Lord fellow who threw the liquor in his face, and he's got his wife, and he's doing trick-firing with a couple of revolvers."

And as he finished I realised we were alone: Jim was racing up the darkening street towards the hotel.

I heard six shots ring out like bullets from a machine-gun as I followed him, and just ten seconds behind Jim I turned into the bar I had so recently left. It was an amazing scene, and that first impression of it is photographed indelibly on my brain. Huddled in small groups sat some twenty miners, and even the drunkest of them seemed to have sobered up. In the centre of the room and hanging from a beam swung a smoking naphtha lamp. Underneath it stood Pete Cornish, holding in one arm a girl, whose look of frozen horror failed to hide her loveliness.

Seated on a chair against the wall was the fifteenth Marquis of Sussex, and like a halo round his head there was a row of holes in the wall. As Mike said, Pete Cornish was trick-firing.

The man on the chair was sitting bolt upright, while his knuckles gleamed like ivory where his hands gripped the seat. His face was white, but with rage--not fear: and his blazing eyes met

those staring blue ones without a quiver.

"Don't move, my darling," said Cornish with an ugly snarl. "You might spoil my aim. And that would be a dreadful thing for your dear husband, wouldn't it?"

Again the six shots rang out, and the wood round the seated man's head splintered anew. The girl moaned piteously, and her husband cursed and stirred in his chair.

"My other gun," said Cornish thoughtfully, and a horrible-looking brute came forward with a freshly loaded six-shooter. And at that John James Hildebrand sprang. It was his only chance, but it was pitiful to watch. As well might a Pekinese spring at a bull-terrier, if one may so insult a grand breed of dog by comparison with Pete Cornish.

He tried to get home with his fist, did John James--and Cornish hit him once. He hit him straight in the face with a grunt of passion, and the poor devil pitched forward and lay still.

"I still want my gun," said Cornish thoughtfully, and as he spoke one solitary shot rang out. The man who was holding the revolver cursed hideously as his hand was shattered, and Jim laughed gently. Slowly the blue eyes came round and fastened on him, staring unwinking; and for a moment or two there was silence--broken at length by a little gasping cry of "Jim!" from the girl.

"Did you fire that shot?" asked Cornish softly, dropping the girl and taking a step forward.

"I did," answered Jim, equally softly. "And I would suggest your standing very still, because I'm now going to fire five more. Stand away, Ruth"--but the girl was on her knees beside her husband.

The five shots cut away a strip from Cornish's shirt, and they sounded almost continuous so incredibly quickly were they fired.

"I have also another gun," drawled Jim, "so that any attempt to pick up your own would be a little unwise. Dick, would you retrieve it?"

But Cornish never moved a muscle. The scar on his face showed red and angry, but the eyes, unwinking as ever, stared, and went on staring at Jim.

"Quite passable shooting," he said at length. "And what do you propose should be the next move? Or do we stand like this all night?"

"We do not," answered Jim. "I have been informed of the toast which you suggested Lord Sussex should drink, just before he wasted good liquor on your face, and it fails to appeal to me. So having given you a little of your own medicine in the shooting line, we will now try the second form of exercise. We will fight here and now to a finish with our fists."

A sudden gleam came into Cornish's eyes--merciless and triumphant; and an audible gasp ran round the room. Was this fellow with an eyeglass completely insane? But only One-eyed Mike said anything, and he was nearly frantic.

"For God's sake, sir," he whispered to Jim, "don't do it! He's been a professional, has Cornish--and he's a slaughterer even with gloves."

But Jim paid no attention. He was peeling off his shirt and giving me instructions.

"If he fights fair, Dick, do nothing. But if any of his pals get gay, I rely on you. I'm not under any delusions as to what I've taken on."

For a moment he glanced across the room to where the girl sat crouched on the floor with her unconscious husband's head pillowed on her lap, and he smiled whimsically.

"I'm over it now," he said, "but seven years ago I thought my world had finished when she turned me down for him. But he's a good boy, Dick--and if Cornish knocks me out--well, again I rely on you."

And just then the girl raised her head and looked full at Jim. In her eyes was a wonderful message, for the Marchioness of Sussex was merely a very primitive woman at that moment. Certainly it was the message Jim wanted, and he smiled at her reassuringly as he stepped into the circle of light thrown by the naphtha lamp.

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Men still talk about that fight on Christmas Eve in the hotel at Bull Mine Creek. And now as I write about it, it comes back to me as if it had taken place only yesterday. Word had flashed round the camp like lightning that a man was taking on Pete Cornish, bare fists, to a finish, and men came pouring in till the room was crammed almost to suffocation. They stood on the bar, they lined the windows, and very soon it was obvious which way their sympathies lay. Not one out of ten knew Jim, but there wasn't a soul in the room who did not know--and hate Pete Cornish. The betting it is true started at five to one on Cornish, for his form was known, and money is money; then the odds shortened and held steady at threes, when Jim, stripped to the waist, was sized up. But even before the first blow was struck there wasn't a soul who wouldn't willingly have lost his money to see Cornish down and out.

There was no time wasted on preliminaries, no introductions, no retinues of seconds. But one could feel the nerve-gripping tension as the two men faced one another, swaying slightly on their feet under the flaring lamp. Cornish, his blue staring eyes fixed unwinkingly on Jim, was a shade the bigger man of the two. As he stood, crouching a little forward, his huge depth of chest was more apparent than when he had had his clothes on, and a little feeling of sick anxiety got hold of me and made it difficult to swallow. Without doubt he was an amazingly powerful brute, and there was a look of implacable rage on his face that boded ill for Jim if the worst happened. And then I glanced at Jim; took in the glistening health of his skin, the clear, unconcerned eyes, and felt better. And in my own mind I sized up the position to find later that it was exactly how Jim had sized it up himself. Cornish was the stronger man of the two; Cornish was probably the better boxer; but Cornish was not in such good condition.

And then they closed, and a kind of sigh went round the packed spectators. Smack, smack and they were away again, with a jaw jolting punch on Jim's jaw as Cornish's contribution, and a heavy body blow on the other side of the ledger which made Cornish draw in his breath with a hiss. Not quite such a spectacular punch perhaps, but as Jim said to me afterwards, it was that first blow that probably won him the fight. For it rather more than touched up Cornish's wind, and there lay his weakness. It was a case of bellows to mend, and inside a minute a sullen-looking purple patch was showing on his ribs.

But there was a long way to go yet, and a punishing way. Cornish was no fool; he knew his weakness, none better. And he started to force the fighting. A quick decision was his best hope, and for the next three minutes my heart was in my mouth. Savagely, but never wildly, he went for Jim, taking his own punishment without a sound. And at least two of his upper cuts, if they had got home, would have ended the fight there and then.

But they didn't. Coolly and warily Jim gave ground, letting the other man follow him round and

round the room, and concentrating always on his one objective, Cornish's body. Twice, three times he landed--heavy punishing blows, and was away before the other had time to counter. He was bleeding from the mouth, and one eye was horribly swollen.

The room was deadly silent. The patter of their feet was the only sound; that, and the thing that was music to me, Cornish's laboured breathing. And then suddenly an angry roar burst out.

"Too low, Cornish--foul!"

With a snarl Cornish sprang back, but Jim was smiling now. An attempted foul right enough, but countered just in time, and Jim changed his tactics. Rightly he guessed that it was the other man's last throw--his breathing was becoming more and more painful. From the defensive he changed to the attack. He gave Cornish not one second's respite; he was here, there and everywhere waiting for the opportunity of a knock-out. Twice Cornish hit him, heavy stopping rib binders, but he was weakening perceptibly. His blue eyes fixed and implacable still stared at Jim from his swollen face, but he was getting slower and slower, while he sucked in air in great wheezing gasps. And then quite suddenly came the end. Jim feinted at his body, and as his guard dropped Jim hit him under the jaw. Feet, body, weight were exactly right, and the blow sounded like the dropping of a billiard ball on a wooden floor.

So came the finish. Cornish spun round, his knees sagging under him, and crumpled up on the floor. He lay there motionless and inert--knocked out, insensible, and Jim stood watching him and rubbing the knuckles of his right hand. For the blow that had knocked out Cornish, had also broken three of Jim's fingers.

There was one dazed moment while nobody spoke; then pandemonium broke loose. A seething, shouting crowd of miners thronged across the floor to where Jim stood, led by One-eyed Mike. For Mike was nearly speechless; he could only babble strange oaths in an almost inarticulate voice.

"Knocked out--Cornish knocked out," he kept on saying over and over again. "And he's my pard, you sons of a gun--don't you forget it!"

But Jim with a faint smile on his battered face pushed through the crowd to where his clothes lay.

"Tell 'em, Dick," he muttered to me, "to come to our shanty. They can't stop here."

With that he was gone, and I crossed the room to Lord Sussex and his wife. He was conscious again, but it was the girl I was looking at. And I had to deliver my message three times before she took it in. She was rubbing her hands gently together, and the expression on her face would have caused a positive sensation in a drawing-room. But then in a drawing-room, I am told, one rarely sees two heavy-weights fight to a finish without gloves.

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We found Jim, clothed and comparatively presentable, trying to cut the wire of a champagne bottle. And the Marchioness of Sussex walked straight up to him and kissed him.

"I hardly know you, Jim," she said, a little tremulously, "without your eyeglass."

Jim grinned. "I'm afraid we shall have to dispense with that for a day or two."

"Good Heavens!" shouted John James Hildebrand, "it's Jim Maitland!"

"Bright boy," said his wife, and it struck me she wasn't quite at her ease.

"I only came to when you were fighting," he went on, "and I never recognised you."

And then he too dried up a little awkwardly.

"By Gad, old man," he said steadily, after a moment, "I feel it horribly, that I couldn't fight my own battles for myself. It was fine of you to take that swine on--fine!"

Jim poured out the champagne.

"I don't profess that I'd have done it five years ago or even to-night if Ruth hadn't been there," he remarked quietly.

And then he smiled suddenly.

"Yes--I would. Your going for him as you did was a darned sight better than my show. We can't all be made big, old chap."

He held out his sound hand.

"John," he said, "shake. I haven't loved you much for the past seven years. In fact I haven't loved you at all. I thought--well, I thought lots of things at the time. But the years have healed, and----" He turned to the girl. "Is it well, Ruth, with you?"

"Yes, Jim, very well," she answered gently. "My dear, I'm sorry. But it was because you thought, and let me see you thought, that it was owing to John being a duke one day, that I was annoyed."

Jim nodded thoughtfully.

"I was a fool," he said quietly. "Still," he added whimsically, "perhaps it was as well. I've had seven good years in the edge of beyond."

"You're very rude," laughed the girl. "We'll have to find you a wife now, Jim."

"You preferred your blessed old John James," Jim said, "and *she* thinks I'm a cur. She told me so."

"Then she must be mad," said Ruth indignantly. "Where is she, Jim?"

"In England somewhere."

"Then come home and stop with us and look for her."

Jim laughed. "I don't know about that, but if I come back I'll spend a few days at the ancestral seat if you'll have me."

"If you don't," cried John James, "you'll have to fight me, my boy. And in the meantime, Ruth, kiss him again."

"I was just going to," said his wife.

And she did.

"You'll come, Jim," she repeated. "And Mr. Leyton too."

"Shall we go back to England, Dick," he said with a little laugh.

"The one sure thing," I remarked, "is that if we decide to, we shan't."

"You see our habits, Ruth," he said. "We're dreadful people to have about the house. Anyway I don't know what you think, Dick, but we might take the first step on the journey in the near

future. My unalterable conviction is that gold mining at a hundred and ten in the shade is an overrated amusement."

And at that we left it.

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## VI. *Pete Cornish's Revenge*

It was the first time that the curtain had been lifted on the years before I met him. Even to me he had never talked. Jim wasn't made that way. But as he wished Lady Sussex a merry Christmas next morning I couldn't help wondering what would have happened if she had become Mrs. Maitland. And I think it must have been a close thing on her side as well as on his, though I've got no earthly right to say so. But as she said good-bye, it struck me that ...

Anyway--that's enough. This is no account of the love affairs of early youth.

We saw them off from the hotel, and stood in the road watching till the dust from their buggy had died away in the distance. And then we started to stroll back to our shanty.

"What I said last night, Dick," he said with a faint smile, "was perfectly right. If she hadn't married John James Hildebrand, she'd have married me. And I should have hunted and shot and fished in England; probably done a nice tour round the world chaperoned by Mr. Thomas Cook, and missed seven years of life."

He grinned ill-advisedly.

"Whew!" he cried, hurriedly composing his face, "don't let me laugh again. It hurts. Mr. Pete Cornish has got what you might describe as a fairly useful punch behind him."

"Once or twice last night, Jim, I thought he'd got you."

Jim nodded briefly.

"So did I. Especially in that first minute. I don't mind telling you, Dick, that if that first smack he got me on the jaw had been half an inch lower, it would have been a knock-out. It was his poor condition that did the trick."

We paused at the door of our shanty, as One-eyed Mike came down the steps to meet us. Judging from the torchlight appearance of that one eye, our friend and partner had celebrated Christmas Eve in his own fashion, but a broad smile adorned his face.

"A merry Christmas, boys!" he cried. And then he went into a fit of ecstatic chuckling. "To think of it: Peter Cornish knocked out with bare fists inside ten minutes. Why, man--I wouldn't have believed it possible. I just wouldn't have believed it possible! I guess I'd give every penny I possess in the world to see you do it again."

"You don't seem particularly fond of him, Mike," said Jim, as he went indoors.

"Fond of him," snarled the other. "Fond of that--swine. Eight years ago he swindled me out of the best claim I ever had, and when I taxed him with it, he and two of his pals waylaid me. That's where I lost this eye."

"A cheerful sort of customer," said Jim thoughtfully. "Well, you got a little bit of your own back last night anyway. And now that you're here, Mike, we might go into business. Dick and I are quitting: we're going back to England--perhaps...."

"Quitting?" There was genuine regret in One-eyed Mike's voice. "Boys, that's too bad. I guess you've got a real good claim up there."

"It's yours, Mike," said Jim. "We're handing it over to you, and the very best of luck, old man." Speechless surprise showed in the one eye, and Mike's voice was a little husky as he answered.

"I guess I don't know what to say, sir," he remarked at length. "Sure Cornish didn't tap you on the head or anything last night?"

Jim laughed. "No, we're quite sane, Mike. But we're going back to England, to look for somebody."

"I hope you find her," said Mike, and then he strolled to the window and stood staring out down the dusty street. "I hope you find her," he repeated. "I reckon a woman--the right woman--is worth most other things put together. Though some of us don't have much luck that way." He paused and drummed on the window. "Bud Sandford's up early this morning. Moreover, pard, he's coming here, unless I'm greatly mistook."

We heard steps outside, and the next moment the door opened and the man in question entered. He held no official position in so far as the Government was concerned, though his power was far greater than if he had. By common consent he had been elected boss, and sheriff, and general settler of disputes, and what he said at Bull Mine Creek went. He was a man of about fifty, with shrewd grey eyes and a reputation for impartial fairness in his decisions, which was just what was wanted in such a community.

"Morning, Bud," said Jim. "Take a seat."

Bud Sandford somewhat deliberately took a chair, and lit a cigar.

"Morning, boy," he remarked. "How's the face?"

Jim grinned. "Wants a week's rest, and it'll grow again."

Bud gazed out of the window.

"I saw your scrap last night," he remarked, "and I lost a tenner on the result. I may say that I'd willingly have lost two. I suppose you know it was a quarter of an hour before Cornish sat up and took notice?"

"As long as that?" said Jim. "I must have hit him harder than I thought."

"It's not to talk about that that I came around," went on Bud, "though as we're on the subject I'd like to say that it was the finest fight I've seen in thirty-five years. But it was to find out what you propose doing in the near future."

Jim looked a trifle surprised.

"Well, Bud," he said at length, "I guess there's no secret about it. I and my pal here are quitting, and our claim passes to Mike."

Bud grunted thoughtfully.

"When are you quitting?"

"We might push off to-day, or we might wait till to-morrow," answered Jim. "We haven't really thought about it yet."

"I guess I'd feel happier if you could make it to-day," said Bud.

"You seem almighty keen to be rid of us, Bud," said Jim. "What's the idea?"

Once again Bud's eyes travelled to the window.

"Just this, boy," he said. "Another twenty-four hours' rest and the effect of that blow on Pete

Cornish's jaw will be wearing off, but the effect on his mind will be wearing in. Do you follow me?"

"Not frightfully clearly, Bud," remarked Jim ominously. "I fail to see any relation between Peter Cornish's jaw and my future plans."

Bud Sandford's grey eyes twinkled.

"I was afraid you mightn't," he confessed. "Though it seems powerful clear to me. Look here, son," he went on, leaning forward, and emphasising his remarks with his finger on Jim's knee, "this is how the land lies. You beat Pete Cornish last night in a fair, straight fight. You laid him out as stiff as a piece of frozen mutton, and everybody knows it. If you fought him again--fair, you'd do it again. And everybody knows that, too. But the next time you fight Pete Cornish you won't fight fair--because he won't let you.

"You see, I know Pete Cornish, and his reputation. He's been a devil in the past when he's been top-dog; now that you've beaten him he'll be a fiend incarnate. He'll stop at nothing till he's got his own back. And, though you're a plaguy fine fighter, boy, with your fists and with a revolver, you don't cut much ice against a man with a rifle hiding up an alley-way and shooting you in the back. And that's what Pete Cornish will do, or something like it, unless, so to speak, you pass out of the picture while he's still holding a raw rump-steak to his jaw."

The worthy Bud leant back in his chair exhausted, and Jim smiled.

"It's very good of you, Bud," he remarked quietly. "And I guess if it was possible I'd just love to take your advice. But since you've been talking I've come to the conclusion that my early religious training doesn't allow me to travel on Christmas Day."

"Early religious fiddlesticks!" Bud remarked. "What you imply, young fellah, is that you'll see me in a warmer place than this before anything would induce you to foot it from Bull Mine Creek until to-morrow."

"Or maybe the day after," murmured Jim. "We've got to do a bit of business, Bud: transferring our claim to Mike."

Bud rose, and flung his cigar through the window.

"Hell!" he remarked tersely. "And if I hadn't come around, you might have gone to-day. But I can promise you one thing, boy"--he paused by the door with a faint grin--"if we can get the smallest shadow of proof we'll hang him the same time as we bury you. And even if we can't, we'll hang him, I think. Pete Cornish has gone on too long."

The door closed behind him, only to open again as he popped his head round. "You'd better think out a good epitaph," he said genially. "Something snappy and original. The last one I made up won't apply, though it's good--mark you, good:

"Here lies Bill Soames, a funny sort of joker; Who held four aces, when he didn't deal at poker."

For the rest of Christmas Day nothing happened to justify Bud's forebodings. We squared up our few belongings--we'd left most of our kit in Sydney--and we carried out the short necessary formalities for re-registering our claim in One-eyed Mike's name. And, having done that, the only remaining occupation was killing time. If only Sandford had not come butting in, though

he had done it with the best intentions, we should have cleared off that evening in the cool. As it was--Jim being Jim, we didn't.

We saw no signs of Cornish the whole of that day. In the hotel we gathered that he was lying up somewhere paying close and earnest attention to his jaw. And in the hotel we also gathered that the general feeling of the community agreed with Bud.

"Pete Cornish ain't finished yet, pard," said one of a group standing by the bar. "Pete Cornish won't never be finished till some public benefactor kills him. And that guy whose hand you shot last night is almost as bad--Yellow Sam."

The others growled assent, and Jim drained his glass with a smile.

"No, thank you, boys," he said, to the chorus of invitation which followed. "No more. I guess I'd better keep the old head cool if Cornish is all you say."

"You weren't here last night when he came to," went on the first speaker. "I was--and I watched him. He sat up, and stared around for a moment or two as if he didn't realise what had happened. Then he remembered. Them eyes of his--well, a sort of film came over them; and then they cleared, and he looked quite slowly and carefully all round the room. Reckon he was looking for you, but you'd gone. He never spoke; he just got up and walked out into the street, swaying a bit as he moved. And he passed me, so close I could have touched him. There was a look on his face such as I've never seen before not on any living man, and hopes I never shall again. And I tell you straight," his voice was very quiet and serious, "if he could catch you--if he could get you into his power by some dirty trick--God help you!"

Once again there was a growl of assent.

"There are stories told about Pete Cornish which aren't good to listen to. Do you remember--in '96 I think it was--way up there in Queensland, when that coach came trotting in without a driver? And inside they found two women and three children all murdered. The boys went out to look, and found Jake Harman, the driver, hanging side by side with his mate. There had been gold in the coach, but there was no one left to say what had happened. Only Cornish was in the neighbourhood, and people said lots. But there weren't no proof.

"That's just one story of many. There's another I remember, about a fellow in his gang who fell foul of him. He just disappeared, that's all--no one knew where. But months after a crazy black told a crazy story, as to how one night up by one of the smelting furnaces he'd heard someone screaming with fear. He'd crept a bit nearer, and a man with staring blue eyes had passed him in the dusk. The furnace was still alight when the black told his yarn--hadn't been let out for seven months--and there ain't much trace left after that time of anything or anybody that might have fallen in. Well--here's fortune, pard."

He lifted his glass and nodded to Jim.

"All I say to you is: Keep your gun handy as you drive over Lone Gully to-morrow. There's fifteen miles there where lots of things might happen."

With another nod and a quick handshake he turned and strolled out of the bar, and after a short while we followed him. We meant getting off early the next day, and we still had our final packing to do. And it was as we were walking down the street towards our shanty that I happened to glance up at a house we were passing. Whether it was purely accidental, or whether indeed some strange outside force was at work, I don't know. But in that momentary

glance I saw quite distinctly a pair of light-blue eyes staring at us with a look of such malevolent hatred that I paused involuntarily. Then they disappeared, and I walked on at Jim's side. But I couldn't help wishing, as I blew out my candle that night, that civilisation in the shape of a railway train had extended to Bull Mine Creek. The prospect of driving over Lone Gully failed to appeal to me.

We were away by four next morning. One-eyed Mike--not at his best at that hour--was there to see us off, divided between real, genuine regret that we were going, and joy that he was now the sole and undisputed owner of our claim. Poor devil! he little knew that it was the last time he was going to see that pitiless sun rise: that before the end of the day he was to be shot without mercy by that cold-blooded murderer Cornish. Rough, honest sportsman--he came after Jim and me to save our lives, and in doing so he lost his own. But perhaps he knows that it wasn't altogether in vain: perhaps he knows that his murderer followed him not long after.

I'm getting on too fast. But sometimes even now I dream of that half-hour when death stared us in the face at the old mine-shaft in Lone Gully, and I wake--dripping with sweat. What Jim must have gone through is beyond my comprehension: in fact, he once confessed to me that if he ever had a nightmare it was always the same. He dreams that his hand--the one he had hurt the preceding night--failed him as he swung for over a minute, with certain death as the result if he let go.

But, as I said, I'm getting on too fast. Except for Mike there wasn't a soul stirring when, without much regret, we said farewell to Bull Mine Creek. Our idea was to push on till about ten o'clock, and then to call a halt until four that afternoon. We reckoned on reaching the beginning of the deserted stretch of country known as Lone Gully in the morning, and getting across it in the evening. And then the next day would see us on the railway. So we calculated, as we drove steadily along the flat, dusty road.

The sun was not too powerful, and Jim's jaw had sufficiently recovered to allow him to sing. The air was like wine, and after a while, under the influence of the, at any rate, powerful concert from the seat beside me, I forgot Pete Cornish. Certainly there had been no sign of him or his pal that morning, and every mile between us and Bull Mine Creek seemed to render the likelihood of trouble less probable. If only I'd been able to get rid of the memory of those eyes as I'd seen them the previous evening, with their look of unwinking, implacable hatred....

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Half-past nine found us at the place where we had decided to stop for the midday halt, and it was none too soon. Already the sun was uncomfortably hot, and the buggy we were driving would not have won a prize for springing.

"Grub first," said Jim, "and then I think a little sleep, Dick. And perhaps, in view of everything, it would be as well if we took it in turns to watch."

We scanned the country in the direction from which we had come, but there was no sign of movement. The shimmering heat haze blurred and contorted the ground, but of life there seemed no sign.

"I can't help feeling sorry we've got no rifle," remarked Jim thoughtfully, a little later. "A revolver is all very well in its way, but it ain't much use against a man with a gun. However, I don't believe myself that we're going to have any trouble at all. They've made a boggy man of Mister Pete Cornish, and all the fellow is just a low-down swine and bully."

And sure enough, when we harnessed up again at four o'clock, there had been no sign of him. Once about noon, while Jim was asleep, I thought I saw a little cloud of dust moving two or three miles away, but I had no field-glasses, and in the glare and haze it was quite possibly my imagination. And it very soon disappeared again.

The track began to rise almost at once towards Lone Gully, and assuredly the place deserved its name. On each side of the road there ran a line of low, broken hills covered with huge boulders and scrub, while here and there disused sheds and the remains of old furnaces showed the positions of worked-out mines. For gold had once been found in Lone Gully, but only in deep placer deposits, requiring shaft-sinking. And the venture had not been a success financially; the seams had proved poor and given out, and nearly five years previously the last of the mines had closed down.

But it wasn't of derelict mining ventures that either Jim or I were thinking, as the mare picked her leisurely way up the hill. And after a while he looked at me a trifle thoughtfully.

"I can't say I like it, Dick," he said. "If one deliberately set out to find a place suited for trouble, you couldn't beat this. We're simply two slowly-travelling bull's-eyes for any man with a gun lying up hidden in that stuff."

He waved the whip at the monotonous expanse of rock and bush which stretched as far as the eye could see on each side of us, and involuntarily I thought of that little cloud of dust. What if my eyes had not deceived me? What if that cloud had been a man, or perhaps two, on horseback, making a detour to get in front of us? The idea was not a pleasant one. No man bent on lawful business would have travelled by any other track save the one we had come by. And no man bent on lawful business would have been likely to travel at all during the heat of the day.

I peered ahead, trying to see some sign of movement, but it was hopeless. An army could have hidden concealed in that country, and I soon gave it up. If my vague forebodings were correct, if that cloud of dust had indeed been a man--well, that man was in front of us by now. Somewhere in the fifteen miles we still had to go he could hide himself, so that it would be absolutely impossible to see him until--- For the first time I told Jim about what I thought I had seen, and his face grew graver.

"I don't like it, Dick," he repeated, "not one little bit. And I'll never forgive myself, old man, if anything happens. We should have gone yesterday, and it was only my wretched bravado that prevented it. Though, to tell you the truth, I'd really forgotten that this place was quite so unpleasant as it is."

We had reached the top of the rise as he spoke, and he whipped up the mare. For the next ten miles the road was level, running almost straight between the two lines of low hills on each side. We could see it stretching away like a long white ribbon into the distance, flanked on each side by that interminable grey-brown scrub. At the rate we were going, it would take us an hour and a half to get through to the descent the other side and safety. Jim's revolver lay on the seat beside him, while I held mine in my hand, though in our hearts we knew it was a perfectly useless precaution. A revolver is no good at a hundred yards, and we formed a sitting shot at two hundred to a man with a rifle.

We had been driving perhaps for a quarter of an hour when suddenly Jim stiffened in his seat, and then looked round over his shoulder.

"There's a horse galloping somewhere, Dick," he muttered.

The next instant we saw it. Away back along the dusty road we had just covered, a man was following us at full gallop.

"Seems a foolish way of doing the trick," said Jim, watching the approaching rider through narrowed eyes. "I think we'll dismount for a while, and await this gentleman on foot."

The mare stood placidly nibbling at some short rank grass by the road, while the horseman, still at the same furious rate, came nearer. And suddenly Jim, who had been holding his revolver in his hand, slipped it into his pocket with a surprised exclamation.

"The Devil!" he cried. "It's One-eyed Mike--or I'll eat my hat!"

Mike it was sure enough, and I don't know which was sweating most--he or his horse. He flung himself off his saddle as he reached us, and his breath was coming in great gasps.

"Pete Cornish and Yellow Sam left Bull Mine Creek at ten this morning," he gasped out. "Riding all out. Said they were going up North ... Started that way ... But a kid at the house they was in told me she heard 'em talking last night. And they mentioned Prospect Mine. Prospect Mine is here--we're close to it--not a mile on. Their going north was a blind--they're after you. Get in your trap again, Jim--and gallop. Gallop like hell--even if you kill the mare." We got into the trap as he was speaking. "They'll have to make a big round to get here, and maybe you'll get through before them."

And at that moment two shots rang out. The shooters were nowhere to be seen, but they could shoot. I saw Mike's horse crumple up quite slowly and lie still, and the next instant I pitched forward out of my seat. Our own gallant little mare had taken the second bullet, and in falling had broken both shafts. We scrambled out of the useless buggy a little bewildered by the suddenness of it all. But it wasn't in Jim's nature to remain undecided for long.

"Run like hares," he cried. "Don't run straight--dodge. Get into the scrub if you can."

And had we been able to do it all might have been well. Once amongst those rocks and bushes the advantage of a rifle over a revolver would have disappeared. But as luck would have it, at the particular spot where we had halted there was a stretch of about seventy yards of open ground to be covered before the protection of the low foothills could be reached. And we hadn't gone ten yards before another shot rang out and Mike gave a cry of pain. He had been plugged through the shoulder and instinctively we stopped to help him.

It was then that we saw Cornish. He had risen from behind a boulder about eighty yards away, and his rifle was still up to his shoulder.

"Put up your hands, or I shall fire again."

His voice was perfectly quiet, without a trace of excitement or anger, and for a moment we hesitated. There was another sharp crack and once again Mike groaned and staggered. This time it was the other shoulder, and it became increasingly obvious that Pete Cornish with a gun was not a man to be played with. Our hands went up, Jim's and mine--while Mike stood beside us helpless. And there we waited in a row while he leisurely approached us. He had been joined by Yellow Sam, and they both were holding their rifles ready for an immediate shot.

"Take their guns," ordered Cornish as he came up, and his companion disarmed us. "And now," he continued almost gently, but with his unwinking eyes fixed on Jim, "we will go for a

little walk. And then, Mr. Maitland--I believe that is your name--we will have a little talk. And after that--who knows? You will keep your hands above your heads, and Sam and I will be behind you. Will you lead the way, Mr. Maitland?"

"Where do you propose that we should go to?" said Jim indifferently.

"To that old mine shaft you see there," answered Cornish, and we started off, Jim leading. A rough disused track marked the way up the hill, and after a few minutes' walking we reached a rotting wooden palisade erected in days gone by around the crushers and stamps and offices generally.

"Straight on, Mr. Maitland," came the quiet voice from behind us. "Through the gate, and then to the left. That's right, and now we will stop and have a little talk. Kindly stand there in a row and I will endeavour to entertain you."

His blue eyes, with a strange, almost filmy, look in them, never left Jim's face.

"Possibly you are unacquainted with deep placer mining," he began gently. "You are now standing at the top of probably one of the deepest shafts in the world. Not the main shaft, but a ventilation shaft. As you will see, there is no lift. But you will also note that this shaft has been used for lowering stores or something of that kind: timber perhaps--but the point is a small one. That pulley attached to the overhead beam, which I have carefully oiled this afternoon, Mr. Maitland, is, you will perceive, immediately over the centre of the shaft. Moreover, this very long coil of rope, which with some difficulty I passed over the pulley, is clearly intended to lower things to the bottom of the shaft. Considering how long it is since this mine was used, it seems in astonishingly good condition."

Fascinated, I stared at the rope as the whole plot became clear. Coil after coil of it lay on one side of the shaft, but one end passed over the central pulley and was loosely tied to a stake beside Cornish.

"I hope my intentions are clear," he continued gently. "I shall request you to take hold of this end that you see attached to this post, and then walk to the edge of the shaft. You will then step over the edge, and I shall lower you to the bottom. Shortly afterwards your friend will repeat the performance, after which the rope will be thrown down to keep you company. Of course," his voice was almost regretful, "should the rope prove unequal to the strain, or should it be too short, you will drop. And the length of the fall will decide whether you do it successfully or not. Oh! and while I think of it, lest you should doubt my words as to the depth." His eyes came round to Mike, who shivered. "We have met before, I think. Just step forward a little. I don't quite know why you have intruded yourself, but since you have----"

It was over in a second. As calmly as if he was eating his dinner Cornish shot Mike through the heart. He had been standing near the edge of the shaft, and he spun round and toppled over backwards.

"You cold-blooded murderer," howled Jim, springing forward, to stop as Cornish's revolver covered him.

"Just listen," said Cornish gently, and with a sick feeling of helpless rage we stood there waiting. And at last it came--a dreadful noise, which echoed faintly, and then died away.

"I should say nearly a quarter of a minute to reach the bottom," he said mildly. "I always believe, you know, in removing all traces of these little affairs, and he's not much loss. So now if

you're ready, Mr. Maitland...."

"And what if I refuse?" said Jim steadily.

"Then your hands will be lashed behind you, and your feet will be attached to the rope, and you will be lowered head first. Or, failing that--you will be shot here and now. I give you five seconds to decide."

For a second or two Jim hesitated. Then he stepped forward and took the rope in his hands. He knew as well as I did that Cornish would do what he said, and it seemed the only possibility. If he did reach the bottom in safety there might still be a bare chance of getting out somewhere. At any rate it was the only hope.

"Sorry, Dick, old man," he said, as he passed me. "It's my fault."

He grinned at me, that wonderful careless grin of his, and without another word, he crossed to the edge of the shaft. And there he stared at Cornish.

"Now, you chicken-hearted coward!" he said contemptuously; "carry on."

But Cornish showed no sign of resenting the insult; his face was quite expressionless.

"I am quite ready, Mr. Maitland," he remarked, picking up the rope.

And Jim swung off into space. Not a vestige of hesitation--not a trace of fear, though he told me after that he fully expected Cornish to leave go the rope and let him drop. And what was really in Cornish's mind must remain an unsolved enigma. Whether he actually did intend to do exactly what he said, or whether he intended to let the rope slip when Jim was half-way down, will never be known.

Certain it is that quietly and steadily he went on paying out the rope--coil after coil, leaning back to take the weight with his feet braced against the shoring at the edge of the shaft--while I watched fascinated and Yellow Sam covered me with his gun.

And then suddenly came the idea. Old memories of mathematics, perhaps, problems on pulleys done in days gone by--but like a flash it came. The coils beside Cornish were getting fewer and fewer, and it had to be done at once.

"Good Lord! Look there!" I shouted, and Yellow Sam turned for a second. There was an iron bar at my feet, and by the mercy of Allah I hit him in the right place. And now came the second awful risk--would Cornish let go? His blue eyes were staring at me over his shoulder, but for just that fraction of time which meant life or death he didn't realise what I was going to do. He held on to the rope, and as I sprang at him he straightened up instinctively. And with all my force I pushed him in the back.

It was enough. He was off his balance, and with a fearful curse, still clinging on to the rope, he swung out himself over the shaft.

"Hold on, Jim!" I roared. "Hold on!"

For I saw at once that luck had held--Cornish was a heavier man than Jim. For a perceptible time he hung there swaying, his blue eyes almost frenzied in their animal rage and the scar on his face a livid purple. Then slowly but steadily his weight told, and he began to sink down and down. And with every foot he fell Jim came up. For a while Cornish tried to climb, but he could make no headway. And Jim was climbing, too, and getting the double advantage. And then I

think it crossed Cornish's mind to cut the rope on Jim's side, until he realised that once the counter weight was gone he must fall himself. They passed two hundred odd feet below the level of the ground, and Cornish tried to grab Jim's leg. But he kicked himself free, coming up quicker and quicker as the acceleration increased. And then suddenly I heard his voice shouting, urgently:

"Check the rope, Dick--check it somehow!"

For a moment I couldn't understand his reason, but I scrambled out along the beam to the pulley. I used a piece of wood as a brake, and then I saw Jim's plan. He was still fifty feet below me, swaying dizzily, but as the rope checked with the brake and finally stopped, he got the part of it on Cornish's side of the pulley with one hand. Gradually he got both ropes into that hand--shifting his legs to help the strain. And then with his free hand he got out his clasp-knife.

He opened it with his teeth, and Cornish from the depths below realised what was happening. He started frenziedly shooting up the shaft, heedless now of whether he died or not, provided he got Jim too. But he was swaying too much, and the end was quick. Jim cut the rope on Cornish's side *below* the place where he had both returns gripped in his other hand. And once again there came that dreadful dull noise which echoed faintly and then died away.

Half a minute later, using the two ends of the rope as one, Jim reached the pulley beam, and scrambled into safety. And then, for the first time in his life, Jim Maitland fainted.

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Later on we walked to the next township, with Yellow Sam in front of us carrying our bags. We gave him to the inhabitants with our love, and I believe they hanged him, though the point is not of great importance. The man who had called himself Pete Cornish was more dangerous than twenty Yellow Sams, and in his case the hangman had been saved the trouble. Who he really was is a mystery, for the man talked and spoke like a gentleman. There were some who said that he had been the illegitimate son of a well-known peer famed in his day for wild living and enormous strength. Others there were who maintained that he was the direct descendant of a famous pirate who had ended his days in Botany Bay, after a career of unbelievable ferocity. Who knows? But whatever may be the truth the one unforgettable picture of him that lives in my mind, is just two staring implacable light blue eyes swinging backwards and forwards and then gradually sinking to the death he had planned for us.

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## VII. *The Madman at Corn Reef Lighthouse*

If you lie on the close-clipped turf that stretches between Beachy Head and Birling Gap, not too far from the edge of the white chalk cliffs, you will see below you the lighthouse. It stands out in the sea some two hundred yards from the base of the cliff, and every few seconds with monotonous regularity, once dusk has fallen, the beam from the revolving light will shine on you and then pass on, sweeping over the grey water below. A dangerous part of the coast, that one time haunt of smugglers, till the lighthouse made it safe.

There are treacherous currents and shoals; but the worst is when the sea wrack comes gently drifting over the Downs and lies like a great grey blanket over the sea below. Then that sweeping light is useless, and every two or three minutes comes the sound of a maroon from the lighthouse--a sound which is answered by the mournful wailing of sirens out to sea, as vessels creep slowly through the fog. Like great monsters out of the depths they wail dismally at one another and pass unseen, their sirens growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

Only the roar of the maroons from the lighthouse goes on unchanged, while the grey fog eddies gently by, making fantastic figures as it drifts. Implacable and silent, it seems to mock such paltry man-made efforts to fight it, and yet there are amazingly few accidents, even in that crowded shipping area. The effort may be man-made, but it is successful.

It depends however for its success upon the man. Elaborate your mechanical devices as you will, introduce the most complicated automatic machinery to control the regular sweep of the light and the monotonous explosion of the maroons, it all comes back finally to the man who lives in that tall, slender building rising out of the water. A dreary life to which not many men are suited; a life where strange thoughts and fancies might come drifting into one's brain--drifting as gently and slowly as the grey wisps of fog outside. And after a while some might remain, even though outside the fog has gone, and the water shines blue again in the sunlight. It is that way that danger lies. In the crowded waterways where inspectors are many and inspections numerous, the risk is small. Moreover, in the crowded waterways the loneliness is not so great.

But there are others where from month's end to month's end a man will see no soul save the other fellow who lives with him; where save for the occasional visit of a boat with supplies there is nothing to break the deadly monotony. Sometimes even there is no other fellow; the man is alone. And strange things may happen if then those drifting thoughts and fancies come and take root. When faces float past, pressing for a moment against the glass, and then are gone; when voices unheard by the other man come clearly out of the night; when strange shapes materialise and gibber mockingly--there is danger ahead. The step between sanity and madness is not a great one, and once it has been taken there is no safe return.

And Corn Reef was one of those others.

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We were drifting homewards, though we neither of us admitted it in so many words, but we were drifting in our own way. Not for Jim the conventional P. and O.; his tastes, as always, were for the small coasting boat which called at unknown islands and dealt in strange cargoes. One went as far as one liked in her and then stopped and waited for something else. Which takes time, but has its advantages undreamt of by the occupants of the millionaire suites in big liners. And so it happened that one day in the following spring we came back to Tampico, that island

where I had first met him--that island which held the grave of the husband of the only woman who mattered to Jim. We took rooms in the hotel, and almost as if the words had been spoken aloud I heard again her voice bitter with unmeasured contempt: "Oh! you cur!" I think Jim heard it too, for suddenly he smiled at me a little bitterly.

"Is it much use going home, Dick?"

He didn't wait for my answer, but turned away with a shrug of his shoulders and went upstairs while I strolled down the street towards the club. Nothing had changed; nothing ever will change at Tampico. Each drunken derelict who dies is replaced sooner or later by another, which can hardly be accounted as change. And as for the club, I might have left it the day before instead of two years previously.

It was unoccupied save for one man, who glanced up as I came in, and then continued reading the letter he held in his hand. Every now and then he gave a little frown, and I looked at him covertly as I ordered a drink. There was that nameless something about him which marked him instantly as one of those thousands of Britishers who spend their lives in God-forsaken quarters of the globe carrying on the little job of Empire. They generally die of some disease, unknown and unthanked, or else they return to England in the fullness of time and sink into utter obscurity in some suburb of that Empire's capital. But while they're in harness they live, and when the harness drops off they don't mind dying. So perhaps it doesn't matter very much.

The native waiter brought me my drink, and with a three-months-old illustrated paper in my hand, I sat down and forgot about him. He did not seem disposed for conversation, and, to tell the truth, no more was I. The club house at Tampico was the starting point of many memories, and I was feeling lazy. Chiefly they centred round Jim, and it wasn't until I heard his voice behind me cheerfully greeting the stranger that I realised I was holding the paper upside down.

"Why, it's MacGregor," I heard him say. "The last time I saw you was in Singapore. How are you, my dear fellow?"

"Jim Maitland, by all that's wonderful!" The stranger got up and seized Jim's hand, and just then Jim caught sight of me.

"Come over here, Dick," he cried. "This is Jock MacGregor, and a partially-demented Government pays him a salary for cruising up and down outlandish waters and seeing that no one has walked off with a lighthouse or two. If they only knew what he did with his salary when he gets ashore they'd halve it in the interests of public morals."

"Salary!" snorted MacGregor. "Call my beggarly pittance a salary! And now the blighters have put a survey job on to my shoulders as well. Think I haven't enough work to do, I suppose."

"But what brings you here, Jock?" asked Jim. "Tampico is a bit out of your beaten track, isn't it?"

MacGregor nodded abruptly and the frown appeared once more.

"The supply-boat for the lighthouse at Corn Reef goes from here," he said. "It starts to-morrow, and I'm going with it."

"Visit of inspection?" said Jim.

"Yes and no," returned the other. "In all probability I shall stay there for a week or so."

Jim raised his eyebrows.

"Since when has the great Pooh Bah stayed at particular lighthouses?" he inquired. "I thought you merely looked in to see that the occupant hadn't been frying sausages on the lamps, and then passed gracefully on."

Jock MacGregor grinned, and then grew serious again.

"That's why I said yes and no. This isn't an ordinary inspection." He hesitated a moment, and then leant forward in his chair. "Care to hear the story, Jim?"

"Get it right off your chest, Jock," he said, beckoning to the waiter for drinks.

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"Well, if it won't bore you, I will," began MacGregor. "Only I'll have to go back a bit. When we last met, I had nothing to do with this area at all. Bill Lambert had it, and mine was farther north. I don't know if you ever met Bill, but he took to seeing things that weren't there, from the usual cause, and has recently gone on permanent sick leave. They said they'd send a successor, as they always do say, but so far there's been no sign of him. And until his arrival Mr. MacGregor was to carry on with both areas--and no increase of pay. Bless their hearts! However, I didn't mind, and to do them justice, in normal circumstances it would have made no odds to me. If you've twice the area to cover, you do half the number of inspections, and it comes to the same thing in the end. It's just a matter of form and routine as you can guess--in normal circumstances."

He emphasised the last three words, and Jim glanced at him.

"One gathers that Corn Reef is not quite normal?" he remarked.

"I'm coming to that," said MacGregor, putting down his glass. "I don't know whether you know the part or not--personally, I only know it from the map. Corn Reef sticks out from a smallish island, called Taba Island, which I believe is inhabited by a few natives. It stretches about half way across a deep-water channel towards the next of the group, which is uninhabited. Beyond that again come other small islands and reefs, and in fact the only method of navigating the belt is through the other half of the deep-water channel I have told you about--one half of which is blocked by Corn Reef.

"The lighthouse stands on the end of the reef, midway across the channel. At low water it can be reached from the island on foot; at high water the reef is covered. So much for the locality; now for the personal details. Six months ago, as I said, I took over from Bill Lambert. It was an informal sort of taking over, as he had delirium tremens pretty badly, and I got no information out of him. But it didn't worry me much, as I'd no idea then that there was anything peculiar in his area. And it wasn't till a month ago, when I received a communication from the keeper at Corn Reef lighthouse, that I began to look into things. His name is David Temple, and the communication was brief and to the point. It stated that his assistant, when attending to the bell, had fallen into the sea and been drowned, and could another be sent."

"Bell?" interrupted Jim. "I don't quite follow."

"Sorry," said MacGregor. "I forgot that point. Apparently at certain times you get a thick belt of fog across the reef and the channel, and stretching right along the belt of islands. Probably it's some form of heavy ground mist. When that comes down they have as a warning for ships a huge bell, which is tolled mechanically. It is built out on a sort of platform below the level of the light, and as far as I can make out from the plans, it seems a pretty antiquated sort of arrangement. However, there it is, and as long as it functions you won't get them to spend any

money in having it replaced by anything more up-to-date.

"Well, when I got Temple's letter I began looking up the files. And to my amazement I found that about three months before Bill Lambert had gone a precisely similar letter had reached *him*. At first I thought that the second was merely a reminder, and that Bill had forgotten all about it. So I made inquiries, only to discover the somewhat sinister fact that it was far from a reminder. Bill *had* sent a man, and I was therefore confronted with the situation that within some nine months two men, when attending to the bell at Corn Reef lighthouse, had fallen into the sea and been drowned. Which seemed to show that there was something radically wrong with the bell arrangements generally: something"--and MacGregor paused--"something, Jim, which I utterly failed to get at from the plans. I'm not denying that the whole idea is antiquated; but, granting the plans and sections are correct, it is perfectly safe. And I could see no reason whatever--short of a desire to commit suicide--why two men should fall into the sea."

"And even granting that, why of necessity they should be drowned?" said Jim quietly.

MacGregor shrugged his shoulders.

"The place is alive with sharks, of course," he remarked. "But I've not quite finished yet. Another unpleasant fact was brought to my notice shortly after I received this letter from Temple. I ran into the skipper of some craft or other in the club at Singapore, and he was looking for Bill Lambert's blood. And when he heard I was doing Bill's job he turned his wrath on me. And his accusation amounted to this: that on the morning of February 24th he was on the bridge of his ship nosing her gently through a thick mist. Suddenly there came a bellow from the look-out man, and to his horror he saw looming out of the mist on the starboard side--Corn Reef lighthouse.

"My God, man!" he said to me. 'I could have spat an orange pip at it, and hit it; I could almost have touched it with my hand. In thirty years I've never had such an escape. Another foot--another six inches--and we'd have been on that reef.'

"But wasn't the bell ringing?' I demanded.

"Not a sound!' he roared. 'Not a sound. You can hear that bell for fifteen miles--and there wasn't a sound. Only as I passed by--damn it, why, the platform on which the bell is built nearly grazed my wireless--I looked up. Man! I tell you the bell was ringing right enough--I could see it through the fog--but no sound came. Only above the beat of the engine, I thought I heard a steady thud, thud, thud in time with the beat of the bell. But maybe it was my imagination.'"

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Jock MacGregor paused and drained his drink.

"So that is the rather peculiar situation I'm up against."

"And how do you propose to deal with it?" asked Jim.

"Temple asked for an assistant," said MacGregor briefly, "and he's going to have one. He's going to have me." He lit a cigarette, and leant back in his chair. "There's something wrong, Jim," he continued after a moment, "something very wrong out there. That merchant skipper was as hard-headed a customer as you could meet, and if he saw that bell moving--it was moving. Then why was there no sound? And then two men drowned in nine months! I guess I'm not going to send a third till I've had a look round myself. This man, David Temple, doesn't know me, hasn't ever seen me, so there won't be any difficulty in passing myself off as his new

assistant."

Jim was looking thoughtfully out of the window.

"How long has Temple been there?" he said at length.

"Years as far as I can make out," answered MacGregor. "There was one paper in the file--the usual routine paper with regard to an exchange--dated five years ago. He'd refused, or rather had requested to be allowed to stay on. And since I gather there is no vast rush for Corn Reef, I suppose Bill Lambert was only too glad to let him."

Jim shook his head.

"Five years is a long time, Jock," he said gravely. "A very long time. It's far too long for a man to spend in a place like that."

"You think I may find Temple a bit queer?" said MacGregor slowly.

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"Jock," he said, "I've got a proposal to make to you. Temple doesn't know you, and he doesn't know me. You go as his assistant as you have already decided. I'll go as your new boss who has just taken Lambert's place. Dick can come as a pal of mine. If everything seems all right, well, we shall all have had a very pleasant little trip, and Temple will be none the worse. If, on the other hand, things are not all right--three heads are better than one, Jock."

"Do you mean it, Jim?" said MacGregor. "Will you both come?"

"I do," answered Jim. "And as for Dick----"

"Count me in," I said at once.

"Then I accept your suggestion with the greatest pleasure," said MacGregor. "And to tell you the strict truth, I might add with the greatest relief."

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At dawn next morning we started in the supply boat, and of the run to Taba Island I shall say nothing. The first part of it was uninteresting, and the last few miles was so inconceivably beautiful as to defy description. In front of us stretched the belt of islands, with the lighthouse standing up slim and clear cut straight ahead. On our left lay Taba Island, a riot of tropical vegetation and glorious flowers which reached right down to the water's edge, broken here and there by stretches of golden sand almost dazzling in its brightness.

Between the lighthouse and the island was a line of surf marking Corn Reef; while to the right of the lighthouse lay the deep-water channel of unbroken blue. And as we got nearer we could see the strange structure which marked the position of the bell. It was built out from the side, and it reminded one of those mediaeval galleries which jut out from the walls of old castles into which the defenders used to go to pour burning oil on the gentlemen below. And this bell jutted out in just such a manner on the deep-water channel side of the lighthouse.

"Great Scott!" said Jim, who had been examining it through his field-glasses; "even allowing for pictorial effect, if that fellow passed close enough to see that bell in a fog, I don't wonder he wanted somebody's blood."

And now we were near enough to see the details with the naked eye. On a rough landing stage at the foot of the lighthouse a man was standing gazing at us fixedly through a telescope, and

as we came close he shut it up and awaited us with folded arms. He was dressed in white, and as the boat made fast he might have been carved out of stone, so motionless did he stand. Then he took a step forward, and spoke in a curiously harsh voice.

"Which is my new assistant?"

He was tall and gaunt, with a coarse, straggling beard, and as I looked at him I could conceive no more awful fate than being condemned to spend month after month alone with him.

It was Jim who answered as we had arranged.

"Here is your new assistant, MacGregor," he said, stepping ashore. "And I am your new inspector in place of Mr. Lambert."

"You will find everything in good order, sir," he said quietly, but it was at Jock MacGregor he was staring.

"How comes it that two men have been drowned within such a short time, Temple?" demanded Jim sternly. "There must have been gross carelessness somewhere."

"It is the bell, sir," answered the man, still in the same quiet voice. "When the mist comes down and presses round one's head with soft, clammy fingers it is sometimes difficult to see."

Jim grunted, and eyed the man narrowly.

"Then the bell must be removed," he said, and Temple started violently.

"It is only carelessness, sir, on their parts," he cried. "The bell has never hurt me."

"Well, I will inspect everything," said Jim curtly. "I shall stay here until the supply boat returns the day after to-morrow."

I saw Temple shoot a quick, suspicious glance at him, but he merely nodded and said, "Very good, sir."

Then he glanced towards Taba Island and nodded as if satisfied.

"There will be fog to-night, sir," he remarked. "When the Queen of the Island is crowned in mist at this time of day there is always fog. So you will hear the bell."

He went off to superintend the disposal of his stores, and Jim turned to MacGregor.

"What the devil is he talking about, Jock?" he muttered.

"The Queen of the Island is that hill, old man," answered MacGregor. "I remember seeing it marked on the map."

"He seems a strange sort of bird," said Jim thoughtfully, and MacGregor nodded.

"You're right, Jim," he said. "Though I'm bound to admit that at present he doesn't strike me as anything out of the way. You meet some queer morose customers on this game, you know."

And certainly during the next hour or so there seemed nothing peculiar about Temple. Jim, carefully primed by MacGregor, asked a few leading questions, but for the most part he said nothing and let the other man talk. We examined the mirrors and reflectors; we examined the lamps; but most of all we examined Temple himself. And then we came to the bell.

If it had looked big as we came towards the lighthouse it looked enormous from close to. Built out from the side, it was carried on a steel cantilever arm, while underneath it, about eight feet

below, a narrow wooden platform jugged out over the water—a platform some eighteen inches wide. It was but little more than a single plank ten feet long, and as one walked out on it, though the railing on each side made it perfectly safe, it gave one almost a feeling of dizziness. Above one's head the bell with its motionless clapper; below one's feet the water; and poised between the two the narrow platform—all too narrow for my liking.

"Now was it from here that the two men fell?" demanded Jim, still in his rôle of inspector.

"Yes, sir," said Temple quietly. "Though I did not see it happen myself. I was inside attending to the mechanism that works the bell."

"And did you make no effort to save them?"

For answer Temple peered over the side for a moment or two—then he pointed downwards without a word. And while I looked I counted three evil shapes glide by in the clear blue depths.

"And when did the last man fall over?" went on Jim. "On what date?"

"On February 24th, sir," said Temple, and MacGregor caught his breath. "In the early morning when the fog was thick. It is entered in my log book."

"Was the bell ringing at the time?" demanded Jim sharply.

"The bell always rings when there is a fog, sir," answered Temple, and Jim glanced at MacGregor, who shook his head imperceptibly. "Would you care to hear it now, and see how it works?"

"Yes," said Jim, "I should."

"There is a heavy weight inside, sir," said Temple, "inside the lighthouse I mean, which works the bell by means of cogged wheels. On the principle, sir, of the weights in a grandfather's clock." His tone was that of a man who is patiently explaining something to a child. "If you will come inside, I will start it."

We followed him in, and he pressed down a lever. Almost at once the bell began to oscillate, slightly at first, but gradually and steadily increasing in swing, until at length the first deep note rang out as it struck the clapper. The notes came deeper and more resonant, though irregularly for a time, till at last both clapper and bell settled down to a rhythmic swing. Like a huge pendulum the clapper passed backwards and forwards over the platform outside, while the bell swung down to meet it first on one side and then on the other. And the deep, booming note ringing out every two or three seconds seemed to fill the whole universe with one vast volume of sound. It deadened one's brain; it stunned one; it made one gasp for breath.

Suddenly I felt Jim grip my arm. Speech was impossible, but I followed the direction of his eyes. He was looking at David Temple, and so was Jock MacGregor. For the lighthouse keeper was staring at the Queen of the Island with blazing eyes. His hands were locked together, and he was muttering something, for we could see his lips moving, while the sweat glistened on his forehead. He seemed to have forgotten our existence, and when Jim touched him on the shoulder he swung round with a hideous snarl.

"Stop the bell," shouted Jim, and the snarl vanished. He was the disciplined subordinate again, though in his eyes there was a look of sly cunning.

He pressed another lever, and after what seemed an interminable time the bell gradually ceased.

Not at once, for it went on swinging under its own momentum for a while, but at length the noise died away; beat after beat was missed till at last it swung in silence, save for a faint creaking.

"Is that satisfactory, sir?" asked Temple quietly. "Because I would like to stow away my stores as soon as possible. Afterwards I will go through my log with you."

Jim nodded. "All right, Temple. Go and attend to your stores."

The man went out, and we stared at one another thoughtfully.

"February 24th," said MacGregor. "Did you note that, Jim?"

"I noted it right enough," answered Jim. "Jock, the man's queer. Did you see his face while that infernal bell was ringing, and he was staring at the mountain yonder?"

MacGregor had strolled over to the window himself, and suddenly he beckoned to us with his hand.

"Come here," he muttered. "Look at him now."

Below, on the landing stage, knelt David Temple with his arms flung out towards the mist-crowned mountain. For half a minute he stayed there motionless; then he rose and came inside the lighthouse.

"He's worse than queer," said MacGregor. "He's mad."

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And now I come to the final chapter, and the thing that happened when the mist came down on Corn Reef. Jim and I had spent the night--I cannot say we had slept very much--in the room normally used by the assistant, while Jock MacGregor had stopped in the other room to take his turn with the lamp. At the faintest sign of trouble he was to call us, and to make doubly sure, Jim and I had taken it in turns to lie down on the bed and sleep while the other remained awake. There was no good in letting Temple see that we suspected anything, since no steps could be taken till the return of the supply boat. Then Jock MacGregor had decided that Temple was to go back in it while he remained in the lighthouse till a relief was sent.

During the evening Temple had been quiet and perfectly rational, though I had caught him once or twice eyeing MacGregor with a curiously furtive expression. He had lit the light and explained the simple mechanism quite normally, and then had stood with us while we watched the beam sweep round the water below. It was a glorious night, such as can only be seen in the tropics, without a trace of fog, and for a time our suspicions were lulled. It seemed impossible that anything could happen in such an atmosphere of peace and beauty. Only once did a stray remark of Temple's bring back our doubts, and then it was more owing to our previous suspicions than to the remark itself.

"The Queen is angry to-night," he said, staring at the island. "She demands a sacrifice."

"What do you mean by such rot, Temple?" said Jim sternly.

"When she veils her head, sir," he answered quietly, "her subjects must appease her. Otherwise she will be revenged."

He left the room with a word of apology, and we heard him going downstairs.

"Native superstition," grunted MacGregor.

"Perhaps," said Jim. "But once native superstition gets hold of a white man, Jock, it's the devil."

And that is all that had happened before we turned in: little enough to prepare us for the thing that was to come later. It must have been about three o'clock when Jim roused me, and prepared to take my place on the bed. And as we were changing round we heard a ship's siren wail in the distance. And then we heard it a second time. For a moment or two it made no impression on our minds, and then the same thought struck us both simultaneously.

We dashed to the window and looked out--looked out into a thick mist that drifted slowly past, blotting out everything. No water could be seen, no star--just dense, clammy vapour. The fog had come down on Corn Reef, and the bell which had deafened us only that afternoon was silent.

Once again the siren wailed mournfully, and then, as we listened, we heard a steady creaking such as the bell had made as it had gradually come to rest the day before. And every now and then a strange, dull thudding noise--creak, thud! creak, thud!

Jim sprang to the door, and turned the handle; but the door refused to budge. We had been locked in, and outside Jock MacGregor was alone with a madman. And even as we realised it there came through the open window a faint shout of "Help!"

It took six shots to shatter that bolt, and by the mercy of Heaven there wasn't a second. And then we dashed up the short flight of stairs into the room above, to halt somewhat abruptly as we entered. For confronting us was David Temple with an iron bar in his hands, and his face was the face of a maniac. But it wasn't at him we were looking--it was beyond him to the place where the platform stretched out into the mist. For the door was open, and we could see the great bell swinging to and fro. And lashed loosely to the end of the clapper and clinging to it desperately, was Jock MacGregor.

"The Queen demands a sacrifice," roared the madman. "Two she has had, and now she requires a third. Stand back!"

There was no time for half-measures. MacGregor's voice, breathless and gasping, came to us faintly: "For God's sake, hurry!" And out of the mist, much louder and nearer wailed the siren.

So Jim shot the poor devil through each arm, and the crowbar crashed to the floor. Even then he tried to stop us, till a blow on the point of the jaw put him to sleep. And then it became a desperate race against time. Outside the siren was going continuously, seeming almost on top of us, while standing on the platform we tried to catch MacGregor as he swung past us. But the bell was heavy, and it seemed an age before we could check the clapper sufficiently to cut him down. And every moment we expected to hear the dreadful grinding crunch of a ship striking rock. But at last we had him down, and Jim darted to the lever to restart the bell.

The first deep boom rang out, and in the silence that followed before the swing became regular we heard a sudden agonised shout, and the thrashing of a propeller. Then the bell tolled again, and then again. All outside sound was obliterated; only the bell swung on, crashing out its message of warning. And so three sweating men sat and waited for the mist to lift off Corn Reef, while in a corner, David Temple, sometime lighthouse keeper, smiled happily to himself, nodding his head in time with the bell. He had put a drug, we discovered, in Jock MacGregor's coffee, and the next thing MacGregor knew was when he found himself swinging violently through space, to stop even more violently as he hit the side of the bell. How even a madman had had the strength to lift a full-grown man and lash him to the clapper was a mystery till we

discovered some rough steps of the housemaid variety, and even with them the strength required was prodigious. But he'd done it right enough, and for ten minutes MacGregor had swung backwards and forwards, dazed and half-stunned, while the madman had crouched below him with his arms flung out towards the Queen of the Island.

At seven o'clock the mist lifted, and we stopped that accursed bell. Out to sea lay a steamer, and a boat was being lowered. Through glasses we saw an officer get in, and then the boat was pulled to the lighthouse.

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I have met angry men in my life, but for sheer speechless fury the skipper of the good ship *Floriana*, one thousand five hundred tons and of mixed cargo, wins in a canter. I don't blame him; when the first clang of the bell rang out he was to all intents and purposes on the reef. He'd gone full speed astern with a second to spare, and his eyes still held the look of a badly-frightened man.

So we told him the story, and Temple smiled placidly in his corner. And after a while, when he'd grunted his amazement, he apologised handsomely. He went out to look at the bell, and for a while we stood on the platform. And then that skipper leant forward, peering at the inside of the bell. In silence he pointed to two dull stains--stains we had not noticed. They were just where the clapper hit the bell--one on each side, and they were a rusty red.

"Two assistants, you say?" he grunted. "God! What a death!"

I looked over, down into the blue water. Three more evil shapes were there, shapes which glided by and disappeared. And then I looked at Taba Island. Clear and beautiful in the morning sun the Queen of the Island rose to the sky. Her crown had disappeared.

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## VIII. *The Seven Missionaries*

It never really got much beyond the rumour stage--Captain James Kelly, of the S.S. *Andaman*, saw to that. It wouldn't have done him any good nor his line, and since England was troubled with railway strikes and war scares at Agadir, things which happened on the other side of the globe were apt to be crowded out of the newspapers.

But he couldn't stop the rumour, and "Our Special Correspondent" in Colombo made out quite a fair story for his paper at home. It didn't appear: seemingly the editor thought the poor devil had taken to drink and was raving. In fact, all that did appear in the papers were two short and apparently disconnected notices. The first ran somewhat as follows, and was found under the shipping intelligence:

"The S.S. *Andaman* arrived yesterday at Colombo. She remained to carry out repairs to her wireless, and will leave to-morrow for Plymouth."

And the second appeared some two or three months later.

"No news has yet been heard of the S.Y. *Firefly*, which left Colombo some months ago for an extensive cruise in the Indian Ocean. It is feared that she may have foundered with all hands in one of the recent gales."

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But she didn't--the sea was as calm as the proverbial duck-pond when the S.Y. *Firefly* went down in the thousand fathoms of water not far from the Cocos Islands. And but for the grace of Heaven and Jim Maitland that fate would have overtaken the good ship *Andaman* instead.

The S.S. *Andaman* was a vessel of some three thousand tons. She was in reality a cargo boat carrying passengers, in that passengers were the secondary consideration. There was only one class, and the accommodation was sufficient for about thirty people. Twelve knots was her maximum speed, and she quivered like a jelly if you tried to get more out of her. And last, but not least, Captain James Kelly had been her skipper for ten years, and loved her with the love only given by men who go down to the sea in ships.

When Jim and I went on board she was taking in cargo, and Kelly was busy. He was apparently having words with the harbour master over something, and the argument had reached the dangerous stage of politeness. But Jim had sailed in her before, and a minute or two later a delighted chief steward was shaking him warmly by the hand.

"This is great, sir!" he cried. "We got a wireless about the berths, but we had no idea it was from you."

"You can fix us up, Bury?" asked Jim.

"Sure thing, Mr. Maitland," answered the other. "We've only got twelve on board--two Yanks, a coloured gentleman, two ladies and a missionary bunch."

We had followed him below, and he was showing us our cabins.

"Seven of 'em, sir," he went on, "with two crates of Bibles and Prayer Books, all complete. Maybe you saw them sitting around on deck as you came on board?"

"Can't say I did, Bury," said Jim indifferently.

"They never go ashore, sir," continued the steward. "We've been making all the usual calls, and you'd have thought they'd have liked to go ashore and stretch their legs, but devil a bit. There they sit from morning till night, reading and praying, till they fairly give you the hump."

"It doesn't sound like one long scream of excitement," said Jim. "But if they're happy, that's all that matters. Come on, Dick, let's go up and see if old man Kelly is still being polite."

We went on deck to find that the argument was finished, and with a shout of delight the skipper recognised Jim. Jim went forward to meet him, and for a moment or two I stood where I was, idly watching the scene on the quay. And then quite distinctly I heard a voice from behind me say, "By God, it's Jim Maitland!" Now, as a remark it was so ordinary, so completely expected when Jim was about, that I never gave it a thought. In those parts of the world one heard it or its equivalent whenever one entered an hotel or even a railway carriage. And so, as I say, I didn't give it a thought for a moment or two, till Jim's voice hailed me, and I turned round to go and be introduced to the skipper.

It was then that I noticed two benevolent-looking clergymen seated close to me in two deck-chairs. Their eyes were fixed on the skipper and on Jim, while two open Bibles adorned their knees. Not another soul was in sight: there was not the slightest doubt in my mind that it was one of them who had spoken. And as I stood talking with the skipper and Jim my mind was subconsciously working.

There was no reason, to be sure, why a missionary should not recognise Jim, but somehow or other one does not expect a devout man with a Bible lying open on his knee to invoke the name of the Almighty quite so glibly. If he had said "Dear me!" or "Good gracious!" it would have been different. But the other came as almost a shock. However, the matter was a small one, and I should probably have dismissed it from my mind, but for the sequel a minute or so later. The skipper was called away on some matter, and Jim and I strolled back past the two parsons. They both looked up at us with mild interest as we passed, but neither of them gave the faintest sign of recognition.

Now that *did* strike me as strange. A clergyman may swear if he likes--in fact, I am given to understand that they frequently do; but why in the name of fortune he should utterly ignore a man whom he evidently knew was beyond me.

"Come and lean over the side, Jim," I said when we were out of earshot. "There's something a little funny I want to tell you. Only don't look round."

He listened in silence, and when I had finished he shrugged his shoulders.

"More people know Tom Fool, old boy, than Tom Fool knows. I certainly don't know either of those two sportsmen, but it's more than likely they know me, at any rate by sight. And wouldn't you swear if you had to wear a dog collar in this heat?"

Evidently Jim was inclined to dismiss the episode as trifling, and after a time I came round to the same view. Even at lunch that day, when the skipper was formally introducing us and the clergyman still gave no sign of claiming any previous acquaintance with Jim, I thought no more about it. Possibly to substantiate that claim he might have had to admit his presence in some place which would take a bit of explaining away to his little flock. For the man whose voice I had heard was evidently the shining light of the bunch.

He turned out to be the Reverend Samuel Longfellow, and his destination, as that of all the

others, was Colombo. They were going to open a missionary house somewhere in the interior of Ceylon and run it on novel lines of their own. Apparently no such place existed belonging to their particular denomination, but at that point Jim and I got out of our depths and the conversation languished. However, they seemed very decent fellows, even if they did fail somewhat signally to add to the general gaiety.

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The voyage pursued its quiet, normal course for the first four or five days. The two Americans and the skipper made up the necessary numbers for a game of poker; the two ladies--mother and daughter they were, by the name of Armstrong--knitted; the seven parsons prayed; and the coloured gentleman effaced himself. The weather was perfect; the sea like a mill-pond, with every prospect of continuing so for some time. And so we lazed along at our twelve knots, making a couple of final calls before starting on the two thousand mile run to Colombo. It was the first night out on the last stage that Jim and I were sitting talking with the skipper on the bridge. Being a privileged person, Jim was allowed there, and the skipper's private whisky was a better commodity than that sold below. Occasionally the sharp, hissing crackle of the wireless installation broke the silence, and we could see the operator in his shirt-sleeves through the open door of his cabin.

"I guess it's hard to begin to estimate what we sailor men owe to Marconi for that invention," said Kelly thoughtfully. "Now that we've got it, it seems almost incredible to think how we got along without it. And what can I do for you, sir?"

An abrupt change in his tone made me look round to see the Reverend Samuel Longfellow standing diffidently behind us. He evidently felt he was trespassing, for his voice was almost apologetic.

"Is it possible, Captain," he asked, "to send a message by your wireless?"

"Of course it is," answered Kelly. "You can hand in any message you like to the operator, and he'll send it for you."

"You see, I've never sent a message by wireless before," said the parson mildly, "and I wasn't quite sure what to do. Can you get an answer quickly?"

"Depends whom you are sending it to and where he is."

"He's on a yacht somewhere in this neighbourhood," answered the clergyman. "He is a missionary like myself whose health has broken down, and a kind philanthropist is taking him for a cruise to help him recover. I felt it would be so nice if I could speak to him, so to say, and hear from him, perhaps, how he is getting on."

"Quite," agreed the skipper gravely. "Well, Mr. Longfellow, there is nothing to prevent your speaking to him as much as you like. You just hand in your message to the operator whenever you want to, and he'll send down the answer to you as soon as he receives it."

"Oh, thank you, Captain Kelly," said the parson gratefully. "I suppose there's no way of saying where I am?" he continued hesitatingly. "I mean, on shore when one sends a wire the person who gets it can look up where you are on the map, and it makes it so much more interesting for him."

The skipper knocked out his pipe.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Longfellow," he remarked at length in a stifled voice, "that you can't quite do

that at sea. Of course, the position of the ship will be given on the message in terms of latitude and longitude. So if your friend goes to the navigating officer of his yacht, he'll be able to show him with a pin exactly where you were in the Indian Ocean when the message was sent."

"I see," said the clergyman. "How interesting! And then, if I tell him that we are moving straight towards Colombo at twelve knots an hour, my dear friend will be able to follow me in spirit all the way on the map?"

The skipper choked slightly.

"Precisely, Mr. Longfellow. But I wouldn't call it twelve knots an hour if I were you. Just say, twelve knots."

The Reverend Samuel looked a little bewildered.

"Twelve knots. I see. Thank you so much. I'm afraid I don't know much about the sea. May I—may I go now to the gentleman who sends the messages?"

"By all manner of means," said Kelly, and Jim's shoulders shook. "Give the operator your message, and you shall have the answer as soon as it arrives."

Again murmuring his thanks, the missionary departed, and shortly afterwards we saw him in earnest converse with the wireless operator. And that worthy, having read the message and scratched his head, stared a little dazedly at the Reverend Samuel Longfellow, obviously feeling some doubts as to his sanity. To be asked to dispatch to the world at large a message beginning "Dear brother," and finishing "Yours in the Church," struck him as being one of those things which a self-respecting wireless operator should not be asked to do.

"Poor little bird!" said the skipper thoughtfully, as the missionary went aft to join his companions. "I'm glad for his sake that he doesn't know what the bulk of our cargo is this trip. He wouldn't be able to sleep at nights for fear of being made to walk the plank by pirates."

Jim looked up lazily.

"Why, what have you got on board, old man?"

The skipper lowered his voice.

"I haven't shouted about it, Jim, and as a matter of fact, I don't think the crew know. Don't pass it on, but we've got over half a million in gold below, to say nothing of a consignment of pearls worth certainly another quarter."

Jim whistled. "By Jove! it would be a nice haul for someone. Bit out of your line, isn't it, James, carrying specie?"

"Yes, it is," agreed the other. "It generally goes on the bigger boats, but there was some hitch this time. It's just as safe with me as it is with them. That has made it safe." He pointed to the wireless operator busily sending out the message from "Yours in the Church." "That has made piracy a thing of the past. And, incidentally, as you can imagine, Jim, it's a big feather in my cap getting away with this consignment. It's going to make the trip worth six ordinary ones to the firm, and—er—to me. And, with any luck, if things go all right, as, humanly speaking, they will do, I have hopes that in the future it will no longer be out of our line. We might get a share of that traffic, and I'll be able to buy that chicken farm in Dorsetshire earlier than I thought."

Jim laughed. "You old humbug, James! You'll never give up the sea."

The skipper sighed and stretched himself.

"Maybe not, lad; maybe not. Not till she gives me up, anyway. But chickens are nice companionable birds, they tell me, and Dorset is England."

We stopped on talking for a few minutes longer, when a sudden and frenzied explosion of mirth came from the wireless operator. I had noticed him taking down a message, which he was now reading over to himself, and after a moment or two of unrestrained joy, he came out on deck.

"What is it, Jenkins?" said the skipper.

"Message for the parson, sir," answered the operator. "There is a duplicate on the table."

He saluted, and went aft to find the Reverend Samuel.

"I think," murmured the skipper, with a twinkling in his eye, "that I will now inspect the wireless installation. Would you care to come with me?"

And this is what we, most reprehensibly, read:

"DEAR BROTHER how lovely the gentleman who guides our ship tells me we pass quite close about midday the day after to-morrow will lean over railings and wave pocket-handkerchief.--FERDINAND."

"My sainted aunt!" spluttered the skipper. "Lean over railings and wave pocket-handkerchief!"

"I think I prefer the gentleman who guides our ship," said Jim gravely. "Anyway, James, I shall borrow your telescope as we come abreast of Ferdinand. I'd just hate to miss him. Good night, old man. I don't think anyone could blame you if you had that message framed."

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It was about half an hour later that the door of my cabin opened and Jim entered abruptly. I was lying in my bunk smoking a final cigarette, and I looked at him in mild surprise. He was fully dressed, though I had seen him start to take off his clothes twenty minutes before, and he was looking grave.

"You pay attention, Dick," he said quietly, sitting down on the other bunk. "I'd just got my coat off when I remembered I'd left my cigar-case in a niche up on deck. I went up to get it, and as I was putting it in my pocket I heard my own name mentioned. Somewhat naturally I stopped and listened. And I distinctly heard this sentence: 'Don't forget--you are absolutely responsible for Maitland.' I listened, but I couldn't catch anything else except a few disconnected words here and there, such as 'wireless,' 'midday,' though I must have stood there for five minutes. Then there was a general pushing-back of deck-chairs, and those seven black-coated blighters trooped off to bed. They didn't see me; they were on the other side of the funnel--but it made me think. You remember that remark you heard as we came on board? Well, why the deuce is this bunch of parsons so infernally interested in me? I don't like it, Dick." He looked at me hard through his eyeglass. "Do you think they are parsons?"

I sat up in bed with a jerk.

"What do you mean--do I think they're parsons? Of course they're parsons. Why shouldn't they be parsons?"

But I suddenly felt very wide awake.

Jim thoughtfully lit a cigar.

"Quite--why shouldn't they be? At the same time----" He paused, and blew out a cloud of smoke. "Dick, I suppose I'm a suspicious bird, but this interest--this peculiar interest--in me is strange, to say the least of it. Of course, it may be that they regard me as a particularly black soul to be plucked from the burning, in which case I ought to feel duly flattered. On the other hand, let us suppose for a second that they are not parsons. Well, I don't think I am being unduly conceited if I say that I have a fairly well-known reputation as a tough customer if trouble occurs."

And now all thoughts of sleep had left me.

"Just exactly what do you mean, Jim?" I demanded.

He answered my question by another.

"Don't you think, Dick, that that radiograph was just a little *too* damn foolish to be quite genuine?"

"Well, it was genuine right enough. Jenkins took it down in front of our eyes."

"Oh, it was sent--I'm not denying that. And it was sent as he received it and as we read it. But was it sent by a genuine parson, cruising in a genuine yacht for his health? If so, my opinion of the brains of the Church drops below par. But if"--he drew deeply at his cigar--"if, Dick, it was not sent by a genuine parson, but by someone who wished to pose as the drivelling idiot curate of fiction--why, my opinion of the brains of the Church remains at par."

"Look here," I said, lighting a cigarette. "I may be several sorts of ass, but I can't get you. Granting your latter supposition, why should anyone not only want to pose as a parson when he wasn't one, but also take the trouble to send fool messages round the universe?"

"Has it occurred to you," said Jim quietly, "that two very useful pieces of information have been included in those two fool messages? First, our exact position at a given moment, and our course, and our speed. Secondly, the approximate time when the convalescing curate in the yacht belonging to the kind friend will impinge on that course. And the third fact--not contained in either message, but which may possibly have a bearing on things, is that on board this boat there is half a million in gold specie and a quarter of a million in pearls."

"Good Heavens!" I muttered, staring at him foolishly.

"Mark you, Dick, I may have stumbled into a real first-class mare's nest. The Reverend Samuel and his pals may be all that they say and more, but I don't like this tender solicitude for my salvation."

"Are you going to say anything to the skipper?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I think I shall tell James. But he's a pig-headed fellow, and he'll probably be darned rude about it. I should if I were him. They aren't worrying over *his* salvation."

And with that he went to bed, leaving me thinking fairly acutely. Could there be anything in it? Could it be possible that anyone would attempt piracy in the twentieth century, especially when the ship, as the skipper had pointed out, was equipped with wireless? It was ridiculous, and the next morning I went round to Jim's cabin to tell him so. It was empty, and there was a note lying on the bed addressed to me. It was brief and to the point.

"I am ill in bed with a sharp dose of fever. Pass the good news on.--JIM."

I did so, at breakfast, and I thought I detected a shade of relief pass over the face of the Reverend Samuel, though he inquired most solicitously about the sufferer, and even went so far as to wish to give him some patent remedy of his own. But I assured him that quinine and quiet were all that were required, coupled with a starvation diet, and with that the matter dropped.

And then there began a time for me of irritating suspense. Not a sign of Jim did I see for the whole of that day and the following night. His door had been locked since I went in before breakfast, and I didn't even know if he was inside or not. All I did know was that something was doing, and there are few things more annoying than being out of a game you know is being played. Afterwards I realised that it was unavoidable; at the time I cursed inwardly and often.

And the strange thing is that when the thing did occur it came with almost as much of a shock to me as if I had had no previous suspicions. It was the suddenness of it, I think--the suddenness and the absolute absence of any fuss or shouting. Naturally, I didn't see the whole thing in its entirety; my outlook was limited to what happened to me and in my own vicinity.

I suppose it was about half-past eleven, and I was strolling up and down the deck. Midday had been the time mentioned, and I was feeling excited and restless. Mrs. Armstrong and her daughter were seated in their usual place, and I stopped and spoke a few words to them. Usually Mrs. Armstrong was the talker of the two--a big, gaunt woman with yellow spectacles, but pleasant and homely. This morning, however, the daughter answered, and her mother, who had put on a veil in addition to her spectacles, sat silently beside her.

"Poor mother has got such a headache from the glare that she has had to put on a veil," she said. "I hope Mr. Maitland is better."

I murmured something about his being the same, just as two of the parsons strolled past, and I wondered why the girl gave a little laugh. Then suddenly she sat up with a cry of admiration.

"Oh! look at that lovely yacht!"

I swung round quickly, and there, sure enough, about a hundred yards from us, and just coming into sight round the awning, was a small steam yacht, the one presumably from which Ferdinand was to wave. And at that moment the shorter of the two parsons put a revolver within an inch of my face, while the other ran his hands over my pockets. It was so unexpected that I gaped at him foolishly, and even when I saw my Colt flung overboard I hardly realised that the big hold-up had begun.

Then there came a heavy thud from just above us, and I saw Jenkins, the wireless man, pitched forward on his face half in and half out of his cabin door. He lay there sprawling while another of the parsons proceeded to wreck his instruments with the iron bar which he had used to stun the operator. It was then, with a squawk of terror like an anguished hen, that Mrs. Armstrong rose to her feet, and with her pink parasol in one hand and her rug in the other fled towards the bows of the ship. She looked so irresistibly funny, this large, hysterical woman, that I couldn't help it, I laughed. And even the two parsons smiled, though not for long.

"Go below," said one of them to Miss Armstrong. "Remain in your cabin. And you"--he turned to me--"go aft where the others are."

"You scoundrel!" I shouted, "what are you playing at?"

"Don't argue, or I'll blow out your brains," he said quietly. "And get a move on."

I found the two Americans and the coloured gentleman standing in a bunch with a few of the deck hands, and everyone seemed equally dazed. One of the so-called parsons stood near with a revolver in each hand, but it was really an unnecessary precaution: we were none of us in a position to do anything. And suddenly one of the Americans gripped my arm.

"Gee! look at the two guns on that yacht."

Sure enough, mounted fore and aft and trained directly on us were two guns that looked to me to be of about three-inch calibre, and behind each of them stood two men.

"What's the game, anyway?" he went on excitedly, as two boats shot away from the yacht. For the first time I noticed that the engines had stopped, and that we were lying motionless on the calm oily sea. But my principal thoughts were centred on Jim. Where was he? What was he doing? Had these blackguards done away with him, or was he lying up somewhere--hidden away? And even if he were what could he do? Those two guns had an unpleasant appearance.

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A bunch of armed men came pouring over the side, and then disappeared below, only to come up again in a few minutes carrying a number of wooden boxes, which they lowered into the boats alongside. They worked with the efficiency of well-trained sailors, and I found myself cursing aloud. For I knew what was inside those boxes, and one was so utterly helpless to do anything. And yet I couldn't help feeling a sort of unwilling admiration; the thing was so perfectly organised. It might have been a well-rehearsed drill instead of a unique and gigantic piece of piracy.

I stepped back a few paces, and looked up at the bridge. The skipper was there and his three officers--covered by another of the parsons. And the fifth member of the party was the Reverend Samuel Longfellow. He was smiling gently to himself, and as the last of the boxes was lowered over the side he came to the edge of the bridge and addressed us.

"We are now going to leave you," he remarked suavely. "You are all unarmed, and I wish to give you a word of advice. Should either of the gunners on my yacht see anyone move, however innocent the reason, before we are on board, he or both of them will open fire. So do not, Captain Kelly, be tempted to have a shot at me, because it will be the last shot you ever have. You will now join your crew, if you please."

In silence the skipper and his officers came down from the bridge, and the speaker followed them. For a moment or two he stood facing us with an ironical smile on his face.

"Your brother in the Church," he remarked, "thanks you for your little gift to his offertory box." Then he turned to one of the other parsons beside him. "Is it set?" he asked briefly.

"Yes," said the other. "We'd better hurry. What about that woman up there?"

"Confound the woman!" answered the Reverend Samuel. "A pleasant journey, Captain Kelly."

He stepped down the gangway into the second boat, and was pulled away towards the yacht.

And then for the first time I remembered Mrs. Armstrong. She was cowering down with her hands over her ears, the picture of abject terror. But now curiosity overcame her fright and she knelt up and stared at the yacht. Her pink parasol was clutched in her hands, and tragic though the situation was, I could not help smiling.

A mocking shout from the yacht made me look away again. The scoundrel who called himself the Reverend Samuel Longfellow was standing beside the boxes of gold and pearls which had

been stacked on the deck. He was waving his hand and bowing ironically, with the six other blackguards beside him, when the last amazing development took place.

Literally before our eyes they vanished in a great sheet of flame. I had a momentary glimpse of the yacht apparently splitting in two, and then the roar of a gigantic explosion nearly deafened me.

"Get under cover!" yelled the skipper, and there was a general stampede, as bits of metal and wood began falling into the sea all round us. Then there came another smaller explosion as the sea rushed into the yacht's engine-room, a great column of water shot up, and when it subsided the yacht had disappeared.

"What in Heaven's name happened?" said one of the Americans dazedly.

I said nothing; I felt too dazed myself. And unconsciously I looked towards the bows. Mrs. Armstrong had disappeared.

The skipper sent away a boat, but it was useless. There was a mass of floating wreckage, but no trace of any survivor.

I met Mrs. Armstrong on deck half an hour afterwards.

"Dreadful! Terrible!" she cried. "How more than thankful I am I didn't see it!"

I stared at her.

"You didn't see it?" I said. "But surely----"

And then I heard Jim's voice behind me.

"Mrs. Armstrong, I have a dreadful confession to make. Mrs. Armstrong, Dick, was good enough to lend me some clothes this morning, so that we could have a rag when crossing the Line, and I've gone and dropped her parasol overboard."

"We're nowhere near the Line," I remarked, but fortunately the good lady paid no attention.

"What does it matter, Mr. Maitland?" she cried. "To think of anything of that sort in face of this awful tragedy!"

She walked away like an agitated hen, and Jim smiled grimly.

"Poor old soul!" he said, "let's hope she never gets an idea of the truth."

"So it was you up in the bows," I remarked.

He nodded. "Didn't you guess, Dick? Let's go and have a drink, and I'll put you wise."

"I went and saw Kelly that night," he began, when we were comfortably settled, "and at first he laughed as I thought he would. Then after a while he didn't laugh quite so much, and presently I made a suggestion. If these men were what they said they were, the two big chests below would prove their case. Let us examine these two chests and see. So finally we went below to where the passengers' luggage is stored. There were the two cases, and there and then we opened one. It was packed--not with Bibles--but with nitro-glycerine."

Jim paused and took a drink.

"I don't think," he went on gravely, "that I have ever seen a man in quite such a dreadful rage as Kelly. There was a clock-work mechanism which could be started by turning a screw on the

outside of each box, and the whole diabolical plan was as clear as daylight. There was enough stuff there to sink a fleet of battleships, and when they had cleared off in the yacht with the gold we should suddenly have split in two and gone down with every soul on board."

He smiled grimly.

"I had no small difficulty in preventing James putting the whole bunch in irons on the spot, but finally I got him to agree to a plan of mine. We changed the cargo round--he and I. Their chests containing nitro-glycerine we filled with gold, and the specie boxes we filled with nitro-glycerine and some lead and iron as a make-weight. And then we let the plan proceed. We banked on the fact that they wouldn't fool around with an hysterical old woman or a man in the throes of fever. Good girl, Miss Armstrong; she kept her mother below all the morning. And that, I think, is all."

"I'm hanged if it is!" I cried. "What made that stuff blow up, if it had been taken out of the prepared boxes?"

Jim drained his glass.

"Well, old Dick," he said, "it may be that the Reverend Samuel dropped his Corona inadvertently. Or maybe something hit one of those boxes very hard--perhaps a bullet from a gun fired from this ship. Come down to my cabin."

I followed him, and he shut the door. On the bed was lying Mrs. Armstrong's pink parasol. Through a hole that had been split in the silk near the ferrule stuck out the muzzle of an Express rifle. Jim took it out and cleaned it carefully, then he looked at the parasol.

"Beyond repair, old man. And since I told the old dear I'd dropped her gamp overboard, well---

"

He rolled it up loosely, and threw it far out through the port-hole.

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## IX. *The Rottenness of Lady Hounslow*

And now, in order to keep things in their correct chronological order, I must put down the story Jim told us himself only a month ago. It was news to me, and it happened while I was otherwise occupied in Cairo. Of which--more later.

But before I give his story I must mention quite briefly the circumstances which led up to it.

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Lady Hounslow, wife of Sir George Hounslow, is a very wonderful woman, as is only right and proper in the wife of a Cabinet Minister. She has the gift, as all the world knows, of giving just the right dinner-parties to just the right people. She also has the gift of flirting so mildly that not even the most censorious can really call it flirting; and she does it with just the right man. Private secretaries adore her--she is so impartially charming to them all; under-secretaries ask her advice, and not infrequently take it. And, of course, her labours on behalf of charity are too well known to need description.

In fact, it was only the other day that she came down to open the new wing of the hospital in the village near Jim Maitland's house. A local deputation, with cinematograph operator complete, met her at the station, and she flashed her well-known smile on all those waiting on the platform as she stood for a moment framed in the carriage door. Then she entered the waiting motor-car: the band delivered itself of a noise, and the ceremony proper started.

It was a ghastly performance, as such ceremonies invariably are, and why Jim insisted on attending it defeated us all. But he would give no reason beyond an inscrutable smile, and when the actual opening was over, we found ourselves sitting in the second row in the village school waiting for the speeches.

Lady Hounslow specialised in little brief speeches--charming little speeches in which she said just the right thing. And if each charming little speech brought a peerage for her husband one step closer--well, surely the labourer is worthy of her hire.

And that afternoon was no exception. She listened prettily to the perspiring effort of the mayor; then, when the cheering had subsided, she rose to her feet. Just three minutes--no more, was her invariable rule. And for two minutes she rippled on, her theme being the sacred cause of devoting one's energy, one's time and one's money to the sick.

"Was it possible," she asked, "for us, who were in the full possession of our health, who were endowed, perhaps, a little more than some others with this world's goods--though in these days of this dreadful Income Tax it was only very little--was it possible to do too much for the sick and suffering?"

Her sweet, pathetic smile as she said it drew a sympathetic response from her audience, which changed suddenly to a little murmur of alarm. For with amazing suddenness the sweet smile faded from her lips, to be replaced by what was almost a look of terror. There was a hunted expression in her eyes, and her cheeks showed blotchy through her make-up. There were lines in a face grown strangely haggard, and she faltered and swayed towards her chair. And she was staring at Jim Maitland.

In an instant a doctor was beside her, and the reporter sitting below the chair heard her murmur something about the heat. Not surprising, of course; opening hospitals is tiring work for frail and delicate women. But it ended the meeting, and in the general confusion we departed. And it

was as we got to the door that Jim stopped and deliberately turned round. Over the heads of the people he stared at the platform, and after a moment or two their eyes met. And in hers terror had been replaced by defiance: one could almost hear a spoken message.

Then Jim swung on his heel and we left. For a while he strode along in silence: then, as the band started again behind us, he stopped suddenly and laughed.

"Wife of a Cabinet Minister," he remarked thoughtfully. "A leader of philanthropic work in this country: probably a future peeress of the realm. And rotten--utterly rotten to the core. You don't mean to say you've forgotten her, Dick?"

Now, as she had stepped on to the platform, some vague chord of memory had stirred in my mind, but it had remained at that. The Rottenness of Lady Hounslow "Of course, you didn't see her as much as I did," went on Jim. "And it's some time ago. But don't you remember Mrs. Dallas in Cairo?"

"But you don't mean to say----!" I cried, and Jim grinned.

"But I do mean to say," he said. "Mrs. Dallas and Lady Hounslow are one and the same person. And with Mrs. Dallas I travelled for a month right up the White Nile. She did what she wanted, and she found what she wanted, and she proved herself to be what I said she was--a rotten woman, rotten to the core."

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And now memory was stirring in earnest. Still on our homeward journey, we had left the *Andaman* at Port Said. And the first person we ran into was a dark-skinned man in European clothes who halted dead in his tracks as he saw Jim. Then without a word he turned away down a side street and Jim followed him.

"Wait for me at the hotel," he said curtly, and there was a gleam in his eyes that had not been there a moment before.

It was an hour before he rejoined me, and the gleam was more pronounced than ever.

"Dick," he said, "I'm going on in the Andaman as far as Malta. Wonderful sea-bathing in Malta in August and September. I'm going to spend all day and every day bathing. Care to come? You'll probably get some polo at the Marsa."

"Somewhat sudden," I murmured mildly. "What's the game?"

"It's *the* game, Dick: the Great Game. The only game in the world worth playing. Sometimes I've been tempted to chuck up roving and take to it permanently. Do you know who that fellow was that I followed?"

"Some Egyptian of sorts, I suppose."

"That was Victor Head, of the Loamshires, temporarily seconded for service with the Government. He's officially A.D.C., I believe, to some General, and he's been on leave of absence for a year." Jim grinned.

"That's the sort of General to have."

And suddenly it dawned on me.

"Secret service work!" I cried.

Jim lifted a deprecating hand.

"Let us call it research work amongst the native population," he murmured. "You don't suppose, do you, old man, that the British Government runs five hundred million black men here and in India by distributing tracts to 'em?"

"But why Malta?" I cried, harking back. "What about Alexandria; there's excellent bathing there. And it's a hole of an island at this time of year."

"One doesn't get that wonderful goat smell here," he remarked, and his eyes were twinkling. "I know the actual rock, Dick, where one can lie and bask in the sun. Coming?"

It was an unnecessary question, and three days later found us in Valetta. A sirocco was blowing, and of all the foul winds that blow upon this universe the sirocco in Malta during the hot months has many strong claims to be considered the most foul. But Jim was in irrepressible spirits, and departed at once to commune with a certain Staff officer. I went with him to be officially introduced, and then I faded out of the picture. For they spoke in a strange cryptic jargon, and when the staff officer had wiped the sirocco sweat from his eyes, I saw they were gleaming even as Jim's.

To one who has played the game himself the call of it is always there. But it wasn't a long interview, and it ended with the officer giving orders that a "Tent, bell, G.S., one, complete with pole," should be placed at our disposal for as long as we needed it. And an hour later we left the Union Club in a *carozzi* with our bell tent and drove away towards the west. We passed St. Paul's Bay, where the celebrated adventure with the viper is duly commemorated, and at last we came to the end of the island.

Below us lay a little bay with the water gleaming gold in the setting sun. We scrambled down the cliff, and we put up our tent on a patch of sand.

"There is the very spot I used last time, Dick," said Jim, pointing to a great sandstone rock jutting out into the sea. "And let us pray to Allah that there are rather fewer mixed bathing parties for our present effort. They always come in the hottest part of the day, and I reckoned that they made me take a week longer than I anticipated to cook."

He laughed at my look of mystification.

"That's what we've come here for, old man. I've got to cook in the sun, and you can take it from me that I turn into the choicest mahogany you've ever seen. But the red blistery stage is painful, and it's dull cooking alone. So if you don't mind keeping me company, and doing the grub side of the business, I shall be eternally grateful."

They're pretty thorough--the men who play that game. When there aren't any rules, and a slip may mean a singularly unpleasant death, they have to be. And Jim was taking no chances. A stain I gathered was all right for a one or two day show, but when it came to a question of weeks there was nothing like the permanent stain of the sun. And so like a chicken on a spit did Jim rotate on that rock, only ceasing when the sound of feminine voices announced the arrival of a bathing party. Then with horrible maledictions he would retire into the tent until they departed.

It took four weeks before he was satisfied, and I certainly would never have thought such a result possible. His skin had turned the dark brown of the typical Berber, and when he walked with the superb dignity of those sons of the desert it was difficult to believe that he was an Englishman at all.

And then one day he disappeared. Mysteriously from somewhere had arrived the necessary clothes; as I have said, there was a Staff officer in Valetta who had played the game himself. And to him I went for further information. But they're an uncommunicative lot--the players, and beyond a vague allusion to Tripoli the Staff Officer was non-committal.

"The season will be beginning soon in Cairo," he remarked. "A P. & O. is calling to-morrow. Why not go and wait there?"

"Have you any idea how long he will be?" I asked.

"Two months: six! Who knows? You might return the bell tent to Ordnance, will you?"

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And so I went back to Cairo and waited. It was then that I had met Mrs. Dallas. Little by little she came back to me--a charming attractive widow with subalterns buzzing round her like flies round a jam-pot. And it was there, of course, that she must have met Hounslow: he was out there at the time on some Government investigation. But that was all I ever knew, and I told Jim so as we sat in the garden having tea after the incident of the opening of the hospital.

Jim grinned, and proceeded to fill his pipe.

"Well, on the understanding that it goes no farther, I'll gratify your vulgar curiosity," he remarked. "After all, it's ancient history now, but there's no good stirring up mud, even if it were possible to do so. Presumably Sir George Hounslow is satisfied with his bargain, and it would be a pity to disillusion him. Though had he known at the time what I knew, infatuated though he was, I think that he would have thought twice about marrying her. I debated in my mind whether I'd tell him, and finally decided not to. There's quite enough trouble in this world already without making more, and anyway he wouldn't have believed me.

"You know, of course, what the situation was at that time. No? I thought it was pretty widely discussed by the Army out there. Well, in brief, though this point has nothing to do with Mrs. Dallas as she then was, the Germans had begun their tricks. They were working tooth and nail for a Jihad to take place in August 1914. A general revolt of Islam to coincide with the world war was their idea, and it is significant that one of their agents mentioned the actual date to me, eighteen months before. He thought he was talking to a fanatical Mahomedan and he became a little indiscreet.

"However, my job when I left you in Malta was a general contre-espionage one. To find out just how widespread the influence was and feel the pulse of the natives. There were ten of us on it, and between us we got in eight reports. Not bad going, especially as the two who were murdered were not really up to the standard required--poor devils. But that's another story altogether; let's get down to my Lady Hounslow.

"He was known as No. 10--the man who lived many days' journey up the White Nile. Who he was exactly, no one knew; at least if anyone did it was not shouted abroad. Officially his name was Brown, and he was new to me. But I found that everyone else who was on the game knew him, and I also found that headquarters in Cairo placed great reliance on him.

"Three years previously he had suddenly appeared on the scenes out of the blue, and there he had remained ever since--buried. With the help of a little quinine and a few simple medicines he had established a big reputation as a doctor amongst the natives. And the Powers That Be kept him supplied with those medicines--because a reputation of that sort amongst the natives is a valuable asset when it is held by the right man.

"It was Victor Head, I think, who first discovered that he was the right sort of man. He ran across him by accident, and got from him some information which at first sight seemed to be not only unlikely but absurd. And it turned out to be correct. Then another fellow sampled him, and once again he put up the goods. Certain inquiries were made, and in due course he became Number 10. I confess I was a little anxious to see him. He was quite a young man, I gathered, and it seemed strange for a young man to bury himself in such a way, however much he might be actuated by a desire to serve his country.

"And so, in due course, I met him. He was doctoring a couple of natives at the time, and having given him the usual Arab greeting, and the sign by which those in the game can recognise one another, I sat down on the ground and studied him. I placed him at about five and thirty--a thin, wiry, sunburnt man. To all outward appearance he seemed fit and healthy, but there was something about him--it was his eyes, I think--that made me wonder whether the man called Brown would have been accepted by an insurance company as a first-class life.

"The natives departed in due course, and having gone through the customary formalities of meeting for the benefit of possible onlookers, I rose and followed him into his house.

"'You're new,' he said when we were alone.

"'New to you,' I answered, 'but not to the game, though I haven't been on it for some years.'

"And for a while we discussed matters irrelevant to this story. It was not until he had completed his self-imposed job that Number 10 allowed himself to turn to matters personal.

"'Are you going back to Cairo direct?' he asked, and when I told him I was he began walking up and down the room with quick, excited steps.

"'Will you do something for me?' he cried.

"'Of course,' I answered. 'What is it?'

"'There's a girl in Cairo,' he said, and his voice was shaking a little. 'Her name is Dallas--Mrs. Dallas--and I've just heard that she arrived there a month ago. Will you find her for me, and say to her--'Jack is waiting. It is quite safe.'"

"Then he paused suddenly and stared at me.

"'They are pleased with me, aren't they, at headquarters? I've done pretty well?'

"'Very,' I answered, feeling a little puzzled at what all the mystery was about. 'As far as I know they're delighted with your work.'

"'I mean, I'm useful to them. They--they won't let me be taken away.'

"'Who is there to take you away?' I asked, staring at him. The perspiration was glistening on his face, and his hands were trembling. 'It strikes me, Brown,' I went on quietly, 'that you're not too fit. You dish out medicine to these natives, when somebody ought to be doing the same to you.'

"'It's nothing,' he cried. 'I'm all right. If only I didn't get these awful night sweats.'

"Then suddenly he started to cough, and I didn't need to be a doctor to tell what was the matter with him. He'd got consumption--and he'd got it badly.

"'I want you to tell her,' he gasped when he'd recovered from the paroxysm, 'that it is quite safe. Impress it on her--that there's no danger. She will understand what you mean.'

"All right,' I said. 'I will certainly do what you ask.'

"You see,' he said quietly, 'she is my wife.'

"I sat up and stared at him.

"Your wife?' I echoed. 'Then why the deuce don't you go to Cairo yourself, my dear fellow?'

"I can't,' he answered; 'I daren't. But when she knows it's safe--impress that on her, don't forget--she'll come here. I suppose,' he went on diffidently, 'you couldn't help her over arrangements for the journey, could you?'

"I assured him that I would do everything I could to assist the lady, and the poor devil was pathetically grateful. After all it was none of my business. There are quite a number of men called Brown dotted about in odd corners, whose wives if they possessed one would not answer to the name. I stayed on with him as long as I could, consistently with my rôle of Arab, and I let him talk. He could think of nothing except his wife, and in view of the fact that he hadn't seen her for four years it was hardly surprising. Once or twice I tried to mention his health, but he waved the matter aside. A bit of a cough--that was all, and everything was going to be perfect when his wife arrived. And his parting injunction to me was a repetition of the fact that there was no danger.

"She ought to be here in a month,' were his last words, and I left him to his dreams--the man who called himself Brown."

Jim paused and knocked out his pipe.

"I was back in Cairo in about a fortnight, and the first thing I did, of course, was to give in my report. It was to Toby Bretherton I made it, and when I'd finished I got down to the other matter.

"Mrs. Dallas,' he cried. 'Do I know her? My dear fellow there's not a man in Cairo who doesn't. She takes very good care of that. Why do you ask?'

"But I wasn't there to gratify Toby's curiosity, and I put him off with some non-committal reply.

"She's a widow,' he went on. 'A distinctly good-looking filly: a high stepper and a rapid mover. But excessively discreet, Jim--very excessively discreet.'

"You don't appear mad about the lady,' I remarked.

"He shrugged his shoulders. 'I am not one of the privileged many. But from what I can see and from what I've been told she has altogether too shrewd an eye for the main chance to be particularly attractive. Her present quarry I believe is that ass Hounslow. Some minor official out from England,' he went on in answer to my look of inquiry. 'Conducting some statistical investigation. And I am told that the air of Cairo and the lady's charms have seriously interfered with the great man's work.'

"I left him soon after, and as you can imagine I was thinking pretty hard. For Toby Bretherton's description of the lady hardly fitted in with the one given me by the man called Brown. In fact I didn't quite see her rushing with outflung arms to the back of beyond up the White Nile. And when I finally met the lady the following afternoon I saw her doing it still less. I was still disguised as an Arab, and I took stock of her without much difficulty. She was surrounded by a bunch of men, and they were watching some flying out at Heliopolis. And Mr. Hounslow, as he then was, was watching her.

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"There was a fancy dress ball that night at the Semiramis, and to that ball I repaired. I was determined to lay up for her, and I did--though it took some time. As Toby had said, she was excessively discreet, and the subalterns cajoled her to go with them to dark corners of the grounds in vain. But at last Mr. Hounslow, not being a subaltern, but a very much bigger fish, persuaded her to brave the rigours of the night air with him. She yielded with becoming reluctance, and allowed herself to be led to a discreet *carla jugga* in the grounds.

"And there I regret to say that the statistical expert's feelings so overcame him that he kissed her. And Mrs. Dallas murmured 'George--dear.' He kissed her again, and shortly afterwards Mrs. Dallas agreed to become Mrs. Hounslow. And then because Mr. Hounslow was a Public Man and had duty dances with the wives of other Public Men he left her. She would not come in for a while, she said: she would sit and dream. Even as the man called Brown was sitting and dreaming many moons away up the White Nile.

"It was the chance I had been waiting for, and I stepped into the *carla jugga*. She gave a little cry, as I bowed deeply before her.

"'Who are you? What do you want?'

"'My name is Ibrahim, lady,' I said, 'and I bring you a message. It is from an Englishman, and it is as follows: "Jack is waiting. It is quite safe.'"

"I thought she was going to faint. In the semi-darkness I could see that every vestige of colour had left her face, and her breath was coming in great gasps.

"'But it isn't true,' she muttered after a time. 'It can't be true, I tell you. Jack is dead: I know he's dead.'

"'He is waiting for you,' I went on impassively. 'And he told me to impress on you that there was no danger.'

"'Where is he?' she cried. 'Tell me where he is.'

"And now she was clutching my arm feverishly.

"'Many days' march away up the White Nile,' I answered gravely. 'You will go to him?'

"'But don't you see it's impossible,' she almost screamed.

"And then what little pity I had for her went. As long as she had believed her husband was dead--and to do the woman justice I have no doubt that she really had believed it--I had nothing to say on the matter. The mere fact that I fully shared Toby Bretherton's opinion of her was beside the point: we don't all think alike. But now the thing was on a different footing altogether.

"'Why is it impossible,' I demanded, 'for a woman to go to her lord and husband?'

"She literally sprang at me.

"'You're not to say that,' she hissed. 'You're not to mention that word.'

"'It is the truth,' I answered, and she began pacing up and down like a caged tigress.

"'How am I to get to him?' she cried, snatching at the straw.

"But I wasn't going to let her off that way.

"I will take you to him," I answered.

"There came the sound of approaching footsteps, and she seized my arm.

"Where can I see you again?" she whispered, "I must have time to think."

"I arranged a meeting place out beyond Mena House for the following day, and then I disappeared to make room for dear George."

Jim smiled a little grimly.

"I don't profess to know what she said to him, or how she accounted for her sudden determination to go up the White Nile. As I said before, she was a rotten woman, and she was an unscrupulous woman--but she certainly was not a fool. And whatever may have been the secret which had caused the man called Brown to bury himself--at the time, of course, I didn't know it--his charming lady-wife was not unacquainted with the law on bigamy. She had to go, and she knew it: and she had to go without arousing dear George's suspicions. She certainly succeeded: the poor boob was eating out of her hand when I met them near the Sphinx the next day.

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"It appeared that Toby Bretherton had been consulted as to my reliability, and I smiled inwardly as I wondered what he had thought about the matter. But true to the instincts of all those who play the game, he had not given me away. And to Mr. George Hounslow and his fiancée I was still Ibrahim--a thoroughly reliable Arab.

"The next day we started by train for Khartoum. There I got the necessary boys, and a fortnight later we came to the place where the man called Brown was awaiting his wife. Throughout the whole journey she had hardly spoken to me, save to ask how much farther it was. To her I was just an Arab guide, and when we arrived that was all I was to the man. I don't think he even recognised me: he had eyes for no one but his wife. She--this wonderful woman--had not failed him: his dreams had come true. And with his arms outstretched he went to her, heedless of everyone else.

"Oh! my dear," I heard him say, "I can hardly believe that it's true."

Jim paused.

"Ever seen a dog jump up suddenly to welcome his master, and get a biff over the head for his pains? Ever seen a child run up to kiss someone and get rebuffed? Of course you have. And you've seen the light--the love-light die out of their eyes? Just so did the light die out of the eyes of the man who called himself Brown. You'd have thought that she might have acted a bit--Lord knows, she was a good enough actress when it suited her book. You'd have thought that she might have had the common decency to pretend she was glad to see the poor devil, even though her plans had been knocked on the head. But I suppose it wasn't worth her while to act in front of a bunch of Arabs: she reserved her histrionic abilities for dear George and the callow subalterns of Cairo.

"What on earth have you done this for?" she snapped at him. "They told me you were dead a year ago."

"There was no mistaking her tone of voice, and the man called Brown looked as if someone had hit him hard between the eyes.

"But, my dear," he stammered, and then suddenly he began to cough. A dreadful, tearing

cough, which shook him from head to foot; a cough which stained his handkerchief with scarlet. And into the eyes of the woman there came a look of shrinking fear, to be replaced almost at once by something very different. Her husband, doubled up in his paroxysm, saw nothing, and a bunch of mere natives didn't count. Hope, triumph, the way out, replaced fear in her eyes: she knew the poor brute who had been waiting for her for four years was dying. Her path was clear--or would be very soon.

"'Jack--you're ill,' she said solicitously as the attack spent itself, and he looked pathetically grateful for the change of tone. He snatched at it--the one crumb of comfort he'd had, and putting his hand through her arm he led her towards his bungalow. He didn't see the hand away from his clenched rigidly: he didn't sense the strained tension of her whole body as she tried not to let him draw her too close: he didn't notice the horror which had come into her eyes again."

Jim laughed savagely.

"'Was it possible to do too much for the sick and suffering?'" he mimicked. "Great Heavens! Dick, I tell you that woman was wild with terror at the thought of getting infected herself. She knew it was consumption: no one could help knowing it. And, as I say, the soul of the philanthropic lady who opened our hospital this afternoon was sick with fear.

"Then they disappeared--she and the man called Brown. What happened at that interview I cannot tell you, but it lasted about an hour. And then she came out of the bungalow alone, and came towards me.

"'Ibrahim,' she said, 'we will start back to-morrow.'

"Then she went to her tent, which the boys had just erected. I waited till she had disappeared: then I walked across to the bungalow. And the man sitting at the table with a face grown suddenly old, stared at me for a while uncomprehendingly. Then he recognised me, and his shoulders shook a little.

"'Thank you for all you've done,' he said, and his voice was dead. 'I'm sorry to have troubled you uselessly.'

"'Why uselessly?' I asked.

"'It would have been better if I had left her to think I was dead,' he went on. 'I shall be pretty soon: and I realise now that I was asking too much of any woman. It's exposing her to too great a risk: it was selfish of me--damned selfish. But, you see, it was for her sake that I defrauded the firm I was employed with in London of several thousand pounds, and I thought, somehow, that----' He broke off, and buried his face in his hands. 'Oh, God! Maitland--what that woman has meant to me through these four years! I got away--out of the country: I buried myself here. And I used just to picture the time when she would join me. When I saw her arrive to-day, I thought I'd go mad with joy.' He raised his face and stared at me sombrely. 'Of course, I ought to have known better. Her coming here would inevitably lead to questions. And besides--there's my health.'

"'And what does Mrs. Dallas propose?' I inquired curtly.

"He looked at me with a strange smile.

"'She proposes to join me,' he remarked quietly, 'as soon as I am well again--in some other

country, under some other name. So if you would be good enough to escort her back to Cairo to-morrow we will await that happy day.'

"I looked at him quickly, but his face was inscrutable.

"'There comes a time, my friend,' he went on, 'when one ceases to see through a glass darkly.'

"And that time had come to the man called Brown. At the moment I didn't realise the full meaning to him of the quotation--later I did. For I hadn't gone ten steps from his bungalow when I heard the crack of a revolver in the room behind me. It's not much good waiting to die of consumption in the back of beyond when the woman you've built your life on turns out rotten to the core.

"I took her to see him," went on Jim, after a while. "I dragged her there--whimpering: and I held her there while she looked on the man who had blown his brains out. He'd done it with a big calibre service revolver, and she stood it for about five seconds. Then she fainted."

Jim Maitland gave a short laugh.

"Which is very near the end of the story--but not quite. I have sometimes wondered whether I would have told Hounslow if I hadn't gone down with fever at Khartoum. If I'd gone straight back to Cairo with her--well, I might have, and I might not. The situation, in parliamentary parlance, did not arise. It only arose considerably later, when Ibrahim the Arab emerged from hospital in European clothes, with eyeglass complete. Astonishing how quickly the colour fades away when you're indoors; astonishing how an eyeglass alters a man. So Ibrahim went in with fever, and yours very truly came out--a little sunburnt perhaps, but otherwise much as usual. And yours very truly went back to Cairo."

Once again Jim laughed.

"I went to see Toby Bretherton as soon as I arrived, and the first thing he said to me was, 'Pity you had your trip in vain, old man.'

"I grunted non-committally.

"'Dashed plucky thing on her part, going off to see her brother like that.'

"'Dashed plucky,' I agreed.

"'And then to find he'd blown his brains out. Bad show. Glad you were there, Jim. By the same token--you kept your identity pretty dark. She has no idea who you are. Why not come and dine to-night, and I'll ask her and Hounslow. She's going to-morrow. It will be rather interesting to see if she recognises you.'

"'It undoubtedly will,' I remarked. 'Eight o'clock?'

"'She didn't recognise me; as I say, a boiled shirt and an eyeglass alter a man. But she was very charming and very sweet, and quite delightfully modest when Hounslow told me of her trip at great length.

"'It was nothing,' she said. Ibrahim--the wonderful Ibrahim had made everything easy. And she would rather not talk about it: it was all too horrible.

"'I do hope he's better, Major Bretherton,' she said gently. 'He looked so ill when he went into hospital at Khartoum. If only I wasn't going to-morrow I would have so liked to thank him again.'

"Toby Bretherton smiled.

"You can thank him to-night, Mrs. Dallas,' he remarked, and she gave a little gasp and stared at him.

"You surely don't suppose, do you,' he went on, 'that I would ever have allowed you--quite ignorant of the country as you are--to go a long trip like that alone with an Arab?'

"His smile expanded; it really was a devilish good joke. It was such a good joke in fact that her tortoiseshell cigarette-holder snapped in two in her hand.

"There is your Ibrahim,' He waved his hand at me, and positively laughed.

"Even George was tickled to death and remarked, 'Well, I'm blowned!'

"As a situation it had its dramatic possibilities, you'll admit, and I've sometimes wondered how one would have ended it if one had been writing a story. The actual truth was almost banal. George had turned to speak to a man passing the table; Toby was giving an order to the waiter. She leant across to me and spoke.

"What are you going to do?'

"And my answer was, 'George is waiting. It is quite safe. And may God help George!'

"I haven't seen her from that day till this afternoon."

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## X. *The Pool of the Sacred Crocodile*

So much for Jim's doings on his own while I kicked my heels in Cairo and waited for him. As for mine during that period, sufficient let it be said that I met She who must be Obeyed. And the rest of these chronicles are concerned with her, and that other She who completed Jim's half-section.

By rights, I suppose, with the advent of the ladies the course of our lives should have at once developed a certain tranquillity. Only things don't always happen according to order. Certain it is that the narrowest shave of all we had occurred through my She: a shave, when for a brief space the curtain was lifted on dark and horrible things--things it is better to forget, though, once seen, they are unforgettable.

I know that to the man who catches the 8.30 train every morning and spends the day in his office in the City, the mere mention of such a thing as Black Magic is a cause for contemptuous laughter.

It is as well that he should think thus. And yet, surely to even the most prosaic of train-catchers, motoring maybe over Salisbury Plain, there must come some faint stirring of imagination as he sees the vast dead monument of Stonehenge. Can he not see that ancient temple peopled with vast crowds of fierce savages waiting in silence for the first rays of the rising sun to touch the altar? And then the wild-eyed priests; the human sacrifice; the propitiation of strange gods?

Thus it was in England two thousand years ago; thus it is to-day in places beyond the ken of England's train-catchers. Stamped out where possible, retreating always before advancing civilisation, there are still men who practise strange and dreadful rites in secret places.

Moreover, it is not good for a white man to dabble in those ceremonies. For they are utterly foul and evil. They are without every law, moral and social--and those who have dealings with them must pay a terrible price, even as Professor John Gainsford paid--Gainsford the celebrated Egyptologist.

Most people by now have forgotten his name, though at the time the case aroused great interest. It may be remembered that, as the result of information given to them, the authorities raided a certain house on the right bank of the Nile about half way between Cairo and Luxor. They found it empty and deserted, but possessed of one very strange feature. In the centre of the house was a large pool--almost the size of a small swimming-bath. It was filled with slimy, stagnant water which stank. And when they had drained the water away they made a very sinister discovery. On the bottom of the pool, partially hidden in the filthy ooze, was a pair of spectacles. And the spectacles were identified as belonging to Professor Gainsford.

No other trace of that eminent savant was ever found, and finally his death was presumed.

We let it rest at that--for, you see, we *knew*. We talked it over, Jim and Molly Tremayne, the Professor's niece, and, rightly or wrongly, we made our decision. Molly insists that it was just a sudden phase of dreadful madness; Jim maintains that Professor John Gainsford was of all vile murderers the vilest, and that the fact that he didn't succeed in his cold-blooded crime, but died himself, was no more than just retribution.

Be that as it may, I will put down now for the first time the real truth of what happened on that ghastly night. For Molly Tremayne is my She who was Obeyed then, and is now.

Professor Gainsford was the last man whom one would have considered capable of evil. His mutton-chop whiskers alone gave him an air of paternal benevolence, which was enhanced by the mild, blue eyes continually blinking behind his spectacles. At Shephard's Hotel he was a familiar figure with his coat-tails flapping behind him whenever he moved, and a silk pocket-handkerchief hanging out of his pocket.

It was one night at dinner that the Professor first mentioned the subject. He had omitted to put on his tie, I remember, and Molly had driven him upstairs again to remedy the defect. I was dining at their table--it was not an unusual occurrence--and we started to pull his leg about it. As a general rule he used to take our chaffing in the mildest way, blinking amiably at us from behind his spectacles.

But on this particular night the Professor seemed strangely preoccupied, and our conversation grew a little desultory. He kept shooting little bird-like glances at Molly, and was, in fact, so unlike his usual self that once or twice we looked at one another in surprise.

It was towards the end of the meal that we found out the reason of his peculiar manner.

"I have had," he remarked suddenly, "an almost unbelievable stroke of luck this afternoon."

"Discovered a new beetle, Uncle John?" asked Molly with a smile.

"I have discovered," he answered solemnly, "that a secret cult thought by every Egyptologist to have become extinct centuries ago is still in existence. If it should prove to be the case, if this cult, which, as far as we know, came into being about the eighteenth dynasty, still lives, and has carried on intact from generation to generation the hidden secrets of the ages, then I shall have made a discovery of staggering magnitude."

"But how did you find out about it, uncle?" said Molly.

"By sheer accident," he remarked. "I was in the bazaar this afternoon haggling with that arch-robber Yussuf over a scarab, when there strode into the shop a native who was evidently not a Cairene. Being engrossed in the scarab, I paid no attention to him until suddenly I happened to glance up. And I saw him make a sign to Yussuf which instantly made me forget everything else. I could hardly believe my eyes, for the sign he made was the secret sign of the highest adepts of this almost forgotten cult.

"A glance at Yussuf confirmed my opinion that I was in the presence of an adept. He was cringing--positively cringing--and my excitement became intense, though needless to say no trace of it showed in my manner. Outwardly I remained perfectly calm."

I caught Molly's eye, and smothered a smile. The Professor's outward calmness when he thought he had made a find was strongly reminiscent of that of a wire-haired terrier confronted by a rat.

"And what did you do then, Uncle John?" asked Molly gravely.

"I waited until he left Yussuf's shop, and then I followed him. There was a risk, of course, that he might refuse to say anything. At first, in fact, he would say nothing, but gradually as he realised that I knew as much if not more than he did about the history of his sect, he grew more communicative."

The Professor's hands were shaking with excitement.

"There seems not the slightest doubt," he continued, "that there has been no break whatever in

the priesthood for over three thousand years. Through all these centuries the cult has been kept alive. It is---- What is it, child? What are you looking at?"

I swung round quickly. Molly was staring into the darkness beyond the tables with frightened eyes.

"What is it, Molly?" I asked.

"A man," she said, "a horrible-looking native, was glaring at me with the most dreadful look in his eyes. He's gone now, but he looked awful."

"I'll go and see," I cried, getting up, but the Professor waved me back.

"Tut, tut!" he said irritably. "The man hasn't done anything."

But it seemed to me that there was a nervous apprehension in the glance he threw at his niece.

"Sorry to be so stupid," she said. "Go on, Uncle John; tell us about your cult."

But I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention to what he said. I was too occupied in watching Molly, and a little later we rose and went into the lounge.

There was a small dance in the hotel that evening, and when the Professor, true to his usual custom, had retired to his room, Molly and I took the floor.

"I can't tell you what that man's face was like, Dick," she said. "His eyes seemed to bore right into my brain, and I felt as if he were dragging me towards him."

However, I soothed her fears, and after a while she forgot him. So did I, and the Professor's new cult, and most other things. Have I not said that Molly was She who must be Obeyed, and the idiocy of the irreparably landed fish had been my portion for some days. And it was not until much later that I remembered him again.

I had gone to bed, when suddenly there came an agitated knocking on my door, and I heard her voice:

"Dick! Dick!"

In an instant I had opened it, to find Molly outside. She was trembling all over, and before I knew what had happened she was in my arms.

"What is it, darling?" I cried. "What has frightened you?"

"That man--that awful native," she gasped. "He's in the hotel. Oh! Dick--I'm terrified. I'd just got into bed, when something made me get up and go to the door. I simply had to; I felt as if my legs weren't my own. I opened it, and there, standing in the passage just outside, was the man. I can't tell you the look in his eyes." She shuddered violently. "It was dreadful--horrible. He seemed to be gloating over me, and then all of a sudden he seemed to vanish."

"Vanish!" I said. "My darling--you've been dreaming. You've had a nightmare."

"But it wasn't a nightmare," she cried. "I tell you he was standing there in the passage."

I soothed her as best I could, and then I had to be firm. I admit that nothing would have pleased me better than to remain there with her in my arms for two or three hours or so. But this world is a censorious place, and the hour was well past midnight. So very gently I insisted that she must either go back to her room, or else spend the night with some woman friend in the hotel.

As luck would have it, the room of a little widow who was a pal of hers was almost opposite mine, and she had no objection to Molly sleeping with her. And to her Molly went, having first driven every coherent thought out of my mind by kissing me.

"When men call me darling," she murmured, "I always kiss them."

"How many men?" I began furiously.

And then the widow's door shut.

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I mentioned the matter to the Professor next morning, and, somewhat to my surprise, he took it quite seriously, shaking his head when I said I thought it was merely a dream.

"Possibly, Leyton," he remarked, peering at me thoughtfully, "possibly not. But from what you say Molly seems to have been very upset. I think a change will do her good. What do you say to us all three going to investigate what I was talking to you about last night at dinner? This cult--this ancient religion--let us all start to-day and go to the place--the secret place--where it still flourishes."

"Have you any idea where it is, Professor?" I asked.

"Between here and Luxor," he answered. "We will take a *dahabeah*, and the exact place will be shown to me by the man I met in the bazaar yesterday."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Professor," I said. "But do you think," I said, "that even if we find the place the priests will let you see anything?"

"Once we get to the Pool of the Sacred Crocodile," he answered, and his blue eyes were staring at me with almost uncanny brightness, "we shall have no difficulty. But Molly must come--you must see to that."

"I expect your niece would like the trip," I answered. "Anyway, here she is now."

And it was while he was outlining the plan to Molly that I looked up to see Jim Maitland strolling across the lounge.

"Hullo! Dick," came his cheerful voice. "I heard you were stopping here. How goes it?"

I murmured an excuse and followed him to a table a little distance away.

"Who's the girl, old man?" he asked. "She's a corker for looks."

"She's a corker in every way, Jim," I answered.

He grinned suddenly.

"So that's how it lies, is it?" he said. "My congratulations, old Dick. Or is it a little premature?"

"It's not actually fixed yet," I said, a bit sheepishly, "but I'm hoping it will be very soon. We're going off to-day--if we can fix up a *dahabeah*--with the old bird. He's her uncle, and he's sane on all points except Egyptology. Come and be introduced."

I took him over to the Professor and Molly, and we sat down.

"I think it sounds a lovely trip, don't you, Mr. Maitland? My uncle wants to find some place with a most romantic name. It's called the Pool of the Sacred Crocodile."

Jim stared at her for a moment or two in silence; then, with a slight frown, he turned to the Professor.

"What on earth do you want to go there for, sir?" he asked quietly.

"Do you know it, Mr. Maitland?" cried the Professor eagerly.

"I know of it," said Jim. "I know of it as the headquarters of one of the most secret and abominable cults handed down from ancient Egypt. And I can assure you, Professor," he went on after a little pause, "that you will be wasting your time if you go there." I frowned at him horribly, but, strangely enough, Jim seemed very serious, and paid no attention. "No white man would ever be allowed inside their temple."

The Professor was blinking so fast that his glasses nearly fell off.

"I think I shall be able to arrange it, Mr. Maitland," he said, rubbing his hands together. "You see, I am acquainted with one or two points concerning the ancient history of the cult of which even one of their leading adepts seemed in ignorance. In return for--for what I can give them I am to be allowed to have a copy of the ritual which has been handed down intact for three thousand years."

"Well," said Jim grimly, "all I can say, Professor, is this: If one-tenth of the rumours I have heard is true, the best thing you can do will be to burn the book unread."

But the Professor seemed not to hear. His little, blinking eyes were fixed on Molly, and he was smiling gently to himself.

For a while the conversation became general, and it wasn't until an hour or two later that I was able to ask Jim what he had meant.

"You darned tactless blighter," I said, pushing a Martini in his direction. "What did you try and put the old man off for?"

"Dick," he answered quietly, "you know me pretty well by this time. You know that there aren't many things on two legs or four that I'm frightened of. But I tell you that no power on this earth would induce me willingly to have anything to do with the sect whose secret temple is at the Pool of the Sacred Crocodile. There are stories of unbelievable things which the natives whisper to one another; stories of black magic and devil worship which make one pinch oneself to see if one's awake. There are stories of human sacrifice carried out with the most appalling rites."

I stared at him in amazement.

"But, good Lord, old man," I cried, "do you believe them?"

He didn't answer; he was looking over my shoulder.

"Something has happened to Miss Tremayne," he said quietly, and the next instant Molly was beside me.

"Dick," she almost whispered, "he's in the hotel. That native. He was standing outside the door of my room again--just now--as I was packing. I looked out into the passage, and there he was, staring, just the same as last night."

"I'll go and see if I can find the scoundrel," I cried, and dashed upstairs.

But the passage was empty. And I was just going down again, when the door of the Professor's room opened and he peered out.

"Hullo!" I said. "I thought you were out making arrangements for a *dahabeah*."

"I have made them," he answered curtly. "We start this afternoon."

He shut the door again abruptly, and I went down to the bar feeling very thoughtful. For over the Professor's head, reflected in a mirror on the other side of the room, I had seen a native. For a moment our eyes had met, then he had vanished. And a vague fear took possession of me. I felt as if I were moving in deep waters, and a sudden distaste for the proposed trip filled my mind.

It was just before we left that Jim took me on one side.

"Whatever you do, Dick," he said gravely, "don't let Miss Tremayne out of either your sight or her uncle's once you get to your destination. One of you must always be with her."

"What on earth are you frightened of, Jim?" I demanded.

"I don't know, old man," he answered. "That's the devil of it--I don't know."

The boat was a comfortable one, and for two days we went slowly towards Luxor, tying up at night. We hardly saw the Professor, except at meals, and then he barely spoke. He sat sunk in thought, shooting strange little bird-like glances at Molly until she got quite annoyed with him.

"Uncle John, I do wish you wouldn't keep looking at me like that," she cried. "I feel as if you were a canary, and I was a bit of bird-seed."

There was no disguising the fact that the Professor was in a very queer mood. It was towards the evening of the second day that he appeared on deck with a pair of field-glasses. His hands were trembling with excitement as he searched the left bank of the river.

"We are there," he shouted. "We have arrived."

He gave a frenzied order to the Captain, who swung his helm over and steered towards a small landing-stage. Behind it the outlines of a house could be seen partially screened by a small orange grove, and on the landing-stage itself there stood a native, motionless as if carved out of bronze.

I suppose we must have been still a hundred yards away when we heard a frantic commotion amongst the crew. They were jabbering wildly together, and seemed to be in a state of the utmost terror. In fact, we bumped that landing-stage badly, as the men, huddled together forward, refused to use a boat-hook or make her fast. It was left to the Captain and me to tie her up, and it struck me that the Captain himself had no liking for his berthing place.

His eyes continually came round to the tall native who had stepped on board the instant we came alongside. A few yards away the Professor and the native were talking earnestly together, and Molly slipped her hand through my arm.

"Dick," she whispered, "I'm frightened. Don't leave me. That man has been looking at me just like that brute did at Shepherd's. I wish we'd never come."

I soothed her, though I didn't feel too happy in my own mind.

Suddenly the Professor came over to me.

"We are in luck," he said, and his eyes were gleaming. "We are to be allowed to see the sacred crocodile at once."

Molly drew back.

"I don't think I want to, Uncle John," she said. "You go--and I'll stop here with Dick."

"Don't be ridiculous, child," he snapped. "It is what we have come here for. You will see a sight that no white woman has seen for a thousand years; the inner temple of one of the sister cults of Ammon Ra. Come at once."

He led the way, and after a moment's hesitation Molly followed.

"We'd better humour him, Dick," she whispered.

The native who had awaited us on the landing led the way towards the house half hidden in the trees, with the Professor shaking with excitement just behind him, and Molly and I bringing up the rear. She was still clinging to my arm, and I could feel that she was trembling.

Our guide stalked slowly on towards the house. He knocked three times on the door and it swung open, slowly, of its own accord and he stood aside to let us enter. In front lay a long stone passage, lit with innumerable lamps and hung with tapestries which even to my inexperienced eye were literally without price.

Braziers sent forth choking clouds of incense which almost stifled one, but in spite of the overpowering fumes there was another smell which assailed one--a cloying, horrible smell. At first I couldn't place it: then I realised that it was the odour of musk.

Our guide stalked slowly on, while the Professor darted from side to side staring at the hangings on the walls. And then another door opened slowly, and Molly and I stopped with a gasp of disgust.

For in an instant the smell of musk had become an overpowering stench. And once again the guide stood on one side to let us pass through. It was the actual pool itself that lay in front.

It was hewn out of a sort of sandstone rock. A gallery some two yards wide stretched right round the walls at the same level as we were standing; while directly opposite us, on the other side of the pool, a heavy curtain concealed what appeared to be another door.

In each corner there sat a motionless priest, cross-legged, in front of a burning brazier; and swinging from the centre of the roof was a marvellous old lamp which provided the only light. Cut into the walls were various Egyptian designs, which roused the Professor to the verge of frenzy in his excitement. And, finally, just in front of us there stuck out over the pool a thing that looked like a diving-board. It shone yellow in the light, and with a sort of dull amazement I realised that it was solid gold.

"The actual platform of death," whispered the Professor in my ear. "Thousands of victims have stepped off that into the pool. And to think that we are the first white people to see it."

"Good God!" I muttered. "Human sacrifice."

But the Professor was engrossed in some hieroglyphics on the wall. And the next instant I heard Molly give a shuddering gasp beside me.

"Look, Dick, look! Over there in the corner."

Just rising above the surface was a thing that looked like a motionless baulk of wood. Suddenly, clear and distinct, a bell chimed out. As if in answer to a signal there was a swirl in the black, oily liquid of the pool, a vast head and snout showed for a moment above the

surface, and I had a glimpse of the most enormous crocodile I have ever seen. And the baulk of wood was no longer there.

With an effort I took my eyes away from the pool and looked up. The curtain opposite had been pulled aside, and a man was standing there staring at Molly. He was clad in some gorgeous garment, but it was not at his clothes that I was looking, it was at the sinister, evil face.

And as I looked I heard Molly's voice as if from a distance.

"Take me away, Dick, take me away! There's that awful native again, who haunted me at Shepheard's."

And it was also the native whom I had seen reflected in the mirror in Professor John Gainsford's room.

He disappeared as suddenly as he had come and Molly gave a sigh of relief.

"Let's get out, Dick, for goodness' sake," she said urgently.

I was only too glad to agree. The door behind us was open, and through it we went, intent only on escaping into God's fresh air. Not until we were clear of the entrance door, with the scent of the orange trees around us, did we breathe freely again.

"Dick--what an awful house!" said Molly, drawing in great gulps of fresh air.

"It was pretty fierce," I agreed. "By the way, where is the Professor?"

Molly laughed.

"It would take more than a bad smell to get him away. But nothing on this earth would induce me to go inside again--nothing. Did you see that man, Dick--the one on the other side of the pool?"

"I saw him," I answered briefly.

"What was he doing in Cairo? And why is he here dressed like that?" She gave a little shudder, and stared across the Nile. "Dick, you may think it fanciful of me and silly, but inside that house just now I felt as if I were in the presence of something incredibly evil. I felt it before that man came in--but I felt it a thousand times more as he stood there."

I nodded gravely.

"If half the rumours I've heard, dear, are true, I'm not surprised. Personally, I couldn't get beyond the smell, but some pretty dreadful things have happened in that house. You saw that gold inlaid board in front of you stretching out over the pool? Well, that is the identical board, according to your uncle, from which human victims have been sacrificed to the crocodile.

"Dick--it can't be true," she whispered, her eyes dilating with horror.

"Incredible as it may seem, darling, I believe it is true."

She shuddered again and I slipped my arm round her waist.

"Don't worry your head about it any more, sweetheart," I said gently. "Let's go on board and get something to wash this filthy taste out of our mouths."

We walked down to the little landing-stage and stepped on to the *dahabeah*. The boat seemed

strangely quiet and deserted, but it was only after I had pressed the bell in the little dining-room three times without any result that I began to feel uneasy. I went into the pantry and kitchen, and there was no sign of either cook or steward. I went on deck again to find the Captain, and his cabin was empty. Finally I went to the crew's quarters and peered in; there was not a soul to be seen. The crew had deserted the boat, lock, stock, and barrel.

A step behind me on the deck made me look round. Molly was coming towards me with a letter in her hand.

"It was on the sideboard, Dick," she said. "Addressed to you."

I glanced at it; to my amazement the handwriting was Jim's. And the note inside was laconic and to the point:

"Get out of this at once. Don't spend the night here on any account."

"What is it, Dick?" she asked, looking at me steadily.

I handed her the slip of paper without comment.

"It's from Jim Maitland," I said, when she had read it. "And when Jim tells you to do something, there is generally a pretty good reason for doing it. Unfortunately, the whole crew--including the precious Captain--have chosen this moment to depart."

Molly heard the news without turning a hair.

"I wonder where Mr. Maitland is," she said thoughtfully. "He must be somewhere about to have left that note. What are we going to do, Dick?"

"That's just the point, darling; what are we going to do? Your uncle will never ..."

The same thought occurred to both of us simultaneously.

"I'll go and look for him, darling," I said, with a great deal more assurance than I really felt. "He's probably forgotten that we even exist."

"Then I'm coming too," she said quietly, and nothing I could say would dissuade her.

But this time our fears proved groundless. Hardly had we entered the orange grove on the way to the house, when we saw the Professor coming towards us. He was muttering to himself, and under his arm he carried a large book.

"We thought you were lost, Professor," I said, as he came up to us.

He peered at us vaguely, as if he hardly recognised who we were. Then, without even answering, he went past us, and we saw him go below. And in the still evening air we heard the sound of a door shutting.

"You were right, Dick," said Molly. "We simply don't exist at the moment."

"I'm afraid we've got to," I said gravely. "I can't help it if I do incur your uncle's wrath, my dear, but he must be told about the state of affairs. I'm going to have it out with him."

I went below to his cabin and knocked on the door.

"Professor," I cried, "I must have a talk with you. A very serious thing has happened."

I heard him muttering to himself inside, and after a while the door opened about two inches and he peered out.

"Go away," he said irritably. "I'm busy."

"Then it's got to wait," I said sternly, and put my foot behind the door to prevent his shutting it. "You've got the rest of your life in which to study that book; but what the duration will amount to unless you listen to me, I can't say."

I intended to frighten him, and apparently I succeeded, for he opened the door and I stepped into his cabin.

"What do you mean?" he said nervously.

"Well, in the first place, the whole of the crew and the Captain have deserted."

"Oh! I know--I know," he cried peevishly. "They'll all come back to-morrow."

"How did you know?" I said, staring at him in surprise.

He blinked at me for a second or two, and then he looked away.

"One of the priests told me that they had gone," he said at length.

In an instant all my worst fears came crowding back into my mind.

"Now, look here, Professor," I said quietly, "please pay attention to me, and very close attention. But you've got to remember that we have on board here a girl who is your niece, and who is going to be my wife. Now I have the best of reasons for believing that the very gravest danger threatens us to-night. I believe that the desertion of the crew is all part of a deep-laid scheme concocted by the priests up in that house to keep us here to-night. I suggest, therefore, that we should cast off, and drift down stream. We shall go aground sooner or later; but, at any rate, we shan't be sitting at these people's front door."

"Quite impossible, Leyton," he cried angrily. "Out of the question. I'm amazed that you should even suggest such a thing. The most ancient ritual of the cult is being given to-night for my special benefit. Do you suppose"--and he lashed himself into almost a fury--"that I have gone to the expense of hiring a *dahabeah*, and coming all the way from Cairo, just to let the boat drift on to a sandbank? What danger are you frightened of? You talk like an hysterical girl."

And Jim's words spoken in Cairo came back to me.

"I don't know, old man. That's the devil of it; I don't know."

And now, confronted by the excited little man, I felt the most infernal fool. If only I had had one definite thing to go on. But I hadn't--with the solitary exception of the crew's desertion. That, and Jim's roughly scrawled note. And to both of them the Professor turned a deaf ear.

"Ridiculous," he snorted. "The Captain was allowed ashore to attend the celebrations which always accompany this ceremonial, and the crew have taken French leave and gone too." And then suddenly his manner changed, and he smiled almost benevolently. "Believe me, my dear fellow--you exaggerate tremendously. Do you think for one moment that I would allow my dear niece to run into any danger? There is no suggestion that she should come to-night--or you. You can stay with her and guard her against any possible harm."

He dug me playfully in the ribs.

"That ought not to be an unpleasant task, my boy," he chuckled. "And now, off you go, and let me study this book of ritual. Time is all too short as it is."

And with that I had to be content. I heard him lock his door behind me, and then I joined Molly on deck. Night had come down, and the faint scent of the orange trees filled the air. Briefly I told her what her uncle had said, and when I had finished she slipped her hand into mine.

"Don't let's worry, Dick," she whispered. "Let him go to his old crocodile, while we sit and watch the sun rise over the desert."

And after a while I forgot my fear, I forgot Jim's warning, I forgot everything except--- However, there is no prize for the correct answer.

And now I come to the thing that happened that night at the Pool of the Sacred Crocodile.

It was just as Molly and I were beginning to think about dinner, and had decided to go and forage for ourselves, that Abdullah, the steward, suddenly appeared in front of us and announced that it was ready.

"Where the devil have you been?" I cried angrily. "I searched all over the place for you an hour or so ago."

He was profuse in his apologies and explanations, and though I was far from satisfied there was nothing to be done about it. Dinner was ready and we sat down to it.

"What about Uncle John?" said Molly.

It appeared that he had given strict orders not to be disturbed, and so we waited no longer. The cook, Abdullah's brother, was a good cook, and in spite of his absence earlier in the evening he had prepared a good dinner. In fact, by the time we had reached the Turkish coffee stage I was feeling quite at peace with the world. Turkish coffee was our cook's speciality, and on that particular night he excelled himself. Even Molly remarked on it as Abdullah refilled her cup.

Of course it was in my coffee--the particular drug they used. What it was I don't know, though it must have been practically tasteless. Whatever it was they put it in my coffee, and not in Molly's. And as long as I live I shall never forget the supreme mental agony of those few seconds after the realisation of what had happened came to me.

Molly was staring out of the open doors into the wonderful desert night. I could see her sweet profile; I could see a sudden little tender smile hover round her lips. And then I made a desperate effort to stand up. I stood there for a second or two clutching the table, making inarticulate attempts to speak. And then I crashed back in my chair, dragging the table-cloth with me.

"Dick, Dick! What's the matter?"

I heard her voice crying from a great distance, and I made another futile effort to speak. But it was useless; she was getting hazier and hazier, though I could still see her like a badly focused photograph. And then suddenly she gave a little scream, and shrank back against the side of the saloon. She was no longer looking at me but into the darkness outside.

"Uncle John!" she screamed. "Uncle John! Save me!"

And then she rushed to me and clung to my chair. Oh God!--the agony of that moment, when I realised I couldn't protect her--that I was just a useless drugged log. Hazily, through the fumes of the dope, I realised what was coming: I knew whom she had seen coming to her out of the night. And I was right--only there were three of them this time. They stood on the other side of the table--the man who had been in Cairo in the centre, the man who had met us on the landing-

stage on his right, and one I had not seen on his left. They were all three dressed in similar gorgeous robes to that which the leader had worn that afternoon when we had seen him for a few seconds on the other side of the sacred pool, and they all three stood motionless staring at Molly.

I heard her terrified whisper--"Dick! Help me, Dick," and I lay there sprawling, helpless. And still they stood there--staring at my adored girl. Hypnotism, of course--I realised that after. They were hypnotising her in front of my eyes, and, poor child, it didn't take long. Even though time is jumbled in my mind, just as it is in a dream, it cannot have been more than a minute before I saw her--my Molly--walking towards them round the table with little, short, jerky steps. I could see her hands clenched rigidly at her sides; I could see her dear eyes fixed on the central man with a dreadful glassy stare.

As she advanced they backed away--step by step--till they passed out of the range of vision. A moment or two later she, too, vanished. I heard her footsteps on the deck--then silence. She had gone--without anyone to help her--gone to that devilish house. And even as wave after wave of the drug surged over me it seemed to me that I gave one desperate shout.

"Jim--save her! Save Molly!"

Maybe I did; maybe it was only mental. But my last coherent thought was a prayer to the man who had never failed me yet. And then I slept.

The lamp was smoking and guttering in its final gasp when I opened my eyes again. For a moment or two I remembered nothing; I felt as if I had just woken from some awful nightmare. And then the table-cloth, which still covered me, the broken coffee-cups, the débris on the floor brought me to my feet with a dreadful terror clutching at my heart. I pulled out my watch; it showed a quarter-past twelve. And we had sat down to dinner at half-past eight. For more than three hours Molly had been in the hands of those devils.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and cursed foolishly. Someone had taken my revolver, and at that moment with a final splutter the lamp went out. But there was no time to look for any weapon; there was no time for anything except to get to Molly at once.

And was there even time for that? As I raced through the orange grove towards the house the thought hammered at my brain. Was I too late?

I had made no plan. I had no clear idea of anything except getting to Molly. What would happen when I got there--how I, unarmed and alone, was going to help her was beside the point.

A man sprang at me as I reached the door, and I hit him on the point of the jaw with all my weight behind the blow. He went straight down like a log, and I felt a little better. Then I flung open the door and dashed into the passage, to pause for a moment in sheer amazement at the spectacle.

The braziers still poured forth their choking clouds of incense; the innumerable lamps were lit as they had been that afternoon. But now the passage was not empty, it was crowded with natives. And one and all were bleeding from self-inflicted wounds.

They lay about on the floor in varying degrees of consciousness. Some were in a state of coma; others writhed in a condition of frenzied madness. And suddenly quivering in the air came the deep note of a drum. It was the signal for a wild outburst. They became as maniacs--stabbing

themselves in the legs and arms, tearing out handfuls of hair till they ran with blood and looked like devils. And once again the deep note came quivering through the stifling air and died away.

Drum madness: that strange phenomenon of Africa. A sickening, horrible scene--and in my mind the sickening, horrible thought that for three hours my Molly had been in this ghastly house--alone.

Dodging between the writhing men, I rushed to the second door. It opened without difficulty--so that I stumbled forward on my face. And the next moment half a dozen men had hurled themselves on top of me. I fought wildly with the strength of despair; I even bit--but it was no good. They got me up and they held me--two of them to each arm, and what I saw almost snapped my reason.

Facing me were the three natives who had come to the *dahabeah* that night. They were on the other side of the pool--clad now in robes even more gorgeous than before. Behind them was the drum beater, rocking to and fro in a sort of ecstasy, and ranged on each side of them were other natives intoning a monotonous dirge. It rose and fell in a strange cadence, culminating each time with the beat of the drum. And at each beat I could feel the men holding me shiver in their excitement.

Below, in the pool, swirl after swirl of the stinking black water showed that the crocodile was waiting for the culmination of the ceremony. But the foul brute knew what that culmination was--even as the fouler brutes opposite knew--even as I knew. For standing on the platform, with her eyes still fixed on the leading native in that same glassy stare, was Molly--my Molly.

In a frenzy of madness I screamed her name. She took no notice, and once again I struggled desperately. If only I could get to her--pull her back--save her somehow. But they held me--there were six of them now--and when I shouted at her again one of them jammed my handkerchief into my mouth.

Suddenly the leader raised his hand, and Molly took another faltering step forward. One step more along the platform of death; one step nearer the end--the end where there would be no more board for her feet but only the pool below.

The drum became more insistent; the singers' voices rose to a harsh screaming.

And then it happened. Jim--Jim the superb, Jim the incomparable--was there on the other side of the pool. Jim with a jagged wound on his cheek, and his clothes in tatters. Jim with his eyeglass--and such cold, devilish fury in his face as I have never seen in any man's before or since.

I heard the dull smash of breaking bone as he hit the drum beater, and then I went mad with the sheer, tense excitement of it, for Jim had gone Berserk. With a great shout he seized the centre native--the leader--and with one stupendous heave he lifted him above his head. And there for a moment he stood holding the struggling native at the full extent of his arms, while the others watched in stupefied silence. Then with cries of fury they closed in on him, only to stop as his voice rang out, speaking their own language.

"If anyone touches me, this man goes into the pool!"

He threw back his head and laughed, and the natives watched him, snarling and impotent.

"Go to her, Dick," he cried, and the next instant Molly was in my arms--a dazed, hypnotised Molly who didn't know me--but still Molly. I dragged her off that damnable platform; I took her to the door--and then I looked back at Jim.

The sweat was gleaming on his forehead; the strain of holding that full-grown native was taxing even his great strength. But once again he laughed--that wonderful cheery laugh of his.

"To the boat, old Dick. Good luck."

And in his heart of hearts that great-souled sportsman thought it was good-bye. Once--years after--he told me that he never thought he would see me again: that the odds would be too great. For even now, heedless of his threat, the natives were closing in on him from each side, and suddenly one of them seized his arm.

"So be it," he roared, and with a mighty heave he threw the leader of that cult into the pool below. There was one frenzied shriek of agonised terror; a dreadful swirling rush through the water: the snap of great jaws. And suddenly the blackness of the pool was stained a vivid crimson. To the crocodile it mattered not whether it was priest or victim.

I waited no longer. Taking advantage of the momentary stupefaction, Jim had vanished, and the next instant I was rushing Molly along the passage outside. With the cessation of the drum the natives there had become quieter, and none interfered with us. We reached the outer door and, half dragging, half carrying Molly, I ran on towards the boat. Behind us I could hear a frenzied babel of cursing and shrieking, but it seemed to come from the other side of the house. They were after Jim--the whole pack of them--and gradually the noise grew fainter and fainter. He was leading them away from us, which was just what Jim would do.

I darted on board to find the Captain and two of the crew standing there.

"Quick, sir," he cried, and I realised the engine was going. Already he was casting off, and I shouted to him to stop. Once Molly was safe I had to go back to help Jim.

I took her below and laid her on the berth in her cabin. Then I rushed on deck again to find that we were in mid-stream.

"Orders, sir," said the Captain, coming up to me as I cursed him. "Orders from the Englishman with the eyeglass."

I looked ashore: the bank was alive with lights. The shouting had died away: the devils were running mute, searching for him. And then suddenly I heard the most welcome sound I have ever heard in my life--a great, hearty laugh--Jim's laugh.

"Stop the old tub, Dick," came his voice. "I'm damned if I'm going to swim to Cairo after you."

And then I saw him--swimming out towards us--saw his head reflected in the light from the bank. We went full speed astern, and half a minute later he swarmed up the side on a rope.

"Not a healthy spot, old Dick," he said with his hands on my shoulders. "Is the girl all right?"

"I think so, old man," I answered. "Thanks to you. But I feel all dazed still. How did you get there?"

"All in good time," he laughed. "At the moment a large whisky-and-soda is indicated."

We went into the saloon, and it was as my hand was on the syphon that a sudden awful thought struck me.

"Good God! Jim," I muttered. "The Professor. I'd forgotten all about him."

Jim's face grew very stern.

"You needn't worry about the Professor," he remarked grimly. "The gentleman I threw to the crocodile was not its first meal to-night."

"You mean they've killed him?" I said, staring at him foolishly.

"Yes, they've killed him," he answered. "And I can think of no white man who more richly deserved to die."

And as the boat chugged steadily on through the soft Egyptian night, Jim filled in the gaps of the story.

"I'd got the wind up, as you know," he began, "right from the very start. Of course I hadn't an inkling of the real truth when you left Cairo--but I was darned uneasy in my mind. And after you'd gone off in this barge I started making a few inquiries."

He paused a minute and refilled his glass.

"Didn't it strike you, old man, that you got this *dahabeah* with exceptional promptitude?"

"Now you mention it--I suppose we did. It hadn't struck me before."

"The gentleman I put into the pool to-night fixed it, as he could fix most things when he put his mind to it. And on this occasion he fixed it as the result of the most diabolical bargain with Professor Gainsford which it is conceivable to think of a man making.

"Mark you, I didn't find it out in Cairo--but I heard enough to send me off by train. I got out at Minieh, and then the game began. It's a good trek from the railway station, and with every mile the reticence and secrecy grew more profound.

"But I got hold of a certain amount which confirmed what I'd heard in Cairo. A great event was portending--some huge tamasha: you know how these things get about amongst the natives.

"Then you arrived, and I came on board to see you and make you clear out. But you were none of you here, and the boat was deserted."

"We were up in the house itself," I explained.

He nodded. "I know. So I sat down to wait, as I knew there was no danger till later. And then, old Dick, they caught me napping. A native came to the bank and told me he'd tell me everything: that he'd just found out the truth. So I scribbled that note, and I followed him. He took me with great secrecy into the house, where someone promptly sandbagged me."

Jim laughed. "Me--at my age--sandbagged by a damned native! And when I came to I found myself trussed up like a fowl, occupying the next place to the skipper of this craft. He's not a bad little man--this skipper, and it was he who told me the truth.

"At first I could scarcely believe it--the bargain made between Professor Gainsford and the native he met in the bazaar. For the Professor had wished to obtain possession of some book of ritual belonging to this sect--a book unique in the world. And the native had agreed--at a price. The price was the sacrifice of your girl."

"What?" I roared. "You mean that that murderer brought Molly here knowing all along what was going to happen?"

"That is exactly what I mean," said Jim gravely. "Afterwards--well, I don't know if he worried much about afterwards. You were to be drugged--and for the rest the native guaranteed silence.

"That's what the Professor thought; unfortunately for him the native's mind is tortuous. The sacrifice of a white girl was his object, and he didn't mind what he promised to achieve the result. And having, as he thought, achieved it when you arrived, he changed his mind about the book of ritual. Which was unfortunate for the Professor."

He broke off suddenly and stared over my shoulder. Molly was standing in the door: Molly--sane and herself again--but with a look of terror in her eyes.

"Dick," she said, "I've had the most awful dream. It must have been seeing that crocodile yesterday. I dreamed that I was standing where we stood, and there were natives all round. And suddenly Uncle John appeared. He was screaming--and they dragged him in and pushed him over into the pool."

Jim and I looked at one another, and after a while he spoke.

"I'm afraid, Miss Tremayne," he said gently, "that it wasn't a dream. Professor Gainsford is dead."

She swayed to a chair and sat down weakly.

"Oh! the brutes--the brutes. Dick--why did we ever come here?" And then she stared at me with puzzled eyes. "But if it wasn't a dream--why, how did I see it? You don't mean to say--you can't mean that it wasn't a dream. That I was there, and saw it: that--that the rest of it was true as well. Dick! I can see you now, lying in that chair: those natives--and you, Mr. Maitland. My God! it hasn't really happened, has it?"

With dilated eyes she stared from one to the other of us, and after a while I went and knelt beside her.

"Yes, darling," I said gently, "it's all true. It's really happened. And but for Jim----" I looked across at him: there are things which no man can put into words.

"Rot," he cried cheerfully. "Utter rot, Dick. Though I admit it was touch and go till I found a sharp stone to cut through my ropes with. And now I think I'll leave you two for a bit."

He beckoned to me to follow him on deck.

"I wouldn't tell her the truth, old man, about her uncle. At least--not yet."

In the light of the dawn I saw his face, and it was very wistful.

"She's a great girl, that--old Dick--great. You lucky, lucky devil."

And with that Jim turned on his heel and went forrard.

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## XI. *An Experiment in Electricity*

Which might have been the end of it as far as we were concerned, only it wasn't. There was a sequel, and the sequel took place in Berkeley Square of all places.

Jim kept every hint of the possibility of such a thing to himself while we were still in Egypt: it was not till we were on board that he mentioned it to me. For Molly and I were going home to be married, and he was to be our best man. In another fortnight--a boiled shirt; a tail coat; London---

For me, at any rate, the days of wandering were over, and just as I was wondering how I'd like the change--a man can't help his *thoughts*--Jim, who was standing beside me, straightened himself up with a little sigh of relief.

We had been watching the last belated sightseers hurrying across the gangway after a frenzied dash round Port Said, and now the first faint throb of the propellers heralded the final lap of the journey.

Slowly the gap between us and the shore widened; the native boats, with their chattering owners busily counting the proceeds of their robberies, fell away. And suddenly Jim turned to me with a grin.

"This is the identical boat, old man, in which I first left England. From a glimpse into the smoking-room, the barman is also identical. Moreover, the sun is over the yardarm."

"Your return to respectability has made you very silent," I said with a laugh. "That's your first remark for half an hour."

He looked at me thoughtfully while the barman produced something that tinkled pleasantly in a long glass.

"Your girl all right, old man?"

"Molly!" I stared at him in some surprise. "Why--yes. I saw her being piloted to her cabin with that eminently worthy parson's wife. What makes you ask?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you now what I didn't tell you in Cairo," said Jim quietly. "To be quite candid, I've been distinctly uneasy these last two days."

"But what on earth about?" I asked.

"Our late friends at the Pool of the Sacred Crocodile. Oh! I know what you're going to say--that the place was empty and all that when we went back, and that the birds had flown. But when you know as much about the native as I do, old man, you'll realise that that means nothing. Put it how you will, Miss Tremayne escaped, and one of their chief scoundrels died a nasty death in the process. And a sect of that sort doesn't forgive things like that. So that when I received in Cairo a letter containing a typewritten threat I wasn't altogether surprised."

"But why the devil didn't you tell me?" I cried.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You couldn't have done anything if I had. And I didn't want to run any risk of alarming your girl."

"What was the threat?"

"Terse and to the point," laughed Jim. "It merely stated that, in view of what had happened, all our lives were forfeit, and that they would be claimed in due course."

"How frightfully jolly!" I remarked a little blankly. "Do you think it need be taken seriously?"

Once again he shrugged his shoulders.

"I take it a great deal less seriously now that we've left the country," he answered. "I think that undoubtedly the principal danger has passed, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that we are out of the wood. It may have been merely an idle threat. The fact that absolutely nothing was tried on any of us in Cairo rather points that way. But with these devils you never know. Once you start monkeying with these fanatical sects you're asking for trouble."

He drained his glass and we strolled out on deck.

"However, there's nothing to be done. We can only wait and see if anything happens."

"It's possible," I said, "that the whole thing is designed to have a mental effect only. To make one nervous anticipating things which are never really coming."

"It is possible," agreed Jim gravely. "If so, they succeeded quite well with me for forty-eight hours. Anyway there's your girl, old Dick, and she is betraying no signs of nervousness anticipating you. I'll go down below and pass the time of day with the purser, and incidentally fix up seats for tiffin."

The boat was fairly empty, as a number of passengers had broken their journey at Port Said. And when Jim discovered that he knew the Captain it was a foregone conclusion that we should sit at his table. A cheerful fellow, that skipper: I remember that there was a story concerning him and Jim and a little episode at Shanghai which was never satisfactorily elucidated. And it was he who introduced us to Prince Selim.

"A charming man," he remarked, as Jim made some comment on the empty seat just opposite him at lunch. "Fabulously wealthy, and almost more of an Englishman than an Egyptian. Has a large house in London, and spends most of his time there. I wonder you didn't meet him in Cairo."

The Prince came in at that moment, and it struck me that the Captain's remarks as to his appearance were quite justified. His clothes were faultless with the indefinable hall-mark of the West End tailor: his face, save that it was a trifle darker, was that of a European. He was wonderfully good-looking, and when he smiled he showed a row of the most perfect teeth. Moreover, he spoke English without a trace of accent. In fact, a charming man, with a most astounding range of knowledge on all sorts of subjects and a fascinating way of imparting it.

Jim and I both took to him at once. He had travelled all over the world, and travelled intelligently. Most of his life seemed to have been spent in wandering, which gave him a common meeting ground with Jim. Yet in spite of his roving propensities he was--so I understood from the Captain--an authority on old china, an electrical expert, and a wonderful violinist.

"I happen to know of those three," said the skipper. "But from what I've seen of the Prince, I shouldn't think they exhaust his repertoire by any means."

Strangely enough, Molly didn't take to him. He was unfailingly charming to her, but for some reason or other she didn't like him from the very first.

"I don't know why it is, Dick," she said to me one day, as we were strolling up and down the deck. "He's charming; he dances divinely and he hasn't said a word that I could object to. But--I don't like him. There's something--but I don't know what it is. Probably all imagination on my part, but there you are. And anyway it doesn't matter very much."

"Not a brass farthing, darling," I agreed. "The loss is entirely his. And in all probability we shall never see him again after we land at Plymouth."

The sea was like the proverbial mill-pond. And a voyage in good weather with the girl who is shortly to become your wife is no unpleasant operation. So it is hardly to be wondered at that by the time Gibraltar hove in sight, Jim and his forebodings were forgotten in pleasanter thoughts.

Wandering was all very well--but a little place somewhere in England with a bit of shooting, and fishing, and some hounds in the neighbourhood seemed very much better. In days to come, perhaps, Molly and I would wander again. Japan, Colombo--there were lots of places I wanted to show her. But for the next two or three years, England filled the bill admirably. And in four days we'd be there; we were in the straight for the run home. The Rock was out of sight behind us; life seemed very, very good.

It was just as I was in that comfortable frame of mind induced by life being good that I saw Jim coming along the deck towards me. And the instant I saw his face I knew that something had happened. He glanced round to see that no one was within earshot; then he went straight to the point.

"I found this reposing on the pillow of my bunk an hour after we left Gib."

He held out a sheet of paper, and with a sense of foreboding I glanced at it. There was only one sentence on it, written with a typewriter:

*"Remember all your lives are forfeit."*

The words danced before my eyes; so much for the quiet life.

"How did it get there?" I asked at length.

"I know no more than you," he answered gravely. "I sent for our lascar at once"--Jim and I were sharing a cabin--"and frightened his soul out. No good; I honestly believe that he knows nothing about it. I've made inquiries from one of the officers about the steerage passengers. He tells me definitely that there are no Arabs or Egyptians amongst them."

He lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

"How it got there," he continued after a moment, "is, comparatively speaking, a trifle. A Scorp may have brought it off at Gib, and given it to one of the lascars; or what is far more likely, it may have been handed to someone before we left Port Said with instructions to put it on my pillow when opportunity arose. And the bustle and excitement at Gib may have been the first chance. No, old man, it doesn't matter *how* it got there; *why* is what concerns me. Is it just the continuation of a stupid bluff--or is it something more serious?"

"Why not ask Selim?" I said. "His opinion ought to be worth having."

"Tell him the whole story," said Jim thoughtfully. "By Jove, Dick, that's a good idea! Let's go and find him."

We ran him to ground in the writing-room, and he rose from his table instantly on hearing we wanted his advice.

"My letter can wait," he said courteously. "It is not the least important. Let us go and have a whisky-and-soda, and for what it is worth my knowledge is at your disposal."

And so without any exaggeration, but at the same time with some fullness, Jim told Prince Selim exactly what had taken place in the Temple of the Sacred Crocodile. Some of the details I put in, but by the time we had both finished he had every fact in his possession.

"You actually threw this priest into the pool yourself?" he said, when we had finished.

"I did," said Jim grimly. "And if I'd had time I'd have thrown the rest. The point, Prince, is this. Are those letters bluff or not?"

"Most emphatically not," answered the Prince promptly. "I, of course, have heard of that sect, and you may take it from me that you only encountered the outside fringe of it. But even so, you have been instrumental in killing a priest who is very highly placed. And that they will never forgive. Whether or not they will be able to carry out their purpose in England is a different matter; they will assuredly try."

"What--to kill the lot of us?" said Jim.

"Certainly," said the Prince calmly. "And deeply as I regret to have to say so, my friend, I wouldn't be at all surprised if they succeeded."

Jim's jaw came out.

"We'll see about that," he remarked quietly. "And in the meantime, Prince, what do you suggest we should do?"

"There is nothing to do," he answered. "Sooner or later they will find you, wherever you hide yourselves; then it will be you or them."

"Hide! Hide ourselves!" Jim stared at him in amazement. "My dear fellow--what an extraordinary flight of fancy. What in the name of fortune should we hide ourselves for?"

The Prince waved a deprecating hand.

"Possibly I expressed myself a little infelicitously," he murmured. "I assure you, my friend, I intended no reflection on your courage. That, so I understand from our most excellent captain, is beyond dispute. But, for all that----"

He broke off with a little characteristic movement of his shoulders, and carefully selected a cigarette from his gold case.

"You can take it from me, Prince," said Jim quietly, "that as far as I am concerned, I don't propose to go into seclusion. But with regard to Miss Tremayne, the matter is altogether different. And if you think her life is in danger we had better take some steps about it. Somewhat naturally, she knows nothing of these two warning letters, and one doesn't want to alarm her unnecessarily."

"Precisely," said the Prince. "That is quite obvious."

He leant back in his chair and blew out a long cloud of smoke, while we watched him a little anxiously.

"I will tell you what I suggest," he said at length. "It is possible that I may be wrong altogether, in which case there is no necessity to do anything. If, on the other hand, I am not wrong, and you become aware that they are after you, then come and see me. I will give you my address, and possibly I may be of assistance. But it is no use our attempting to evolve any scheme now, when we have no idea what to be on our guard against. Therefore, let us leave it until we have got an idea, and then--well, three heads are better than two."

"I call that devilish sporting of you, Prince," said Jim heartily. "And I'm quite sure that we accept your offer with gratitude--don't we, Dick?"

"Certainly," I agreed. "And in the meantime you don't think there is any need to alarm Miss Tremayne, or take any special precautions on her behalf?"

"I do not," said Prince Selim. "If the attempt is made at all, I feel tolerably certain that it will be made in London."

A moment or two later he rose and left us.

"That was a brain-wave of yours, Dick," said Jim, as we watched him sauntering back to the writing-room. "Pon my soul, it's extraordinarily good of the fellow. All we can do is to hope that we shan't have to avail ourselves of his kindness."

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It was just a week after we reached London that the blow fell. I, certainly, as day by day went by and nothing happened, had been lulled into a false sense of security. The half-naked priests of that foul pool in Egypt seemed so utterly incongruous in the crowded streets that sometimes I almost believed it had all been a dream. And once or twice with a feeling of inward amusement I wondered what would be the result if I told the story at my club. To Podgers, for choice, of the firm of Podgers & Podgers--a chartered accountant of blameless life. Great Scott! I could see his face as he listened.

And yet, in London itself, in a house in the middle of Mayfair there took place a thing more amazing, more horrible by the very reason of the surroundings, than anything that had happened by the Nile. There, at any rate, the setting was appropriate, but in London it appeared even at the time to be unreal and incredible. To me--for I was destined to fill the rôle of spectator--it seemed as if I were watching some Grand Guignol play. But it was no play; it was grim reality--a little too grim.

As I say, it was a week after we reached London that it happened. I had been out all the afternoon shopping with Molly. She and I were going to a theatre that night, and, after seeing her to her hotel, I had returned to my club to dress. And I found Jim waiting for me in a state of unconcealed impatience.

"I thought you were never coming, Dick," he cried as soon as he saw me. "Take me somewhere where we can talk."

I led the way to a small card-room which was luckily unoccupied.

"What is it?" I said. "Further developments?"

He nodded.

"You know I gave Selim my address? Until this afternoon I'd heard nothing from him, and nothing had happened on our side to make me get in touch with him. In fact, I was beginning to think that the whole thing was a leg-pull. An hour ago I was told that someone wanted me on

the telephone, and it turned out to be the Prince." Jim stared at me gravely. "It's evidently no leg-pull, Dick."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He started off with a bright, chatty little remark," said Jim grimly. "The first thing he said when he heard my voice was 'Thank Heaven you're still alive.'"

"'Never better,' I assured him.

"He didn't beat about the bush at all, but came straight to the point. 'You're in the most deadly peril,' he said, in the same sort of voice as you'd ask someone out to dinner. 'I've just received information,' he went on, 'from a source that is open to me which it is absolutely imperative you should know at once. It is too long to tell you over the telephone even if I dared.'"

"Well, that sounded a jolly sort of beginning, and I asked him what he suggested as the next move. He'd got everything cut and dried, and it boiled down to this.

"You and I are to go round to his house this evening at nine o'clock precisely. The time is important, as he will then arrange that his Arab butler is out. That little precaution is for *his* benefit. He told me it would be signing his own death sentence if it were known he was warning us. He will then tell us exactly what he has found out, and it will be up to us after that.

"Molly--because I immediately asked about her--is perfectly safe for the next twelve hours. He further asked if we would both be good enough to preserve absolute silence as to where we were going. That--also for his sake.

"In fact, he made no bones about it. By doing what he was going to do he was running a very grave risk, and, somewhat naturally, he wants that risk minimised as much as possible. Which is quite understandable, because, after all, there's really no call on the fellow to do anything at all for us."

"None whatever," I agreed. "However, I must go and ring up Molly at once, and tell her I can't go to-night. And after that you'd better stop and have an early dinner with me."

All through that meal we discussed it fruitlessly. What could it be--this danger that threatened us? The whole thing seemed so fantastic in the comfortable dining-room of a London club. And then, just as we had advanced the sixth wild guess, I saw one of the page-boys coming towards me.

"There's a black man as wants to see you, sir, in the 'all."

I glanced at Jim; then rose and followed the boy.

"This man, sir," began the hall-porter, looking out of his window. He stared round foolishly for a moment or two: the hall was empty.

"Hey! boy--where's that Arab gone, wot wanted to see Mr. Leyton?"

But the page-boy didn't know, and the hall-porter didn't know, and the sergeant outside didn't know. One and all were positive that a dark-skinned man who looked like an Arab had entered the club, to inquire for me. After that the situation was obscure. He had arrived: he was no longer there. Therefore, presumably, he had left. But the staff were still arguing about it half an hour later when Jim and I were ready to go.

"They're on to us, Dick--that's evident," he said gravely. "That man merely came round to find

out if you were in the club. And that being the case, I think it's only fair to Selim to throw any possible watchers off the scent if we can. Let us, therefore, announce in a loud tone outside the door that we are going to Hampstead. Then we can double back on our tracks in case we're being followed."

He gave an address in Eton Avenue, while I looked round. Not a soul, as far as I could see, was in sight--certainly no other vehicle, but we were taking no chances. So it wasn't until we were in Oxford Street that we gave the driver the real address we wanted in Berkeley Square. And even then we didn't give him the number of the house: we intended to walk the last few yards for greater safety.

"Have you got a gun, Dick?" said Jim suddenly.

"I haven't," I answered. "But we shan't want one to-night."

He laughed shortly. "No--I suppose not. But old habits die hard with me. I don't sort of feel dressed unless I've got one. By Jove! I wonder what this show is going to develop into."

"We shall know very soon," I said. "It's five to nine, and here is Berkeley Square."

The door was opened by the Prince himself, and he immediately shut it again behind us. He was in evening clothes, and we murmured an apology for our own attire, which he waved aside.

"Follow me, please, gentlemen. There is not a moment to be lost."

He led the way through the hall to a heavy green-baize door at the farther end, and even in the one rapid glance I threw round me it was easy to see that money was no object. Down two flights of steps we hurried after him, till another door barred our progress. The Prince produced a key from his pocket, and the next moment an exclamation of wonder broke from both our lips as we saw into the room beyond. In fact, for a while I forgot the real object of our visit in my amazement.

It was a big room divided in half by an ornamental grille. There was an opening in the centre, and the grille itself hardly obstructed one's view at all. But it was the beauty of the furniture and the wonderful lighting effect that riveted my attention: it seemed like a room out of a fairy story.

The general design was Oriental, and save for the perfect taste of everything the display of wealth would have been almost vulgar. Luxurious divans, with costly brocades: marvellous Persian rugs, with small inlaid tables of gold and silver: the sound of water trickling through the leaves of a great mass of tropical flowers: and over everything the soft glow of a thousand hidden lights. Such was my first impression of that room, and the Prince, seeing my face, smiled faintly.

"A room on which I have expended a good deal of time and money," he remarked. "The general effect is, I think, not unpleasing. I use it a lot when I am in London. And I may say without undue pride that some of the things in here are absolutely unique. For instance, that chair in which you are sitting, Mr. Leyton, is one that was used by the Doges of Venice. Now put your arms along the sides as you would do when sitting comfortably--oh! by the way, Maitland, there's a head through there that will interest you. A record specimen, I'm told."

"That's comfortable now," I said as Jim strolled into the other half of the room.

"Well, all I do," said the Prince, "is to turn this little lever behind our head, and there you are."

"Well, I'm damned!" I exclaimed. "That's neat."

Two curved pieces of metal, which were normally parallel to the arms and quite unnoticeable, turned inwards through a right angle and pressed lightly on my wrists. But though the pressure was negligible, it was none the less effective. The curve of the metal prevented me from disengaging my hands by moving them inwards: my elbows, hard up against the back of the chair, prevented me moving my arms in that direction. And by no possible contortion could I reach the lever at the back of the chair. I was a prisoner.

"That's extraordinarily neat, Prince," I repeated. "So absurdly simple, too."

And at that moment there came a faint clang: the opening in the grille through which Jim had passed a moment or two before had shut.

"Absurdly so," agreed the Prince pleasantly. "But then, my friend--so are you."

For a moment or two the silence was absolute. On the other side of the grille Jim swung round; then he took three quick steps to the place where the opening had been, and shook the grille. It refused to budge.

"Is this a game, Prince?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know whether you will find it so, Mr. Maitland. I have every intention of enjoying myself thoroughly, but you may not see the humour of it."

"So it was a trap, was it?" Jim said thoughtfully. "At the moment I confess I'm a little in the dark as to your intentions, but doubtless I shall not remain so for long."

"You will not," agreed the other. "In fact, I propose to enlighten you now. When you first went into that half of the room, it was just a normal room. You could have sat on any of the chairs, Mr. Maitland, with perfect impunity. You could have stretched yourself on either of the two sofas and been none the worse. You could have stood anywhere on the floor, touched anything on the walls. That was when you first went in. Now I regret to state things are rather different."

He stretched himself out in an easy-chair and lit a cigarette.

"You may happen to have heard, Mr. Maitland, that I am somewhat of an expert on electricity. And during the last week I have been very busy on a little electrifying scheme. Having been cheated by you of my excitement at the Pool of the Sacred Crocodile, I am sure you will agree with me that you owe me some reparation."

"So you were there, were you?" said Jim slowly. "You damned swine!"

"Certainly I was there," answered the Prince. "And though I confess I was quite amused by the evening, it had not quite the same zest as if the charming Molly had gone into the pool."

"You foul blackguard," I roared, struggling impotently to free my arms.

"This room is sound-proof," murmured the Prince. "So when I ask you to moderate your voice you will realise that I am merely considering my own hearing, and nothing else. And don't please let any thought of Molly mar your enjoyment, Mr. Leyton. I will look after her with great pleasure when--er--you are unable to."

He turned once again to Jim, who had slipped his hand into his pocket.

"Take it out, and have a chat," said the Prince with a faint smile.

"Confound it!" cried Jim furiously. "What's the matter with the gun? Who is tugging at my

pocket?"

He swung round with his fists clenched, and an amazed look on his face. He was alone: there was no one there. And yet I could see the pocket that contained his revolver being dragged away from him, as if pulled by an invisible hand.

"I told you that I had carried out a small electrification scheme," went on the Prince affably, and just then Jim managed to extricate his revolver. Simultaneously the Egyptian leant forward and pressed a button.

It looked as if the revolver was wrenched from Jim's hand. It crashed to the floor at his feet, while he stared at it bewildered: then he stooped to pick it up. It was resting on two small pillars which stuck up a few inches from the floor; it continued to rest there. He tugged at it with all his great strength, and he might have been a child trying to push a locomotive up a hill.

Once again the Prince smiled faintly.

"Magnetism, my dear Maitland," he murmured. "Perfectly simple and saves such a lot of trouble."

I saw the beads of sweat beginning to gleam on Jim's forehead.

"What's all this leading to?" he said a little hoarsely, staring at the Egyptian through the grille.

"What I told you before--an evening's amusement for me."

And suddenly Jim lost his temper. He sprang at the gate in the centre and shook it wildly, only to give a shout of pain and jump backwards again.

"What the devil was that?" he muttered.

"A severe electric shock," said the Prince genially. "Not enough to do you any real harm--but enough to prove to you that I am not romancing or bluffing--when I tell you of my little scheme. You know the principles of electricity, don't you?"

The Prince lit another cigarette, and lay back luxuriously in his chair.

"You remember them doubtless from your school days--anyway those that count. For instance, you must certainly remember the method of getting a shock, by holding two terminals in your hands. That is what happened a moment ago, except that you were standing on one terminal, and holding the other."

"Suppose you quit fooling and get down to it," said Jim grimly.

"Certainly," said the Prince pleasantly. "In the week since I last saw you I have occupied myself in fixing scores of similar terminals all over your half of the room. For instance--the chair just behind you. There are two there. And though you might sit in that chair for quite a time in perfect safety, some chance movement might make the connection. And then you'd get another shock."

"Am I to understand," snarled Jim, "that you propose to keep me here hopping round the room having electric shocks?"

He again took a step forward towards the grille, to stop abruptly at the Prince's shout of warning.

"Good Heavens! My dear fellow, not yet. I couldn't bear to lose you so soon."

"What do you mean?" said Jim.

"You see, when you shook the gate before only one-fiftieth of the current was switched on. And now it's all on. Why, you'd have been electrocuted far too soon. I should have had no fun at all."

The Prince lay back as if appalled at such a narrow escape from disaster, and Jim stood very still.

"You see, they're all over the room," he explained. "For all you know, at this very moment you may be within an inch of death. And I mean that literally. Perhaps if you moved your right foot an inch, you would complete the circuit and be electrocuted. On the other hand, you may not be within a yard of it. That's the game. Just like hunt the thimble. Sometimes as you move about the room you'll be warm, and sometimes you'll be cold--and I wait and watch. How long will you last? It may be next minute; it may not be for an hour or more. Some of the death spots I know; some I do not. They were put in by another. And that makes it more exciting for me."

He pressed a button, and an Arab came swiftly in with champagne and caviare sandwiches, to depart again as noiselessly as he had entered. And still Jim stood there motionless, staring at the Prince. Was it bluff or was it not? That was the thought in both our minds.

"You can, of course, continue standing exactly where you are with perfect impunity," continued the Prince suavely. "And as a matter of fact--this being my first experiment of this nature--I am quite interested in the psychology of the thing. How long will you go on standing there? Four hours--five? The night is yet young. But sooner or later, my dear Maitland, you will have to move. Sleep will overcome you, and it will be dangerous to sleep, Maitland, very dangerous for you. But interesting for me."

"What's your object in doing this?" said Jim slowly, after a long pause.

"Amusement principally--amusement and revenge. How dared you, you miserable Englishman, profane our temple, and put the authorities on our track?"

With his teeth bared like a wolf's, the Egyptian rose and approached the grille. He stood there snarling, and Jim yawned.

"You murdered a man," went on the Prince, and his voice was shaking with rage, "a man who had forgotten more of the mysteries of life than you and all your miserable countrymen put together will ever know. And the penalty for that is death, as I told you."

"So it was you who wrote those notes, was it?" said Jim in a bored voice. "You wretched little nigger."

In a frenzy of rage at the insult the Egyptian shook both his fists.

"Yes, it was I," he screamed. "And it was I who went round to your club this evening, and it was I who heard you order the car to go to Hampstead; and it is I who have bluffed you all through. It was considerate of you, Maitland, to tell the taxi-driver that. There are numbers of excellent places on the tube line out there where both your bodies can be found--electrocuted. And as I've told you before,"--he turned to me--"I will look after Molly."

With a great effort he recovered himself and sat down again to his interrupted meal. And once more silence reigned. Motionless as a statue, Jim still stood there, and his eyes never left the Prince's face.

I sat there watching him helplessly. In my own mind I knew that this was not bluff; in my own mind I knew that in all his life of adventure Jim had never stood in such deadly peril as he did at that moment. And the thing was so diabolically ingenious. Sooner or later he *must* move, and then with every step he ran the risk of sudden death. But the hand that held and lit his cigarette was steady as a rock.

He smoked it through calmly and quietly, while the Egyptian watched him as a cat watches a mouse. It couldn't go on; we all knew that. It had to finish, and as Jim flung the end away the Prince rose and approached the grille. On his face was a horrible look of anticipation; his sinewy hands were clenched tight.

"Well, old Dick," said Jim steadily, "this appears to be the end of a sporting course. I refuse to stand here any more for the amusement of that foul nigger. So I propose to sit down. And in case I sit the wrong way--so long."

He turned and lounged towards the big chair. Then he sat down and polished his eyeglass, while the Egyptian clutched the grille and gloated. I could have told then if I hadn't known it before that it was no bluff--that he was waiting in an ecstasy of anticipation for Jim to die. Anyway, it would be sudden, but when--when?

"A poor chair this, nigger," said Jim mildly--and then it happened. Jim gave one dreadful convulsive leap and slithered to the floor, where he lay rigid and stiff. For a moment I was stunned; for a moment I forgot that it was my fate, too. I could only grasp that Jim was dead. Murdered by a madman--for there was madness in the eyes of Prince Selim, as I cursed him for a murderer.

"Your turn next," he snarled, "but first we will remove the body."

He pressed over a switch on the wall, and a great blue spark stabbed the air. Then he went to the central gate and pulled it back.

"Not much sport that time," he remarked, "Too quick. But, anyway, my dear Leyton, you will now know one place to avoid."

"Which is more than you do," came a terrible voice, and the Prince screamed. For Jim's hands were round his throat, and Jim's merciless eyes were boring into his brain.

"You're not the only person who can bluff, nigger."

The grip tightened, and the Egyptian struggled madly to free himself, until quite suddenly he grew limp, and Jim flung him into the chair, where he lay sprawling. Then, picking up his revolver, Jim came towards me.

"Touch and go that time, Dick," and there was a strained look in his eyes as he set me free.

"I thought you were done in, old man," I said hoarsely. "At first I put him down as bluffing, but afterwards I knew he wasn't. And when you doubled up like that----"

I broke off as Jim crossed to the switch.

"I knew he wasn't bluffing," he answered. "I saw that in his eyes. Now we'll see how he likes it."

There came another vivid spark, and with a loud clang the gate closed in the grille, while the Egyptian still sprawled unconscious in the chair.

"So I took the only possible way as it seemed to me. If it failed--I died, and by the mercy of

Allah it didn't. Oh! my God! look!"

His hand gripped my arm, and I swung round just in time to see it. I suppose he'd slipped in the chair or something, but Prince Selim's back was arched inwards in a semi-circle, and for a moment he seemed to stand on his head. Then he crashed forward on to the floor and lay still.

"No," repeated Jim, and his hand shook a little, "it wasn't bluff."

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I don't profess to account for it. Whether he was indeed mad, or whether he was merely the victim of some terrible form of mental abnormality, will never be known. Amazing stories of unbelievable debauches were hinted at by his servant during the inquest--debauches always carried out in this room.

Tales showing his appalling cruelty and his fiendish pleasure in witnessing pain in others were listened to by an astounded and open-mouthed jury. But one thing they did not hear--and that was of the presence of two white men in the house on the night preceding the finding of the Prince's dead body. The Arab who had brought in the champagne was not quite a fool, and a verdict of accidental death saved complications.

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## XII. *Molly's Aunt at Angmering*

And so I come to the finish. As I have said, Jim's half-section was made up, and he wasn't our best man after all, for we had a double wedding. As is only meet and proper, it caused the cessation of his wanderings and turned him into an orderly member of society. How long it will last is another thing altogether. Sometimes now there comes a gleam into his eyes not induced, I regret to say, by the intense excitement of English country life. And sometimes now, when Molly and I go to stay with them, the two men of the party are routed out by their indignant wives at two in the morning.

The whisky is low in the decanter; the atmosphere gives every excuse for paroxysms of feminine coughing as the door opens. And then the two men rise sheepishly from their chairs and basely pretend that they had no idea it was so late. It doesn't deceive their wives for an instant, but they are merciful and kindly souls who have even been known to brave the atmosphere and come and sit on the arms of their respective husband's chairs.

For he found her--did Jim. He found his girl--the girl he had last seen in the hotel at Tampico. The Fate that juggles the pieces gave the wheel another twist--a kindly twist, and the harbour for which old Jim in his heart of hearts had been steering through long years hove in sight. And now there was Molly, bless her! at the helm.

Great happiness is apt to make one a bit selfish, I think, and somehow or other Jim and his quest had slipped a little into the background of my mind. As he had said to me with a shrug of his shoulders and an apparent indifference which failed to deceive, what chance was there of finding her--that girl who was never absent for long from his mind? And even if he did find her--what then? She hated and despised him. And I had agreed: the odds against finding her were long. Also I had forgotten, for such is the way of a man in love himself.

And then suddenly one afternoon it happened. At first I could hardly believe my eyes: I said to myself that it was merely an astonishing likeness. But after a moment or two I knew that it was no mistake: the girl talking to Molly was Jim's girl.

It was a hat shop--*Chez Bernie* it was called: and Molly had taken me there for the purpose of disregarding my advice. It appeared that she often came to this shop. It was run by a lady who had built up the business herself. Moreover she was a dear: had struggled through a real bad time and now had made good. Sheila Bernie was her name, and from the corner to which I had retired I saw Sheila Bernie come out from an inner sanctum and greet Molly. And Sheila Bernie was the girl I had known as Sheila Blair--the wife of Raymond Blair, drunken derelict.

Molly called me up to introduce me, and for a moment Jim's girl--in my mind I always called her that--stared at me with a puzzled frown.

"Surely," she said hesitatingly, "we have met somewhere?"

I bowed and took her hand.

"Tampico," I said. "In the South Seas."

I heard her catch her breath, and then I went on.

"Mr. Maitland and I landed in London about a month ago."

I knew that Molly was looking from one to the other of us, but she didn't make any fool remark

about the world being small. And even when the girl went on, with her head thrown back in that queer little way that I remembered so well, Molly said nothing, being that manner of human who knows when to speak and when not to.

"Will you tell Mr. Maitland," said the girl quietly, "that I made a very grave mistake which I have never ceased regretting. I can quite understand that he will find it impossible to forgive me, but I had no method of communicating with him."

"I will certainly tell him," I assured her. "But is there any reason, Mrs. Blair, why you shouldn't tell him yourself?"

For a moment she hesitated.

Then: "I am here every day from nine till five."

She turned to Molly, but for the first and last time in her life Molly's interest in hats seemed to have waned. Tea was her sole thought, and she would come back again to-morrow when she had more time. So tea it was, and at tea came the inquisition.

"Tell me everything, Dick. Why did you call her Mrs. Blair? I've known her now for two years: I've stayed with her sometimes down in a little bungalow she's got down in Sussex. And she's never mentioned the fact that she was married."

"Her husband died some years ago," I said quietly, and my thoughts went back to that sun-drenched dusty street in Tampico.

"It's an amazing, an incredible coincidence running into her this afternoon. You see there has never been another woman in Jim's life since he met her. And I think he'd given up all hope of ever seeing her again."

And then I told her the whole story. I told her of Tampico, of its loneliness and its rottenness; I told her of the human derelicts who died their drink-sodden deaths in it. And I told her of Raymond Blair.

"In your life, Molly," I said, "you've probably never come across such a case. You've seen men tight maybe, and on that you've based your ideas of drunkenness. Blair was a crawling, pitiful thing: he wasn't a man at all. When the drink was out of him there was no depth to which he wouldn't sink to get it: when the drink was in him--and this is the point I want to make clear--he was almost normal. In fact, he had got into the last and final stage of the drunkard."

"And that was Sheila's husband," said Molly, very low.

"That was her husband," I answered gravely. "She wasn't out there with him, and she thought he was a trader in a big way. In fact, she used to send out money to him every month to help him expand his business. How she got it I don't know--but it went down his throat right enough."

"What a brute!" cried Molly.

"When a man gets to that condition, my dear, he's dead to every sense of decency. And things might have gone on till he died without her ever finding out, but for the fact that she suddenly decided to come out herself and see her husband. She arrived with Jim--he looked after her on the way out. And that was when I met him first."

"And what was her husband doing?"

"Raymond Blair was in a saloon reciting nursery rhymes for the benefit of a bunch of Dagos, and crawling on the floor like a dog to get the nickels they flung at him in their contempt."

"How awful!" whispered Molly.

"You see the drink was out of him, and that was the problem."

And then I briefly sketched for her the fight in Dutch Joe's gin hall, and the council of war in MacAndrew's house.

"There he was--a gibbering, crawling thing: and waiting for him at the hotel was his wife, utterly unsuspecting--his wife, the woman Jim loved. Don't make any mistake about that point--Jim loved her, and she wasn't far off loving Jim. But she was straight, and she was white, and she had come out to join her husband.

"It was Jim who decided. He might have taken Blair to the hotel as he was, and then waited for the inevitable end that could not be long delayed. But he didn't: he gave the man a bottle of gin and turned him into something comparatively normal. You see, as I've told you before, with Blair the position of things was reversed. Blair drunk was normal: Blair sober was just a dreadful nightmare. And it seemed to Jim that it was the only way of playing the game. But you could hardly expect the girl to understand that.

"What Blair said to her I don't know. I suppose she found him peculiar and changed--I suppose he tried to make some pitiful excuse. At any rate she found out that he had just drunk a complete bottle of gin. He'd gone to the hotel with Jim, and it was Jim she blamed. She thought he'd deliberately gone out of his way to make her husband drunk. Which was no more than the truth, but not for the reason which she imagined.

"I suppose she knew Jim was in love with her, and thought he hoped by this method to blacken her husband in her eyes. So she called Jim a cur, and told him she never wished to see him again. And Jim never said a word nor would he let MacAndrew or me explain. He just stood there until she'd finished--and at the top of the stairs stood her husband with his hands shaking and his lips trembling and a look of pitiable entreaty in his eyes. One could almost hear him saying, 'Don't give me away.' And Jim didn't. He turned on his heel and went out into the night, and he's never seen her since that day. We went off together next morning on the boat."

"But it was big, Dick--big," said Molly, and her eyes were shining. "And she knows now, anyway."

"Yes--she knows now," I answered. "During the remaining six months of his life she must have seen him sober fairly often. And maybe MacAndrew put her wise later."

"So it's all come right after all," cried Molly. "You'll tell Jim, and he'll go round and they'll meet again."

"I shall tell Jim right enough," I answered. "But he's a queer, proud sort of blighter, you know, and----"

"You don't mean to say," interrupted Molly, "that you think he'll be such an ass as to stick in his toes and jib?"

"Dash it all!" I said rather feebly, "you must admit that it's a bit galling to a fellow to be abused like a pickpocket for doing one of the whitest things he could possibly have done."

"That was years ago," cried Molly scornfully. "He ought to have forgotten all about it by this

time."

"Well, he hasn't," I said. "Besides, how do you know that she is in love with him?"

"Because I saw her face when you mentioned his name."

"You weren't looking at her: you were looking at me."

"My dear boy," said Molly kindly, "don't expose your limitations too much. These things are a little beyond you. I have definitely decided that Jim and Sheila Bernie--or Blair, whichever you prefer--are to be married on the same day as you and I. You will, therefore, tell him where she is to be found, and if necessary conduct him to her shop to-morrow morning personally. You will then leave them alone, and engage a table for four at the Ritz for lunch."

"Bismillah!" I murmured, and consumed a cup of cold tea. "Everything shall be as you say."

And up to a point it was. I dined with Jim that night, and over the port I told him.

"I've some wonderful news for you, old man. Who do you think I saw this afternoon?"

He sat very still staring at me.

"She's running a hat shop down in Sloane Street. I was in there with Molly to-day. And she wants to see you, and apologise for the mistake she made that night in Tampico."

"You've seen her, Dick?" he said at length. "Tell me--how does she look?"

"Prettier than ever, as you'll see for yourself to-morrow morning."

For the life of me I couldn't keep my voice quite steady, there was such a wonderful look in old Jim's eyes.

"You're to go round," I went on gruffly, "and you are to bring her to lunch with Molly and me at the Ritz. It's all fixed up. You're to tell her to shut up her shop for the remainder of the day."

He gave a little whimsical smile, and laid his hand on my shoulder as we strolled out of the dining-room.

"Methinks I see the work of one Molly in that arrangement, Dick, my boy. Bless both your hearts! And in the meantime only the old brandy can do justice to the occasion."

And so we fell to yarning till the reproachful eye of the waiter woke us to the fact that the last member had left half an hour previously. They were good years to look back on, those we had spent together, and now he, as well as I, had the wonderful years to look forward to also. So we had one final one, and after that the absolute definite last, and then Jim came with me to the door. Just for a few moments we stood there, and instinctively our eyes went up to the star-studded sky of the soft May night.

"Fine weather, old Dick; fine weather in front. And happy days behind. Surely the world is good."

And with the grip of his hand still on mine I walked back to my own club.

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Now what on earth more could I have done than that? I'd given him the address of the hat shop; I'd told him she wanted to see him, and short of taking him there in a taxi and pushing him through the door I fail to see that I deserved the withering contempt poured on me next day by Molly at the Ritz.

"I've got a table for four," I began brightly as I saw her.

"Then you can countermand it," she remarked, "and order one for two. Not that you deserve to have anyone at all to lunch with you, but since I'm hungry I don't mind."

"Good Heavens!" I cried, "you don't mean to say they've gone and messed it up?"

Molly gurgled suddenly.

"When you see him you ask him why he doesn't buy his matches wholesale in future. It would save such a lot of time."

"When you've quite finished talking in riddles," I murmured resignedly, "perhaps you'll condescend to explain."

Once again she gurgled.

"Oh, Dick, what an angel he is! We were both up in the work-room, watching----"

"What on earth were you doing there?"

"Buying hats, silly, and other things--and talking generally. Suddenly we saw him getting out of a taxi about fifty yards away. Dick--he'd got on a top hat, and he looked too beautiful. He glanced at the numbers of the houses, and then very slowly he started to walk towards the shop. He got slower and slower and finally he stopped altogether. I think the poor darling's collar was a little tight, judging by the way he was fingering it.

"At any rate, that was when he bought his first box of matches. Must have been, because he went into a tobacconist's. However, after about five minutes he emerged--rapidly crossed the road, strode furiously down the other side as if no such place as Bernie's existed, and bought another box of matches from an old man selling them in the gutter.

"After that he went off for a little ta-ta by himself, because he was not seen for quite five minutes. Then he appeared on our side of the street again, only coming from the other way. My dear, how so many tobacconists pay I don't know. He went to ground in another one; more matches. And then the poor old thing lost his head completely. He rushed straight past the door of the shop, and vanished into the blue. I suppose he'd exhausted the tobacconists in the near neighbourhood.

"Anyway, it was a full quarter of an hour before he appeared again, looking thoroughly grim and determined. In one hand he held a large bunch of flowers which were not in their first youth, and armed with them he advanced to the door. Marie was below--she's the assistant, and she greeted him with her best shop manner.

"Poor lamb! it was too pathetic. We were both just out of sight, listening hard. Was Miss Bernie in? Marie believed so, but she would see. Did Monsieur wish to see her particularly, for at this hour Mademoiselle Bernie was generally busy. My dear, he clutched at it. Horrible coward! It didn't matter at all; he wouldn't dream of worrying Mademoiselle if she was busy. Another time would do just as well. Perhaps Marie would give her these flowers. Then he took out his handkerchief to wipe his forehead: boxes of matches flew in all directions, and he bolted like a maniac to return no more."

"But why didn't Mrs. Blair go out and speak to him?" I demanded indignantly.

"Why didn't she?" said Molly, and of a sudden there came into her eyes a look I had never

seen in them before. "Because, my dear, she loves him. And no woman wants the man she loves to see her for the first time when her eyes are wet."

"Oh!" I grunted foolishly. "I see."

"Just tears of joy, Dick, the most wonderful tears in the world. But they're quite as bad for the complexion as the ordinary brand. So when she was sure he wasn't coming back, she just picked up the boxes of matches for a few minutes, and kissed the flowers and put them in water, and then shut up the shop for the day."

"And what happens now?" I asked.

"I shall take the matter in hand myself," she remarked casually. "Though if it wasn't for the fact that I have decided on a double wedding I would let things take their natural course. He richly deserves to be kept on tenterhooks for at least six months after his revolting display of cowardice this morning. But since time is getting short, something has got to be done at once."

She looked at me thoughtfully, and I preserved a discreet silence. I felt that the male sex was not at a premium at the moment.

"At once," repeated Molly, and her eyes were still pensive. "I think--yes, I think you had better take a little motor trip in Sussex, Dick. The car's still going, I suppose."

"I put on a new bit of stamp-paper last night," I said with dignity.

"Good," said Molly. "You will take a little trip in Sussex, and you will bring Jim with you. Take enough clothes for the week-end, and something to bathe in."

"And which particular portion of Sussex am I to go to?"

"It's close to a little place called Angmering," she said. "A charming bungalow with a strip of garden running down to the sea. I shall be there, and----"

"Mrs. Blair's bungalow," I announced brightly.

"What wonderful brain power!" remarked Molly. "But you're not to tell Jim that, or he'll funk it again. Just you bring him down and arrive to-morrow afternoon. Say I'm stopping with my aunt. Now pay the bill and buzz off. You're to keep the patient amused to-day, but don't let him get feverish."

So I buzzed off to find Jim at his club displaying every symptom of profound melancholia.

"Well," I said, affecting not to notice his anguished expression. "How did you find Mrs. Blair?"

"She was too busy to see me, old boy," he said sheepishly. "She's always too busy in the morning, so I was told."

And then I laughed in his face.

"You confounded old liar!" I cried; "you know perfectly well that you ratted horribly. You were in a pea-green funk and all the traces still remain."

"It seemed so different this morning from when we were talking about it last night," he said in an abashed voice. "Do you think I ought to try again this afternoon, Dick?"

"She's gone out of London for the week-end," I remarked at once, and the look of the reprieved prisoner appeared on his face. "I thought I told you last night that she was going. So you can't do anything till Tuesday. And in the meantime Molly wants to know if you will motor down

with me to-morrow to her aunt's bungalow for a couple of nights or so."

"Aunt?" cried Jim suspiciously.

"Yes--aunt. Either mother's sister or father's. I didn't ask which. But lots of people have one or two lying about the place."

"Is anybody else going to be there?" he demanded.

"Not that I'm aware of," I answered. "They particularly want you to make a four at bridge or ludo or something. It will fill in the time quite nicely till you can go round and see Mrs. Blair on Tuesday. And a quiet week-end by the sea may make your nerves a bit stronger."

And suddenly he grinned like a schoolboy.

"You're right, old Dick. I did rat this morning. I've never been in such a funk in my life. For all I know she may be engaged to someone else or even married again. And anyway she's probably forgotten all about me by now."

"More than likely," I agreed brutally. "But you'd better talk things over with Molly this week-end--or her aunt."

And so the following afternoon we arrived at the bungalow where the garden ran down to the sea. Molly was there, and her aunt, and I heard Jim give an audible gasp as he saw his portion for the week-end. His job was the aunt, as I told him on the way down in the car, and she was some portion. Grey hair that hung in wisps appeared below a cotton sun bonnet; a pair of large yellow spectacles concealed her eyes, and one dreadful black tooth hit one in the face whenever she smiled. But her particular charm lay in her voice, which was a cracked falsetto.

"I'm a little hard of hearing, Mr. Maitland," she said, producing an ear-trumpet. "But if you speak into this all the time I expect I shall hear you. You must tell me all your adventures in those heathenish parts while the two young people enjoy themselves."

"Delighted," boomed Jim, and his face looked a little strained.

"It's wonderful to be young," she went on. "Now, my dears, you two run away and have a little talk while Mr. Maitland amuses me."

I had one fleeting glimpse of her adjusting the ear trumpet, and Jim's look of fixed horror as of a bird that gazes at a snake from close quarters: I just heard her first remark--"Now tell me all about pirates and sharks and things," and then Molly and I collapsed into one another's arms.

"She's wonderful," I murmured weakly. "How long is the punishment to last?"

"It depends," said Molly. "We'll give 'em half an hour at any rate."

We did, and when we got back Jim was a shattered wreck.

"I can't stand it any more." He had seized my arm and took me on one side. "Much will I do for you, Dick--but not that. I don't want to be rude about Molly's relative, but the woman should be put under restraint. Are you aware that she's just asked me if I've ever eaten anybody? Said Molly had told her I had become a cannibal."

"Courage, *mon brave!*" I muttered in a shaking voice. "I'll do the same for you some day. Think how you're amusing the old pet! And after tea we're going to bathe."

"Not the elderly trout," he gasped. "Great Heavens! my dear fellow, you can't tell me that she's

going to bathe. I simply couldn't bear it."

"Auntie swims very well," said Molly, who had joined us unperceived. "But sometimes she gets cramp, Jim, and if she does you must be at hand to help her."

"Merciful Allah!" said Jim under his breath, and Molly turned away with suspicious abruptness.

And sure enough auntie appeared after tea completely enveloped in a bath robe. We were waiting for her in the garden and as she passed us only her shrill falsetto, summoning Jim, proclaimed who she was.

"You and I will swim together, Mr. Maitland," she announced. "And my right knee has been cracking dreadfully, so you mustn't leave me in case I get cramp. There's a lovely pool here with a diving-board, and then we'll swim out to sea."

"For Heaven's sake get a boat and follow," croaked Jim to me. "If the old woman gets cramp we're lost. And surely she's not going to dive----"

The words died away on his lips, and of a sudden he stood very still. Silhouetted on the end of the diving-board was the lovely figure of a girl. Gone were the spectacles and the grey hair--gone was the ear trumpet. And for one second she looked back at him as he stood there speechless.

"Come with me, won't you--just in case I get cramp?"

Then she was gone, and only a little swirling eddy marked the perfect dive. And Molly, being a girl, slipped her hand through my arm and cried a little and laughed a little as we watched Jim's dark head pursuing the elusive scarlet cap in front of him.

"The dear fool!" she whispered at length. "But he deserved it, didn't he?"

And it seemed to me that just at that moment dark head caught scarlet cap. And whether it was cramp or not I don't know, but I saw her arms go round his neck. For you may kiss in the water just as you may kiss on land, and both methods were in use at that moment.

**Transcriber's Note:--**

Punctuation errors have been corrected.

The following suspected printer's errors have been addressed.

Page 67. devastating changed to devastating.  
(the devastating effects)

Page 135. preceptibly changed to perceptibly.  
(he was weakening perceptibly)

Page 165. once's changed to one's.  
(into one's brain)

Page 275. has changed to have.  
(might have been)

Page 282. it's changed to it.  
(it doesn't matter)

Page 312. that changed to than.  
(have done than that)

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[The end of *Jim Maitland* by Herman Cyril McNeile]