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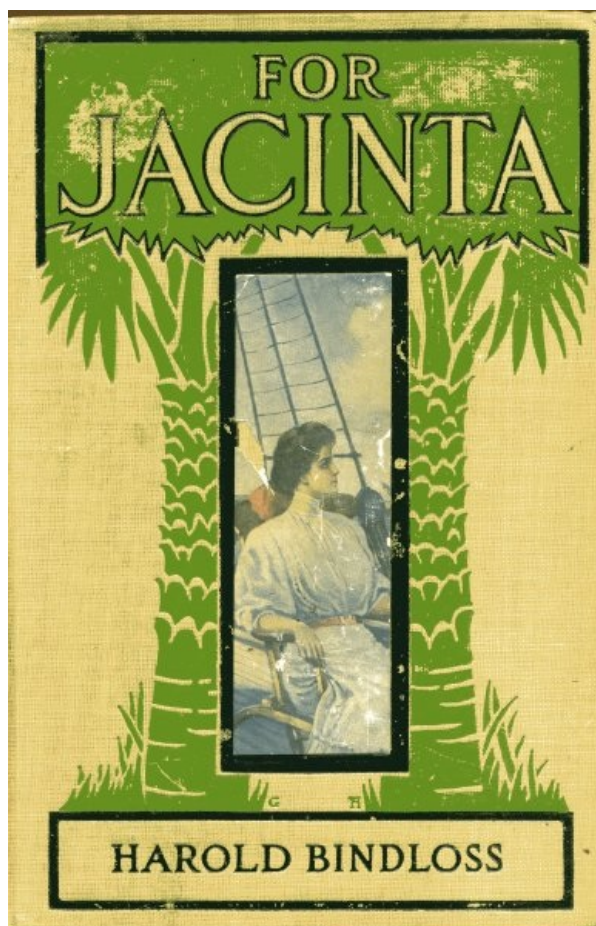
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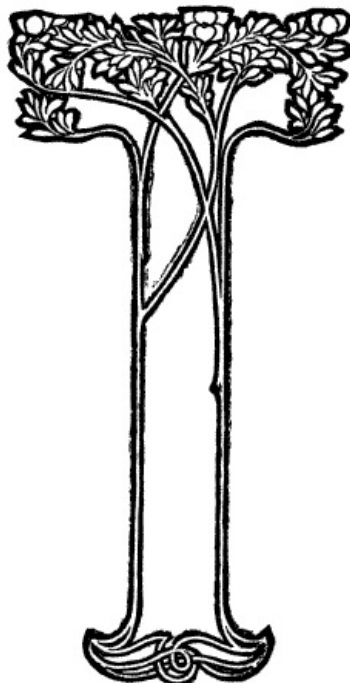
"DON'T YOU KNOW THAT IT IS RATHER A SERIOUS THING TO DELAY A SPANISH MAIL-BOAT?"—Page 19

FOR JACINTA

By HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF

"ALTON OF SOMASCO," "THE CATTLE-BARON'S DAUGHTER,"
"THE DUST OF CONFLICT," "WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE," ETC.



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FOR JACINTA

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CHAPTER I JACINTA BROWN

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when sobrecargo Austin boarded the little mail-boat *Estremadura* as she lay rolling at anchor on the long, moon-lit heave that worked into the roadstead of Santa Cruz, Palma. Sobrecargo means much the same thing as purser, and Austin was an Englishman, though the *Estremadura* was to all intents and purposes a Spanish steamer. She traded round the islands of the Canary archipelago with mules and camels, tomatoes, bananas, onions, and seasick English tourists, as fortune favoured her. Now, as the heavily sealed document Austin carried in his pocket declared, she was to sail for Las Palmas, Grand Canary, with the Cuban mail, by the gracious permission of the young King of Spain.

He had trouble on getting on board of her, for there were a good many bullocks swimming about her side waiting until the red-capped crew should heave them on board beneath the derrick-boom by means of a rope twisted round their horns. It probably hurt the bullocks, and now and then one succumbed to a broken neck during the operation; but the Castilian, who can face his losses placidly, is not, as a rule, particularly merciful to his beast. There were also stray sheep, goats, and donkeys, as well as olive-faced peasants with blankets strapped about their shoulders, wandering about the after portion of the main deck, which was supposed to be reserved for the second-class passengers, when Austin stopped a moment by the covered hatch. A big electric light hung from the spar-deck beams above his head, and he looked about him with a little ironical smile.

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He was a young man of average stature, and there was nothing especially distinguished in his appearance, though he had good grey eyes, and a pleasant bronzed face. He was somewhat lightly made, though he looked wiry, and held himself well, and there was a certain languidness in his smile which seemed to suggest that he was not addicted to troubling greatly about anything. Because the Scotchman who ran the *Estremadura's* engines had sold his white uniform jacket with the resplendent buttons a day or two before, he was just then attired somewhat incongruously in a white cap with the very large and imposing badge of the Spanish mail service clasped into the front of it, a brown alpaca jacket, white duck trousers, and pipe-clayed shoes. The latter two items were, however, by no means immaculate, since he had, as a special favour to the mate, brought off certain sheep and goats in his despatch-boat, as well as a camel tied astern of it. Spaniards and Englishmen do not invariably agree, but they lived like brothers on board the *Estremadura*, which, however, had its disadvantages. Austin objected in particular to the community of property.

That evening the steamer hummed with life, and the clatter of polyglot tongues. Parsee dealers in silver-thread embroideries, German commercial travellers, Madeiran Portuguese, Canario hillmen, and Peninsular Spaniards, moved amidst the straying livestock, while a little group of Anglo-Saxons naturally sat apart upon the hatch. There were, as is usual when Englishmen foregather in a country where wine is cheap, empty bottles scattered about. The engineer from the sister ship and an athletic tourist, stripped, at least as far as was permissible, were wrestling in Cumberland fashion on the hatch, with much delicate manœuvring of their feet and futile clutches at each other's waists. Macallister, who, when he felt inclined, superintended the *Estremadura's* machinery, alternately encouraged them sardonically and solaced himself with one of the bottles. He was a big, gaunt man, and just then extremely dirty, and when he saw Austin he looked up with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

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"I have been waiting for ye anxiously," he said. "Ye may now have the pleasure of lending me five dollars."

"I'm afraid not!" said Austin decisively. "For one thing, I haven't got them. I very seldom have—as you ought to know."

Macallister made a little gesture of resignation. "Well," he said, "ye have always your clothes, and if ye had known us better ye would not have brought so many of them on board the *Estremadura*. I'm half expecting yon Jackson o' Las Palmas, who gave us two dollars for the last white suit, to come round for some more o' them when we get in."

Austin tried the door of his room close by, and was consoled to find it locked, as he had left it.

"They cost me five, and I naturally never saw a peseta of the money. I suppose you kept the Correo buttons?"

"I did not," said Macallister, unabashed. "Ye may observe Miguel, the quartermaster, walking round in them. It was no a bad bargain—a basket o' big grapes an' a watermelon."

Austin bore it patiently. There was, in fact, nothing to be gained by protesting, and he knew that it was useless to expostulate with Macallister when he spoke his own tongue, which was not an invariable custom with him. Then the engineer turned and glanced at the wrestlers, who were still stamping up and down the hatch with feet spread well apart, compassionately.

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"They've been at it the whole o' a half hour, an' no a fall to cheer a body yet. One would think it was dancing they were," he said. "It wasn't to see that I wasted a tumblerful o' anisow on them."

Now, anisado is a preparation of spirit and extract of anise seed, which is esteemed in that country, and Austin looked hard at his comrade, because he had a jar of it, intended for a Spanish friend, in his room. He was a trifle uneasy, since a lock is not an insuperable obstacle to an engineer. The latter, however, changed the subject.

"It's a kind o' pity about your clothes," he said. "Miss Jacinta Brown is going across with us to-night, an' she was enquiring kindly after ye."

Austin had a good deal of composure, and he often needed it, but the shrewd Scottish eyes saw the momentary pleasure in his face. Then, because he did not appreciate Macallister's badinage on that subject, he went into his room and bolted the door behind him before he switched on the light and examined the anisado jar. It seemed quite full when he shook it, and the seal was intact, but on looking closer he saw that the impression on the latter was not what it had been when he left it. He was aware that a certain proportion of sea-water may be added to rum without the average consumer noticing any great difference, but he had suspicions that a blend of brine and anise was not likely to be appreciated by its recipient, and he was for a moment or two consumed with righteous indignation. This, however, passed, for he realised that his expostulations would be heard with laughter. It was all a part of the happy-go-lucky life he led, and nobody concerns himself unduly about anything under the flag of Spain. The Castilian, as a rule, bears his troubles patiently, which is, perhaps, just as well, since he rarely sees them coming or makes any attempt to get out of the way of them.

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Austin accordingly busied himself with his papers, and it was an hour later when he went on deck. The *Estremadura* had gone to sea by then, and the lights of the little Spanish town blinked above the broad fringe of surf astern. High above her the great black cordillera cut hard and sharp against the luminous blueness of the night, and the long heave of the Atlantic flashed,

white-topped, beneath the moon ahead. She swung over it with slanted spars and swaying funnel, while the keen trade-breeze sang in her rigging, and now and then a flying-fish ricocheted, gleaming, from sea-top to sea-top beneath her side. She was very well kept above decks, a trim, yacht-like vessel, and for a while Austin leaned over her quarter-rails, smoking a cigarette, and wondering when Miss Jacinta Brown would come up on deck. There was a very deaf Englishman, who insisted on conversing with him in stentorian tones in the saloon, and he had no desire for his company. In the meanwhile, it was pleasant to lounge there and watch the moonlight gleam upon the tumbling seas.

There were, he admitted, a good many compensations in the life he led. The warmth and colour of the South appealed to him, and, though they are not particularly numerous, there are men like him who retain a somewhat chastened affection for the sea they earn their bread upon. It is true that he earned very little more than that on board the *Estremadura*, and he had once had his aspirations like other men, as well as a prospect of realising them; but when financial disaster overtook the family firm nobody seemed anxious to secure the services of a young man without specialised training, who had artistic and somewhat expensive tastes, which was, perhaps, not altogether astonishing. That was how Austin eventually came on board the *Estremadura*, and stayed there, though there were odd hours when he took himself to task for doing so. Still, he did not exactly know where he could go if he left her, and the indifference of the Latins was already infecting him. Men in Spain believe that the future is quite able to take care of itself.

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By and by, however, a slim, white-clad figure appeared in the entrance to the saloon companion, and he moved in that direction with evident alacrity. As one result of being the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo, he was acquainted with everybody of importance in the archipelago, and among them all there was nobody who figured more prominently than Miss Jacinta Brown. She was English on both sides, though she had lived in those islands most of her twenty-five years, and understood the Spaniards, probably better than they understood themselves, for they are rather an impulsive than an introspective people. She also understood her countrymen, and ruled over them, as well as Spanish artillery officers and Commandantes. It was not very evident how she did it, for there were a good many Spanish women, at least, almost as pretty, and of much better birth than she, and she apparently received no great assistance from her father, for Pancho Brown was a merchant of an unusually solid and unimaginative description. The wives of the English visitors, however, did not, as a rule, like Jacinta. They said she was forward, and it was a pity she had no mother; but when any of them received an invitation from her it was immediately proclaimed all over the hotel.

She smiled at Austin graciously, and allowed him to place her a deck chair beneath a big lifeboat, where it was out of the wind, after which he procured himself another, and sat down and looked at her. Jacinta did not seem to mind it, and most men would probably have found it difficult to keep their eyes off her. She was little, shapely, and very dainty, though she could, as Austin knew, on occasion be essentially dignified. She had brown hair and eyes, with a little scintillating gleam in them, and her face was slightly tinted with the warm Andalusian olive, though there was only English blood in her. She was dressed in white, as usual, with a simplicity that suggested perfect taste, while, as he watched her, Austin wondered again exactly where her compelling attractiveness lay. He had met women with more delicate complexions, finer features, softer voices, and more imposing carriage; that is, women who possessed one or two of these advantages, but he had not as yet met any one to be compared to Jacinta, as he expressed it, in the aggregate. Then it seemed that she read his thoughts, which was, as he had noticed, a habit of hers.

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"Yes, the dress is a new one. I am rather pleased with it, too," she said.

Austin laughed. "If I hadn't had the pleasure of making your acquaintance some time ago, you would have astonished me. As it is——"

"Never mind," said Jacinta. "After all, there is no great credit in telling people of your kind what they are thinking, though I can't help it now and then. You were wondering what anybody saw in me."

Now Austin was too wise to fancy for a moment that Jacinta was fishing for compliments. She knew her own value too well to appreciate them unless they were particularly artistic, and he surmised that she had merely desired to amuse herself by his embarrassment.

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"If I was, it was very unwise of me," he said. "You are Jacinta—and one has to be content with that. You can't be analysed."

"And you?"

"I am the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo, which is, perhaps, a significant admission."

Jacinta nodded comprehension. "I think it is," she said. "Still, since you considered yourself warranted in approving of my dress, what are you doing in that jacket on a mail run?"

"As usual, there is a reason. When I was across at Arucas my comrades laid hands upon my garments, and disposed of them at a bargain. They had naturally squandered the money by the time I came back. I am now longing for a few words with the man who, I understand, is coming down to purchase some more at an equally alarming sacrifice."

Jacinta laughed, but she also looked at him with a little gleam in her eyes. "Don't you think it's

rather a pity you—are—the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo?"

"Well," said Austin, reflectively, "I won't pretend to misunderstand you, but the trouble is that I don't quite see what else I could be. I cannot dig, and I'm not sure that it would be very pleasant to go round borrowing odd dollars from my friends, even if they were disposed to lend them to me, which is scarcely probable. Most of them would, naturally, tell me to look at them, and see what I might have been if I'd had their diligence and probity. Besides, I have time to paint little pictures which rash tourists buy occasionally, and the life one leads here has its compensations."

The *Estremadura's* whistle hooted just then, and as Jacinta looked round a lordly four-masted ship, carrying everything to her royals, swept up out of the night. She was driving down the trade-breeze a good twelve knots an hour, and the foam flew up in cascades as her bows went down, swirled in a broad, snowy smother along the slender streak of rushing hull. Above it four tapered spires of sailcloth swung back against the moonlight at every stately roll, and she showed as an exquisite cameo cut in ebony on a ground of silver and blue. Still, it was not the colour that formed the strength of that picture, but the suggestion of effort and irresistible force that was stamped on it. She drove by majestically, showing a breadth of wet plates that flashed in a leeward roll, and Jacinta's eyes rested on the bent figure high on the lifted poop grappling with her wheel.

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"Ah!" she said. "I suppose it's sometimes brutal, but that is man's work, isn't it?"

Austin laughed again, though there was a faint warmth in his cheek. "Of course, I see the inference," he said. "Still, it really isn't necessary for everybody to hold a big vessel's wheel, and I would a good deal sooner you said something nice to me. Nobody likes to be told the truth about themselves, you know, and I understand now why folks threw big stones at the goat-skinned prophets long ago."

"Well," said Jacinta, "we will talk of somebody else. I wonder if you know that Jefferson has been left a fortune, or, at least, part of one?"

"I didn't. Still, I'm glad to hear it. I like the man. In fact, he's the straightest one I've come across in his occupation, which, by the way, is, perhaps, somewhat of an admission, considering that he's an American."

"I like most Americans. For one thing, they're usually in earnest."

"And you like Spaniards, who certainly aren't."

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"We will waive the question. It's rather a coincidence that Jefferson should have fallen in love about the same time."

"Do I know the lady, who is, presumably, in earnest, too? I don't like women who have a purpose openly, though that does not apply to you. You have usually a good many, but nobody knows anything about them until you have accomplished them."

Jacinta ignored the compliment. "I don't think you know her, but she is a friend of mine. I went to school with her for two years in England."

"Then, of course, she's nice."

"That," said Jacinta, "is naturally a matter of opinion. She is, however, not in the least like me."

"In that case it's difficult to see how she can be nice at all."

Jacinta smiled somewhat sardonically. "Well," she said, "Muriel is bigger than I am, and more solid—in every way—as well as quiet and precise. Being the daughter of the clergyman of a forlorn little place in England, she has, of course, had advantages which have been denied to me. There are people who have to undertake their own training, or do without any, you know. She very seldom says anything she does not mean, and always knows exactly what she is going to do."

"I'm not sure that sounds particularly attractive."

Jacinta lifted her head and looked at him. "Still, she is worth—oh, ever so much more—than a good many such frivolous people as you or I. You will see her yourself to-morrow. She is coming across with us to Las Palmas, and, of course, if you would like to please me—"

"That goes without saying. To-morrow we will endeavour to turn this ship upside down. It usually has to be done when we have the honour of carrying a lady from any part of provincial England."

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"I really don't want very much," and Jacinta smiled, at him. "Just the big forward room for her, and the seat next me at the top of your table. The nicest things have a way of getting there. Then she is fond of fruit—and if you could get any of the very big Moscatel, and some of that membrillo jelly. A few bunches of roses would look nice at our end of the table, too."

"Well," said Austin, with a little whimsical gesture of resignation, "there is, as you know, a Spanish Commandante and his wife in that forward room, but I suppose we shall have to turn them out. The other things will naturally follow, but I'm afraid Major-domo Antonio will call us dreadful names to-morrow."

Jacinta rose. "You are as nice as I expected you would be," she said. "Now it is getting chilly, and I have a letter to write."

She smiled at him and went forward, walking, though she was English, with a curious buoyant gracefulness as Spanish women do, while Austin sat still and considered the position. He was quite aware that he would have trouble with the Spanish Commandante as well as his Major-domo on the morrow, but that was, after all, of no great importance. When Jacinta wanted anything she usually obtained it, and it was not a little to be counted among her friends, since she frequently contrived to do a good deal for them. There were men as well as women in those islands who owed more than they were aware of to Jacinta Brown.

Austin sighed as he remembered it, for he was a penniless sobrecargo, and she, in those islands, at least, a lady of station. It must be sufficient for him to do what little he could to please her, and he had, in fact, once or twice done a good deal. He took life easily, but there was in him a vein of chivalry, which for the most part, however, found somewhat whimsical expression. Then he recollected that he had still certain documents to attend to, and going down again locked himself into his room.

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CHAPTER II

AN OVERHEATED JOURNAL

The *Estremadura* lay rolling gently off the quaint old Spanish city of Santa Cruz, Teneriffe, most of the following day. It was, indeed, late in the afternoon when she went to sea, and while the jumble of white walls and red-tiled roofs faded astern Austin sat in a deck-chair under a lifeboat, while Jacinta, Mrs. Hatherly, and Miss Muriel Gascoyne, to whom he had been duly presented, occupied a seat close by. He was not particularly charmed with the latter's company, and decided that she was certainly as unlike Jacinta as she very well could be.

Miss Gascoyne was a clear-complexioned, blue-eyed young Englishwoman, solidly put together, and endued with a certain attractiveness; but she was quiet, and had a disconcerting way of looking at him in a fashion which vaguely suggested disapproval. There was also what he felt to be a slightly irritating air of authority about her, which seemed to suggest that she recognised the responsibility of her station, as one who was looked up to in a remote corner of rural England. Mrs. Hatherly, her aunt, was a little, withered old lady, with ruddy cheeks and the stamp of vigorous health upon her, though she had apparently been ordered south for the winter. She became visibly interested when Jacinta contrived to mention that Austin was in charge of the *Estremadura's* medicine chest.

"It really isn't my fault, and I don't do more harm with it than I can help," he said.

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"Then you have a knowledge of medicine?" asked the red-cheeked lady.

"No," said Austin, "not in the least. I had to get a sixpenny book from England to tell me the difference between a scruple and a drachm, and I'm not sure about some of the measures yet. You see, I entered the profession quite by accident. The manual in the drug chest was, naturally, in English, as it was sent on board a Spanish ship, and the skipper, who couldn't read it, passed it on to me. My first case was a great success, unfortunately. We were loading pine, and one of the men contrived to get a splinter into the inner side of his eyelid. I suppose it was a weakness, but I really couldn't watch him going about in agony."

"Is the desire to relieve a fellow creature's suffering a weakness?" asked Miss Gascoyne.

Austin appeared to reflect. "I almost think it is when the chances are tolerably even that you're going to blind him. Still, I got the thing out, and that man never quite knew the risks he ran. The next week another of them dropped a hogshead on to his foot, and smashed it badly—they don't wear boots, you know. He seemed quite convinced that I could cure him, and, as the risk was his, I undertook the thing. You can see him on the forecastle yonder, and he isn't limping. After that my fame went abroad, and they send their cripples off to me at several of the desolate places we call at. I always give them something, but whatever quantity of water the manual recommends I put in twice as much."

Miss Gascoyne looked at him curiously. She had not met a young man of this type before, and was not sure that she approved of him. She also fancied that he was a trifle egotistical, which he certainly was not, and it never occurred to her that he was merely rambling on for her entertainment because he felt it his duty.

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"Don't you think that one should always have faith in one's prescriptions and act upon it?" said her aunt. "I endeavour to do so when I dose the village people who come to me."

Austin laughed. "Well," he said, "you see, I haven't any, and, perhaps if I had, it would be a little rough on others. Still, as a matter of fact, they do get better—that is, most of them."

Miss Gascoyne looked startled. "Is it right to abuse the ignorant people's credulity like that?" she said, and stopped a trifle awkwardly, while a little twinkle crept into Jacinta's eyes.

"Mr. Austin hasn't really killed anybody yet," she said. "You haven't told us what you think of Teneriffe, Muriel."

Miss Gascoyne turned her face astern, and there was appreciation, and something deeper than that, in her blue eyes, which had seen very little of the glory of this world as yet. High overhead the great black wall of the Cañadas cut, a tremendous ebony rampart, against the luminous blue, and beyond it the peak's white cone gleamed ethereally above its wrappings of fleecy mist. Beneath, the Atlantic lay a sheet of glimmering turquoise in the lee of the island, and outside of that there was a blinding blaze of sunlight on the white-topped sea.

"It is beautiful—wonderfully beautiful," she said, with a little tremble in her voice. "Isn't it sad that such a country should be steeped in superstition?"

Austin felt the last observation jar upon him, for he knew that the inhabitants of that land would, in respect of sobriety and morality, compare very favourably with those of several more enlightened places he was acquainted with at home, and that was going far enough for him. Still, he could defer to another's convictions when they were evidently sincere, and it seemed to him that Jacinta's warning glance was a trifle unnecessary. There was, however, an interruption just then, for a steward appeared with a laden tray at the door of the captain's room.

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"Doesn't Don Erminio take his comida in the saloon?" asked Jacinta.

"No," said Austin. "Not when we have English ladies on board. He's a different man, you know, and some of them will insist on talking Spanish to him. It's a little trying to have to admit you don't understand your own language."

"Vaya!" said a deep voice beyond the open door. "Eso no me gusta," and while the steward backed out in haste, a couple of plates went flying over the rail.

"Don Erminio," said Jacinta, "evidently doesn't approve of his dinner."

Miss Gascoyne appeared astonished, and looked at Austin gravely.

"Does he often lose his temper in that fashion?" she asked. "Isn't it very childish to throw—good food into the sea?"

"The captain is, when you come to know him, really a very good-natured man," said Austin. Then he stopped, and stood up suddenly as two figures came towards them along the deck, and another from the opposite direction. "It's Monsignor—I wonder what Macallister wants with him."

A little, portly priest moved forward with a smile of good-humoured pride, and an ecclesiastic of a very different stamp walked at his side. The latter was a great man, indeed, a very great man, though he had once toiled in comparative obscurity. Even Miss Gascoyne had apparently heard of him.

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"If one could venture, I should like to speak to him," she said.

Neither Jacinta nor Austin seemed to hear her. They were both watching Macallister, and he, at least, clearly intended to accost the clerics. He was now dressed immaculately in blue uniform, and in that condition he was a big, handsome man, but he was also a North British Calvinist, so far as he had any religious views at all, and accordingly not one who could reasonably be expected to do homage to a dignitary of Rome. Still, the little fleshy priest was a friend of his, and when the latter presented him he bent one knee a trifle and gravely took off his uniform cap. The ecclesiastic raised two fingers and spoke in Latin. Macallister smiled at him reassuringly.

"That isn't exactly what I meant, but it can't do me any harm coming from a man like you, while if it does me any good I daresay I need it. You see, I'm one of the goats," he said.

The great man glanced at his companion, who translated as literally as he could, though he also explained that the Señor Macallister not infrequently made things easier for some of the peasants who travelled third class on board the *Estremadura*. Then a whimsical but very kindly twinkle crept into the great man's eyes, and he laid a beautiful, olive-tinted hand on the shoulder of the mechanic who had graciously approved of him.

"If he is kind to these poor hill men he is a friend of mine. The charity it covers many—differences," he said.

Then, as they came aft together, Austin also took off his cap, and touched Miss Gascoyne's arm as he turned to the cleric. The girl rose gravely, with a tinge of heightened colour in her face and a little inclination, and, though nobody remembered exactly what was said, unless it was the eminent cleric, who was, as usual with his kind, a polished man of the world as well, he moved on with the girl on one side of him and Macallister talking volubly in a most barbarous jargon on the other. Mrs. Hatherly and the little priest took their places behind them, and Austin gathered that as a special favour Macallister was going to show them all his engines. Jacinta leaned back in her seat and laughed musically.

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"Macallister," she said, "is always unique, and he will probably finish the entertainment by offering Monsignor a glass of whiskey. It is to be hoped he doesn't apostrophise his firemen with his usual fluency. Still, do you know, I am rather pleased with you? You have made Muriel happy."

"If I have pleased you it is rather more to the purpose," said Austin, reflectively. "I have, however,

noticed that when you express your approbation there is usually something else to be done."

Jacinta smiled. "It is very little, after all, but perhaps I had better explain. Muriel met Jefferson, who had been to London to see somebody, on board the *Dahomey*, and—I'm telling you this in confidence—there are reasons for believing the usual thing happened. She is really good, you know, while Jefferson is a somewhat serious man himself, as well as an American. They treat women rather well in his country—in fact, they seem to idealise them now and then. Besides, I understand it was remarkably fine weather."

"Yes," said Austin, who glanced suggestively across the sunlit heave towards the dim, blue heights of Grand Canary, "it is, one would believe, quite easy to fall in love with any one pretty and clever during fine weather at sea. That is, of course, on sufficient provocation. There are also, I think, Englishmen with some capacity for idealisation—but hadn't you better go on?"

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Jacinta pursed her lips as she looked at him with an assumption of severity, but she proceeded. "Now, I had arranged for Mrs. Hatherly and Muriel to spend the winter in Grand Canary, but she has heard of a doctor in one of the hotels at Madeira, and is bent on going there. There is, of course, nothing the matter with her; but if she approves of the doctor in question it is very probable that she will stay in that hotel until the spring. Still, she is changeable, and if she doesn't go at once it is possible that she will not go at all. The Madeira boat leaves Las Palmas about half an hour after we get there, and I don't want Mrs. Hatherly and Muriel to catch her. Muriel doesn't want to, either."

Austin shook his head. "Don't you know that it is rather a serious thing to delay a Spanish mailboat?" he said. "Still, I suppose you have decided that it must be done?"

"I think so," said Jacinta sweetly. "I also fancy you and Macallister could manage it between you. You have my permission to tell him anything you think necessary."

She rose and left him, with this, and Austin, who was not altogether pleased with his commission, waited until after the four o'clock comida, when, flinging himself down on a settee in the engineer's room, cigar in hand, he put the case to Macallister, who grinned. The latter, as a rule, appeared to find his native idiom more expressive in the evening.

"I'm no saying Jacinta's no fascinating, an' I've seen ye looking at her like a laddie eyeing a butterscotch," he said. "Still, it can no be done. Neither o' our reputations would stand it, for one thing."

"We have nothing to do with the Madeira boat, and the Lopez boat for Cuba doesn't sail until an hour after her," said Austin. "Besides, Jacinta wants it done."

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Macallister looked thoughtful. "Weel," he said, "that is a reason. Jacinta thinks a good deal of me, an' if I was no married already I would show ye how to make up to her. I would not sit down, a long way off, an' look at her. She's no liking ye any the better for that way of it."

"Hadn't you better leave that out?" said Austin stiffly. "I'm the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo, which is quite sufficient. Can't you have a burst tube or something of the kind?"

"A burst tube is apt to result in somebody getting scalded, an' stepping into boiling water is sore on a Primera Maquinista's feet. Ye'll just have to make excuses to Jacinta, I'm thinking."

Austin, who knew he could do nothing without Macallister's co-operation, was wondering what persuasion he could use, when he was joined by an unexpected ally. A big, aggressive Englishman in tourist apparel approached the mess-room door and signed to him.

"You were not in your room," he said, as though this was a grievance.

Austin looked at him quietly. "I'm afraid I really haven't the faculty of being in two places at once. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"There is. I particularly want to catch the Liverpool boat *via* Madeira to-night, and the time you get in cuts it rather fine. It occurred to me that you might be able to hurry her up a little."

"I'm sorry that's out of the question," said Austin, languidly. "You see, I'm not expected to interfere with this steamer's engines."

He was wondering how he could best favour the Englishman with a delicate left-handed compliment, when Macallister, who was once more very dirty, and wore only a dungaree jacket over his singlet, broke in:

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"I would," he said, "like to see him try."

"May I ask who you are?" said the passenger, who regarded him superciliously.

"Ye may," and there was a portentous gleam in Macallister's eyes. "I'm only her chief engineer."

"Ah!" said the other, who did not consider it advisable to mention that he had supposed him to be a fireman. "Well, there are, I believe, means of obtaining a favour from a chief engineer. You naturally don't get many pickings in this kind of boat."

Austin laughed softly, for he knew his man. It is now and then permissible to bestow an honorarium upon a chief engineer over a deal in coals, but it requires to be done tactfully, and when the stranger suggestively thrust his hand into his pocket, Macallister hove his six feet of

length upright, and looked down on him, with a big hand clenched and blazing eyes.

"Out o' this before I shake some manners intil ye, ye fifteen-pound-the-round-trip scum!" he said.

The stranger backed away from him, and then bolted incontinently as Macallister made for the door. Austin laughed softly when he heard him falling over things in the dark alleyway, and Macallister sat down fuming.

"A bit doosoor on the coal trade is one thing, but yon was—insultin'," he said, and then looked up with a sudden grin. "I'll fix the waster. Can ye no smell a crank-pin burning?"

"I can't," said Austin. "Still, under the circumstances, I'm quite willing to take your word for it."

He went up on deck. It was dark now, but the moon was shining, and he was not surprised to see a sooty fireman clambering in haste up the bridge ladder. Then the throb of the propeller slackened, and when the *Estremadura* lay rolling wildly athwart the long, moonlit heave, an uproar broke out in the engine room below. The Castilian is excitable, and apt to lose his head when orders which he cannot understand are hurled at him, while Macallister, when especially diligent, did not trust to words alone, but used lumps of coal and heavy steel spanners. He was just then apparently chasing his greasers and firemen up and down the engine room. There was a rush of apprehensive passengers towards the open skylights, from which steam as well as bad language ascended, and Austin, who went with them, found Jacinta by his side.

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"I suppose it's nothing dangerous?" she said.

Austin laughed. "If it were Macallister would not be making so much noise. In fact, I don't think you need worry at all. When Miss Jacinta Brown expresses her wishes, things are not infrequently apt to happen."

Jacinta smiled at him. "I have," she said, "one or two faithful servants. Shall we move a little nearer and see what he is doing?"

"I'm afraid the conversation of one of them is not likely to be of a kind that Miss Gascoyne, for example, would approve of."

"Pshaw!" said Jacinta, and followed when Austin made way for her to one of the skylights' lifted frames.

The *Estremadura* was rolling wickedly, and very scantily attired men were scrambling, apparently without any definite purpose, beneath the reeling lights which flashed upon the idle machinery. They, however, seemed to be in bodily fear of Macallister, who held a spouting hose, while a foamy, soapy lather splashed up from the crank-pit on the big, shining connecting-rod. Austin could see him dimly through a cloud of steam, though he could think of no reason why any of the latter should be drifting about the engine room. There were several English passengers about the skylights, and the one with the aggressive manner was explaining his views to the rest.

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"The man is either drunk or totally incapable. He is doing nothing but shout," he said. "You will notice that he spends half the time washing the connecting-rods, which, as everybody knows, cannot get hot. If we miss the Madeira boat I shall certainly call upon the company's manager."

Perhaps he spoke too loudly, or it may have been an accident, though Austin, who saw Macallister flounder on the slippery floor-plates as the steamer rolled, did not think it was. In any case, he drew Jacinta back, and a moment later a jet from the spouting hose struck with a great splashing upon the glass. The aggressive passenger, who was looking down just then, got most of it in his face, and he staggered back, dripping, and gasping with anger. When he once more became vociferous, Austin led Jacinta away.

"I'm afraid we will not catch that boat, but I really don't think you ought to hear Mack's retort," he said.

It was not quite half an hour later when the *Estremadura* moved on again, and Macallister informed Austin that he could not allow two journals to become overheated in the same voyage. It would, he said, be too much of a coincidence, and some of his subordinates did know a little about machinery. They had accordingly some few minutes yet in hand when they swung round the high Isleta cinder heap into sight of Las Palmas. It gleamed above the surf fringe, a cluster of twinkling lights at the black hills' feet, and there were other lights, higher up, on ships' forestays, behind the dusky line of mole. In between, the long Atlantic heave flashed beneath the moon, and there was scarcely two miles of it left. Austin, standing forward with a pair of night-glasses, and Jacinta beside him, watched the lights close on one another dejectedly.

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"We'll be in inside ten minutes, and I think the Madeira boat has still her anchor down," he said. "I had to give the quartermaster orders to have our lancha ready, and he'll take any passengers straight across to her."

"I believe you did what you could," said Jacinta. "Still, you see——"

"Oh, yes," said Austin. "You like success?"

Jacinta looked at him with a little enigmatical smile. "When any of my friends are concerned, I believe I do."

Austin went aft, and a little while later found Macallister standing by the poop, which was piled

with banana baskets, among which seasick Canary peasants lay. The big crane on the end of the mole was now on the *Estremadura's* quarter, and they were sliding into the mouth of the harbour. Close ahead, with white steam drifting about her fore-castle, lay the Madeira boat.

"They're heaving up," said the engineer. "Jacinta will no' be pleased with ye, I'm thinking."

"There's only one thing left," said Austin. "One of us must fall in."

Macallister grinned. "Then I know which it will be. It was not me who swam across the harbour last trip. But wait a moment. There's a dozen or two Spaniards among the baskets, an' I'm thinking nobody would miss one of them."

Austin, who knew what his comrade was capable of, seized hold of him, but Macallister shook his grasp off and disappeared among the baskets. Then there was a splash in the shadow beneath the ship, a shout, and a clamour broke out from the crowded deck. A gong clanged below, the captain shouted confused orders from his bridge, and the *Estremadura* slid forward, with engines stopped, past a British warship with her boats at the booms. Then in the midst of the confusion, Austin, who was leaning on the rail, wondering what had really happened, felt himself gripped by the waist. They had slid into the shadow of the Isleta, which lay black upon the water just there.

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"Noo's your chance," said a voice he knew. "It's a hero she'll think ye. In ye go to the rescue!"

Austin, who was by no means certain that there was a man in the water at all, had no intention of going if he could help it, but, as it happened, he had no option. The *Estremadura* rolled just then, he felt himself lifted, and went out, head foremost, over the rail. The steamer had gone on and left him when he rose to the surface, but there was nobody either swimming or shouting in the water behind him. He knew it would be a minute or two yet before they got the big passenger lancha over, but the *Estremadura's* propeller was thrashing astern, and when she came back towards him he seized the boat-warp already lowered along her side. Nobody appeared to notice him, for one of the British warship's boats was then approaching. She flashed by as he crawled in through the opened gangway, and a man stood up in her.

"Spanish mail ahoy!" he cried. "Anybody speaking English aboard of you? If so, tell your skipper to go ahead. We have got the banana basket he dropped over. He can send for it to-morrow."

Austin slipped, unnoticed, into his room, but he laughed as he heard the roar of a whistle, and saw a long, black hull ringed with lights slide by. It was the Madeira boat, steaming down the harbour.

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CHAPTER III ON THE VERANDA

It was a clear, moonlight night when Pancho Brown, Mrs. Hatherly, and Erminio Oliviera, the *Estremadura's* captain, sat in big cane chairs on the veranda of the Hotel Catalina, Las Palmas. The Catalina is long and low, and fronted with a broad veranda, a rather more sightly building than tourist hotels usually are, and its row of windows blazed that night. They were, most of them, wide open, and the seductive strains of a soft Spanish waltz drifted out with the rhythmic patter of feet and swish of light draperies, for the winter visitors had organised a concert and informal dance. A similar entertainment was apparently going on in the aggressively English Metropole, which cut, a huge, square block of building, against the shining sea a little further up the straight white road, while the artillery band was playing in the alameda of the town, a mile or two away. The deep murmur of the Atlantic surf broke through the music in a drowsy undertone.

Pancho Brown was essentially English, a little, portly gentleman with a heavy, good-humoured face. He was precise in dress, a little slow in speech, and nobody at first sight would have supposed him to be brilliant, commercially or otherwise. Still, he had made money, which is, perhaps, the most eloquent testimony to anybody's business ability. He was then meditatively contemplating his daughter, who was strolling in the garden with a young English officer from the big white warship in the harbour. A broad blaze of silver stretched back across the sea towards the hazy blueness in the east beyond which lay Africa, and it was almost as light as day. Mrs. Hatherly followed his gaze.

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"An only daughter must be a responsibility now and then," she said. "I have never had one of my own, but for the last few months my niece has been living with me, and I have had my moments of anxiety."

Pancho Brown, who fancied she was leading up to something, smiled in a fashion which suggested good-humoured indifference, though he was quite aware that his daughter was then talking very confidentially to the young naval officer.

"I am afraid I do not deserve your sympathy," he said. "Jacinta's mother died when she was eight years old, but ever since she came home from school in England Jacinta has taken care of me. In

fact, I almost think it is Jacinta who feels the responsibility. I am getting a little old, and now and then my business enterprises worry me."

"And does that young girl know anything about them?"

"Jacinta," said Brown, "knows a good deal about everything, and it really doesn't seem to do her any harm. In fact, I sometimes feel that she knows considerably more than I do. I make mistakes now and then, but if Jacinta ever does I am not aware of them."

"Still, a girl with Miss Brown's appearance—and advantages—must naturally attract a good deal of attention, and, of course, one has——"

Brown smiled at her indulgently. "When Jacinta chooses her husband I shall, no doubt, approve of him. I am not sure," he added, with an air of reflection, "that it would make any great difference if I didn't."

"You are to be envied," said his companion, with a little sigh. "I feel the responsibility circumstances have placed on me is unpleasantly heavy, and I am almost sorry I missed the Madeira boat two or three weeks ago. If we had gone in her we should not, of course, have been in Las Palmas now."

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"It is almost as evident that I should have been left forlorn to-night," said Brown, with cumbrous gallantry.

Mrs. Hatherly appeared to reflect. "It is a curious thing that Miss Brown assured me we should not catch the steamer that night, though we had apparently half an hour to spare; but in one respect it was perhaps fortunate, after all. If we had gone to Madeira I should not have consulted Dr. Lane, who seems to understand my case so thoroughly; but, on the other hand, we should have seen no more of Mr. Jefferson."

"It is not such a long way to Madeira, and there is a steamer every week or so. From what I know of Mr. Jefferson, I think it is possible he would have gone there, too."

"You are well acquainted with him?"

Brown glanced at her with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "I know a little about everybody in these islands, madam. Mr. Jefferson is considered a straight man, and I may mention that he meets with Jacinta's approval. I almost think I could vouch for his character. I wonder," and he smiled genially, "if it would be as much to the purpose if I said that he had just been left eight thousand pounds?"

"Eight thousand pounds is not very much," and Mrs. Hatherly turned to him as if for guidance. "Mr. Jefferson called on me this afternoon, and it would be almost three weeks before I could get a letter from Muriel's father, who trusted her to me. Of course, a good deal would depend upon what I said about him; but, after all, Muriel has not a penny of her own."

"The sum in question is apt to go a long way when the man who has it is an American, and I really think you could leave him and Miss Gascoyne to settle the affair between them." Brown stopped a moment, and then added, as if by an afterthought: "It is, of course, quite possible that they have done so already; and, in any case, I am not sure, my dear madam, that Jefferson would be very greatly discouraged by your opposition. He is—as has been said—an American."

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The little, red-cheeked lady made a gesture of resignation, but just then Captain Oliviera, who spoke a little English, and appeared to feel himself neglected, broke in:

"You come here for your healt, señora?" he said. "Bueno! My sobrecargo go by the step, and he is savvy much the medsin. Me, he cure, frecuentemente, by the morning. Ola, I call him!"

"Otra vez," said Brown, restrainingly, and Mrs. Hatherly favoured the captain, who was big and lean and bronzed, with a glance of interested scrutiny.

"You are an invalid, too?" she said. "One would scarcely fancy it. In fact, you seem very robust to me. What do you suffer from?"

Brown made this a trifle plainer, and Don Erminio smiled. He had no great sense of fitness, and was slightly reckless in his conversation.

"Mi t'roat, and the head of me—by the morning," he said, and made a curious gurgling to give point to the explanation. "El sobrecargo he laugh and say, 'Aha, mi captain, you want a peek-a-up again.' It is of mucho efecto. I go call him. He make some for you."

"Peek-a-up!" said Mrs. Hatherly, and Brown laid his hand restrainingly upon the gallant skipper's arm.

"It is a preparation they find beneficial at sea, though I do not think it would suit your case," he said, and Oliviera roused himself to a further effort.

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"Good man, mi sobrecargo. Much education. Also friend of me. I say him often: 'Carramba! In Spain is no dollar. Why you stay here?' Aha, Señor Austin savvy. By and by he marry a rich English señorita."

It occurred to Mrs. Hatherly that Brown's face lost a trifle of its usual placidity as his eyes rested on his daughter, who was, however, still apparently talking to the naval officer. The Catalina did

not possess a particularly attractive garden then, but there were a few dusty palms in it, and any one strolling in their shadow that moonlight night could see the filmy mists drifting athwart the great black cordillera, and the wisp of lights that twinkled above the hissing surf along the sweep of bay until they ended in a cluster where the white-walled city rose above the tossing spray. There were several pairs of young men and women who apparently found the prospect attractive, but Brown did not notice Austin among them. He and Mrs. Hatherly sat in the shadow, but Oliviera was in the moonlight, which was probably how it happened that a man who appeared in the lighted doorway close by turned towards him, evidently without noticing the others.

"That you, Don Erminio? Then come right along," he said. "I've got to give somebody a good time, and you have so much human nature it's easy pleasing you. Get up on your hind feet, and have some champagne—enough to make your throat bad for a month, if you feel like it."

Oliviera rose with alacrity. "Aha!" he said. "I come."

He wasted no time in doing it, though he reluctantly spared a moment to make his companions a little grave inclination, for Don Erminio was, after all, a Castilian, and when he had gone the two who were left looked at one another. The joyous satisfaction in the voice and attitude of the man at the door had its significance for both of them. Mrs. Hatherly looked troubled, but there was a faint twinkle in her companion's eyes.

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"I wonder if Mr. Jefferson often gives his friends invitations of that kind?" she said.

Brown smiled reassuringly. "I almost think I could answer for his general abstemiousness. Still, there are occasions upon which even the most sedate of us are apt to relax a little, and wish to share our satisfaction with our friends."

"Then," said Mrs. Hatherly, with evident anxiety, "you fancy——"

"I should almost fancy this is one of the occasions in question."

The little, red-cheeked lady rose with a sigh. "I have tried to do my duty," she said. "Now, I think I must find Muriel, if you will excuse me."

She left him, and when Brown also sauntered into the hotel the veranda remained empty until Jacinta came up the broad stairway just as it happened that Austin came out of the door. She was attired diaphanously in pale-tinted draperies, and seemed to Austin, almost ethereal as she stopped a moment at the head of the stairway with the moonlight upon her. He was, however, quite aware that material things had their value to Jacinta Brown, and that few young women had a more useful stock of worldly wisdom. In another moment she saw him, and made him a little sign with her fan. He drew forward a chair, and then leaned against the balustrade, looking down on her, for it was evident that Jacinta had something to say to him.

"As I haven't seen you since that night on board the *Estremadura*, I naturally haven't had an opportunity of complimenting you," she said.

"May I ask upon what?" and Austin looked a trifle uneasy.

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"Your discretion. It would, perhaps, have been a little cold for a moonlight swim, and one's clothing would also be apt to suffer. After all, there was, of course, no reason why it should afford you any pleasure to display your gallantry."

Austin's face flushed. "There have been other occasions when it would have pleased me to twist Macallister's neck," he said. "No doubt you overheard what he said to me?"

"I did," said Jacinta, who looked at him quietly over her fan. "It is a little astonishing that neither of you noticed me. Still, of course, your attitude was, at least, sensible. What I do not understand is why you saw fit to change it a minute or two later. I had, I may mention, left the poop then."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Jacinta laughed musically. "Now," she said, "I really believe you do."

"Well," said Austin, with a doubtful smile, "if you think I went overboard of my own will to win your approbation, you are mistaken. I did not go at all. I was, in fact, thrown in. Macallister is, as you know, a somewhat persistent person."

"Ah!" said Jacinta. "That explains a good deal. Well, I feel almost tempted to be grateful to him for doing it, though you were, of course, sensible. There was really no reason why you should wish me to credit you with courage and humanity—especially when you didn't possess them."

Austin hoped she did not see that he winced, for although he had borne a good deal of her badinage, he felt his face grow hot. He was quite aware that this girl was not for him, and he had, he believed, succeeded in preventing himself falling in love with her. It seemed quite fitting that she should regard him as one of her servants, and since he could look for nothing more, he was content with that. He had, however, a spice of temper, and sometimes she drove him a trifle too hard.

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"Still," he said, "if I ever did anything really worth while, I think I should insist upon your recognising it, though it is scarcely likely that I shall have the opportunity."

"No," said Jacinta, reflectively, "I scarcely think it is; but, after all, I have a little to thank you for."

You see, you did delay the *Estremadura*. I suppose you have not seen Mr. Jefferson during the last half hour?"

"No," said Austin, with a little start of interest. "Has he——"

"He has. Muriel, at least, has evidently arrived at an understanding with him. I am not sure they saw me, but I came across them a little while ago—and they looked supremely happy."

There was satisfaction in her voice, but it was with a mildly ironical and yet faintly wistful expression she gazed at the shining sea. It somewhat astonished Austin, though there was so much about Jacinta that was incomprehensible to him.

"Well," he said, "I'm glad; but I should scarcely have fancied Miss Gascoyne would have attracted Jefferson. After all, one would hardly consider her a young woman who had very much in her. Indeed, I have wondered why you were so fond of her."

Jacinta smiled curiously as she looked at him. "She is wonderful to Jefferson. There is no grace or goodness that she is not endowed with in his estimation."

"But if she doesn't possess them?"

"Then," said Jacinta, decisively, "because he believes she does, she will acquire them. There are women like that, you know, and I am not sure that sensible people like you and I don't lose the best of life occasionally. If a man believes a girl of Muriel's kind angelic she is very apt to unfold shining wings, though nobody else ever fancied that she had anything of the kind about her."

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"Ah!" said Austin, who was a little stirred, though he would not admit it. "No doubt you know. A good many men must have thought that of you."

Jacinta laughed again. "No, my friend," she said. "I have met men who thought me amusing, and two or three who thought me clever—but that is a very different thing—while it is possible that the others remembered I was Pancho Brown's daughter. So, you see, my wings have not unfolded. In fact, I sometimes think they are in danger of shrivelling away."

There was nothing that Austin could say, for he was the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo, and had never forgotten that Pancho Brown was reputed to be making several thousand a year. Still, he found silence difficult, and changed the subject.

"Well," he said, "you haven't told me yet why you are so fond of Miss Gascoyne."

"She—is—good, and, after all, goodness really does appeal to some of us. Besides, when I went to an English school, a stranger, more Spanish than English in thought and sentiment, and most of the others held aloof from me, she saw I was lonely, and came and made friends with me. I was glad to cling to her then, and you see I haven't forgotten it."

There was a tone in the girl's voice which sent a little thrill through the man. It was very clear that Jacinta did not forget a kindness, and he had once or twice already had glimpses of her deeper nature. While he stood silent, and, as it happened, in the shadow, Miss Gascoyne came out of the door and approached Jacinta with the moonlight on her face. Austin was almost startled as he glanced at her.

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When he had last seen Muriel Gascoyne he had considered her a comely English girl without imagination or sensibility. She had, in fact, appeared to him narrow in her views, totally unemotional, and more than a little dull, certainly not the kind of young woman to inspire or reciprocate passionate admiration in any discerning man. Now, as she came towards him with her eyes shining and the soft colour in her face, which was very gentle, she seemed transfigured and almost radiant. She stooped and kissed Jacinta impulsively.

"I am so happy, my dear," she said. "We owe ever so much to you."

Austin had the grace to wish himself somewhere else, though he did not see how he could get away, but Jacinta, with her usual boldness, turned in his direction.

"Well," she said, "I almost think you owe Mr. Austin a little, too. If he hadn't stopped the *Estremadura* you would probably have been in Madeira now."

Again Muriel Gascoyne astonished Austin, for though it was evident she had not been aware of his presence, she showed no embarrassment, and smiled at him with a simplicity which, though he had not expected it from her, had in it the essence of all womanly dignity.

"Yes," she said, "I realise that. Mr. Austin, Harry has been looking for you everywhere."

Austin made her a little grave inclination, and then, because she seemed to expect it, shook hands with her.

"I am glad that the man you have promised to marry is one of my friends," he said. "There is not a better one in these islands."

He did not remember what Miss Gascoyne said, and perhaps it was not of any particular consequence, but when she left them it happened that he and Jacinta did not look at one another. There was, in fact, an almost embarrassing silence, and through it they heard the rhythmic swing of a soft Spanish waltz, and the deep-toned murmur of the sea. Then Jacinta laughed.

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"I wonder what you are thinking?" she said.

Austin smiled, somewhat drily. "I was endeavouring to remember that there are a good many things the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo must dispense with. It is exceedingly unlikely that anybody will ever leave me eight thousand pounds."

"I fancy there are a good many of us who would like to have a good deal more than we will probably ever get," said Jacinta. "It can only be a very few who ever hear the celestial music at all, and to them it comes but once in their life."

Austin looked at her quietly. "A little while ago I should not have considered Miss Gascoyne capable of hearing it; but now, and because I know the man she has promised to marry, I almost think she will, at least occasionally, be able to catch an echo of it. It must be difficult to hear that orchestra once and forget it."

Jacinta turned to him with a curious little smile in her eyes. "You and I are, of course, sensible people, and fancies of that kind have nothing to do with us. In the meanwhile, it is really necessary that I should appear in one or two of the dances."

Austin made a little gesture that might have expressed anything, and she rose and left him standing on the veranda.

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CHAPTER IV A BIG CONTRACT

It was the day after the dance at the Catalina, and Austin was running into Las Palmas harbour in a powerful steam launch which had been lent him to convey certain documents to a Spanish steamer. The trade-breeze had veered a little further east that day, as it sometimes did, and the full drift of the long Atlantic sea came rolling inshore. The launch was wet with spray, which flew up in clouds as she lurched over the white-topped combers that burst in a chaotic spouting on a black volcanic reef not far away from her. It also happened that the coaling company's new tug had broken down a few minutes earlier, and when the launch drove past the long mole the first thing Austin saw was a forty-ton coal lighter, loaded to the water's edge, drifting towards the reef. There was a boat astern of her, out of which a couple of Spanish peons seemed to be flinging the water, preparatory to abandoning the lighter to her fate, but Austin could see very little of the latter. The sea washed clean across her, and she showed no more than a strip of sluicing side amidst the spray.

What became of her was no business of his, but when the whistle of a big grain tramp rolling across the mouth of the harbour, and apparently waiting for her coal, roared out a warning, it occurred to Austin that the Spaniards in the boat might have considerable difficulty in pulling her clear of the reef against the sea. Accordingly, he unloosed the launch's whistle, and while it screeched dolefully, put his helm over and ran down upon the lighter. She was wallowing sideways towards the reef when he rounded up close alongside and saw, somewhat to his astonishment, that there was a man still on board. He was very black, though the spray was dripping from his face, and the seas that swept over the lighter's deck wet him to the knees. Austin shouted to him:

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"I'll run round to leeward, Jefferson, so you can jump!" he said.

The wet man swung an arm up. "Stand by to take our rope. I'm not going to jump."

Austin considered. He was by no means sure that the launch had power enough to tow the lighter clear, and the long white seething on the jagged lava astern of her suggested what would happen if she failed to do it.

"Come on board. I haven't steam to pull her off," he said.

Jefferson made an impatient gesture. "If you want me, you have got to try."

Austin wasted no more time. It was evidently valuable then, and he knew his man. He signed to the Spanish fireman to back the launch astern, and clutched the rope Jefferson flung him as she drove across the lighter's bows.

"I can tow her just as well with you on board here," he roared.

"I guess you can," and a sea wet Jefferson to the waist as he floundered aft towards the lighter's stern. "Still, you're going to find it awkward to steer her, too."

This was plain enough, and Austin decided that if Jefferson meant to stay on board it was his affair, while he was far from sure that he would gain anything by attempting to dissuade him, even had there been time available. As it was, he realised that the lighter would probably go ashore while they discussed the question, and he signed to the Spanish fireman, who started the

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little engine full speed ahead, and then opened the furnace door. There was a gush of flame from the funnel, and the tow-rope tightened with a bang that jerked the launch's stern under. Then, while she was held down by the wallowing lighter a big, white-topped sea burst across her forward, and for a few seconds Austin, drenched and battered by the flying spray, could see nothing at all. When it blew astern he made out Jefferson standing knee deep in water at the lighter's helm, though there was very little else visible through the rush of white-streaked brine. Austin shouted to the fireman, who once more opened the furnace door, for that cold douche had suddenly made a different man of him.

He did, for the most part, very little on board the *Estremadura*, and took life as easily as he could, but there was another side of his nature which, though it had been little stirred as yet, came uppermost then, as it did occasionally when he brought his despatches off at night in an open roadstead through the trade-wind surf. It was also known to the *Estremadura's* skipper that he had once swum off to the steamer from the roaring beach at Orotava when no fishermen in the little port would launch a barquillo out. Thus he felt himself in entire sympathy with Jefferson as every big comber hove the launch up and the spray lashed his tingling skin, while for five anxious minutes the issue hung in the balance. Launch and lighter went astern with the heavier seas, and barely recovered the lost ground in the smooths when a roller failed to break quite so fiercely as its predecessors.

Then the Spanish fireman either raised more steam, or the heavy weight of coal astern at last acquired momentum, for they commenced to forge ahead, the launch plunging and rolling, with red flame at her funnel, and the smoke and spray and sparks blowing aft on Austin, who stood, dripping to the skin, at the tiller. Ahead, the long seas that hove themselves up steeply in shoal water came foaming down on him, but there was a little grim smile in his eyes, and he felt his blood tingle as he watched them. When he glanced over his shoulder, which it was not advisable to do unguardedly, he could see Jefferson swung up above him on the lighter's lifted stern, and the long white smoother that ran seething up the reef.

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It, however, fell further behind them, until he could put the helm over and run the lighter into smoother water behind the mole, when Jefferson flung up his arm again.

"Swing her alongside the grain boat, and then hold on a minute. I'll come ashore with you," he said.

Austin stopped the launch and cast the tow-rope off, and the lighter, driving forward, slid in under the big grain tramp's side. A few minutes later Jefferson appeared at her gangway, and when Austin ran in jumped on board. He was a tall man, and was just then very wet, and as black as any coal heaver. This, however, rather added to the suggestion of forcefulness that usually characterised him.

"That fellow has been waiting several hours for his coal, and as I couldn't get a man worth anything on to the crane, I ran the thing myself," he said. "The way the wind was it blew the grit all over me, and I'm coming across for a wash with you. I'm 'most afraid to walk through the port as I am just now."

He laughed happily, and Austin fancied that he understood him, since he felt that if he had held Miss Gascoyne's promise he would not have liked to run any risk of meeting her in the state in which Jefferson was just then. As it happened, it did not occur to either of them that they had done anything unusual, which had, perhaps, its significance.

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Austin took him on board the *Estremadura*, and when he had removed most of the coal-dust from his person they sat down with a bottle of thin wine before them in the sobrecargo's room. Jefferson was lean in face and person, though he was largely made, and had dark eyes that could smile and yet retain a certain intentness and gravity. His voice had a little ring in it, and, big as he was, he was seldom altogether still. When he filled his glass his long fingers tightened on it curiously.

"I owe you a little for pulling us off just now, but that's by no means all," he said. "Miss Gascoyne told me how you stopped the boat that night three weeks ago. Now——"

Austin laughed. "We'll take it item by item. When you get started you're just a little overwhelming. In the first place, what are you coaling grain tramps for when somebody has left you a fortune?"

"It's not quite that," said Jefferson. "Forty thousand dollars. They're busy at the coal wharf, and wanted me to stay on until the month was up, any way."

"I don't think you owe them very much," said Austin. "In fact, I'm not sure that if I'd been you I'd have saved that coal for them; but we'll get on. I want to congratulate you on another thing, and I really think you are a lucky man."

The smile sank out of Jefferson's eyes. "I'm quite sure of it," he said gravely. "I get wondering sometimes how she ever came to listen to such a man as I am, who isn't fit to look at her."

Austin made a little gesture of sympathy. This was not what he would have said himself, but he was an insular Englishman, and the reticence which usually characterises the species is less highly thought of across the Atlantic. The average American is more or less addicted to saying just what he means, which is, after all, usually a convenience to everybody. Before he could speak Jefferson went on:

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"I've been wanting to thank you for stopping that steamer," he said. "It's the best turn anybody ever did me, and I'm not going to forget it. Now—"

"If you're pleased, I am," said Austin, who did not care for protestations of gratitude, a trifle hastily. "Any way, you have got her, and though it's not my business, the question is what you're going to do. Eight thousand pounds isn't very much, after all, and English girls are apt to want a good deal, you know."

Jefferson laughed. "Forty thousand dollars is quite a nice little sum to start with; but I've got to double it before I'm married."

"There are people who would spend most of their life doing it," said Austin, reflectively. "How long do you propose to allow yourself?"

"Six months," and there was a snap in Jefferson's voice and eyes. "If I haven't got eighty thousand dollars in that time I'm going to have no use for them."

"When you come to think of it, that isn't very long to make forty thousand dollars in," said Austin.

He said nothing further, for he had met other Americans in his time, and knew the cheerful optimism that not infrequently characterises them.

Jefferson looked at him steadily with the little glow still in his eyes. "You stopped the *Estremadura*, and, in one respect, you're not quite the same as most Englishmen. They're hide-bound. It takes a month to find out what they're thinking, and then, quite often, it isn't worth while. Any way, I'm going to talk. I feel I've got to. Wouldn't you consider Miss Gascoyne was worth taking a big risk for?"

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"Yes," said Austin, remembering what he had seen in the girl's face. "I should almost think she was."

"You would almost think!" and Jefferson gazed at him a moment in astonishment. "Well, I guess you were made that way, and you can't help it. Now, I'm open to tell anybody who cares to listen that that girl was a revelation to me. She's good all through, there's not a thought in her that isn't clean and wholesome. After all, that's what a man wants to fall back upon. Then she's dainty, clever, and refined, with sweetness and graciousness just oozing out of her. It's all round her like an atmosphere."

Austin was slightly amused, though he would not for his life have shown it. It occurred to him that an excess of the qualities his companion admired in Miss Gascoyne might prove monotonous, especially if they were, as in her case, a little too obtrusive. He also fancied that this was the first time anybody had called her clever. Still, Jefferson's supreme belief in the woman he loved appealed to him in spite of its somewhat too vehement expression, and he reflected that there was probably some truth in Jacinta's observation that the woman whose lover credited her with all the graces might, at least, acquire some of them. It seemed that a simple and somewhat narrow-minded English girl, without imagination, such as Miss Gascoyne was in reality, might still hear what Jacinta called the celestial music, and, listening, become transformed. After all, it was not mere passion which vibrated in Jefferson's voice and had shone in Muriel Gascoyne's eyes, and Austin vaguely realised that the faith that can believe in the apparently impossible and the charity that sees no shortcomings are not altogether of this earth. Then he brushed these thoughts aside and turned to his companion with a little smile.

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"How did you ever come to be here, Jefferson?" he asked, irrelevantly. "It's rather a long way from the land of progress and liberty."

Jefferson laughed in a somewhat curious fashion. "Well," he said, "others have asked me, but I'll tell you, and I've told Miss Gascoyne. I had a good education, and I'm thankful for it now. There is money in the family, but it was born in most of us to go to sea. I went because I had to, and it made trouble. The man who had the money had plotted out quite a different course for me. Still, I did well enough until the night the *Sachem*—there are several of them, but I guess you know the one I mean—went down. I was mate, but it wasn't in my watch the Dutchman struck her."

"Ah!" said Austin softly, "that explains a good deal! It wasn't exactly a pleasant story."

He eat looking at his companion with grave sympathy as the details of a certain grim tragedy in which the brutally handled crew had turned upon their persecutors when the ship was sinking under them came back to him. Knowing tolerably well what usually happens when official enquiry follows upon a disaster at sea, he had a suspicion that the truth had never become altogether apparent, though the affair had made a sensation two or three years earlier. Still, while Jefferson had not mentioned his part in it, he had already exonerated him.

"It was so unpleasant that I couldn't find a shipping company on our side who had any use for the *Sachem's* mate," he said, and his voice sank a little. "Of course, it never all came out, but there were more than two of the men who went down that night who weren't drowned. Well, what could you expect of a man with a pistol when the one friend he had in that floating hell dropped at his feet with his head adzed open. That left me and Nolan aft. He was a brute—a murdering, pitiless devil; but there were he and I with our backs to the jigger-mast, and a few of the rest left who meant that we should never get into the quarter-boat."

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Austin was a trifle startled. "You told Miss Gascoyne that?" he said. "How did she take it?"

Jefferson made a curious little gesture. "Of course," he said simply. "I had to. She believed in me; but do you think I'm going to tell—you—how it hurt her?"

It was borne in upon Austin that, after all, he understood very little about women. A few days earlier it would have seemed impossible to him that a girl with Muriel Gascoyne's straitened views should ever have linked her life with one who had played a leading part in that revolting tragedy. Now, however, it was evident that there was very little she would not do for the man who loved her.

"I'm sorry! You'll excuse it," he said. "Still, that scarcely explains how you came to Las Palmas."

"I came as deck-hand on board a barque bringing tomato boxes over. They were busy at the coaling wharf just then, and I got put on. You know the rest of it. I was left forty thousand dollars."

"You haven't told me yet how you're going to turn them into eighty thousand."

"I'm coming to it. You know we coaled the *Cumbria* before she went out to West Africa. A nearly new 1,500-ton tramp she was, light draught at that, or she'd never have gone where she did. You could put her down at £15,000 sterling. She went up into the half-charted creeks behind the shoals and islands south of Senegal, and was lost there. Among other things, it was a new gum she went for. It appears the niggers find gums worth up to £5 the hundredweight in the bush behind that country. A Frenchman chartered her, but he's dead now, as is almost everybody connected with the *Cumbria*. They've fevers that will wipe you out in a week or two yonder—more fever, in fact, than anywhere else in Africa. Well, as everybody knows, they got oil and sundries and a little gum, and went down with fever while they crawled about those creeks loading her. She got hard in the mud up one of them, and half of the boys were buried before they pulled her out at all, and then she hit something that started a plate or two in her. They couldn't keep the water down, and they rammed her into a mangrove forest to save her. More of them died there, and the salvage expedition lost three or four men before they turned up their contract."

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"That," said Austin, "is what might be termed the official version."

Jefferson nodded. "What everybody doesn't know is that the skipper played the Frenchman a crooked game," he said. "There was more gum put into her than was ever shown in her papers; while they had got at the trade gin before she went ashore. In fact, I have a notion that it wasn't very unlike the *Sachem* affair. I can't quite figure how they came to start those plates in the soft mud of a mangrove creek. Any way, the carpenter, who died there, was a countryman of mine. You may remember I did a few things for him, and the man was grateful. Well, the result is I know there's a good deal more than £20,000 sterling in the *Cumbria*."

Austin surmised that this was possible. It was not, he knew, seafarers of unexceptional character who usually ventured into the still little known creeks of Western Africa, which the coast mailboats' skippers left alone. He was also aware that more or less responsible white men are apt to go a trifle off their balance and give their passions free rein when under the influence of cheap spirits in that land of pestilence.

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"Well?" he said.

"I've bought her, as she lies, for £6,000."

Austin gasped. "You will probably die off in two or three weeks after you put your foot in her."

"I'm not quite sure. I was at Panama, and never had a touch of fever. Any way, I'm going, and if you'll stand in with me, I'll put you down a quarter-share for a dollar."

It was in one respect a generous offer, but Austin shook his head. "No," he said decisively. "Have you forgotten that Miss Gascoyne expects you to marry her?"

Jefferson's eyes glowed. "I'm remembering it all the time. That's why I'm going. Would you take a refined and cultured girl and drag her through all the hard places men of my kind make money in up and down the world? Has she to give up everything and come down to me? No, sir! It seems to me, the man who wants to marry a girl of that kind has got to do something to show he knows her value before he gets her, and it would be way better for both of us that she should be sorry for me dead than that I should live to drag her down."

It seemed to Austin that there was a good deal to be said for this point of view, and it also occurred to him that there was in this latter-day American, who had still the grime of the coaling wharf upon him, something of the spirit which had sent the knight-errant out in the days of chivalry. Still, he naturally did not say so, for he was, after all, what Jefferson called a hide-bound Englishman.

"Well," he said, "you're taking a big risk, but perhaps you are right."

Jefferson rose with the abruptness which usually characterised his movements.

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"You're not coming?"

"No. I haven't your inducement, and I'm afraid the contract's too big for me."

"You have a week to consider it in," said Jefferson, who opened the door. "In the meanwhile

CHAPTER V THE TOMATO FINCA

Three weeks had passed since his interview with Austin before Jefferson was ready to sail, and he spent most of the time in strenuous activity. He had cabled to England for a big centrifugal pump and a second-hand locomotive-type boiler, while, when they arrived, Macallister said that five hundred pounds would not tempt him to raise full steam on the latter. He also purchased a broken-down launch, and, though she was cheap, the cost of her and the pump, with other necessaries, made a considerable hole in his remaining £2,000. It was for this reason he undertook to make the needful repairs himself, with the help of a steamer's donkey-man who had somehow got left behind, while Austin and Macallister spent most of the week during which the *Estremadura* lay at Las Palmas in the workshop he had extemporised. He appeared to know a little about machinery, and could, at least, handle hack-saw and file in a fashion which moved Macallister to approbation, while Austin noticed that the latter's sardonic smile became less frequent as he and the American worked together.

Jefferson was grimly in earnest, and it was evident that his thoroughness, which overlooked nothing, compelled the engineer's admiration. It also occurred to Austin that, while there are many ways in which a lover may prove his devotion, few other men would probably have cared for the one Jefferson had undertaken. He was not a very knightly figure when he emerged, smeared with rust and scale, from the second-hand boiler, or crawled about the launch's engines with blackened face and hands; but Austin, who remembered it was for Muriel Gascoyne he had staked all his little capital in that desperate venture, forebore to smile. He knew rather better than Jefferson did that it was a very forlorn hope indeed the latter was venturing on. One cannot heave a stranded steamer off without strenuous physical exertion, and the white man who attempts the latter in a good many parts of Western Africa incontinently dies.

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At last all was ready, and one night Jefferson steamed off to the African liner from Las Palmas mole, taking with him the steamboat donkey-man and another English seafarer, who were at the time disgracefully drunk, as well as six Spaniards from the coasting schooners. He said that when he reached the *Cumbria* he would hire niggers, who would be quite as reliable, and considerably cheaper. As it happened, the *Estremadura* was going to sea that night, bound for the eastern islands, and Mrs. Hatherly, who was never seasick, and had heard that the climate of one of them where it scarcely ever rained was good for rheumatic affections, had determined to visit it in her. Jacinta, for no very apparent reason, decided to go with her, and it accordingly came about that most of her few acquaintances were with Muriel Gascoyne when she said good-bye to Jefferson at the head of the mole. She kissed him unblushingly, and then, when the launch panted away across the harbour, turned, a little pale in face, but with a firm step, towards the *Estremadura*, and an hour later stood with Jacinta on the saloon deck, watching the liner's black hull slide down the harbour. Then as the steamer lurched out past the mole, with a blast of her whistle throbbing across the dusky heave, Muriel shivered a little.

"I don't know whether we shall ever meet here again, but I think I could bear that now, and it really couldn't be so very hard, after all," she said. "It would have been horrible if he had gone and had not told me."

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Jacinta looked thoughtful, as in fact she was. She was of a more complex, and, in some respects, more refined nature than her companion, while her knowledge of the world was almost startlingly extensive; but wisdom carries one no further than simplicity when one approaches the barriers that divide man's little life from the hereafter. Indeed, there is warrant for believing that when at last they are rolled away, it is not the wise who will see with clearest vision.

"I am not—quite—sure I understand," she said.

There was a trace of moisture on Muriel Gascoyne's cheek, but she held herself erect, and she was tall and large of frame, as well as a reposeful young woman. Though she probably did not know it, there was a suggestion of steadfast unchangeableness in her unconscious pose.

"Now," she said, very simply, "he belongs to me and I to him. If he dies out there—and I know that is possible—it can only be a question of waiting."

Jacinta was a little astonished. She felt that there had been a great and almost incomprehensible change in Muriel Gascoyne since she fell very simply and naturally in love with Jefferson. It was also very evident that she was not consoling herself with empty phrases, or repeating commendable sentiments just because they appealed to her fancy, as some women will. She seemed to be stating what she felt and knew.

"Ah!" said Jacinta, "you knew he might die there, and you could let him go?"

Muriel smiled. "My dear, I could not have stopped him, and now he is gone I think I am in one

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way glad that it was so. I do not want money—I have always had very little—but, feeling as he did, it was best that he should go. He would not have blamed me afterwards—of that I am certain—but I think I know what he would have felt if hardship came, and I wanted to spare it him." Then, with a faint smile, which seemed to show that she recognised the anti-climax, she became prosaic again. "One has to think of such things. Eight thousand pounds will not go so very far, you know."

Jacinta left her presently, and, as it happened, came upon Austin soon after the *Estremadura* steamed out to sea. He was leaning on the forward rails while the little, yacht-like vessel—she was only some 600 tons or so—swung over the long, smooth-backed undulations with slanted spars and funnel. There was an azure vault above them, strewn with the lights of heaven, and a sea of deeper blue which heaved oilily below, for, that night, at least, the trade breeze was almost still.

"The liner will be clear of the land by now," she said. "I suppose you are glad you did not go with Jefferson? You never told me that he had asked you to!"

Austin, who ignored the last remark, laughed in a somewhat curious fashion.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "in one respect Jefferson is, perhaps, to be envied. He is, at least, attempting a big thing, and if he gets wiped out over it, which I think is quite likely, he will be beyond further trouble, and Miss Gascoyne will be proud of him. In fact, it is she I should be sorry for. She seems really fond of him."

"Is that, under the circumstances, very astonishing?"

"Jefferson is really a very good fellow," said Austin, with a smile. "In fact, whatever it may be worth, he has my sincere approbation."

Jacinta made a little gesture of impatience. "Pshaw!" she said. "You know exactly what I mean. I wonder if there is one among all the men I have ever met who would—under any circumstances—do as much for me?"

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She glanced at him for a moment in a fashion which sent a thrill through him; but Austin seldom forgot that he was the *Estremadura's* purser. He had also a horror of cheap protestations, and he avoided the question.

"You could scarcely expect—me—to know," he said. "Suppose there was such a man, what would you do for him?"

There was just a trace of heightened colour in Jacinta's face. "I think, if it was necessary, and he could make me believe in him as Muriel believes in Jefferson, I would die for him."

Austin said nothing for a space, and looked eastwards towards Africa, across the long, smooth heave of sea, while he listened to the throbbing of the screw and the swash of the water beneath the steamer's side. He was quite aware that while Jacinta, on rare occasions, favoured her more intimate masculine friends with a glimpse of her inner nature, she never permitted them to presume upon the fact. He had, he felt, made some little progress in her confidence and favour, but it was quite clear that it would be inadvisable to venture further without a sign from her. Jacinta was able to make her servants and admirers understand exactly what line of conduct it was convenient they should assume. If they failed to do so, she got rid of them.

"Whatever is Mrs. Hatherly going to Fuerteventura for?" he asked.

"Dry weather," said Jacinta, with a little smile.

Austin laughed. "One would fancy that Las Palmas was dry and dusty enough for most people. I suppose you told her there is nowhere she can stay? They haven't a hotel of any kind in the island."

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"That," said Jacinta, sweetly, "will be your business. You are a friend of Don Fernando, and he has really a comfortable house. Still, I expect three days of it will be quite enough for Mrs. Hatherly. You can pick us up, you know, when you come back from Lanzarote."

Austin made a little whimsical gesture of resignation. "There is, presumably, no use in my saying anything. After all, she will be company for Confidencia."

"Who is, by the way, a friend of yours, too."

"I have artistic tastes, as you know. Confidencia is—barring one or two—the prettiest girl in these islands."

He moved away, but he turned at the top of the ladder, and Jacinta smiled.

"It is almost a pity a taste of that kind does not invariably accompany an artistic talent," she said.

Austin went down to his little room, which was almost as hot as an oven, and strove to occupy himself with his papers. The attempt, however, was not a success, for his thoughts would follow Jefferson, who was on his way to Africa with a big centrifugal pump, a ricketty steam launch, and a second-hand boiler of the locomotive type. In view of his ulterior purpose, there was, it seemed to Austin, something ludicrously incongruous about this equipment, though he realised that the gaunt American possessed in full degree the useful practical point of view in which he himself fell

short. Jefferson was, in some respects, primitive, but that was, after all, probably fortunate for him. He knew what he desired, and set about the obtaining of it by the first means available. Then he dismissed the subject, and climbing into his bunk went to sleep.

Next morning he took Jacinta, Mrs. Hatherly, and Muriel Gascoyne ashore, and afterwards went on with the *Estremadura* to the adjoining island. It was three days later, and the steamer had come back again, when he and her captain rode with the three ladies towards the coast, after a visit to the black volcanic hills. Mrs. Hatherly and Muriel sat in a crate-like affair upon the back of a camel, with distress in their faces, for there is probably no more unpleasant form of locomotion to anyone not used to it than camel-riding. The beast possesses a gait peculiarly its own, and at every lurch of its shoulders the two women jolted violently in the crate. The camel, however, proceeded unconcerned, with long neck moving backwards and forwards like a piston-rod. The rest rode horses, and a gun and several ensanguined rabbits lay across the Captain's saddle. He rode like a Castilian, and not a sailor, and Jacinta had noticed already that Austin was equally at home in the saddle. The fact had, naturally, its significance for her.

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It was then about two o'clock in the afternoon, and very hot, though the fresh trade breeze blew long wisps of dust away from under the horses' feet. Nobody could have called that part of Fuerteventura a beautiful country, but it had its interest to two of the party, who had never seen anything quite like it before. Behind them rose low hills, black with streams of lava, red with calcined rock, and every stone on them was outlined in harsh colouring in that crystalline atmosphere. In front lay a desolation of ashes and scorïæ, with tracts of yellow sand, blown there presumably from Africa, which swirled in little spirals before the breeze. It was chequered with clumps of euphorbia and thorn, but they, too, matched the prevailing tones of grey and brown and chrome, and there was not in all the waste a speck of green. Further still in front of them the sea flamed like a mirror, and a vault of dazzling blue hung over all.

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They wound down into a hollow, through which, as one could see by the tortuous belt of stones, a little water now and then flowed, and dismounted in the scanty shadow of a ruined wall. It had been built high and solid of blocks of lava centuries ago, perhaps by the first of the Spanish, or by dusky invaders from Morocco. As it was not quite so hot there, Austin and the Captain made preparations for a meal when a bare-legged peon led the beasts away. Then the Captain frowned darkly at the prospect.

"Ah, mala gente. Que el infierno los come!" he said, with blazing eyes, and swung a brown hand up, as though appealing to stones and sky before he indulged in another burst of eloquence.

"What is he saying?" asked Muriel Gascoyne. "He seems very angry."

Austin smiled. "I scarcely think it would be altogether advisable to enquire, but it is not very astonishing if he is angry," he said. "Don Erminio is not, as a rule, a success as a business man, and this is a farm he once invested all his savings in. I am particularly sorry to say that I did much the same."

Miss Gascoyne appeared astonished, which was, perhaps, not altogether unnatural, as she gazed at the wilderness in front of her. There were, she could now see, signs that somebody had made a desultory attempt at building a wall which was nearly buried again. A few odd heaps of lava blocks had also been piled up here and there, but the hollow was strewn with dust and ashes, and looked as though nothing had ever grown there since that island was hurled, incandescent, out of the sea. It was very difficult to discover the least evidence of fertility.

"Ah!" said Jacinta, "so this is the famous Finca de La Empresa Financial?"

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Oliviera overheard her, and once more made a gesture with arms flung wide.

"Mira!" he said. "The cemetery where I bury the hopes of me. O much tomate, mucho profit. I buy more finca and the cow for me. Aha! There is also other time I make the commercial venture. I buy two mulo. Very good mulo. I charge mucho dollar for the steamboat cargo cart. Comes the locomotura weet the concrete block down Las Palmas mole. The mole is narrow, the block is big, the man drives the locomotura behind it, he not can look. Vaya, my two mulo, and the cart, she is in the sea. That is also ruin me. I say, 'Vaya. In fifty year she is oll the same,' but when I see the Finca de tomate I have the temper. Alors, weet permission, me vais chasser the conejo."

"The unfortunate man!" said Jacinta, when he strode away in search of a rabbit. "Still, the last of it wasn't quite unexceptional Castilian."

Austin laughed. "Don Erminio speaks French almost as well as he does English. In fact, he's a linguist in his way. Still, I'm not sorry he didn't insist upon me going shooting with him. It's risky, and I would sooner he'd borrowed somebody else's gun."

They made a tolerable lunch, for the *Estremadura's* cook knew his business, and, though it very seldom rains there, some of the finest grapes to be found anywhere grow in the neighbouring island of Lanzarote. Then Mrs. Hatherly apparently went to sleep with her back against the wall, while Muriel sat silent in the shadow, close beside her. Perhaps the camel ride had shaken her, and perhaps she was thinking of Jefferson, for she was gazing east towards Africa, across the flaming sea. Jacinta, as usual, appeared delightfully fresh and cool, as she sat with her long white dress tucked about her on a block of lava, while Austin lay, contented, not far from her feet.

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"You never told me you had a share in the Finca," she said.

"Well," said Austin, "I certainly had. I also made a speech at the inaugural dinner, and Don Erminio almost wept with pride while I did it. I had, though he did not mention it, a share in his mule cart, too, and once or twice bought a schooner load of onions to ship to Havana at his suggestion. You see, I had then a notion that it was my duty to make a little money. Somehow, the onions never got to Cuba, and our other ventures ended—like the Finca."

"Then you have given up all idea of making money now?"

"It really didn't seem much use continuing, and, after all, a little money wouldn't be very much good to me. A chance of making twenty thousand pounds might, perhaps, rouse me to temporary activity."

"Ah," said Jacinta, looking at him with thoughtful eyes, "you want too much, my friend. You are not likely to make it by painting little pictures on board the *Estremadura*."

A faint trace of darker colour showed through the bronze in Austin's cheek. "Yes," he said, "that is exactly what is the matter with me. Still, as I shall never get it, I am tolerably content with what I have. Fortunately, I am fond of it—I mean the sea."

"Of course," said Jacinta, with a curious little sparkle in her eyes, "contentment is commendable, though there is something that appeals to one's fancy in the thought of a man struggling against everything to acquire the unattainable."

"So long as it is unattainable, what would be the good? Besides, I am almost afraid I am not that kind of man."

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Jacinta said nothing further, and half an hour slipped by, until a trail of smoke with a smear of something beneath it, crept up out of the glittering sea.

"The *Andalusia*," said Austin. "She takes up our western run here under the new time-table. I hope she's bringing no English folks from Las Palmas to worry us."

As it happened, there was a man on board the *Andalusia* who was to bring one of the party increased anxiety and distress of mind, but they did not know that then, and in the meanwhile the peon with the horses and Don Erminio came back again. He brought no rabbits, but he had succeeded in badly scratching one of the Damascene barrels of Austin's gun.

"The conejo he no can eat the stone, and here there is nothing else," he explained. "Otra vez—the other time, comes here a señor Engleesman, and we have the gun, but there is no conejo. Me I say, 'Mira. Conejo into his hole he go!' Bueno! The Engleesman he put the white rat into that hole, and wait, oh, he wait mucho tiempo. Me, away I go. I come back, the Engleesman has bag the Captain of puerto."

Then he turned with a dramatic gesture to the camel, which stretched out its little head towards his leg. "Bur-r-r. Hijo de diablo. Aughr-r-r. Focha camello! Me, I also spick the Avar-r-ack. The condemn camello he comprehend."

The long-necked beast at least knelt down as though it did, and Mrs. Hatherly climbed into the crate with a somewhat apprehensive glance at the gallant captain.

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CHAPTER VI

AUSTIN'S POINT OF VIEW

Mrs. Hatherly decided during the ride to the beach that she had seen quite enough of that island in the three days she had spent there, and she had already gone off to the *Estremadura* with Muriel and Jacinta when Austin stood smoking on the little mole. Long undulations of translucent brine seethed close past his feet to break with a drowsy roar upon the lava reefs, and the *Estremadura* lay rolling wildly a quarter of a mile away. A cluster of barefooted men were with difficulty loading her big lancha beneath the mole with the barley-straw the row of camels, kneeling in the one straggling street behind him, had brought down. The men were evidently tired, for they had toiled waist-deep in the surf since early morning, and Austin decided to spare them the journey for his despatch gig.

Accordingly, when the lancha was loaded high with the warm yellow bales he clambered up on them and bade the crew get under way. The long sweeps dipped, and the craft went stern first towards the reef for a moment or two before she crawled out to sea, looking very like a cornstack set adrift as she lurched over the shining swell. Austin lay upon the straw, smoking tranquilly, for everybody leaves a good deal to chance in Spain, and now and then flung a little Castilian badinage at the gasping men who pulled the big sweeps below. As it happened, they could not see him because the straw rose behind them in a yellow wall. They were cheerful, inconsequent fishermen, who would have done a good deal for him, and not altogether because of the bottle of caña he occasionally gave them.

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They had traversed half the distance, when, opening up a point, they met a steeper heave, and when the dripping bows went up after the plunge there was a movement of the barley-straw. Austin felt for a better hold, but two or three bales fetched away as he did so, and in another moment he plunged down headforemost into the sea. When he came up he found a straw bale floating close beside him, and held on by it while he looked about him. The lancha was apparently going on, and it was evident that although the men must have heard the straw fall, they were not aware that he had gone with it. There was, he surmised, no room for the lost bales, and the men could not have heaved them up on top of the load. It therefore appeared probable that they purposed unloading the lancha before they came back for them, and he decided to climb up on the bale.

He found it unexpectedly difficult, for when he had almost dragged himself up the bale rolled over and dropped him in again; while, when he tried to wriggle up the front of it, it stood upright and then fell upon him. After several attempts he gave it up, and set out for the steamer with little pieces of barley-straw and spiky ears sticking all over him. He could swim tolerably well, and swung along comfortably enough over the smooth-backed swell, for his light clothing did not greatly cumber him. Still, he did not desire that any one beyond the *Estremadura's* crew should witness his arrival.

He was, accordingly, by no means pleased to see Jacinta and Miss Gascoyne stroll out from the deck-house as he drew in under the *Estremadura's* side, especially as there were no apparent means of getting on board quietly. The lancha had vanished round the stern, the ladder was triced up, and the open cargo gangway several feet above the brine. The steamer also hove up another four or five feet of streaming plates every time she rolled. Still, it was evident that he could not stay where he was on the chance of the ladies not noticing him indefinitely, and as he swam on again Miss Gascoyne broke into a startled scream.

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"Oh!" she said, "there's somebody drowning!"

The cry brought Macallister to the gangway, and he was very grimy in engine-room disarray. Austin, in the water, saw the wicked twinkle in his eyes, and was not pleased to hear Jacinta laugh musically.

"I really don't think he is in any danger," she said.

Austin set his lips, and swam for the gangway as the *Estremadura* rolled down. His flung up hand came within a foot of the opening, and then he sank back a fathom or more below it as the *Estremadura* hove that side of her out of the water. When he swung up again Macallister was standing above him with a portentiously sharp boat hook, while two or three grinning seamen clustered round. The girls were also leaning out from the saloon-deck rails.

"Will ye no keep still while I hook ye!" said the engineer.

"If you stick that confounded thing into my clothes I'll endeavour to make you sorry," said Austin savagely.

Macallister made a sweep at him, and Austin went down, while one of the seamen, leaning down, grabbed him by the shoulder, when he rose.

"Let go!" he sputtered furiously. "Give me your hand instead!"

He evidently forgot that the seaman, who held on, was not an Englishman, and next moment he was hove high above the water. Then there was a ripping and tearing, and while the seaman reeled back with a long strip of alpaca in his hand, Austin splashed into the water. He came up in time to see Macallister smiling in Jacinta's direction reassuringly.

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"There's no need to be afraid," he said. "Though I'm no sure he's worth it, I'll save him for ye."

Now, Jacinta was usually quite capable of making any man who offended her feel sorry for himself, but the sight of Austin's savage red face as he gazed at Macallister, with the torn jacket flapping about him in the water and the barley-straw sticking all over him, was too much for her, and she broke into a peal of laughter.

In another moment Macallister contrived to get his boat hook into the slack of Austin's garments, and when two seamen seized the haft they hove him out, wrong side uppermost, and incoherent with wrath. When they dropped him, a tattered, dripping heap, on the deck, Miss Gascoyne leaned her face upon her hands, and laughed almost hysterically, until Jacinta touched her shoulder.

"Mr. Austin evidently believes he has a good deal to thank his comrade for. I think you had better come away," she said.

Austin put himself to some trouble in endeavouring to make Macallister understand what he thought of him, when they had gone, but the engineer only grinned.

"Well," he said, "I'll forgive ye. If I had looked like ye do with two ladies watching me, I might have been a bit short in temper myself, but come away to your room. The *Andalusia's* boat came across a while ago, and there's business waiting ye."

Austin went with him, but stopped a moment when he approached his room. The door was open, as usual, and a stranger, in grey tourist tweed, upon whom Englishman and clergyman was

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stamped unmistakably, sat inside the room. Austin felt that he knew who the man must be.

"Does he know Miss Gascoyne is on board?" he asked.

"No," said Macallister. "The boat came round under our quarter, and we landed him through the lower gangway. He said he'd stay here and wait for ye. He's no sociable, anyway. I've offered him cigars and anisow, besides some of my special whisky, but he did not seem willing to talk to me."

Austin fancied he could understand it. Macallister, who had discarded his jacket, was very grimy, and his unbuttoned uniform vest failed to conceal the grease stains on his shirt. Then he remembered that his own jacket was torn to rags, and he was very wet; but Macallister raised his voice:

"Here's Mr. Austin, sir," he said.

The clergyman, who said nothing, gazed at him, and Austin, who realised that his appearance was against him, understood his astonishment. He also fancied that the stranger was one with whom appearances usually counted a good deal.

"If you will wait a minute or two while I change my clothes, I will be at your service, sir," he said. "As you may observe, I have been in the sea."

"Swum off to the steamer," said Macallister, with a wicked smile. "It saves washing. He comes off yon way now and then."

Austin said nothing, but stepped into the room, and, gathering up an armful of clothing, departed, leaving a pool of water behind him. The clergyman, it was evident, did not know what to make of either of them. A few minutes later Austin, who came back and closed the door, sat down opposite him.

"My name is Gascoyne," said the stranger, handing him an open note. "Mr. Brown of Las Palmas, who gave me this introduction, assured me that I could speak to you confidentially, and that you would be able to tell me where my daughter and Mrs. Hatherly are staying." [Pg 65]

Austin glanced at him with misgivings. He was a little man, with pale blue eyes, and hair just streaked with grey. His face was white and fleshy, without animation or any suggestion of ability in it, but there had been something in the tone which seemed to indicate that he had, at least, been accustomed to petty authority. Austin at once set him down as a man of essentially conventional views, who was deferred to in some remote English parish; in fact, just the man he would have expected Muriel Gascoyne's father to be; that is, before she had revealed her inner self. It was a type he was by no means fond of, and he was quite aware that circumstances were scarcely likely to prepossess a man of that description in his favour. Still, Austin was a friend of Jefferson's, and meant to do what he could for him.

"I know where Miss Gascoyne is, but you suggested that you had something to ask me, and I shall be busy by and by," he said.

Gascoyne appeared anxious, but evidently very uncertain whether it would be advisable to take him into his confidence.

"I understand that you are a friend of Mr. Jefferson's?" he said.

"I am. I may add that I am glad to admit it, and I almost fancy I know what you mean to ask me."

Gascoyne, who appeared grateful for this lead, looked at him steadily. "Perhaps I had better be quite frank. Indeed, Mr. Brown, who informed me that you could tell more about Jefferson than any one in the islands, recommended it," he said. "I am, Mr. Austin, a clergyman who has never been outside his own country before, and I think it is advisable that I should tell you this, because there may be points upon which our views will not coincide. It was not easy for me to get away now, but the future of my motherless daughter is a matter of the greatest concern to me, and I understand that Mr. Jefferson is in Africa. I want you to tell me candidly—as a gentleman—what kind of man he is." [Pg 66]

Austin felt a little better disposed towards Gascoyne after this. His anxiety concerning his daughter was evident, and he had, at least, not adopted quite the attitude Austin had expected. But as Austin was not by any means brilliant himself, he felt the difficulty of making Gascoyne understand the character of such a man as Jefferson, while his task was complicated by the fact that he recognised his responsibility to both of them. Gascoyne had put him on his honour, and he could not paint Jefferson as he was not. In the meanwhile he greatly wished to think.

"I wonder if I might offer you a glass of wine, sir, or perhaps you smoke?" he said.

"No, thanks," said Gascoyne, with uncompromising decision. "I am aware that many of my brethren indulge in these luxuries. I do not."

"Well," said Austin, "if you will tell me what you have already heard about Jefferson it might make the way a little plainer."

"I have been told that he is an American seafarer, it seems of the usual careless type. Seafarers are, perhaps, liable to special temptations, and it is generally understood that the lives most of them lead are not altogether——"

Austin smiled a little when Gascoyne stopped abruptly. "I'm afraid that must be admitted, sir. I can, however, assure you that Jefferson is an abstemious man—Americans are, as a rule, you see—and, though there are occasions when his conversation might not commend itself to you, he has had an excellent education. Since we are to be perfectly candid, has it ever occurred to you that it was scarcely likely a dissolute sailor would meet with Miss Gascoyne's approbation?"

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Gascoyne flushed a trifle. "It did not—though, of course, it should have. Still, he told her that he was mate of the *Sachem*, which was a painful shock to me. I, of course, remember the revolting story."

He stopped a moment, and his voice was a trifle strained when he went on again. "I left England, Mr. Austin, within three days of getting my daughter's letter, and have ever since been in a state of distressing uncertainty. Mr. Jefferson is in Africa—I cannot even write him. I do not know where my duty lies."

Had the man's intense anxiety been less evident, Austin would have been almost amused. The Reverend Gascoyne appeared to believe that his affairs were of paramount importance to everybody, as, perhaps, they were in the little rural parish he came from; but there was something in his somewhat egotistical simplicity that appealed to the younger man.

"One has to face unpleasant facts now and then, sir," he said. "There are times when homicide is warranted at sea, and man's primitive passions are very apt to show themselves naked in the face of imminent peril. It is in one respect unfortunate that you have probably never seen anything of the kind, but one could not expect too much from a man whose comrade's head had just been shorn open by a drink-frenzied mutineer. Can you imagine the little handful of officers, driven aft away from the boats while the ship settled under them, standing still to be cut down with adze and axe? You must remember, too, that they were seafarers and Americans who had few of the advantages you and your friends enjoy in England."

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He could not help the last piece of irony, but Gascoyne, who did not seem to notice it, groaned.

"To think of a man who appears to hold my daughter's confidence being concerned in such an affair at all is horribly unpleasant to me."

"I have no doubt it was almost as distressing to Jefferson at the time. Still, as you have probably never gone in fear of your life for weeks together, you may not be capable of understanding what he felt, and we had perhaps better get on a little further."

Gascoyne seemed to pull himself together. "Mr. Jefferson has, I understand, no means beyond a certain legacy. It is not, after all, a large one."

"If he is alive in six months I feel almost sure he will have twice as much, which would mean an income of close upon £600 a year from sound English stock, and that, one would fancy, would not be considered abject poverty in a good many English rural parishes."

Gascoyne sighed. "That is true—it is certainly true. You said—if he were alive?"

"As he is now on his way to one of the most deadly belts of swamp and jungle in Western Africa, I think I was warranted. Knowing him as I do, it is, I fancy, certain that if he does not come back with £16,000 in six months he will be dead."

"Ah," said Gascoyne, with what was suspiciously like a sigh of relief. "One understands that it is a particularly unhealthy climate. Still, when one considers that all is arranged for the best——"

Austin, who could not help it, smiled sardonically, though he felt he had an almost hopeless task. It appeared impossible that Gascoyne should ever understand the character of a man like Jefferson. But he meant to do what he could.

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"It is naturally easier to believe that when circumstances coincide with our wishes, sir," he said. "Now, I do not exactly charge you with wishing Jefferson dead, though your face shows that you would not be sorry. I am, of course, another careless seafarer, a friend of his, and I can understand that what you have seen of me has not prepossessed you in my favour. Still, if I can, I am going to show you Jefferson as he is. To begin with, he believes, as you do, that Miss Gascoyne is far above him—and in this he is altogether wrong. Miss Gascoyne is doubtless a good woman, but Jefferson is that harder thing to be, a good man. His point of view is not yours, it is, perhaps, a wider one; but he has, what concerns you most directly now, a vague, reverential respect for all that is best in womanhood, which, I think, is sufficient to place Miss Gascoyne under a heavy responsibility."

He stopped a moment, looking steadily at Gascoyne, who appeared blankly astonished.

"Because it was evident to him that a woman of Miss Gascoyne's conventional upbringing must suffer if brought into contact with the unpleasant realities of the outside world, he has staked his life willingly—not recklessly—on the winning of enough to place her beyond the reach of adversity. He realised that it was, at least, even chances he never came back from Africa; but it seemed to him better that she should be proud of him dead than have to pity him and herself living. I know this, because he told me he would never drag the woman who loved him down. He fell in love with her without reflection, instinctively—or, perhaps, because it was arranged so—I do not understand these things. As surely—conventionalities don't always count—she fell in love with him, and then he had to grapple with the position. Your daughter could not live, as some

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women do, unshocked and cheerfully among rude and primitive peoples whose morality is not your morality, in the wilder regions of the earth. It was also evident that she could not live sumptuously in England on the interest of £8,000. You see what he made of it. If he died, Miss Gascoyne would be free. If he lived, she could avoid all that would be unpleasant. Isn't that sufficient? Could there be anything base or mean in a nature capable of devotion of that description?"

Gascoyne sat silent almost a minute. Then he said very quietly: "I have to thank you, Mr. Austin—the more so because I admit I was a little prejudiced against you. Perhaps men living as I do acquire too narrow a view. I am glad you told me. And now where is my daughter and Mrs. Hatherly?"

"Wait another minute! Jefferson is, as you will recognise, a man of exceptional courage, but he is also a man of excellent education, and, so far as that goes, of attractive presence; such a one, in fact, as I think a girl of Miss Gascoyne's station is by no means certain to come across again in England. Now, if I have said anything to offend you, it has not been with that object, and you will excuse it. Your daughter and Mrs. Hatherly are on board this ship. It seemed better that you should hear me out before I told you."

"Ah," said Gascoyne. "Well, I think you were right, and again I am much obliged to you. Will you take me to Mrs. Hatherly?"

Austin did so, and coming back flung himself down on the settee in Macallister's room.

"Give me a drink—a long one. I don't know that I ever talked so much at once in my life, and I only hope I didn't make a consummate ass of myself," he said.

"It's no that difficult," said Macallister, reflectively, as he took out a syphon and a bottle of wine. "Ye made excuses for yourself and Jefferson?"

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Austin laughed. "No," he said. "I made none for Jefferson. I think I rubbed a few not particularly pleasant impressions into the other man. I felt I had to. It was, of course, a piece of abominable presumption."

Macallister leaned against the bulkhead and regarded him with a sardonic grin.

"I would have liked to have heard ye," he said.

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CHAPTER VII AT THE BULL FIGHT

Austin was writing in the saloon, which was a little cooler than his room, at about eight o'clock that night, while Jacinta and Mrs. Hatherly made ineffectual attempts to read in the ladies' cabin, for the *Estremadura* was on her way south again, with the trade-wind combers tumbling after her. She rolled with a long, rhythmic swing, and now and then shook and trembled with the jar of her lifted propeller. Muriel Gascoyne was accordingly alone with her father on the deck above. She sat in a canvas chair, while Gascoyne leaned upon the rails in front of her. There was a full moon overhead, and a fantastic panorama of fire-blackened hills, wastes of ash and lava, whirling clouds of sand, black rocks lapped by spouting surf, and bays of deepest indigo, unrolled itself upon one hand. It is, however, probable that neither of the pair saw much of it, for their thoughts were not concerned with the volcanic desolation.

"It is a pity I did not come a few weeks earlier," said Gascoyne with a sigh.

Muriel's eyes were a trifle hazy, but her voice was even. "If you had come then, and insisted upon it, I might have given him up," she said.

"That means it is irrevocable now? I want you to make quite sure, my dear. This man does not belong to our world. Even his thoughts must be different from ours. You cannot know anything of his past life—I scarcely think he could explain it to you. He would regard nothing from the same standpoint as we do."

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"Still, it cannot have been a bad one. I can't tell you why I am sure of that, but I know."

Gascoyne made a little, hopeless gesture. "Muriel," he said, a trifle hoarsely, "it is a terrible risk—and if you marry him you must inevitably drift away from me. You are all I have, and I am getting old and lonely, but that is not of the greatest moment. It would be horrible to think of you drifting away from all you have been taught to believe in and hold sacred."

It was a strong appeal, perhaps the strongest he could have made, for the girl had been without breadth of view when she left home, and the boundaries of her outlook had coincided with those of the little rural parish. Still, in some strange fashion she had gained enlightenment, and she was resolute, though her blue eyes slowly brimmed with moisture. It was true that he would be

very lonely.

"Ah," she said, and it was a significant sign that she questioned the comprehension of the man whom she had regarded as almost infallible a few weeks earlier, "how can I make you understand? There are, perhaps, many worlds, and we know there are many kinds of men. They must think differently, but does that matter so very much, after all? There is the same humanity in all of us."

"Undoubtedly! In Turks, idolaters, and unbelievers. Humanity in itself is fallen and evil."

Muriel smiled. "Father," she said, "you don't believe that there is no good in all those who have not been taught to believe as we do."

Gascoyne did not answer her, though it is possible that there were circumstances under which he would have returned a very slightly qualified affirmative.

"There is a perilous optimism abroad," he said.

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"Still," said Muriel, unconscious of the irony of her deprecatory answer, "Mr. Jefferson is neither a Turk nor an idolater. He is only an American sailor."

Gascoyne sighed dejectedly, for there was, it seemed, nothing left for him to appeal to. The girl's beliefs had gone. The simple, iron-fast rules of life she had once acknowledged were now apparently discredited; but even in his concern he was vaguely sensible that an indefinite something which he did not recognise as the charity that love teaches was growing up in place of them. Still, he felt its presence as he watched her, and knew that it could not be altogether born of evil.

"My dear," he said, "how shall I implore you to consider?"

Muriel smiled out of hazy eyes. "It is too late. He has my promise, and I belong to him. Nothing that you could say would change that now. He has gone out—to Africa—believing in me, and I know that he may never come back again."

Gascoyne appeared a trifle startled, and remembered a curious remark that Austin had made to the effect that there was a heavy responsibility upon his daughter. He could not altogether understand why this should be, but he almost fancied that she recognised it now. There was also a finality and decision in the girl's tone which was new to him.

"I think you know how hard it was for me to get away, but it seemed necessary. I came out to implore you to give this stranger up," he said.

The girl rose, and stood looking at him gravely, with one hand on the chair arm to steady herself as the steamer rolled, and the moonlight upon her face. It was almost reposeful in its resolution.

"Father," she said, "you must try to understand. Perhaps I did wrong when I gave him my promise without consulting you, but it is given, and irrevocable. He has gone out to Africa—and may die there—believing in me. I don't think I could make you realise how he believes in me, but, though, of course, he is wrong, I grow frightened now and then, and almost hope he may never see me as I really am. That is why I—daren't—fail him. If there was no other reason I must keep faith with him."

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"Then," said Gascoyne, very slowly, "I must, at least, try to resign myself—and perhaps, my apprehensions may turn out to be not quite warranted, after all. I was horribly afraid a little while ago, but this man seems to have the faculty of inspiring confidence in those who know him. They cannot all be mistaken, and the man who is purser on this steamer seems to believe in him firmly. His views are peculiar, but there was sense in what he said, and he made me think a little less hardly of Mr. Jefferson."

Muriel only smiled. She realised what this admission, insufficient and grudging as it was, must have cost her father, and—for she had regarded everything from his point of view until a few weeks ago—she could sympathise with him. Still, she was glad when she saw Jacinta and Mrs. Hatherly coming towards them along the deck.

It was an hour later when Jacinta met Austin at the head of the ladder, and stopped him with a sign.

"I have had a long talk with Mr. Gascoyne, and found him a little less disturbed in mind than I had expected," she said. "I want to know what you said to him."

"Well," said Austin, reflectively, "I really can't remember, and if I could it wouldn't be worth while. Of course, I knew what I wanted to say, but I'm almost afraid I made as great a mess of it as I usually do."

"Still, I think Miss Gascoyne is grateful to you."

"That," said Austin, "affords me very little satisfaction, after all. You see, I didn't exactly do it to please Miss Gascoyne."

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"Then I wonder what motive really influenced you?"

Austin pursed his lips, as if thinking hard. "I don't quite know. For one thing, very orthodox people of the Reverend Gascoyne's description occasionally have an irritating effect upon me. I

feel impelled to readjust their point of view, or, at least to allow them an opportunity of recognising the advantages of mine, which, however, isn't necessarily the correct one. I hope this explanation contents you."

Jacinta smiled. "I think I shall remember it," she said. "I believe I generally do when anybody does a thing to please me. Still, Miss Gascoyne's gratitude will not hurt you."

Then she swept away, and left him standing meditatively at the head of the ladder. He saw no more of her that night, and he was busy when the *Estremadura* steamed into Las Palmas early next morning, while it was nearly three weeks later when he met her again at a corrida de toros in the bull ring at Santa Cruz, Teneriffe, which was, perhaps, the last place where one would have expected to find an English lady.

The spacious amphitheatre was open to the sky, and all its tiers of stone benches packed with excited humanity, for half the inhabitants of the island had apparently gathered to enjoy the sanguinary spectacle. Black is the colour affected by men who can afford it on a Spanish holiday, but the white cotton the bare-legged hillmen wore, and the pink and chrome of their wives' and daughters' dresses, flecked with luminous colour the sombre ranks of the close-packed multitude. Blazing sunlight beat down upon them, for it is only the richer citizens who sit in the shadow, and the topmost row was projected, a filagree of black and motley, against the hard glaring blue. Below, the arena shone dazzlingly yellow, and the smell of blood and fresh sawdust came up from it through the many-toned murmur of the crowd. When this sank a little one could hear the deep boom of the Atlantic swell crumbling on the lava beach.

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The revolting picador scene was over. Two or three worn-out and blindfolded horses had been gored or trampled to death, and one picador's arm had been broken. The tawny, long-horned bull, which had shown unusual courage, stood panting in the middle of the arena, with a crimson smear on one shoulder where a lance had scored it deep, and while the bugles rang, the vast assembly waited for the banderillero scene in high good humour. Just then a little party descended one of the avenues on the shady side, and Austin, who had a note from Pancho Brown in his pocket, with some difficulty made his way to meet them. He was quite aware that Brown was probably the only Englishman in those islands who would have been able to reserve desirable places at a corrida de toros.

Jacinta, who accompanied him, was attended by his Spanish housekeeper and two sunburnt English naval officers, but she made room for Austin on one side of her, and appeared in no way displeased by his indifferently veiled approbation. Miss Brown had been dressed by a Castilian modeste, mostly in black lace, that day, and her clustering brown hair was ornamented by a little mantilla of the same material. It was not a dress which would have suited every Englishwoman, especially of substantial type, but Jacinta was slight, and delicately round, and altogether sylph-like.

"You venture to approve of this get-up?" she said. "The tourists were a little horrified at the hotel."

Austin, who wore white duck, noticed that she smiled at the Governor, who sat above them amidst his glittering staff, and that almost sufficed to spoil his satisfaction, though it was only one of the many little things that emphasised the difference between them. Still, he contrived to laugh.

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"I expect they were envious. It's bewilderingly effective, and I am a bit of an artist, as you know," he said. "I was wondering whether you would have the courage to come."

"Jacinta," said Pancho Brown, "has courage enough for anything. Still, she came because I asked her. I make my living out of these people, and, perhaps, a little more. It was policy."

Jacinta laughed. "Well," she said, "I rather like it, and I have been before. Of course, I mean after they have killed the horses and smashed the picadores. That part is not only cruel, but ineffective. It's not inspiriting to see a man padded with leather sit quite still to be knocked over. They should either wipe it out or give them stuffed horses. By the way, you don't know my companions."

The two naval officers acknowledged the introduction with characteristic brevity. Their eyes were fixed on the arena, and the scene was probably worth their attention, for there are parts of a bull fight which cannot be termed revolting, at least, by those who have actually witnessed them.

A lithe, well-favoured man, picturesquely attired, skipped into the ring, holding a crimson cape in one hand, and a couple of little decorated darts in the other. It was his business to strike them into the neck or shoulder of the bull, but nowhere else, while their points were calculated to do no more than exasperate it. The beast watched him savagely, pawing up the sand, and the chances appeared somewhat against the man, since to reach its neck he must approach his silk-covered breast within an inch or two of the gleaming horns, one of which was suspiciously reddened.

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Austin could not quite see how he did it, for his motions were bewilderingly rapid, but he saw the wave of the gaudy cloak and heard its crisp rustle that was lost in the roar. Then the man was running round the ring for his life, and the bull thundering along with lowered head and a dart bristling in its neck, a yard or two behind him. He had no time to swing himself over the barricade, as hard pressed banderilleros now and then did, for the deadly horns were almost in

the small of his back. It was a frantic test of speed, highly trained human agility and endurance against the strength of the beast, and there was dead silence while they went round the arena once, the man running desperately, with tense, set face, while Austin fancied he could hear his gasping breath through the roar of the hoofs. Then, with a splendid bound, he drew a yard ahead, and another man with a green cape hurled himself through the opening. Somehow he escaped destruction, and the bull slid onward with hoofs ploughing up the sand, and the gaudy silk fluttering about its head. There was a roar of plaudits that could have been heard miles away at sea, and while from tiers of benches the hats came sailing down, the bull, which shook the cape off, tore the coloured rags to fragments.

"That fellow has good nerves," said one of the navy men. "I don't see anything very brutal in it, after all. They both start level, and take their chances, you know."

Jacinta looked at Austin over her fan, and there was a faint flush in as much of her face as he could see, as well as a little gleam in her eyes.

"I'm afraid it—is—a little barbarous," she said. "Everybody says so. Still, wasn't that banderillero splendid! You see, I have put on Castilian notions with my clothes. Of course, as an Englishwoman, I could never venture here." [Pg 80]

Austin was a little annoyed to feel that he was smiling sardonically. "Well," he said, "I should almost have fancied that you were too super-refined and ethereal to admire that kind of thing, but I really believe you do."

Jacinta waved her fan. "Do not be deceived, my friend. There is a good deal of the primitive in us all, and it shows up now and then." Then she laughed. "I wonder how they all get their right hats back again."

Austin could not tell her, for it was a thing he could never understand; but while the attendants were still flinging the black sombreros into the air another banderillero approached the bull. He planted one dart and then dashed across the ring, but either his nerve failed him, or he could not trust his speed, for he grasped the top of the barricade and swung himself over. In another moment the bull struck it with a crash, and then stood still, half stunned, apparently endeavouring to make out where the man had gone. There was a storm of hisses and opprobrious cries.

"That banderillero," said Jacinta, sweetly, "should have been driven out of the ring. He ought never to have undertaken a thing that was too big for him."

"Isn't that a little hard upon the man?" said Austin. "He probably didn't know it was too big until he had undertaken it."

"That's sensible, Miss Brown," said one of the navy men. "When he found he couldn't run as fast as the bull could what was he to do?"

"What did a certain gunboat's men do when they found themselves quite unexpectedly in front of the African headman's battery?" [Pg 81]

The navy man flushed a little, for he was young. "Oh," he said, "that was different. They set their lips and went in, though I don't suppose any of them liked it. Still, you see, that was what they were there to do."

"Exactly!" and Jacinta laughed a little, though there was still a gleam in her eyes, and it was Austin she looked at. "They did the obvious, as well as the most artistic thing. It fortunately happens that they're often very much the same."

"I'm not quite sure I understand you," said the young officer. "People who want me to have to talk plain. Still, I suppose one has always a certain sympathy for the fellow who gets himself killed decently."

Then, for a time, they became absorbed in the play of the banderilleros, who, flashing here and there, with cloaks of red, and gold, and green, passed the bull from one to another up and down the trampled arena. Now, one of them escaped annihilation by a hairsbreadth, while the thundering vivas went up to the glaring sky, and a comrade turned the tormented beast again. Now, a silk-clad athlete swept through the two-foot gap between deadly horns and flying man, and the bull swung round with a bellow to pursue him, or stood still, temporarily blinded with the gaudy cloak about its horns. It was a fascinating exhibition of human nerve and skill, and Austin saw that Jacinta watched it with slightly parted lips and a gleam in her eyes, until at last the bugles rang, and most of the men withdrew, leaving the bull alone in the middle of the arena, with the foam flakes dripping from its muzzle and its brawny neck bristling with the little darts. Then there was a general movement and a great hum of voices rose from the close-packed benches. Jacinta waved her fan, and touched Austin's arm as she looked about her. [Pg 82]

"Surely that is Macallister. But whatever is he doing there?" she said.

Austin looked up across the long rows of faces, and saw his comrade sitting, spick and span in the blue Spanish mail uniform, among the brilliant officers of the Governor's staff. Macallister was a big man, with a commanding appearance, when he had for the time being done with the engine room, and Austin, who knew that he could make friends with anybody, was not astonished to notice that he seemed very much at home.

"It is rather more than I know," he said. "Still, I should fancy he was telling them something amusing in execrable Castilian, by the way they are laughing. I believe Macallister could get anywhere he wanted. He has, as a matter of fact, dragged me into somewhat astonishing places."

"I shouldn't wonder," said one of the navy men. "George, isn't that big fellow in the uniform yonder the one we saw the other night at the opera?"

"It is," said his comrade, with a little soft laugh, as though he remembered something that had afforded him considerable pleasure.

Jacinta touched Austin with her fan. "I presume you know what he is referring to?"

"Well," said Austin, "what I do know is this. Mack and I went to see the Italian company the other night, and because he, of course, knew everybody about the place, we went behind the scenes. He, unfortunately, became interested in the stage machinery, and when he had made spirited attempts to pull some of it to pieces, I and the improvisatore beguiled him to a chair in the wings. We gave him a cigar to keep him quiet, as well as the libretto, which he could not read, and, as he seemed somewhat sleepy, I was thankful to leave him there. I didn't care about that opera. He never told me what happened after."

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The young officer laughed again. "I daresay I can enlighten you. In the middle of the last act one of the wings collapsed, and everybody saw a big Englishman, who had apparently just kicked it over, sitting, half asleep, in a folding chair. He didn't appear to have any legitimate connection with the drama, but he brought the house down when he got up in a hurry and fell over his chair."

Then the shrill call of the bugles rang through the great building, and a tall man, with a scarred face, gorgeously dressed, walked into the arena, holding a three-cornered hat and a long, straight sword. He stood still a moment, an imposing and curiously graceful figure, with bright blade lowered, while a tumultuous shout of "Mæstro!" filled the building; and then, taking a cloak from an attendant, approached the bull. It was freely smeared with blood, and as it stood, bellowing, and pawing the sand in murderous rage, it was evident that the Mæstro's task was not a particularly pleasant one. There was only one way in which he could kill the bull, and that was to pass his sword over the horns and down into the brawny chest, near the base of the neck. Should he strike elsewhere it was probable that the vast assembly would descend and trample on him, for this was a duel to the death between man and beast, in which the latter was secured what seemed an even chance by punctilious etiquette. The Spaniard displays a good deal of sympathy with a gallant bull.

The beast seemed to understand that this man was different from the banderilleros who had previously tormented it, and backed away from him until he smote it lightly on the nostrils. Then it swept forward in a savage rush but though the man's movements were so quick that one scarcely noticed them, he was not quite where he had been a moment earlier, when the bull thundered past him. Still, one horn had ripped a strip of silk from him. He followed the beast, and struck it with his hand, and for five or six frenzied minutes the vast audience roared. This man never ran. He stepped backwards, or twisted, always with grave gracefulness, in the nick of time, until at last the bull stood still, as though stupefied with rage or uncertain how to attack its elusive persecutor.

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Then, as the man walked up to it very quietly and unconcernedly, it seemed to hump itself together for a furious bound and rush with lowered head, and there was no sound in the great building until the bright steel flashed. Man's breast and gleaming horns seemed to meet, but apparently in the same second the gorgeously clad figure had stepped aside, and in the next the bull plunged forward and came down upon its knees.

There was another roar, and once more from all the close-packed benches came the rain of hats, cigars, and bundles of cigarettes.

"Ah," said Jacinta, with a little gasp, "I think I have seen enough. There will be another bull and more picadores now. I never could stand that part of it. Besides, I have done my duty, and patronised the show."

They made their way out while the audience waited for another bull, and certain leather-swathed picadores rode in on decrepit, blindfolded horses, brought there to be killed; and it was an hour later when, as they stood beneath the oleanders in a fonda garden looking down upon the white-walled town, Jacinta mentioned the affair again.

"Of course, it is a little cruel; but, after all, it appeals to rather more than the lower passions and lust of slaughter, don't you think?" she said.

"I never saw anything to equal that Mæstro's play in my life," said one of the young officers. "It was cool daring in the superlative degree."

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"I fancy," said Austin, "you want us to make excuses for your being there."

Jacinta laughed. "Not exactly! I am rather proud of being a law to myself—and others—you know. Now, I really think that the qualities the Mæstro possessed appealed to me, though I naturally mean some and not all of them. I am, after all, as I admitted, a little primitive in some respects."

"You mean that you like a man to be daring?" asked the other officer.

"Of course!" and once more it was Austin Jacinta looked at. "Still, I don't necessarily mean that everybody should go bull-fighting. There are other things more worth while."

"Even than sailing round the Canaries and painting little pictures?" said Austin.

Jacinta glanced at him with a curious smile. "Well," she said, "since you ask me, I almost think there are." Then she stopped a moment, and stood looking out from among the oleanders towards the glittering heave of the Atlantic across the white-walled town. Once more a faint gleam crept into her eyes.

"I wonder," she added, "what Jefferson is doing—out yonder in Africa."

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CHAPTER VIII

JEFFERSON FEELS THE STRAIN

The afternoon was wearing through, but it was still almost insufferably hot when Jefferson stood with his hand upon the valve of the *Cumbria's* forward winch. She lay with her bows wedged into the mangrove forest, which crawled on high-arched roots over leagues of bubbling mire to the edge of one of the foulest creeks in Western Africa. It flowed, thick and yeasty, beneath the steamer's hove-up side, for she lay with a list to starboard athwart the stream. There was a bend close by, and her original crew had apparently either failed to swing her round it, which is an accident that sometimes happens in that country, or driven her ashore to save her sinking.

Her iron deck was unpleasantly hot, and the negroes who crossed it between hatch and surfboat hopped. They, of course, wore no boots, and, indeed, very little of anything at all beyond a strip of cotton round their waists. There was not a breath of wind astir, and the saturated atmosphere, which was heavy with the emanations of the swamps, seemed to seal the perspiration in the burning skin. Jefferson felt the veins on his forehead swollen to the bursting point when he stopped the winch and looked about him while the Spaniards slipped a sling over a palm-oil puncheon in the hold below.

He could see nothing but a strip of dazzling water, and the dingy, white-stemmed mangroves which stretched away farther than the eye could follow, and sighed as he glanced back at the *Cumbria*. She lay with deck unpleasantly slanted and one bilge in the mire, a rusty, two-masted steamer, with the blistered paint peeling off her, and the burnt awnings hanging from their spars. He did not expect much water in that creek until the wet season, and in the meanwhile it was necessary to heave the coal and cargo out of her and send it down stream to a neighbouring beach. It was very slow work with the handful of men he had, and those few weeks had set their mark on Jefferson.

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He had never been a fleshy man, and long days of feverish toil under a burning sun and in the steamy heat of the flooded holds had worn him to skin and bone. His duck garments hung with a significant slackness about his gaunt frame, and they were rent in places, as well as blackened and smeared with oil. His face was grim and hollow, but there was a fierce steadfastness in his eyes, which seemed filled with curious brilliancy.

"Are you going to sleep down there? Can't you send up another cask?" he said.

A voice came up from the dusky hatch, out of which there flowed a hot, sour smell of palm oil and putrefying water. "The next tier's jammed up under the orlop beams," it said. "We might get on a little if we could break a puncheon out."

Jefferson laid his hands upon the combing of the hatch and swung himself over. It was a drop of several yards, and he came down upon the slippery round of a big puncheon, and reeling across the barrels, fell backwards against an angle-iron. He was, however, up again in a moment, and stood blinking about him with eyes dazzled by the change from the almost intolerable brightness above. Blurred figures were standing more than ankle deep in water on the slanted rows of puncheons, and Jefferson, who could not see them very well, blinked again when an Englishman, stripped to the waist, moved towards him. The latter was dripping with yellow oil and perspiration.

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"It's this one," he said, and kicked a puncheon viciously. "The derrick-crabs have pulled the tops of the staves off her. They're soaked an' soft with oil. The water underneath's jamming them up, an' you'll see how the tier's keyed down by the orlop-beams."

Jefferson wrenched the iron bar he held away from him and turned to the rest.

"There's a patch of the head clear. Two or three of you get a handspike on to it," he said. "No, shove it lower down. Mas abajo. Now, heave all together. Vamos. Toda fuerza!"

They were barefooted Canary Spaniards, of an astonishing ignorance, but excellent sailormen, and they understood him. Lean, muscular bodies strained and bent, the dew of effort dripped from them; and, as he heaved with lips set, the hollows grew deeper in Jefferson's grim face. No

one spoke; there was only a deep, stertorous gasping, until the puncheon moved a little, and Jefferson, stooping, drove his bar a trifle lower. Then, while he strained every muscle and sinew in strenuous effort, the great, slimy barrel rose again, tilted, and rolled out on its fellows. For a moment it left a space of oily black water where it had been, and then the puncheons closed in with a crash again. Jefferson flung the bar down and straightened himself.

"Now," he said wearily, "you can get ahead."

He crawled up the ladder with a curious languidness, and while one of the Englishmen apostrophised the puncheons the Spaniards went back to their task. The Castilian is not supposed to be remarkable for diligence, but there is, at least among the lower ranks of men in whom the Iberian blood flows, a capacity for patient toil and uncomplaining endurance which, while not always very apparent, nevertheless shows itself unmistakably under pressure of circumstances. These were simple men, who had never been encouraged to think for themselves, and were, therefore, like other Spaniards of their degree, perhaps, incapable of undertaking anything on their own initiative, but they could do a great deal under the right leader, and they had him in Jefferson.

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One of the Englishmen, however, was not quite satisfied. He had been in the tropics before, and did not like the curious flush in Jefferson's face or the way the swollen veins showed on his forehead, so he climbed the ladder after him and leaned upon the winch-drum looking at him meditatively. The man was very ragged as well as very dirty, and altogether disreputable, so far as appearance went, while it is probable that in several respects his character left a good deal to be desired.

"Here's your hat. It's wet, but that's no harm," he said. "You forgot it. Hadn't you better put it on quick?"

Jefferson, who recognised the wisdom of this, did so.

"That's all right! Well, what—are—you stopping for?" he said.

The other man still regarded him contemplatively. "I know my place—but things isn't quite the same aboard this 'ooker as they would be on a big, two-funnel liner. You couldn't expect it. That's why I come up just now to speak to you. You're not feelin' well to-day?"

"It's not worth worrying about. I guess nobody but a nigger ever does feel well in this country."

The other man shook his head. "You go slow. I've seen it comin' on," he said. "You oughtn't to 'a' had your hat off a minute. You see, if you drop out, how's Bill an' me to get the bonus you promised us?"

Jefferson laughed, though he found, somewhat to his concern, that he could not see the man very well.

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"I'm going to hold up until I knock the bottom of this contract out," he said, good-humouredly. "I can't do it if I stop and talk to you. Get a move on. Light out of this!"

The man went back. He had done what he felt was his duty, though he had not expected that it would be of very much use, and Jefferson started the winch. It hammered and rattled, and the barrels came up, slimy and dripping, with patches of whitewash still clinging to them. The glare of it dazzled Jefferson until he could scarcely see them as they swung beneath the derrick-boom, but he managed to drop them into the surfboat alongside and pile the rest on deck, when she slid down the creek with a row of negroes paddling on either side. The steamer had struck the forest at the time of highest water, and it was necessary to take everything out of her if she was to be floated during the coming rainy season.

He toiled on for another hour, with a racking pain in his head, and the Canarios toiled in the stifling hold below, until there was a jar and a rattle, and a big puncheon that should have gone into the surfboat came down with a crash amidst them, and, bursting, splashed them with yellow oil. Then the man who had remonstrated with Jefferson went up the ladder in haste. The winch had stopped, and Jefferson lay across it, amidst a coil of slack wire, with a suffused face. The man, who stooped over him, shouted, and the rest who came up helped to carry him to his room beneath the bridge. The floor was slanted so that one could scarcely stand on it, and as the berth took the same list, they laid him where the side of it met the bulkhead. He lay there, speechless, with half-closed eyes, and water and palm oil soaking from him.

"Now," said the man who had given Jefferson good advice, "you'll get these Spaniards out of this, Bill. Then you'll go on breaking the puncheons out. Wall-eye, here, can run the winch for you, but you can come back in half an hour when I've found out what's wrong with the skipper."

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Bill seemed to recognise that his comrade had risen to the occasion. "Well," he said, "I s'pose there's no use in me sayin' anything. All I want to know is, how you're going to do it?"

"See that?" and the other man pointed to a chest beneath the settee. "It's full of medicines, an' there's a book about them. Good ole Board of Trade!"

"How d'you know those medicines arn't all gorn?" asked Bill.

"They arn't. I've been in. There's a bottle of sweet paregoricky stuff I came round for a swigg of when Mr. Jefferson wasn't there now and then. It warms you up kind of comfortin'."

Bill went away with the Spaniards, and, in place of improving the occasion by looking for liquor, as he might, perhaps, have been expected to do, went on with his task. The English sailorman does not always express himself delicately, but he is, now, at least, very far from being the dissolute, unintelligent ruffian he is sometimes supposed to be. There is no doubt of this, for shipowners know their business, and while there is no lack of Teutons and cheerful, sober Scandinavians, a certain proportion of English seamen still go to sea in English ships. The man who sat in Jefferson's room could, at least, understand the treatise in the medicine chest, although it was one approved by the Board of Trade, which august body has apparently no great fondness for lucid explanations. He was, however, still pouring over it when his comrade thrust his head into the doorway again, and it is possible that Jefferson had not suffered greatly from the fact that he had not as yet quite decided on any course of treatment.

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"Well," said the newcomer, "I s'pose you know what he—has—got?"

"Come in, an' sit down there," said the other. "It's fever, for one thing—I've seen it coming on—an' sunstroke for another. What I'm stuck at is if I'm to treat them both together."

Bill looked reflective. "I think I'd take them one at a time. Get the sunstroke out of him, an' then go for the fever. How d' you start on it, Tom?"

"Undo his clothes. That's easy. The buttons is mostly off them, an' he has hardly any on. Then you put cold water on his head."

"That's not easy, anyway! Where the blazes are you going to get cold water from?"

It was somewhat of a paradox, for while there is plenty of water in Western Africa, none of it is cold. Tom, however, was once more equal to the occasion.

"We could get a big spanner from the engine room, an' put it on his head," he said. "There's plenty of them. S'pose you go an' bring one. Any way, we'll swill him with the coldest water we can get."

They laid a soaked singlet upon his head with a couple of iron spanners under it, and then sat down to watch the effect. Somewhat to their astonishment, it did not appear to do him any appreciable good. Darkness closed down as they waited, and it seemed to grow hotter than ever, while the thick white steam rose from the swamps. Tom stood up and lighted the lamp.

"The fever's easier," he said. "I've had it. You give him the mixture—it's down in the book—though I don't know what the meaning of all these sign things is. That starts him perspiring, an' then it's thick blankets. We used to give them green-lime water in the mailboats."

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"Where's the green limes?" said Bill. "Any way, I'd give the sunstroke a decent chance first. Perhaps he'll come out of it himself. I don't know that it wouldn't be better if he did."

Jefferson came out of his limp unconsciousness into a raving delirium that night, and they rolled him in two blankets, while Bill, being left on watch, wisely threw away the draught his comrade had concocted. Jefferson was also very little more sensible during the next few days, and, though the work went on, before the week was over the two lonely Englishmen found they had another difficulty to grapple with. The sun was almost overhead, and the iron deck, insufferably hot, when the surfboat negroes, who had just finished their meal, came forward together, eight or nine big, naked men, with animal faces and splendid muscles. Nobody knew where they came from, but when two or three of them appeared in a canoe, Jefferson had managed to make them understand that he was willing to pay them for their services, and they forthwith went away, and came back with several comrades and a man of shorter stature who had apparently worked on a steamboat or at a white man's factory. They had worked tolerably well while Jefferson was about to watch them, but they had now apparently decided on another mode of behaviour, for the attitude of their leader was unmistakably truculent. The man called Bill, sitting on the fore hatch, turned at the patter of naked feet, and looked at him.

"Well," he said sharply, "what the — are you wanting?"

"Two bokus them green gin," said the negro. "Two lil' piece of cloff every boy."

Tom laughed ironically. "There isn't any green gin bokus in the ship, for one thing. You'll get your cloth-piece when the work is done. That's all I've got to say to you. Get out of this!"

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The negro made a little forceful gesture. "You no cappy."

"Well," said Bill, drily, "he figures he's a bloomin' admiral in the meanwhile, and that's good enough for you. Go home again, and don't worry me."

"Two cloff-piece," said the negro. "Two cloff-piece every boy. You no lib for get them, we come down too much boy an' take them 'teamboat from you."

The white men looked at one another, and it was evident that they were uncertain how far the negro might be able to make good his threat. There was, as it happened, very little to prevent him doing it, and stockaded factories, as well as stranded steamboats, have been looted in Western Africa. Still, they remembered that they had the prestige of their colour to maintain.

"Oh, get out one time!" said Tom.

The negro turned upon him. "You no cappy. You low, white 'teamboat bushman. Too much boy he

lib for come down one night an' cut you big fat t'roat."

Bill, who was big and brawny, rose with an air of sorrowful resignation. "This —— nonsense has got to be stopped," he said, and walked tranquilly towards the negro. "You wouldn't listen to reason, Black-funnel-paint."

Then, before the latter quite realised what had happened to him, a grimy fist descended upon his jaw, and as he staggered backwards somebody seized his shoulders and whirled him round. In another moment Bill kicked with all his might, and the negro went out headlong through the open gangway into the creek alongside. In the meanwhile the Spaniards came tumbling from the hatch, and, though they were quiet men, they carried long Canary knives. The sight of them was enough for the negroes, and they followed their leader, plunging from the gangway or over the rail. Their canoes still lay beneath the quarter, and though Tom hurled a few big lumps of coal on them as they got under way, they were flying up the creek in another minute, with paddles flashing.

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Then Bill explained the affair to the Canarios as well as he could, and afterward drew his comrade back into the shadow of the deck-house to hold a council. Both of them felt somewhat lonely as they blinked at the desolation of dingy mangroves which hemmed them in. There was, so far as they knew, not a white man in that part of Africa, and the intentions of the negroes were apparently by no means amicable.

"Funnel-paint may come back an' bring his friends," said Tom. "I don't know what's to stop him if he wants to. There's not a gun in the ship except Mr. Jefferson's pistol, an' those Canary fellows' knives, an' we can't worry Mr. Jefferson about the thing when he's too sick to understand. If I'd only begun on him for fever he might have been better."

"I'm thankful," said Bill, "as he isn't dead. It wouldn't be very astonishing, but that don't matter."

"You'd think it mattered a good deal if you was Mr. Jefferson. If I wasn't that anxious about him I'd let you try your hand an' see how easy it is worrying out that book. As it is, one of us is enough."

"I'm thinking," said Bill sourly, "as it's a —— sight too much!"

Tom glared at him a moment, for one of the effects that climate has upon a white man's nerves is to keep him in a state of prickly irritation; but he was more anxious than he cared to confess, too anxious, indeed, to force a quarrel.

"Well," he said, "I'll ask you what you mean another time. Just now, we've got to do a little for Mr. Jefferson and a little for ourselves. Eight pound a month, all found, and a fifty-pound bonus when he gets her off, isn't to be picked up everywhere, and, of course, there's no telling when you an' me may get the fever. Now, then, we want a boss who isn't sick, an' more men, as well as a doctor."

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"Of course. How're you goin' to get 'em?"

"Not here. They don't grow in the swamps. Somebody's got to go for them, an' Las Palmas is the best place. You could find a West-coast mailboat goin' home if you went down the creek in the launch. They've a man or two sick in the engine room most trips, an' they'd be glad to take you firin'. Now, before Mr. Jefferson got that sunstroke he showed me two envelopes. If he was to peg out sudden I was to see the men in Las Palmas got them, and they'd tell me what to do. Men do peg out at any time in this country. Well, you look for a liner an' take those letters. If it's a good boat she'll only be four or five days steaming up the trades. Mr. Jefferson deserves a chance for his life."

"What's wrong with takin' him, too; or all of us goin', for that matter?" asked his companion.

"Eight pounds a month, an' a bonus! Besides, Mr. Jefferson put all his money into getting this ship off. If he comes round an' finds it thrown away he's not going to be grateful to either of us."

Bill sat silent, evidently thinking hard for a minute or two. "Well," he said, "there's sense in the thing, an' I'll try it. You'll be all right with those Canariers. They're nice quiet men, an' if you make 'em say it over lots of times you can generally understand 'em. Wall-eye can bring the launch back. I'll get out of this when we've steam up."

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It was two hours later when he and one of the Canarios who had worked on board the coaling company's tug departed, and the rest, clustering along the *Cumbria's* rail, watched them wistfully as the little clanking craft slid down the creek. They would very much have liked to have gone in her, and might have done so had not Jefferson had the forethought to promise them a small share of the profit when the work was done, and fed them well. There are also men who inspire confidence in those they lead, and sailormen capable of carrying out a bargain. Thus there were no open expressions of regret or misgivings when the last of the launch's smoke-trail melted above the mangroves, though Tom looked very grave as he clawed the shoulder of an olive-faced Canario seaman who did not understand him.

"If that man goes on the loose with what he gets for firin', an' forgets all about those letters, it won't be nice for us," he said. "In the meanwhile, we've just got to buck up and lighten the blame old scrap-iron tank between us."

He called her a few other names while the Spaniard watched him, smiling, and, having so

CHAPTER IX

AUSTIN MAKES A VENTURE

It was late one hot night when Austin first met Captain Farquhar of the S.S. *Carsegarry* in a calle of Santa Cruz, and the worthy shipmaster, being then in a somewhat unpleasant position, was sincerely pleased to see him. The *Carsegarry* had reached Las Palmas with three thousand tons of steam coal some ten days earlier, and, because there are disadvantages attached to living on board a vessel that is discharging coal, Farquhar had taken up his abode at the Metropole. He had, as usual, made friends with almost everybody in the hotel during the first few days, which said a good deal for his capabilities, considering that most of them were Englishmen; and then, finding their society pall on him, went across to Santa Cruz in search of adventure and more congenial company.

As it happened, he found the latter in the person of another Englishman with similar tastes; and one or two of their frolics are remembered in that island yet. On the night Farquhar came across Austin they had amused themselves not altogether wisely in a certain café, from which its proprietor begged them to depart when they had broken one citizen's guitar and damaged another's clothes. Then, as it was getting late, they adjourned to the mole, where the Englishman had arranged that a boat at his command should meet them, and convey Farquhar, who was going back to Las Palmas next day, on board the *Estremadura*. The boat was not forthcoming, and the Englishman's temper deteriorated while they waited half an hour for it, until when at last the splash of oars came out of the soft darkness he was not only in a very unpleasant humour, but determined upon showing his companion that he was not a man with whom a Spanish crew could take liberties.

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There was also a pile of limestone on the mole, and when a shadowy launch slid into the blackness beneath it he hurled down the biggest lumps he could find, as well as a torrent of Castilian vituperation. Then, however, instead of the excuses he had expected, there were wrathful cries, and the Englishman gasped when he saw dim, white-clad figures clambering in portentous haste up the adjacent steps.

"We'll have to get out of this—quick!" he said. "I've made a little mistake. It's somebody else's boat."

They set about it without waste of time, but there was a good deal of merchandise lying about the mole, and the Englishman, who fell over some of it, lay still until a peon came across him peacefully asleep behind a barrel next morning. Farquhar, however, ran on, snatching up a handspike as he went, with odd lumps of limestone hurtling behind him; and as he and his pursuers made a good deal of noise as they sped across the plaza at the head of the mole, the citizens still left in the cafés turned out to enjoy the spectacle. English seafarers are tolerated in that city, but it is, perhaps, their own fault that they are not regarded with any particular favour, and when Farquhar turned at bay in a doorway and proceeded to defy all the subjects of Spain, nobody was anxious to stand between him and the barelegged sailors, who had nasty knives. It might, in fact, have gone hard with him had not two civiles, with big revolvers strapped about them, arrived.

They heard the crowd's explanations with official unconcern, and then, though it was, perhaps, their duty to place Farquhar in safe custody in the cuartel, decided on sending for Austin, who was known to be staying that night in a neighbouring hotel. He had befriended English skippers already under somewhat similar circumstances, and the civiles, who knew their business, were quite aware that nobody would thank them for forcing the affair upon the attention of the English Consul. Austin came, and saw Farquhar gazing angrily at the civiles and still gripping his bar, while the crowd stood round and made insulting remarks about him in Castilian. He at once grasped the position, and made a sign of concurrence when one of the civiles spoke to him.

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"You take him to his steamer," said the officer. "One of us will come round in the morning when he understands."

Austin turned to Farquhar. "Give the man that bar," he said. "Come along, and I'll send you off to your steamer."

"I'm going to have satisfaction out of some of them first," and Farquhar made an indignant gesture of protest. "Then I'll knock up the Consul. I'll show them if a crowd of garlic-eating pigs can run after me."

"If you stop here you'll probably get it, in the shape of a knife between your ribs," said Austin, who seized his arm. "A wise man doesn't drag in the Consul when he wants to keep his berth."

He forced Farquhar, who still protested vigorously, along, and, because the civiles marched

behind, conveyed him to the mole, where a boat was procured to take them off to the *Estremadura*. Farquhar had cooled down a little by the time they reached her, and appeared grateful when Austin put him into his berth.

"Perhaps you did save me some trouble, and I'll not forget you," he said. "Take you round all the nice people in Las Palmas and tell them you're a friend of mine." [Pg 101]

"I'm not sure it would be very much of a recommendation," said Austin, drily.

Farquhar laughed. "That's where you're mistaken. When I've been a week in a place I'm friends with everybody worth knowing."

"If to-night's affair is anything to go by, it's a little difficult to understand how you manage it," said Austin.

"It's quite easy to be looked up to, and still have your fun," and Farquhar lowered his voice confidentially. "When folks think a good deal of you in one place you have only to go somewhere else when you feel the fit coming on."

The *Estremadura* sailed for Las Palmas next morning, and on arriving there Austin was somewhat astonished to discover that Farquhar had, in fact, acquired the good-will of a good many people of consequence in that city. He was a genial, frolic-loving man, and Austin, who became sensible of a liking for him, spent a good deal of his leisure on board the *Carsegarry*, while, when the *Estremadura* came back there, he also consented to advise Farquhar about the getting up of a dance to which everybody was invited. It was a testimony to the latter's capacity for making friends that a good many of them came, and among the rest were Pancho Brown, his daughter, Muriel Gascoyne, and Mrs. Hatherly, as well as the commander of a Spanish warship, and several officers of artillery.

The night was soft and still, and clear moonlight shone down upon the sea. The trade breeze had fallen away, and only a little cool air came down from the black Isleta hill, while fleecy mists drifted ethereally athwart the jagged peaks of the great cordillera. An orchestra of guitars and mandolins discoursed Spanish music from the poop, and there was room for bolero and casucha on the big after-hatch, while, when the waltzers had swung round it, the *Carsegarry's* engineer made shift to play the English lancers on his fiddle. Everybody seemed content, and the genial Farquhar diffused high spirits and good humour. [Pg 102]

Austin had swung through a waltz with Jacinta, though the guitars were still twinging softly when they climbed the ladder to the bridge-deck, where canvas chairs were laid out. It was a curious waltz, tinged with the melancholy there is in most Spanish music, but the crash of a gun broke through it, and while the roar of a whistle drowned the drowsy murmur of the surf, the long black hull of an African mailboat slid into the harbour ringed with lights. Then there followed the rattle of cable, and Austin fancied that the sight of the steamer had, for no very apparent reason, its effect upon his companion. She had been cordial during the evening, but there was a faint suggestion of hardness in her face as she turned to him.

"I am especially fond of that waltz," she said. "You may have noticed there's a trace of what one might call the bizarre in it. No doubt, it's Eastern. They got it from the Moors."

"It only struck me as very pretty," said Austin, who surmised by her expression that Jacinta was preparing the way for what she meant to say. "I'm afraid I'm not much of a musician."

"You, at least, dance rather well. There are not many Englishmen who really do, which is, perhaps, no great disadvantage, after all."

Austin laughed, though he was a trifle perplexed. "Well," he said, "though you don't overwhelm me with compliments, as a rule, you have told me that I could dance before. Now, however, one could almost fancy that the fact didn't meet with your approval."

Jacinta looked at him reflectively over her fan. "I scarcely supposed you would understand, and one does not always feel in the mood to undertake a logical exposition of their views. Still, here's Muriel, and she, at least, generally seems to know just what she means. Suppose you ask her what she thinks of dancing." [Pg 103]

Austin did so, and Miss Gascoyne, who was crossing the deck-bridge with Farquhar, stopped beside them.

"I don't think there is any harm in dancing, in itself—in fact, I have just been waltzing with Captain Farquhar," she said. "Of course, the disadvantage attached to amusements of any kind is that they may distract one's attention from more serious things. Don't you think so, Captain Farquhar?"

Farquhar caught Austin's eye, and grinned wickedly, but Miss Gascoyne, who failed to notice this, glanced towards the steamer which had just come in.

"That must be the African boat, but I suppose there is no use expecting any news?" she said quietly, though there was a faint suggestive tremour in her voice.

She passed on with Farquhar, and Jacinta glanced at Austin with a little enquiring smile.

"If I had a sister who persisted in talking in that aggravatingly edifying fashion, I should feel tempted to shake her," he said. "Still, one could forgive her a good deal if only for the way she

looked at the West-coast boat. It suggested that she has as much humanity in her as there is in the rest of us, after all."

"Still, don't you think there was a little reason in what she said?"

"Of course. That is, no doubt, why one objects to it. Well, since it's difficult to keep the personal equation out, I suppose dancing and sailing about these islands on board the *Estremadura* is rather a wasteful life. Painting little pictures probably comes to much the same thing, too, though there are people who seem to take art seriously." [Pg 104]

Jacinta looked at him steadily. "When one has really an artistic talent it is different," she said.

Austin, who hoped she did not notice that he winced, sat silent a space, gazing out across the glittering sea, and it was not altogether a coincidence that his eyes were turned eastwards towards Africa, where Jefferson was toiling in the fever swamps. He wondered if Jacinta knew his thoughts had also turned in that direction somewhat frequently of late.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it is. Some of those pictures must be pretty, or the tourists wouldn't buy them, but that doesn't go very far, after all." He stopped a moment, and then went on with a little wry smile. "No doubt some patients require drastic treatment, and there are cases where it is necessary to use the knife."

Jacinta rose, and, dropping her fan to her side, gravely met his gaze.

"If it wasn't, it would probably not be tried," she said. "One could fancy that it was, now and then, a little painful to the surgeon."

Austin walked with her to the ladder, and stopped a moment at the head of it. "Well," he said, "one has to remember that all men are not built on the same model, and, what is more to the purpose, they haven't all the same opportunities. No doubt the latter fact is fortunate for some of them, since they would probably make a deplorable mess of things if they undertook a big enterprise."

"Ah!" said Jacinta, who remembered it afterwards, "one never knows when the opportunities may present themselves."

She went down the ladder, and it was about an hour later when a boat slid alongside, and a man came up, asking for Austin. The latter, who sat on the bridge-deck amidst a group of Farquhar's guests, looked at him curiously when he handed him an envelope. His garments had evidently not been made for him, and there were stains of grease and soot on his coarse serge jacket, while the coal dust had not been wholly washed from his face. It was not difficult to recognise him as a steamer's fireman. [Pg 105]

"You're Mr. Austin?" he said.

Austin admitted that he was, and after a glance at the letter turned round and saw that Muriel Gascoyne, who sat close by, was watching him with a curious intentness. Then he once more fixed his attention on the paper in his hand.

"S.S. *Cumbria*" was written at the top of it, and there followed a description of the creek, and how the steamer lay, as well as the cargo in her holds. Then he read: "I'm beginning to understand why those wrecker fellows let up on the contract, though they hadn't the stake I have in the game. There are times when I get wondering whether I can last it out, for it seems to me that white men who work in the sun all day are apt to drop out suddenly in this country. I make you and Mr. Pancho Brown my executors in case of anything of that kind happening to me. If you come across anybody willing to take the *Cumbria* over as a business proposition, do what you can, on the understanding that one-third of the profit goes to Miss Gascoyne, the rest as executors' and wreckers' remuneration. I don't know how far this statement meets your law, but I feel I can trust you, any way. In case either party is not willing to take the thing up, the other may act alone."

Austin turned to the fireman. "You have another letter for Mr. Brown?"

"Yes, sir," said the man. "Mr. Jefferson——"

Austin, who heard a rustle of feminine draperies and what seemed to be a little gasp of surprise or alarm, made the man a sign. [Pg 106]

"Come into the skipper's room. I've two or three things to ask you," he said. "Miss Brown, will you please hand that letter to your father?"

They disappeared into the room beneath the bridge, and it was some time before they came out again. Then Austin sent the man down the ladder with a steward to take him to Brown, and leaned against the rail. Jacinta, Muriel, and Mrs. Hatherly were still sitting there, but the rest had gone. He told them briefly all he had heard about Jefferson, and then descended the ladder in search of Brown. The latter met him with the letter in his hand, and they found a seat in the shadow of the *Carsegarry's* rail. Nobody seemed to notice them, though the fluttering dresses of the women brushed them as they swung in the waltz.

"You have read it," said Austin. "What do you think?"

Pancho Brown tapped the letter with the gold-rimmed glasses he held in his hand.

"As a business proposition I would not look at it. The risks are too great," he said.

"It struck me like that, too. Still, that's not quite the question. You see, the man isn't dead."

"I almost think he is by this time," said Brown, reflectively. "Now, he did not seem quite sure when he wrote those letters that there was really any gum in her. At least, he hadn't found it, and I understand that circumstances had made him a little suspicious about the *Cumbria's* skipper, who we know is dead. Taking oil at present value, in view of what we would have to pay for a salvage expedition and chartering, there is, it seems to me, nothing in the thing."

"I'm not quite sure of that; but you are still presuming Jefferson dead."

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Brown turned and looked at him. "The first thing we have to do is to find out. Somebody will have to go across, and, of course, he must be a reliable man. I should be disposed to go so far as to meet the necessary expenses, not as a business venture, but because Jacinta would give me no peace if I didn't."

"There would be no difficulty about the man."

Brown turned to him sharply. "You?"

"Yes. If Jefferson is dead I should probably also undertake to do what I can to meet his wishes as executor."

Brown sat silent a space, and then tapped the letter with his glasses again. "In that case I might go as far as to find, say, £200. It should, at least, be sufficient to prove if there is any odd chance of getting the *Cumbria* off."

"I think I shall do that with £80, but I should prefer that you did not provide it. That is, unless you decide to go into the thing on a business footing, and take your share of the results, as laid down by Jefferson."

Brown seemed to be looking hard at him, but they sat in shadow, and Austin was glad of it.

"Ah!" he said quietly, though there was a significance in his tone. "Well, somebody must certainly go across, and if you fail elsewhere you can always fall back on me for—a loan. When are you going?"

"By the first boat that calls anywhere near the creek."

He rose and turned away, but Pancho Brown sat still, with a curious expression in his face. If any of the dancers had noticed him, it would probably have occurred to them that he was thinking hard. Pancho Brown was a quiet man, but he often noticed a good deal more than his daughter gave him credit for. Still, when at length he rose and joined Farquhar there was nothing in his appearance which suggested that he was either anxious or displeased.

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In the meanwhile Austin came upon Mrs. Hatherly, who was wandering up and down the deck, and she drew him beneath a lifeboat.

"Miss Gascoyne is, no doubt, distressed? I am sorry for her," he said.

The little lady held his arm in a tightening grasp. "Of course," she said, and there was a tremour in her voice. "Still, after all, that does not concern us most just now. Somebody must go, and see what can be done for Mr. Jefferson."

"Yes," said Austin. "I am going."

"Then—and I am sure you will excuse me—it will cost a good deal, and you cannot be a rich man, or——"

"I should not have been on board the *Estremadura*? You are quite correct, madam."

Mrs. Hatherly made a little deprecatory gesture. "I am not exactly poor; in fact, I have more money than I shall live to spend, and I always meant to leave it to Muriel. It seems to me that it would be wiser to spend some of it on her now. You will let me give you what you want, Mr. Austin?"

Austin stood silent a moment, with a flush in his face, and then gravely met her gaze.

"I almost think I could let you lend me forty pounds. With that I shall have enough in the meanwhile. You will not think me ungracious if I say that just now I am especially sorry I have not more money of my own?"

The little lady smiled at him. "Oh, I understand. That is what made me almost afraid. It cannot be nice to borrow from a woman. Still, I think you could, if it was necessary, do even harder things."

"I shall probably have to," said Austin, a trifle drily. "I don't mind admitting that what you have suggested is a great relief to me."

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"You would naturally sooner let me lend it you than Mr. Brown?"

"Why should you suppose that?" and the flush crept back into Austin's face.

Mrs. Hatherly smiled again. "Ah," she said, "I am an old woman, and have my fancies, but they are right now and then. I will send you a cheque to-morrow, and, Mr. Austin, I should like you to

think of me as one of your friends. Do you know that I told Muriel half an hour ago you would go?"

Austin made her a little grave inclination, though there was a smile in his eyes.

"I am not sure that any of my other friends has so much confidence in me, madam," he said. "After all, it is another responsibility, and I shall have to do what I can."

The little lady smiled at him as she turned away. "Well," she said quietly, "I think that will be a good deal."

It was ten minutes later when Austin met Jacinta, and she stopped him with a sign.

"You are going to Mr. Jefferson?" she said.

"Yes," said Austin, with a trace of dryness. "I believe so. After all, he is a friend of mine."

Jacinta watched him closely, and her pale, olive-tinting was a trifle warmer in tone than usual. His self-control was excellent, to the little smile, but she could make a shrewd guess as to what it cost him.

"Soon?" she asked.

"In two or three days. That is, if the Compania don't get the Spaniards to lay hands on me. By the way, you may as well know now that I had to get Mrs. Hatherly to lend me part, at least, of the necessary money."

Jacinta flushed visibly. "You will not be vindictive, though, of course, I have now and then been hard on you." [Pg 110]

"I shouldn't venture to blame you. As we admitted, there are occasions on which one has to resort to drastic remedies."

Jacinta stopped him with a gesture. "Please—you won't," she said. "Of course, I deserve it, but you will try to forgive me. You can afford to—now."

She stood still a moment in the moonlight, an ethereal, white-clad figure, with a suggestion of uncertainty and apprehension in her face which very few people had ever seen there before, and then turned abruptly, with a little smile of relief, as Miss Gascoyne came towards them.

"He's going out, Muriel. You will thank him—I don't seem able to," she said.

Muriel came forward with outstretched hands, and in another moment Austin, to his visible embarrassment, felt her warm grasp.

"Oh," she said, "Mrs. Hatherly knew you meant to. I feel quite sure I can trust you to bring him back to me."

Austin managed to disengage his hands, and smiled a little, though it was Jacinta he looked at.

"I think," he said, "I have a sufficient inducement for doing what I can. Still, you will excuse me. There are one or two points I want to talk over with Captain Farquhar."

He turned away, and twenty minutes later Jacinta, standing on the bridge-deck, alone, watched his boat slide away into the blaze of moonlight that stretched suggestively towards Africa.

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CHAPTER X JACINTA IS NOT CONTENT

Darkness was closing down on the faintly shining sea, and the dull murmur of the surf grew louder as the trade-breeze died away, when Jacinta and Muriel Gascoyne sat in the stern of a white gig which two barefooted Canarios pulled across Las Palmas harbour on the evening on which Austin was to sail. In front of them the spray still tossed in filmy clouds about the head of the long, dusky mole, and the lonely Isleta hill cut black as ebony against a cold green transparency, while skeins of lights twinkled into brilliancy round the sweep of bay. Jacinta, however, saw nothing of this. She was watching the *Estremadura's* dark hull rise higher above the line of mole, and listening to one of the boatmen who accompanied the rhythmic splash of oars with a little melodious song. She long afterwards remembered its plaintive cadence and the words of it well.

"Las aves marinas vuelen encima la mar," he sang, and then while the measured thud and splash grew a trifle faster, "No pueden escapar las penas del amor."

He did not seem to know the rest of it, and when she had heard the stanza several times Jacinta, who saw Muriel's eyes fixed upon her enquiringly, made a little half-impatient gesture.

"It's the usual sentimental rubbish, though he sings passably well. 'Even the sea birds cannot escape the pains of love,'" she said. "Absurd, isn't it? like most of the men one comes across nowadays, they probably spend all their time in search of something to eat. Still, I suppose—you—would sympathise with the man whose perverted imagination led him to write that song."

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Muriel looked at her with a hint of reproach in her big blue eyes, which were very reposeful. "I don't think I ever quite understood you, and I don't now, but I once went to see an English gullery," she said. "There were rows of nests packed so close that one could scarcely pick a way between, with little, half-feathered things in most of them. They all had their mouths open."

Jacinta laughed musically. "Of course," she said. "You are delightful. But never mind me. Go on a little further."

"It was the big gulls I was thinking of," said Muriel gravely. "They didn't fly away, but hung just above us in a great white cloud, wheeling, screaming, and now and then making little swoops at our heads. It didn't seem to matter what happened to them, but any one could see they were in an agony of terror lest we should tread upon some of the little, half-feathered nestlings. I came away as soon as the others would let me. It seemed a cruelty to frighten them."

"It seems to me," said Jacinta, "that you are anticipating, or confusing things considerably, but I'll try not to offend you by making that a little plainer, though, I should almost like to. I'm in quite a prickly humour to-night."

She sat silent a moment or two, while a trace of colour crept in her companion's face, looking out towards the eastern haze, as she had done of late somewhat frequently.

"Yes," she said, reflectively, "I feel that it would be a relief to make you upset and angry. You are so aggravatingly sure of everything, and serene. Of course, that is, perhaps, only natural, after all. You have, in one respect, got just what you wanted, and have sense enough to be content with it."

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Muriel turned and looked at her with a trace of bewilderment, for there was an unusual hardness in Jacinta's tone.

"Wouldn't everybody be content in such a case?" she asked.

"Oh, dear no!" and Jacinta laughed. "I, for one, would begin to look for flaws in the thing, whatever it was, and wonder if it wouldn't be wiser to change it for something else. In fact, I don't mind telling you I feel like that to-night. You see, for a year at least, I have been trying to bring a certain thing about, and—now I have succeeded—I wish I hadn't. Of course, you won't understand me, and I don't mean you to; but you may as well remember that it's a somewhat perilous thing to keep on giving people good advice. Some day they will probably act upon it."

"But that ought to please one."

Jacinta glanced once more into the soft darkness that crept up from the East with a little shiver. "Well," she said sharply, "in my case it certainly doesn't."

They were alongside the *Estremadura* in another minute, but the seaman they found on deck did not know where Austin was, and led them down to Macallister's room. It was beneath the spar-deck, and very hot, for the dynamo was not running that night, and a big oil lamp lighted it. It was also full of tobacco smoke, and—for the port was open—the rumble of the long swell tumbling against the mole came throbbing into it. A big man in very shabby serge, with a hard face, sat opposite the engineer, until the latter, seeing the two women, laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Out ye get!" he said, and his guest was projected suddenly into the dimly-lighted space about the after-hatch. [Pg 114]

Then he smiled upon the newcomers affably. "Come away in," he said. "Was it me or Mr. Austin ye came to see?"

"On this occasion it was Mr. Austin," said Jacinta, who found a place opposite him, beside Muriel, on a settee. "Of course, that was because he is going away. Isn't he here?"

"He is not," and Macallister beamed at her. "In one way, it's not that much of a pity. There's twice the light-heartedness in me that there is in Mr. Austin."

"I can quite believe it. Still, light-heartedness of one kind is now and then a little inconvenient. Where has he gone?"

"To the town. I don't expect him until he calls for his man—the one I've just hove out—when the West-coast mailboat comes in. She won't stop more than half an hour, but there's no sign of her yet."

Jacinta sighed whimsically, perhaps to hide what she felt.

"Then I'm afraid we shall not see him, which is a pity, because I've been thinking over the nice things I meant to say to him, and now they're all wasted," she said. "You will tell him that we came to say good-bye to him, won't you, and that I'm just a little vexed he never called to tell us anything about his expedition."

Macallister grinned sardonically, and though Jacinta was usually a very self-possessed young woman, she appeared to find his gaze a trifle disconcerting.

"Well," he said, "I know all about it. He has sold everything he had, and he borrowed £40. One way or another he has another £60 of his own."

Jacinta looked up sharply. "He has no more than that?"

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"It's not likely," and Macallister watched her with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "I do not know why he would not have the £200 Mr. Brown offered him. Maybe ye do."

There was a just perceptible trace of colour in Jacinta's cheek. "I hardly see how you could expect me to when I never heard of it until this moment," she said. "Would £100 be enough for Mr. Austin?"

"I'm thinking it would. No for everybody under the same circumstances, but enough for him. There are folks in these islands who have only seen the outside of Mr. Austin, which, ye may observe, is in one sense quite a natural thing."

He stopped a moment, and smiled upon her genially. "It's not his fault that he's no quite so well favoured as I am. What would ye expect of an Englishman? Still, there are men aboard here who have seen what's underneath—I mean the other side of him—at nights when he brought the dispatch off through the surf, and once—though that was not his business—when I was sick, an' they let water down in the starboard boiler."

"Still," said Jacinta, "he would naturally have to have so many things."

"He has four good men, a little box o' drugs, and a case o' dynamite. Farquhar's going on to Australia with mining stores, and he gave it him."

It seemed absurdly insufficient, and Jacinta struggled with an almost hysterical inclination to laugh. It was, she realised, a very big thing Austin had undertaken, and his equipment consisted of a case of dynamite and a box of drugs, which, on his own confession, he knew very little about. Still, she saw that Macallister, who, she fancied, ought to know, rated manhood far higher than material. It was Muriel who broke the silence.

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"But they will want a doctor," she said, with a little tremour in her voice.

Macallister shook his head. "Ye would not get one to go there for £500, and he would be no use if he did," he said. "Ye will remember that malaria fever does not stay on one long. It goes away when it has shaken the strength out o' ye—and now and then comes back again—while by the time Austin gets there Mr. Jefferson will be——"

He stopped with some abruptness, but though she shivered, Muriel looked at him with steady eyes.

"Ah!" she said, "you mean he will either be better, or that no doctor could cure him then?"

Macallister made her a little inclination, and it was done with a grave deference that Jacinta had scarcely expected from him.

"Just that," he said. "I'm thinking ye are one of the women a man can tell the truth to. It is a pity there are not more o' them. It is no a healthy country Mr. Austin is going to, but I have been five years on the coast o' it, and ye see me here."

"I wonder," said Jacinta, "whether you, who know all about ships and engines, did not feel tempted to go with Mr. Austin?"

The engineer smiled curiously. "Tempted!" he said. "It was like trying to be teetotal with a whisky bottle in the rack above one's bunk; but I am a married man, with a wife who has a weakness for buying dining-room suites."

"Dining-room suites! What have they to do with it?"

"Just everything," and Macallister sighed. "She will only have the biggest ones the doors will let in, and she has furnished a good many dining-rooms altogether. Ye will mind that we lived here and there and everywhere, while she's back in England now. Ye would not meet a better woman, but on £20 a month ye cannot buy unlimited red-velvet chairs and sideboards with looking-glasses at the back o' them."

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Jacinta laughed as she rose. "You will tell Mr. Austin we are sorry we did not see him."

"I will," and Macallister stood up, too. "Perhaps ye mean it this time, and I'm a little sorry for him myself. There are men who get sent off with bands and speeches and dinners to do a smaller thing, but Mr. Austin he just slips away with his box o' dynamite and his few sailormen."

He stopped and looked hard at her a moment before he turned to Muriel. "Still, we'll have the big drum out when he brings Mr. Jefferson and the *Cumbria* back again, and if there's anything that can be broken left whole in this ship that night it will be no fault o' mine."

They went out and left him, but Jacinta stopped when they came upon the man he had ejected from his room, sitting on the companion stairway and smoking a very objectionable pipe. She also held a little purse concealed beneath her hand.

"You are going back with Mr. Austin to the *Cumbria*?" she said.

The man stood up. "In course," he said. "It's eight pound a month, all found, an' a bonus."

"Ah!" said Jacinta. "I suppose there is nothing else?"

The man appeared to ruminate over this, until a light broke in on him.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Jefferson does the straight thing, an' he fed us well. That is, as well as he could, considering everything."

Jacinta smiled at Muriel. "You will notice the answer. He is a man!" Then she held out a strip of crinkly paper. "That will make you almost a month to the good, and if you do everything you can to make things easier for the man who wants to get the *Cumbria* off, there will probably be another waiting for you when you come back again."

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The man, who took the crinkly paper, gazed at it in astonishment, and then made a little sign of comprehension. "Thank you kindly, miss, but which one am I to look after special? You see, there's two of them."

Jacinta was apparently not quite herself that night, for the swift colour flickered into her face, and stayed there a moment.

"Both," she said decisively. "Still, you are never to tell anybody about that note."

The man once more gazed at her with such evident bewilderment that Muriel broke into a little half-audible laugh. Then he grinned suddenly, and touched his battered cap.

"Well, we'll make it—both," he said.

They went up the companion, and left him apparently chuckling, but Jacinta appeared far from pleased when she got into the waiting boat.

"That was to have gone to England for a hat and one or two things I really can't do without—though I shall probably have to now," she said. "Oh, aren't they stupid sometimes—I felt I could have shaken him."

In the meanwhile the man in the fireman's serge went back to Macallister's room.

"Give me an envelope—quick!" he said.

Macallister got him one, and he slipped a strip of paper inside before he addressed it and tossed it across the table.

"You'll post that. There's a Castle boat home to-morrow, and I'd sooner trust you with it than myself," he said, with a little sigh, which, however, once more changed to a chuckle.

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"If there's money inside it ye're wise," said Macallister drily. "Still, what are ye grinning in yon fashion for?"

"I was thinking it's just as well I've only—one—old woman. It would make a big hole in eight pounds a month—an' a bonus—if I had any more of 'em. But you get that letter posted before I want it back."

"Wanting," said Macallister, reflectively, "is no always getting. Maybe, it's now and then fortunate it is so, after all."

It was two hours later, and Jacinta stood on the flat roof of Pancho Brown's house looking down upon the close-packed Spanish town, when the crash of a mail gun rose from the harbour and was lost in the drowsy murmur of the surf. Then the other noises in the hot streets below her went on again, but Jacinta scarcely heard the hum of voices and the patter of feet as she watched a blinking light slide out from among the others in the harbour. It rose higher and swung a little as it crept past the mole, then a cluster of lower lights lengthened into a row of yellow specks, and she could make out the West-coast liner's dusky hull that moved out with slanting spars faster into the faintly shining sea. Jacinta closed one hand as she leaned upon the parapet and watched it, until she turned with a little start at the sound of footsteps. She was, one could have fancied, not particularly pleased to see Muriel Gascoyne then.

"We were wondering what had become of you, and Mrs. Hatherly is waiting to go home," said the latter. Then she turned and caught a glimpse of the moving lights that were closing in on one another and growing dim again. "That must be the African boat?"

"It is. She is taking out six careless sailormen whose lives are, perhaps, after all, of some value to them."

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Muriel looked at her, and wished she could see her face. "Every one of them may be of some value to somebody else."

"I suppose so," and Jacinta laughed curiously. "You obvious people are now and then to be envied, Muriel."

"If there is anything you would like to tell me——" and Muriel laid a hand upon her arm with a gesture of sympathy.

"There isn't. We all have our discontented fits, and mine is, no doubt, more than usually unreasonable since everything has turned out as I wanted it."

Then she rose and turned towards the stairway with a little laugh which Muriel fancied had a hint of pride in it. "I really don't think I would have had anything done differently, after all, and now I must not keep Mrs. Hatherly waiting."

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CHAPTER XI THE LAND OF THE SHADOW

It was towards the end of the afternoon when the skipper of the West-coast mailboat, peering through his glasses, made out two palms that rose apparently straight out of the sea. He watched them for some minutes, and then took their bearing carefully upon the compass, before he rang for half speed and called Austin to the bridge.

"That's your island, and we'll run in until I get under six fathoms," he said. "After that it will have to be the surfboat, and I fancy you will be very wet when you get ashore."

It seemed to Austin that this was more than probable, for although there was not an air of wind to wrinkle it, a long heave came up in vast, slow undulations out of the southern horizon, and the little mailboat swung over them with sharply slanted spars and funnel. She stopped once for a few moments while the deep-sea lead plunged from her fore-castle, and then, with propeller throbbing slowly, crept on again. She had come out of her course already under the terms of the bargain Austin had made with the Las Palmas agent, for some of those steamers have the option of stopping for odd boatloads of cargo and passengers wherever they can be found along the surf-swept beaches, and since no offer he could make would have tempted her skipper to venture further in among the shoals, Austin had fixed upon that island as the nearest point of access to the *Cumbria*. He did not, however, know how he was to reach her when he got there.

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In the meanwhile they were slowly raising the land, or the nearest approach to it to be found in that part of Africa, which consists of mire and mangroves intersected everywhere by lanes of water. It lay ahead, a grey smear streaked with drifting mist against which the palms that had now grown into a cluster rose dim and indistinct, and a thin white line stretched between themselves and it. The skipper appeared to watch the latter anxiously.

"There's considerable surf running in on the beach, and I'm a little uneasy about my boat," he said. "I suppose it wouldn't suit you to go on with us, and look for a better place to get ashore to-morrow?"

"No," said Austin, decisively. "I'm far enough from where I'm going already, and one would scarcely fancy that there are many facilities for getting about in this country."

The skipper made a little gesture of resignation. "That's a fact," he said. "Well, I can't go back on the agent, but if the boat turns you and the boys out before you get there you can't blame me."

Austin laughed. He had got many a wet jacket, and had once or twice had to swim for it, in the surf of the Canary beaches, though he was quite aware that there are very few places where the sea runs in and breaks as it does on the hammered coast of Western Africa. Indeed, as he watched the blur of steamy mangroves grow clearer, and the filmy spouting increase in whiteness, he could have fancied that nature, in placing that barrier of tumbling foam along its shore, had meant it as a warning that the white man was not wanted there. The air was hot and heavy, the sky a dingy grey, the sea a dim, slatey green, and there came off across the steep heave a dull booming like the sound of distant thunder.

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It was not an encouraging prospect, and Austin knew from what he had heard about the country that he was not likely to be more favourably impressed with it upon closer acquaintance. He also felt that if there was not quite so much at stake he could very willingly leave the salvaging of the *Cumbria* to Jefferson and take the next steamer back again. He could fix upon no sufficient reason for his being there at all, since the very uncertain profits on a quarter share in the venture did not account for it. In one respect, also, Jacinta's favourable opinion could scarcely be of any practical value to him, since she would naturally marry a man of means by and by, and forget all about him. Still, she had, dropping now and then a barbed word which rankled in his memory, striven to stir him to endeavour; and now he was watching the spray drive across a beach of Western Africa, while he wondered what the result of it all would be, and whether he or the men he had brought with him would escape the fever. So far as he was concerned, it did not seem to greatly matter. He had taken life easily, but he realised that it had very little to offer him, and it was, perhaps, fortunate that he did so, since it is, as a rule, broken men and those who have nothing to fall back upon who accomplish what is most worth doing in the lands that lie beneath the shadow.

In any case, it was clear that he had broken down the last bridge behind him when the mailboat stopped and lay rolling more wildly than ever athwart the long swell. A big surfboat sank down

her side amidst a clatter of blocks and complaining of davit-falls, down which a cluster of almost naked black men slid on board. It was not an easy matter to descend after them. The steamer rolled one way, the boat another, while the latter swung up one moment almost level with her rail and swooped down beneath a fathom of streaming side the next. Austin, Bill, the fireman, and the Canarios, however, accomplished it, and there was a waving of hats among the cluster of passengers who watched them above. Then the negroes, perched six or seven on either side, took up the paddles, and Austin was sensible of a momentary sinking of his heart as the boat slid out from the rolling steamer. She was a part of the civilisation he had been accustomed to, and when a sonorous blast of her whistle came throbbing after him in farewell he sighed.

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He would, however, at least not look behind, and sitting in the stern-sheets, out of the paddlers' way, he tossed the Canarios a bundle of maize-husk cigarettes, and passed one to Bill, the fireman, who glanced at it scornfully. Then he made himself as comfortable as he could upon the box of dynamite while he lighted another, for that compound of nitro-glycerine is supposed to require a detonator, and nobody is very particular who has lived in Spain. The black men wanted cigarettes, too, but Austin did not hand them any. The island was still a good way off, and it seemed to him advisable that they should devote their attention to their paddling.

They did it, swaying rhythmically, with toes in a loop of fibre, and naked black bodies that straightened suddenly and bent again, while some kept up a measured hissing and the rest broke into a little doleful song. A brawny man, with a blue stripe down his forehead, stood upright grasping the sculling oar astern, and the boat swung along smoothly, with big, dim slopes of water rolling up astern of her. They, however, grew steeper as she drew in with the shore, and the easy dip and swing became a succession of fierce rushes, during which she drove onwards, lifted high, with the foam seething to her gunwale, and then swooped suddenly into the hollow. When she did so Austin, glancing aft, could see a great slope of water that grew steeper and steeper as it came speeding after her.

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Then the slopes became ridges that frothed above and roared, and the paddles whirled faster, while the big muscles bunched beneath the helmsman's skin, and the veins began to stand out on his sable forehead. The boat no longer sailed inshore. She sped like a toboggan on an icy slide, though it seemed to Austin that the comparison was faulty, because she went fastest uphill, while when he rose upright for a moment he could see no shore at all. There was only a succession of parallel white ridges in front of them and a filmy cloud of spray. The afternoon was also wearing through, and the vapours from the steaming swamps obscured the dingy heavens.

It was even less consoling to glance astern, for the surf that sweeps the fever coast was evidently rather worse than usual that day, as it is now and then for no very apparent reason. The ridges had become walls, with great frothing crests and sides that were smeared with spumy lines. They had the vast, slow lift and fall of the ocean behind them, and were running up a smoothly slanted plane of shoals.

The black men paddled faster, and they no longer sang. They hissed and shrieked and whistled, while the thud of their paddles rose in a strenuous rhythm like the tapping of a great drum, and the craft careered at furious speed beneath them, driven by the sea. The foam stood feet above her now when she sped along, very like an arrow, and boiled in over her high, pointed stern every now and then. There was a foot of brine inside her that swilled to and fro, and every man was dripping, while the roar of the tumbling rollers had grown bewildering. They appeared to be crumbling upon hammered sand not very far away.

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How the negroes meant to beach her, Austin did not know, and he was content that it was their business and not his. The Canarios were evidently uneasy, for, sailormen as they were, they had never run through surf like this; but they were also of Iberian extraction, and, when discussion is clearly useless, and the last crisis must be faced, the Spaniard is, at least, as capable of calm resignation as most other men. In any case, there is certainly no better boat-boy than the West African Kroo, and Austin left the affair to the helmsman, when there was a sudden horrifying crash that threw three or four of the paddlers down together. It was evident that they had touched bottom, but, fortunately for them, the swirl of the shore-running sea dragged them off again, and they went up, not more than half swamped, sideways, with the foam seething into her, on the next roller. Then the spouting chaos about them seemed to suddenly melt away, and Austin, wiping the water from his eyes, saw that they were sliding round a sandy beach into a little bay.

In another few minutes they were out on the sand, though they toiled for the next half hour helping the negroes to tilt the great boat and run her in again when they had emptied the water out of her. It was done at last, and Austin felt almost sorry, while he was once more sensible of vague but unpleasant misgivings when the negroes drove her lurching out into the spray. Night was not very far away, and he had no notion of where he was to sleep, or what he was to eat, for that matter, since the provisions the steward had given him were, for the most part, saturated. A little muddy creek oozed down amidst the mangroves across the bay, and there were a few huts, apparently made of rammed soil, beside it, as well as a canoe. The light was going when they reached them, and Bill, who went into the nearest, came out suddenly.

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"There's a dead nigger inside," he said.

Austin looked at him with a little smile. He had reasons for surmising that the man's nerves were good, but his voice had an uncertain tone in it, and his eyes were anxious.

"Well," he said, "I suppose one must expect to come across a dead nigger now and then in this country."

Bill glanced furtively over his shoulder towards the hut, as though he desired to be rather farther away from it.

"That one wasn't nice to look at," he said. "What did they leave him there for when there's a creek just outside the door, and where are the rest of them? I'd like to know what he died of. It might be catchin'."

Austin was once more sensible of a little thrill of apprehension as he looked about him and considered the question. On the one side a tuft of palms dominated the narrow strip of sand, but the little ridge of high land behind it was covered with apparently impenetrable jungle. Elsewhere the dingy mangroves rose from black depths of mire on slimy roots and pale stems that glimmered, blanched, amidst the drifting steam that clung about them. Night was close at hand, and, though there was no sign of the land breeze yet, the air was thick and heavy with a hot, sour smell. The clamour of the surf made the deep silence more apparent, for there was no sound of life about the clustered huts. Austin knew that the black man is frequently stricken by the pestilence, and as he stood there on the little strip of desolate beach he felt his courage melting away from him. The Canarios he also saw were standing close together and murmuring excitedly, while every now and then one of them would glance askance at the huts.

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"If there was any niggers but dead ones in the place they'd have been out by now," said Bill.

"The *Cumbria* should lie about north from here up the biggest creek," said Austin. "If we borrowed the canoe yonder you could find your way to her?"

"I'd try that, or anything, so long as it was to get out of this."

He glanced towards the hut again, and Austin, who could not quite explain it, then or afterwards, became sensible that if he waited much longer he would say or do something that would not be seemly in one who was there as leader. He felt that had he been alone he would probably have turned and run.

"Well," he said, as quietly as he could contrive, "we will run the canoe down. I believe some of the things they get are infectious now and then."

He had no need to repeat the order. The Canarios jumped at the word, and in another few minutes they had launched the canoe and were paddling her out of the creek clumsily, as men unaccustomed to the oar might do. It opened into a wider one, through which the heave of the sea pulsed languidly, until they crawled round a point and the streamy mangroves closed in on them. Then suddenly the thick, hot darkness fell.

They moored the canoe to a slimy stem, and lay down in her, packed like herrings; but in spite of the mosquitoes Austin slept a little of the night. He was glad when all the swamps steamed again as the dawn broke suddenly upon them; and when they had eaten they took up the paddles. The mists thinned and melted, the sun that sucked the damp from their dew-soaked clothing scorched their skin, and the glare from the yellow water became intolerable. Still, it was evident that it would not be advisable to waste any time, and through the long hot hours the canoe crept on.

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Now she slid into steamy shadow among the mangrove islets, skirting belts of mire, and now crept, a slender strip of hull, packed with wearied and perspiring humanity, across broad reaches of flaming water that moved on inland under her, streaked with smears of yellow foam. It was evident to Austin that the flood tide ran longer than usual there, as it sometimes does about an island, or the Guinea stream had backed it up along the shore. The stream, however, did not only set up the creek, but slid through the forest, where the trees rose on arched roots above the water; and here and there they had to paddle hard to avoid being drawn into branch-roofed tunnels that smelt like open sewers. The refuse of leagues of forest seemed to lie rotting there.

By afternoon Austin's hands were bleeding, and one of his knees was raw where he pressed it as a point of resistance to paddle from on the craft's bottom; but he took his place when his turn came, though his eyes were dazzled, and the headache that had crept upon him was growing insufferable. He was now distinctly anxious as to when they would reach the *Cumbria*, for, though Bill said she lay up a big muddy creek north of the island, he appeared by no means sure that was the one, and Austin felt he could not logically blame him. Creeks, it was evident, were bewilderingly plentiful in that country, and there were no distinctive features in the scenery. Dingy, white-stemmed mangroves, fermenting mire, and yellow water, were all the same, and as they crept on past bend and island there was no sign of change.

The shadows lay black upon the water when they stopped again, all of them horribly cramped, and aching in every limb; but when they had sat portentously silent, with the craft moored to a mangrove root, for half an hour or so, Bill stood up in the bow.

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"Did you hear anything, Mr. Austin?" he asked.

Austin fancied that he did, though for a moment or two he was not sure that it was not the ticking of his watch, for the sound, which was very faint, had a beat in it. Then it grew a little louder, and he felt a curious thrill of satisfaction.

"Engines!" he said sharply. "It's the launch."

She swung out, apparently from the mangroves, in another few minutes, and came on towards them, clanking and wheezing horribly, with the yellow foam piled about her, but Austin felt that he had never seen anything more welcome than that strip of mire-daubed hull with the plume of smoke streaming away from it. Then she stopped close alongside them, and Austin shook hands with Tom as he climbed on board.

"Did you come across any niggers, sir?" asked the latter.

"No," said Austin. "How's Mr. Jefferson?"

"Comin' round," said Tom, with a grin. "I've worked most of the fever—an' the sunstroke—out of him. It was a big load off me when, as I took him his mixture one morning, he looks up at me. 'Who the devil are you poisoning?' says he, quite sensible, an' like himself again."

"You were coming down to look for us?"

"We were—an' uncommonly glad to see you. The blame niggers is getting aggravating. Came down, two canoe loads of 'em, a night or two ago, an' only sheered off when we tumbled one o' them over with a big lump o' coal. Wall-eye dropped it on to the man in the bow of her from the bridge, an' so far as we could make out it doubled him up considerable."

Wall-eye was apparently the squinting Spaniard who acted as fireman, and when he saw Tom glance at him he stood up, with a grimy hand clenched, and unloosed a flood of Castilian invective. Austin, who smiled as he watched him, felt that while most of what he said could not be effectively rendered into cold Anglo-Saxon, it was probably more or less warranted. In the meanwhile the launch was coming round with backed propeller, and in another moment or two she was clanking away into the darkness that descended suddenly, towards the *Cumbria*.

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CHAPTER XII NOCTURNAL VISITORS

Jefferson was standing at the open door of the house beneath the *Cumbria's* bridge when Austin first caught sight of him, as he groped his way forward along the slanted deck. The black, impenetrable obscurity that descends upon the tropic swamps when the air is full of vapour, hung over the stranded steamer, and the man's gaunt figure cut with harsh sharpness against the stream of light. The thin duck he wore clung about him, soaked with perspiration and the all-pervading damp, emphasising the attenuated spareness of his frame, and Austin could almost have fancied it was a draped skeleton he was gazing at. Still, he was a trifle reassured when he felt the firm grasp of a hot, bony hand.

"So you have come?" said the American. "It's good to get a grip of you. I guessed you would."

He drew Austin into the deck-house, and they sat down opposite each other, and said nothing for almost a minute, though there was a little smile in Jefferson's face as he leaned back against the bulkhead. His hair, which had grown long since he left Las Palmas, hung low and wet upon his forehead, and the big cheek bones showed through the tight-stretched skin, which was blanched, though there was a faint yellow tinge in it which relieved its dead whiteness. This had its significance, for the coast fever has not infrequently an unpleasant after effect upon the white man's constitution.

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"It isn't quite a sanatorium," he said, as though he guessed his comrade's thoughts. "Port Royal, Santos, Panama—I know them all—aren't a patch on these swamps. Still, we needn't worry now you have come."

Austin smiled as he looked at him. "To be correct, I'm not quite sure that I did," he said, reflectively. "I mean, it wasn't exactly because I wished to."

"Ah!" said Jefferson, as comprehension dawned on him. "Then the quarter share—that offer stands good—didn't bring you? Well, I was wondering if she would make you go."

Austin was a trifle astonished, for, though he had a somewhat hardly acquired acquaintance with human nature, it had never occurred to him that the patronage Jacinta extended to her masculine friends naturally attracted some attention, or that in this particular case the onlookers might most clearly grasp the points of the game.

"I can't quite see why she should have wanted me to," he said.

There was another brief silence, during which the men looked at one another. This was not a subject either of them had meant to talk about. Indeed, it was one which, under different circumstances, they would have kept carefully clear of, but both realised that conventional niceties did not count for much just then: They were merely men who had henceforth to face the grim realities of existence with the shadow of death upon them, and they knew that the primitive humanity in them would become apparent as the veneer wore through.

"Still," said Jefferson, "I can think of one reason. There was a time when Muriel was good to her, and Jacinta can't forget it. She's not that kind. The first day I met her I felt that she was taking stock of me, and I knew I'd passed muster when she made you stop the *Estremadura*. Perhaps, it wasn't very much in itself, but I was thankful. I've done a few tough things in my time, but I know I'd never have got Muriel if that girl had been against me. Still, it wasn't altogether because of Muriel she sent you."

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Austin showed his astonishment this time, and Jefferson smiled. "You can't quite figure how I came to understand a thing of that kind? Well, some of you smart folks have made the same mistake before. You don't seem to remember when you waste ten minutes working a traverse round what you could say in one, that however you dress it up, human nature's much the same. Now you're astonished at me. I'm talking. Sometimes I feel I have to. You want to know just why she really sent you?"

"To be frank, I have asked myself the question, and couldn't be quite sure it was altogether because she wanted me to get this unfortunate steamboat off."

"It wasn't. You're getting as near to it as one could expect of an Englishman. It hurts some of you to let anybody know what you really think. Well, I'll try to make my notion clear to you. There was a lady in France who threw her glove among the lions long ago, but the man who went down for it was of no great account after all. He hadn't sense enough to see the point of the thing."

"There were apparently folks who sympathised with him," said Austin, with a reflective air. "I'm not sure the man could reasonably have been expected to go at all, since the lady in question evidently only wished to show everybody how far he would venture to please her."

"Now it seems to me quite likely that she meant to do a good deal more. The man may have been content to fool his time away making pretty speeches to the court ladies and walking round dressed in silk while the rest of them rode out in steel. Can't you fancy that she wanted him to find out that he had the grit of the boldest of them, and could do something worth while, too? She probably knew he had, or she would never have sent him."

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A little colour crept into Austin's face, but he laughed. "One could, no doubt, imagine a good many other reasons, and most of them would probably be as wide of the mark. Any way, they don't concern us. If the thing ever happened, it was a very long while ago. We know better now."

"Well, I guess you can't help it," and there was a twinkle in Jefferson's eyes. "Your shell's quite a good fit, and you don't like to come out of it, though I almost thought you were going to a moment or two ago."

"I don't like to be pulled out. One feels that it isn't decent. The shell's the best of some of us," said Austin.

"Then we'll come down to business. You brought the giant powder?"

"A case of it, with fuses and detonators," and Austin's relief at the change of subject was evident. "Are you contemplating blowing her up?"

"No, sir. She's worth too much. It is, however, quite likely that we'll make a hole in the mangrove forest and shake up the bottom of this creek. That is, when we're ready. There's a good deal to be put through first."

"Have you found the gum?"

"I haven't looked. She's full to the orlops, and we haven't started in to pump her out. Didn't seem much use in trying while she had so much weight in her, and we'll want all the coal we've got. When we have hove most of it and the oil out I'll start the big centrifugal. You see, she hasn't a donkey on deck. That's why, though it cost me a good deal, I bought the locomotive boiler. You folks have a library of Shipping Acts, but you don't show much sense when you let anything under 2,000 tons go to sea with her pumps run from the main engines. When you most want steam for pumping it's when your fires are drowning out."

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It was once more evident to Austin that Jefferson knew his business, and had foreseen most of the difficulties he would have to grapple with. Still, he fancied, by his face, that he had not quite anticipated all.

"Where are you putting the oil you take out of her?" he asked.

"On a strip of sand up a creek. That's one of the few things that are worrying me. We'll have to get it on board as soon as we float her off when the rain comes, or the creek will get it ahead of us. The next point is that it will be a little rough on the men who have to watch it after working all day long."

"To watch it! Who is likely to meddle with it here?"

"Niggers," said Jefferson drily. "They cleaned most everything they could come at off the boat before I got to her, but they couldn't break out cargo with the water in her, and didn't know enough to get at the provisions in the lazaret. Still, while these particular swamps don't seem to belong to anybody, there's trade everywhere, and oil's a marketable commodity."

"Where's the Frenchman who chartered the *Cumbria*?"

"Dead. I've been up to his place in the launch. I found it caved in, and trees growing up in it already. Nature straightens things up quite smartly in this country. Any way, I'll show you round to-morrow; and, in the meanwhile, it's about time that Spaniard brought you some supper."

"It seems to me that everybody who had anything to do with this unfortunate vessel invariably died."

Jefferson smiled a trifle grimly. "That's a fact," he said.

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Then one of the Canarios brought in a simple meal, and when they had eaten and talked for another hour, Austin stretched himself out on the settee and Jefferson climbed into his slanted bunk. They left the light burning and the door wide open, and both of them lay down dressed as they were; but while Jefferson seemed to fall into a somewhat restless doze, Austin found that sleep fled the further from him the more he courted it that night. It was very hot, for one thing, and stranded steamer and mangrove forest alike seemed filled with mysterious noises that stirred his imagination and disturbed his rest. It was only by a strenuous effort he lay still for a couple of hours, and then, rising softly, with a little sigh, went out into the night.

The darkness closed about him, black and impenetrable, when he stepped out of the stream of light before the deck-house door, and the feeble flame of the match he struck to light his pipe as he leaned upon the rail only made it more apparent. He could see nothing whatever when the match went out, but the oily gurgle of the creek beneath him suggested the height of the steamer's hove-up side. She lay, so Jefferson had told him, with her inshore bilge deep in the mire, and two big derrick-booms slung from the wire hawser that ran from her stern to the mangroves along what should have been the bank, as a precaution against any nocturnal call by negroes in canoes. Her outshore side, which he looked down from, was, he surmised by the slant of deck, between ten and fifteen feet above the creek.

It was a little cooler there, and the sounds were less disquieting than they had been in the room. He could localise and identify some of them now—the splash of falling moisture, the trickle of the stream, and the soft fanning of unseen wings as one of the great bats which abound in that country stooped towards the light. Still, behind these were mysterious splashings among the mangroves and wallowings in the creek, while the thick, hot darkness seemed to pulse with life. He could almost fancy he heard the breathing of unseen things, and it did not seem strange to him that the dusky inhabitants of that country should believe in malevolent deities. Indeed, as he leaned upon the rail, with its darkness enfolding him, he was troubled by a sense of his own insignificance and a longing to escape from that abode of fear and shadow. Other men, including those who had come out with a salvage expedition, had found the floating of the *Cumbria* too big a thing for them, and he already understood that there are parts of the tropics where the white man is apt to find his courage melt away from him as well as his bodily vigour.

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Then he commenced to wonder dispassionately why Jacinta had sent him, or if he had, after all, been warranted in considering that she had done so. She had, though he admitted it unwillingly, at least, not bidden him go, but she had certainly done what she could to make him understand that he was wasting his life on board the *Estremadura*. It would have been a consolation to feel that he was obeying her command and doing her a definite service, if it was only to bring Jefferson home to Muriel Gascoyne; but she had not laid one upon him, and even Jefferson seemed to understand that her purpose went further.

He was less pleased with the fancy that Jacinta had undertaken what she apparently considered his reformation. He had been, in some respects, content as he was, for while there was no other woman he had the same regard for, he had forced himself to recognise that it was quite out of the question that she should ever entertain more than kindness for him. Austin could be practical, and remembered that young women with her advantages, as a rule, looked higher than a steamboat purser, while even if Jefferson succeeded in his venture, and he went home with four or five thousand pounds, which appeared just then distinctly unlikely, Jacinta was the only daughter of a man whose income was supposed to amount to as much a year.

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Austin sighed a little as he decided that he did not really know why he had come. In the meanwhile he was there, and there was nothing to be gained by being sorry, especially as he could not even console himself with the fancy that Jacinta was grieving over him. She was probably, as usual, far too busy by that time with somebody else's affairs. He was also averse from permitting himself to feel any glow of self-congratulation over the fancy that he was doing a chivalrous thing. In fact, he saw it with realistic clearness of vision as one that was wholly nonsensical, and it did not occur to him that the essence of all that was best in the old knightly days might be surviving still, and, indeed, live on, indestructible, even in the hearts of practical, undemonstrative Englishmen, as well as garlic-scented Spaniards, and seafaring Americans. Still, when he had yielded himself instinctively to Jacinta's will he had vaguely realised that, after all, the bonds of service are now and then more profitable to a man than dominion.

In the meanwhile the damp soaked through his clothing, and his physical nature shrank from the hot steaminess and the sour odours of putrefaction. It was unpleasant to stand there in that thick darkness, and even a little hard upon the nerves, but he had had enough of the deck-house, and he could not sleep, which is by no means an unusual difficulty with white men in the tropics. It was a relief when at last a sound that grew louder fixed his attention, and resolved itself into a measured thudding. Here were evidently canoes coming down the creek, but Austin was a little uncertain what to do. He had no wish to rouse the worn-out men, who probably needed all the sleep they could get, if this was a usual occurrence; but it did not appear advisable that there

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should be nobody but himself on deck in case the canoes ran alongside. He was considering what he should do when Jefferson, who held a glinting object in his hand, appeared in the door of the deck-house. Then there was a pattering of feet on a ladder below, and another dim figure materialised out of the darkness.

"That — Funnel-paint come back again," said the half-seen man.

Jefferson laughed unpleasantly. "He's getting monotonous, but he's taking steep chances this time."

The beat of paddles slackened a little, there was a murmur of voices beneath the steamer's side, and Jefferson leaned out, looking down into the impenetrable blackness beneath him. A scraping sound came out of it, and apparently moved along, while, when the half-seen man thrust a big block of coal upon him, Austin turned and strode softly after Jefferson, who walked forward beside the rail.

"Better let him have it now, sir," said the other man. "She's quite low on the other quarter, and if they try swimming round her stern the booms won't stop them."

Then there was a vivid streak in the darkness, and a detonation that was twice repeated, while Austin, who hurled his lump of coal down with all his strength, caught a whiff of acrid smoke. There was also a splash below, and a confused clamour that was lost in the hasty thud of paddles as the invisible canoes got away. Then, while the Canarios came floundering across the deck, a single voice rose up.

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"Bimeby we done lib for cut you t'roat!" it said.

"Oh, go to the devil!" said Jefferson, and the big revolver flashed again.

There was no answer, and the splash of paddles slowly died away. It was evident that the affair was over, and Austin fancied that nobody was much the worse. Jefferson sauntered towards him snapping the spent shells out of his pistol.

"Funnel-paint is getting on my nerves. I'll have to drop half a stick of giant powder on him next time he comes," he said.

"He didn't make much of a show," said Austin. "You think he meant to come on board?"

"If there had been nobody round he would have done so, but how far he'd have gone then is another question. He probably knows that nigger stockades are apt to get blown up when a white man disappears, and it's quite likely his nerve would have failed him. Any way, he's hanging out at a village up the creek, and we'll probably go round to-morrow with some giant powder and make a protest. In the meanwhile, I don't know any reason why you shouldn't go to sleep again."

Austin went back with him to the house beneath the bridge, and, though it was not perceptibly cooler, found sleep come to him. His vague apprehensions had vanished in the face of a definite peril.

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CHAPTER XIII

TOIL

A faint light was creeping into the skipper's room when Austin awakened, and, seeing his comrade's berth unoccupied, went out on deck. The swamps were wrapped in woolly vapour, and a column of dingy smoke went up straight and unwavering from the funnel of the locomotive boiler. The hot land breeze had died away, and it would be some time yet before that from the sea set in. In the meanwhile it was almost cool, and very still; so still, in fact, that Austin was startled when a flock of parrots, invisible in the mist, swept past, screaming, overhead.

Then the sounds of man's activity suddenly commenced, for there was a clatter forward where the Spaniards flung the loose covers from the hatch, and a harsh rattle of chain mingled with the soft pattering of their naked feet. In another few moments a sharp, musical clinking broke out, and Austin saw Tom, who had served as a steamer's donkey-man, straighten his bent back when a rush of white vapour whirled with a strident hissing about the locomotive boiler, which now drove the winch. He grinned at Austin, and glanced at the misty creek, far down which a faint screaming was dying away.

"Those parrots must be — silly things," he said. "What d' they want to live here for when they can fly?"

Austin, who decided that there was some reason in the query, strolled round the house, and came upon Jefferson sitting with his back to it and the box of dynamite on the deck in front of him. He looked gaunter and more haggard than ever in the daylight, but he was busy pinching down a copper cap upon a strip of snaky fuse, which he proceeded to carefully embed in a roll of semi-

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plastic material that looked very like a candle made of yellow wax.

"What are you doing?" asked Austin.

"Nipping on a couple of detonators," said Jefferson. "Stand clear of the one on the deck. They're lined with mercury fulminate, and you want to take your shoes off when you come near that. Giant powder's innocent by comparison. I mean to try a stick or two of this consignment."

"What are you going to try it on?" asked Austin, who stepped back a pace or two expeditiously.

Jefferson looked up with a little grim smile. "On the house of the headman of the village where Funnel-paint lives," he said. "If we can get in a good morning's work, we'll go up and remonstrate with him this afternoon. You might take that stick of powder and fuse and wrap it up in something."

Austin picked up the yellow roll, and then held it as far as he conveniently could from him, while Jefferson laughed.

"I guess you needn't worry. You could pound it with a hammer, or put it in the fire, and it wouldn't show fight—that is, ninety-nine times out of the hundred," he said. "Still, there might be considerable trouble on the other one. The sure way to stir it up is to pat a shred of it with a piece of wood, though the man who tries it is scarcely likely to see what it does."

Austin got rid of the dynamite as speedily as he could, and when he came back one of the Spaniards was laying out breakfast on the deck. It was not a sumptuous meal, consisting, as it did, of coffee, a can of meat that Austin fancied was tainted, ship's bread, which is biscuit, and a pale fluid that had presumably been butter; but he did not feel hungry, and Jefferson ate little. In the meanwhile a blaze of light beat through the mists which melted under it, and flaming yellow creek and dingy mangroves sprang suddenly into being as by the unrolling of a transformation scene. Their pale stems dripped slime, and just there their foliage was blotched and spotted as with smears of flour. It gave them a diseased appearance, and Austin, who felt he loathed the sight of them already, remembered that where the mangrove grows the white man not infrequently dies. He was almost glad when breakfast was over and Jefferson rose.

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"I want to be quite clear," he said. "You're going to see this thing out with me on a quarter share?"

"I am," said Austin. "Anyway, I'll do what I can, though I'm afraid I haven't given the question of the share much consideration."

Jefferson looked at him intently. "Well," he said, "I've worried a good deal about my three-quarters. That's what I came for, and if we float her off you'll get yours, just as sure as you'll earn it—hard. It's a big thing you're going into, and you'll find it calling on all the grit that's in you. We're on results here, and, now you understand that, we'll start in."

He went to the forward winch, and Austin, obeying his directions, descended to the hold with a vague recognition of the fact that there was a change in Jefferson. As coaling clerk in Grand Canary, Austin had found him a quiet and somewhat reserved man, who conducted himself in everything, at least, as conventionally as most of his English friends in that island. Now it was as though he had sloughed off the veneer so that the primitive man beneath it appeared, which is a thing that not infrequently happens in such places as the swamps he was toiling in. His voice, even, was different. It was harsh, with a suggestion of command; and the fierce, resolute nature of the man became revealed in it and the penetrating glance of his steady eyes.

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Austin, however, discovered that he had very little time to think of Jefferson. The Spaniards were on results, too, and when the chain sling came rattling down the strenuous toil began. The hold was dim and shadowy, as well as insufferably hot, and filled with nauseating smells. The tiers of barrels slanted so that one could scarcely stand on them, but when somebody gave Austin a handspike he took his place with the rest, and set about prizing loose the puncheons so that they could get a sling round them or the hoisting-crabs on the stave-ends. Now and then the crabs slipped, or tore through the oil-soaked wood when the great barrel swung up into the sunlight, and it came crashing down; while each time they made an opening, the rest slipped down, grinding upon each other, and squeezed it up again. Those on the lower side were water-borne, but the others were only held in place by those beneath them on the incline, and the men could not keep the untouched tiers intact as they would have done had the *Cumbria* been floating level.

For the first half hour, Austin, who had never undertaken manual toil before, felt that his task was beyond the strength of such a man as he. One can no more acquire facility in labour without some training than he can in an art or craft, and again and again his untaught muscles failed to obey the prompting of his will. Then the heavy puncheon generally rolled back and bruised him, or the slipping handspike left its mark upon his skin. It was probably fortunate that the Canarios were cheerful, deft-handed sailormen, courteous, too, and considerate in their own fashion, for that half hour was, in some respects, a bitter one. During it the man of taste and leisure had his comparative uselessness impressed upon him, for, while he gasped, and the dew of effort dripped from him, it was not alone the slackness of his soft muscles that became apparent, but his inferiority in quickness, and the intrepidity which on occasion risks crushed foot and hand or a broken limb. The men who surpassed him were also benighted aliens, but he remembered afterwards that there was not one among them who flung a jibe at him.

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Then it became a trifle easier. His nerves steadied, and the fits of gasping became less frequent

as he warmed to the work. It was, as Jefferson had mentioned, a big thing they had undertaken, a thing worth doing, even apart from what they might gain by it, and it occurred to him that somebody must toil brutally before anything of that kind in brought to its accomplishment. By and by the strain and stress of it, the swift flitting of half-naked figures, the upward lurch of the dripping puncheons, and the clanging of the winch commenced to fire his blood. There was, after all, a good deal of the primitive in him, and he had the capacity for finding delight in bodily toil which still lurks here and there in a cultured Englishman, and presently he flung his oil-stained jacket away. Then, in a momentary pause, his shirt was discarded, too, and he knotted his suspenders about his waist. When he fell in between the grinding puncheons one of them removed most of the light singlet from him, and he clambered out with a Berserker fit upon him. He had found his manhood, and vaguely recognised that the curse laid on man in Eden might be a privilege. Something had awakened in him he had not felt before, though he had run the *Estremadura's* lancha through the spouting surf, and had never been accounted a laggard in the strenuous English games. [Pg 147]

The chain slings came down faster and faster, while the hammerings of the winch rang insistently through their rattle. At any cost to the men below it must not be kept waiting. The blaze of brightness beneath the hatch became dazzling, and Austin felt his shoulders scorched as he passed through it. The iron deck above them shed down an intolerable heat, and still the olive-faced Canarios swayed, and splashed, and heaved amidst the barrels. Now and then a man said "Car-rai!" or in incongruous juxtaposition, "Ave Maria!" ejaculating it in gasps, but there was a puncheon ready when the sling came clashing down, and Jefferson's voice rang encouragingly through the din.

"Oh, hump yourselves! Send her up!" he said. "Vamos! Adelante! Dern your skins! More bareel!"

Bill grinned at Austin in one momentary stoppage. "The boss is himself again," he said. "He's shoving her along. We've got to make the time for our little trip this afternoon. Oh, howling—is that how you slew a puncheon? You'll manslaughter one of us next time. Cut her as she rolls."

Austin gasped with astonishment as well as relief when the winch stopped at last. The first half hour had appeared interminable, the other hours had fled, for he saw by the distance the glare of light had moved across the hold that the sun was overhead. Then he essayed to straighten himself, and when he had with some difficulty accomplished it went up the ladder with the rest. When he went out on deck Jefferson was sitting upon the drum of the winch, and smiled curiously as he scrutinised him. Austin, whose torn singlet fell away from him clitted with yellow oil, was almost naked to the waist, as well as very wet from the knees downwards. One of his canvas shoes had burst, and his hands were bleeding. He stood still, dazzled by the change of light, and blinked at his comrade. [Pg 148]

"Well," said Jefferson, reflectively, "I have seen men who looked smarter, but I guess you'll do. In fact, I'm beginning to feel sure of you."

"Thanks!" said Austin. "I suppose in one respect that's a compliment. Still, I almost think, or, at least, I did when I first went down there, that if I'd known what was in front of me I'd have stayed in Grand Canary."

Jefferson nodded with a curious little smile. "I wonder," he said, reflectively, "if you ever felt like that before?"

Austin considered a moment.

"I'm not going to make any admissions. You probably have?" he said.

"Quite often," and Jefferson laughed. "It's a thing that happens to most of us now and then. There are times when the contract looks very big and the man feels very small. In fact, it's sometimes hard to look straight at it and not back down. Still, in the case of this one, it has to be done."

"I suppose so!" said Austin, and then turned round. "Well, what is it, Bill?"

"Here's your shirt an' jacket," said the man. "If you don't want your skin to come off, you'd better put them on."

Austin, who thanked him, did so, and then fumbled in the pocket for a cigarette. The one he found was torn and crushed, but he contrived to light it, and flung himself down in the shadow of the rail. Jefferson, who watched him, grinned.

"You're getting your grip," he said. "Not long ago you'd have slung that thing into the creek. The man left the sir out, too. Perhaps you noticed it?"

"I did. Still, no doubt, after watching my efforts in the hold, he felt himself warranted. I didn't expect to find things quite the same here as they are at the Catalina." [Pg 149]

Jefferson laughed softly. "They're not. This is a blame risky co-operative venture, and when I made it so I put down a big stake on human nature. We're all on results, and partners in the thing. There's no respect in this ship. I don't want it. Why should any man touch his hat to me? Oh, I know we use the fist and handspike on American ships—when it's necessary—and I skipped round the *Sachem's* deck-house once with the cold steel an inch or two behind me; but that's not the point at all. I want a hundred cents' worth for my dollar from every man, and I'm going to get it, but I'm boss because I can drive a winch and break out cargo better than any of the rest of

them. At least, that's one big reason."

Austin would have grinned at this not very long ago. Jefferson expressed himself crudely, but Austin was disposed to be less critical after that morning's labour, and was commencing to realise that his comrade had, in fact, placed a heavy stake upon the reliability of seafaring humanity. A taint of suspicious distrust or petty treachery would, he felt, be sufficient to ruin the venture, for there was one pistol in the ship to enforce authority, and a dozen men, who might defy it, with wicked knives. It was also evident that the full dollars' worth would be demanded from every one of them. Still, Austin smiled.

"I scarcely think that's the American skipper's usual point of view, though, of course, it's a commendable one," he said. "After all, one has to admit that there is, perhaps, some foundation for the equality notion in a democratic country, but from what I know of yours, while you seem willing to act upon it in regard to Scandinavians, Teutons, Poles, and Englishmen, you make Indians and niggers an exception."

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"Exactly! They were made different, and they stop outside. I was crowding her a little this morning to save time, because I mean to remonstrate with one of them this afternoon. This ship's mine; I bought her with good money, and there may be a balance out that's to be settled with blood as well. Am I to sit down while the black scum take her from me?"

"I really think that the longer one looks at this contract the bigger it gets," said Austin, reflectively.

Jefferson glanced at the dingy forest, flaming creek, and the *Cumbria's* slanted deck with a little glow in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "that's what gets hold of me. To worry a big contract through, is—life—to some kinds of men."

"Perhaps it is, but it was easier painting little pictures. Still, you see, when you marry Miss Gascoyne you'll have to go round with your shirt, and, perhaps, a frock coat on, and let up on this kind of thing. In fact, what you are doing isn't at all what the folks she is acquainted with would expect from a man with £20,000 in England."

Jefferson laughed, though there was a certain grimness in his face. "Well," he said, "there is a good deal to be done everywhere, and different ways of playing the game. A frock coat wouldn't stop a man making a show at one of them, although at first he mightn't find it comfortable. Life's much the same thing everywhere when you mean to take part in it and hustle. Any way, I've talked enough, and Wall-eye's coming along with the comida."

They ate the meal in silence. Austin was glad to rest, and sitting drowsily content in the shadow, he began to realise the boundless optimism and something of the adaptability of his companion. Jefferson had made an excellent coaling clerk at Las Palmas, though he knew nothing about the business, which demands a good deal of discretion, when he came there. He had also passed muster with Mrs. Hatherly and Muriel Gascoyne as what they no doubt called a gentleman, which was a manifestly harder thing, and here in Africa he was a ragged and fever-worn leader of primitive men, but clearly a successful one. It seemed to Austin that if he eventually aspired to become a local influence in any part of sheltered England he would also in all probability show up equally well.

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CHAPTER XIV

JEFFERSON'S REMONSTRANCE

They were not long over the meal, and when Austin thrust his plate aside, Jefferson, who had waited at least five minutes for him, rose with a little twinkle, which seemed to express whimsical resignation, in his eyes.

"And now there's something I'd rather leave alone to be done," he said. "The launch is ready, and we'll go up and remonstrate with those niggers. It's a little rough upon a man who is fond of a quiet life."

"One would scarcely have fancied that quietness had any great attraction for you," said Austin. "Still, you probably know what pleases you better than I do."

Jefferson laughed. "There are folks who seem to like being kicked, but it's a sensation that doesn't appeal to everybody."

"You have a case of dynamite, too. Now, I had once an air-gun sent me, a good many years ago, and I remember how I burned to go out and destroy the neighbours' cats with it."

The American's face grew a trifle grim, and he looked at him with half-closed eyes. "Well," he said, "I suppose that feeling's there, but in a sense you're wrong. It isn't the only one. We put up

a big bluff in coming here at all, and it's nerve, and nothing else, that will have to keep us where we are. There are no police or patrolmen in this country to fall back upon, and you have to face the cold truth, which is this: If one of those niggers clinched with you or me, he would mop the deck with us in about two minutes. It's not a nice thing to admit, but there it is."

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Austin looked thoughtful, as, indeed, he was, for Jefferson, who, it seemed, could look an unpleasant fact in the face, had gone straight to the bottom of the question, as he usually did. The white man's domination, it had to be admitted, largely depended upon his command of machine guns and magazine rifles, but they had none of these on board the *Cumbria*. They were no match for the negro as a muscular animal, and there was only left them what Jefferson called bluff, which apparently consisted of equal parts of hardihood and arrogance. Still, there are respects in which it is difficult to distinguish between it and genuine courage, and it was certainly apt to prove futile in that land without the latter. Austin realised that since there was nothing else available, they must do what they could with it, though this was far from pleasing him. He had a dislike for anything which savoured of assertive impudence.

They went up the creek in the little, clanking launch, eight limp and perspiring white men, with knives and iron bars, under a scorching sun that burned through their oil-stained garments. They slid through strips of shadow where the belts of mire they skirted bubbled with the emanations the heat sucked up from them, and slid across lake-like reaches where the yellow water was dazzling to look upon. All the time, endless ranks of mangroves crawled past them, and there was no sound but the presumptuous clanking of the engine to break the deep silence of the watery forest. The whole land seemed comatose with heat, and all that had its being in it probably was so, for it is at night that nature awakens in the swamps of the fever belt. Man alone was stirring, and the puny noise of his activity jarred for a few moments on the great stillness and then sank into it again.

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Austin sat huddled in the launch's stern-sheets with his senses dulled by the heat and glare, though the desolation of mire and mangroves reacted on him. He knew, as he sometimes admitted, a little about a good many things which were of no use to him, and he remembered then that the vast quadrilateral of Northern Africa west of Egypt had absorbed several civilisations long before the Portuguese saw its southern shores. They had vanished, and left no mark on it, and it was plain that in the great swamp belt, at least, the black man still lived very much as he had done when the first mangroves crept out into the sea. It is a primitive country, where man knows only the law of the jungle, and Jefferson, who grasped that fact, was apparently ready to act upon it in the usual primitive fashion.

There was, at first, no sign of life when the launch came into sight of a little village hemmed in by the swamps. It had its attractiveness in that country, for the clustering huts stood, half buried in foliage, beneath towering cottonwoods, with a glaring strip of sand in front of them. There were bananas, and, as Jefferson recognised, lime trees in between. Still, by the time they approached the beach men came floundering hastily out of the huts, and Austin was not greatly consoled by the sight of them. They were big men, and wore very little to conceal their splendid muscles. Some of them also carried long canoe paddles, and one or two had wicked, corkscrew-headed spears. Austin wondered, a little uneasily, whether they only speared fish with them, and looked round to see what effect their appearance had upon his companions.

It was apparently not a great one. Jefferson was quietly grim; Tom, the donkey-man, scornfully cheerful; while there was a little portentous glint in the Canarios' eyes. Austin fancied he was the only one who had the slightest doubt that anything their leader did would not be altogether warranted. This, however, was comprehensible, for he was aware that while the American's attitude towards the coloured people is, perhaps, not altogether what it should be, the Western pioneer never quite equalled the Iberian in his plan of subjugation. The Spaniard, at least, did not send out Indian agents, or dole out rations of very inferior beef.

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They landed without molestation, and straightened themselves to make what show they could, though there was nothing very imposing about any of the party. The climate had melted the stiffness out of them, and their garments, which were stained with oil, and rent by working cargo, clung about their limbs soaked with perspiration. They looked, Austin fancied, more like shipwrecked seamen than anything else. In fact, he felt almost ashamed of himself, and that it was the negroes' own fault if they did not unceremoniously fling them back into the creek. Still, he realised that they were men who probably held their lives in their hands, and had what appeared to be a singularly difficult task in front of them. They were there to make it clear to the headman that it would be wise of him to leave them alone, and Austin was quite willing to supplement Jeffersons' efforts in this, though he was by no means sure how it was to be accomplished. The negroes, so far as he could see, were regarding them with a kind of derisive toleration.

In the meanwhile they were moving forward between patches of bananas, and under a few glossy limes, while groups of dusky men kept pace with them behind, until they reached a broad strip of sand with a big cottonwood tree in the midst of it. There was a hut of rammed soil that appeared more pretentious than the rest in front of them, and a man stood waiting in the door of it. Jefferson stopped in the shadow when he saw him.

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"I'm going to sit down where it's cool," he said. "Any way, if that is their headman, I'd sooner he came out to us."

He sat down, with his back to the tree, while the rest clustered round him, a lean, dominant

figure, in spite of his haggard face and the state of his attire, and it seemed to Austin that there was a suggestion of arrogant forcefulness in his attitude. The headman stood quietly in his doorway, looking at him, while the negroes drew in a little closer. They now seemed uncertain what to make of these audacious strangers, and waited, glancing towards their leader, though there were, Austin fancied, forty or fifty of them.

"Is there anybody here, who speaks English?" asked Jefferson.

It appeared that there was, for all along that coast there is a constant demand for labour in the white men's factories, and a man who wore a piece of cloth hung from his shoulder instead of the waist-rag, stood forward at a sign from the headman. The latter had little cunning eyes set in a heavy, fleshy face, and he, too, wore a piece of cloth, a sheet of white cotton, which flowed about his tub-like body in graceful lines. Negroes, like other people, fatten when they seize authority and live in idleness upon the result of others' toil, for even the swamp belt heathen who asks very little from life must now and then work or starve. There are no charitable institutions to fall back upon in that country, where the indigent is apt to be belaboured by his neighbours' paddles.

Then the headman, who did not leave his hut, conferred with the interpreter, until the latter turned to Jefferson, whom he had, it seemed, already pitched upon as leader.

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"Them headman he done say—what the debbil you lib for here for?" he announced.

"We have come for Funnel-paint," said Jefferson.

It was evident that the negro did not understand whom he meant, but when Jefferson, assisted by the donkey-man, supplied him with a very unflattering description of the delinquent, comprehension seemed to dawn on him, and he once more conferred with his master.

"Him no one of we boy," he said. "Him dam bad 'teamboat bushman, sah. Lib for here two three day. Now lib for go away."

Austin, who understood that the term bushman was not used in a complimentary sense in those swamps, smiled as he noticed that seafaring men were evidently also regarded there with no great favour, and glanced at Jefferson inquiringly.

"He's probably lying," said the latter. "I've trailed Funnel-paint here, and there's nowhere else he could live. I've been round to see. Any way, he had a crowd of this rascal's boys with him when he came down to worry me. We'll let him have that to figure on."

It cost him some trouble to make his meaning clear to the negro, while when the latter in turn explained it to the headman, Austin noticed a retrograde movement among several of those about them. They seemed desirous of getting a little further away from the domineering white man.

"I want those boys," said Jefferson, indicating the negroes who had edged away. "Then I want some gum or ivory, or anything of that kind your headman has, as a token he'll send me down Funnel-paint as soon as he can catch him. He hasn't caught on to half of it. Help me out, Austin."

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Austin did what he could, and at last it became evident that the interpreter grasped their meaning. This time there was, however, a change in the attitude of the negro, which had hitherto appeared to be a trifle conciliatory.

"None of my boys have been near your steamer. Go away before we drive you out," was, at least, the gist of what he said.

Jefferson made a little contemptuous gesture, and pointed to one of the negroes. "Tell him I want those boys, and it would be wise of him to turn them up before the shadow crawls up to where that man is. If he doesn't, I'll let a Duppy, Ju-Ju, or whatever he calls his fetish devils, loose on him. He has about fifteen minutes to think the thing over in."

Even with the help of the donkey-man they were some time in making this comprehensible, and Austin glanced at his comrade when the headman's answer came. It was a curt and uncompromising *non possumus*, and Jefferson sighed.

"Of course," he said, "I saw it would come to this from the beginning, and in one way I'm not sorry. I don't know what I'd have done with Funnel-paint or his friends if I had got them, except that somehow I'd 'most have scared them out of their lives. Still, it seemed only decent to give the headman a chance for himself. Now it will suit us considerably better to scare him and the others all together. I'll wipe that house of his out of existence inside twenty minutes."

Austin glanced at the house. It was larger than the others, and comparatively well built, and, he fancied, probably of as much value to its owner as a white man's mansion would be to him. This was clearly not a time to be supersensitive, but he felt a trace of compunction.

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"I don't know that I'd go quite so far myself," he said. "After all, we're not sure that the headman is responsible."

"Then," said Jefferson, drily, "we'll make him, and you listen to me. We may have to do quite a few things that aren't pretty, and we have no use for sentimentality. We're just a handful of white men, with everything to grapple with, and we'll be left alone to do it while these devils are afraid of us, and not a moment longer. The fever may wipe half of us out at any time, and we have got to make our protest now."

"It's the giant-powder I'm sticking at. No doubt it's a little absurd of me—but I don't like it."

Jefferson laughed a trifle scornfully. "There's a good deal of what we call buncombe in most of you. You don't like things that don't—look—pretty, pistols among them. Well, am I to be trampled on whenever it happens that the other man is bigger than I?"

"The law is supposed to obviate that difficulty in a civilised community."

"The man who gets the verdict is usually the one with the biggest political pull or the most money, in the one I belong to, but that's not quite the point just now. If you have a notion that the game's all in our hands, look at them yonder."

Austin did so, and decided that, after all, Jefferson might be right. The negroes had clustered together, and there were more of them now, while all of them had spears or big canoe paddles. It was tolerably evident that any sign of vacillation would bring them down upon the handful of white men whose prestige alone had hitherto secured them from molestation. If they failed to maintain it, and had to depend upon their physical prowess, the result appeared as certain as it would be unpleasant. The affair had resolved itself into a case of what Jefferson termed bluff, a test of coolness and nerve, and Austin glanced a trifle anxiously at the Spaniards. They were, he fancied, a little uneasy, but it was clear that they had confidence in their leader, and they sat still, though he could see one or two of them fingering the wicked Canary knives. Their courage was, however, not of the kind that stands the tension of uncertainty well, and he commenced to long that the shadow would reach the trampled spot where the man Jefferson pointed to had stood.

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In the meanwhile it was creeping slowly across the hot white sand, and he felt his heart beat as he watched it and the negroes, who commenced to murmur and move uneasily. The white man's immobility had its effect on them, and it seemed that Jefferson had done wisely in confiding in the latter's ability to bear the longer strain. Still, Austin was not sure that the impatience of the Spaniards might not spoil everything after all. As regarded himself, he began to feel a curious and almost dispassionate interest in the affair which almost prevented him considering his personal part in it. He also noticed the intensity of the sunlight, and the blueness of the shadows among the trees, as well as the mirror-like flashing of the creek. It was, he fancied, the artistic temperament asserting itself. Then he felt a little quiver run through him when Jefferson stood up.

"We have to get it done," he said. "Keep those Canarios close behind me."

They moved forward in a little phalanx, carrying staves and iron bars, though Austin knew that a word would bring out the twinkling steel; and, somewhat to his astonishment, the negroes fell back before them, and as they approached it the headman scuttled out of his house. Jefferson stopped outside it and taking a stick of yellow substance from his pocket, inserted it in a cranny he raked out in the wall. Then he lighted the strip of fuse and touched Austin's shoulder.

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"Get those fellows back to the creek, but they're not to run," he said. "The action of one stick of giant-powder is usually tolerably local, but I don't want any of the niggers hoisted, either. Where's that interpreter? Steady, we'll bring them down on us like a swarm of bees if they see us lighting out before they understand the thing."

There was, Austin fancied, not much time to waste; but he managed to impress the fact upon the Canarios that their haste must not be too evident, and to make the negro understand that it was perilous to approach the house. Then he overtook the Spaniards, and they moved back in a body towards the launch, and stopped close by the beach. The negroes also stood still, and all alike watched the little sputtering trail of smoke creep up the side of the house. It showed blue in the sunlight, though there was a pale sparkling in the midst of it.

Then a streak of light sprang out suddenly, and expanded into a blaze of radiance. After it came the detonation, and a rolling cloud of thin vapour, out of which there hurtled powdered soil and blocks of hard-rammed mud. The vapour thinned and melted, and Austin saw that there was no longer any front to the headman's house, while, as he watched it, most of the rest fell in. He looked round to see what effect it had on the negroes, but could not make out one of them. They had, it seemed, gone silently and in haste. Then he heard Jefferson sigh as with relief.

"Well," he said, "that's one thing done, and I'm glad we have come out of it with a whole skin. We'll light out before somebody shows them that we're only human, and spoils the thing."

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They went on board the launch, but Austin felt curiously limp as she clanked away down stream. The strain of the last half hour had told on him, though he had not felt it to the full at the time. It was two hours' steaming before they swept past the *Cumbria*, and a man on her fore-castle waved an arm to indicate that all was right on board her; but Austin would not have had the time any shorter. He felt it was just as well that village lay some distance from them. They went on to the strip of sand where Jefferson had stored the coal and oil, and when they reached it he stood up suddenly with an imprecation.

"Four puncheons gone! Funnel-paint has come out ahead of me, after all," he said. "Well, there's no use in worrying now, when he has got away with them; but I'm going to stop down here to-night in case he comes back again."

Then he swung the launch round with backed propeller, and in another few minutes they were steaming back up stream towards the *Cumbria*. A tent of some kind must be extemporised, for it is not wise of a white man to spend the night unprotected in the fever swamps.

CHAPTER XV

STARTING THE PUMP

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The bush was dim with steamy shade when Austin and Jefferson plodded along a little path behind the beach where the oil was stored. It was with difficulty they made their way, for the soil was firmer there, and a dense undergrowth sprang up among the big cottonwoods which replaced the mangroves. They were draped with creepers, and here and there an orchid flung its fantastic blossoms about a rotting limb, while the path twisted in and out among them and through tangled thickets. It was then the hottest part of the afternoon, and save for the soft fall of the men's footsteps everything was still. The atmosphere was very like that of a Turkish bath, and as Austin stumbled along the perspiration dripped from him.

He had toiled strenuously from early dawn until darkness closed down, of late, and though he had, as yet, escaped the fever, every joint in his body ached, and he was limp and dejected with the heat and weariness. His only respite from labour had been the few hours spent on watch beside the landed oil when his turn came, and he had now come down with two of the Spaniards to relieve Jefferson, who was going back to the *Cumbria*. The latter glanced towards a ray of brightness that beat into the dim green shadow, and here and there flung a patch of brilliancy athwart the great columnar trunks.

"I've been wondering where this trail goes, and it seems to me there's an opening close in front of us," he said. "We'll rest when we get there, and I don't know that I'll be sorry. You have to choose between stewing and roasting in this country, and, when it lets my skin stay on me, I almost think the latter's easier." [Pg 164]

Austin felt inclined to agree with him, for they had blundered through the shadowy bush for half an hour, and its hot, saturated atmosphere made exertion almost impossible. Still, he said nothing, and in a few more minutes they came out upon a glaring strip of sand beside another creek. Jefferson stopped a moment, with a little gesture of astonishment, in the shadow of a palm.

"What in the name of wonder have they been turning that sand over for?" he said.

Austin walked out of the shadow, blinking in the dazzling brightness the creek flung back, and saw that the sand had certainly been disturbed every here and there. It seemed to him that somebody had been digging holes in it and then had carefully filled them up.

"There isn't a nigger village nearer than the one where Funnel-paint lives, or I could have fancied they'd had an epidemic and been burying their friends," he said.

Jefferson shook his head. "They wouldn't worry to bring them here," he said. "Still, somebody has been digging since the last wet season, for it seems to me that when the rain comes the creek flows over here."

It occurred to Austin that one or two, at least, of the excavations had been filled in not long ago, but his comrade made no comment when he suggested it, and they went back together to the shadow of the palm, where Jefferson, sitting down thoughtfully, filled a blackened pipe.

It was several minutes before he broke the silence.

"There is," he said, at length, "a good deal I can't get the hang of about the whole affair; but if I knew just how they came to start the plates that let the water in, I'd have something to figure on. You can't very well knock holes in an iron steamer's bottom on soft, slimy mud, and I don't know where they could have found a rock here if they wanted to." [Pg 165]

"Ah!" said Austin. "Then you think they might have wanted to find one?"

Jefferson again sat silent for almost a minute, and then slowly shook his head. "I don't know—I've nothing to go upon," he said. "She's not even an old, played-out boat. Still, it seems to me that a heavily freighted steamer, hung up by her nose on the bank, might easily have started some of her plates when the waters of the creek subsided. Then she'd settle deeper—it's nice soft mud."

"But that would be—after—she went ashore."

"Yes," said Jefferson dryly. "That's the point of it."

Austin looked thoughtful. It had also occurred to him that there was a good deal it was difficult to understand about the stranding of the *Cumbria*, though that, after all, did not appear to concern them greatly just then.

"What puzzles me is why the salvage men let go," he said. "You see, they're accustomed to this kind of thing, and have money behind them."

Jefferson looked at him with a little smile, and Austin saw that he guessed his thoughts. Jefferson was as gaunt as ever, a fever-worn skeleton of a man, dressed, for the most part, in oil-stained rags, while Austin was quite aware that, so far as outward appearances went, there was very little that was prepossessing about himself. His big felt hat hung over his forehead, sodden with grease, and shapeless; his hands were hard and scarred, his nails were broken, and the rent singlet hung open almost to his waist. All this seemed to emphasise their feebleness, and the fact

that there was no money behind them, at least.

"Well," said Jefferson, "that's quite easy. Those salvage men are specialists, and expect a good deal for the time they put in. Now they took some oil out of her, but there is reason for believing they were not sure they'd get the *Cumbria* off at all, and it would cost a good deal to charter a light-draught steamer to come up here. They tried towing it down to a schooner, and lost a good deal of it on the shoals. Then they towed the schooner in, and had to wait for a smooth surf before they could get her out, with no more than sixty tons at that. The game wasn't worth while, and the men were going down with fever."

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"But the gum?"

"There wasn't a great deal down in the cargo sheets, and, any way, until they'd hove the oil out they couldn't come at it."

"You are still sure about the gum yourself?"

Jefferson laughed softly. "I think I am. I don't quite know where it is, but the skipper got it—a good deal of it."

"Still, the steamer would be worth a persistent effort. There was no doubt about her being there."

"No," said Jefferson, with a little gesture of comprehension. "Now I know just what you mean. You're wondering, since those men couldn't heave her off, what's the use of us trying. Well, specialists make their mistakes now and then, just like other men, and they took it for granted that things were normal when they were there. From what I've seen of the sand strips and the marks on the mangrove trunks, I don't think they were. You see, there's a good deal we don't know about the tides yet, and the Guinea stream doesn't always run quite the same along this coast; while, when there's less than usual of the southwest winds that help it along, it's quite likely to mean two or three feet less water in these creeks. Then you can have a wet season that's a little drier than the other ones, and it's fresh water here—the tide just backs it up."

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"Then you're counting on the present season being a normal one?"

"Yes," said Jefferson quietly. "I've staked all I have on it—and a good deal more than that. If it isn't, I might as well have pitched my forty thousand dollars into the sea."

He stopped a moment, and then laid a little grey object in Austin's palm. "What d'you make of that?"

Austin started as he looked at it. "A pistol bullet!"

"Exactly," said Jefferson. "It has been through the barrel, too; you can see the score of the rifling. I picked it up along the trail, but I don't know how long it lay there, or who fired it. Still, the niggers don't carry pistols. Well, it's about time I was getting back on board if we're to start the pump to-night."

Austin glanced at him sharply, and noticed that there was a suggestion of tension in his voice, though his face was quiet. It was evident that a good deal would depend upon the result of the first few hours' pumping, for unless it lowered the water there would be little probability of their floating the steamer. Neither of them, however, said anything further, and when they went back to the beach where the oil was, Jefferson steamed away in the launch, and Austin, who was left with two Canarios, lay down in the shadow of a strip of tarpaulin. The Spaniards, tired with their morning's labour, went to sleep; and Austin, who filled his pipe several times, found the hours pass very slowly. There was nothing to hold his attention—only glaring sand, dingy, dim green mangroves, and tiers of puncheons with patches of whitewash clinging to them. It flung back an intolerable brightness that hurt his aching eyes, and he became sensible of a feverish impatience as he lay watching the shadows lengthen.

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His thoughts were with Jefferson, who was, no doubt, now getting steam on the locomotive boiler and coupling up the big pump. Unless the latter did what they expected of it, the toil they had undergone, and Jefferson's eight thousand pounds, would have been thrown away. That was very evident, but Austin wondered a little at himself as his impatience grew upon him, until it was only by an effort he held himself still.

It was not the quarter share Jefferson offered him which had brought him there, for he realised that even with five thousand pounds he would still be, to all intents and purposes, a poor man, and his life on board the *Estremadura* had, in most respects, been one that suited him. He had, in fact, not greatly cared whether the *Cumbria* could be floated or not, when he came out, but since then Jefferson's optimism, or something that was born of the toil they had undertaken, had laid hold of him, and now he was almost as anxious as his comrade that their efforts should result in success. In fact, he was feverishly anxious, and felt that if it would gain them anything he would willingly stake his life on the venture. Then he smiled as he remembered that he had, without quite realising it, done so already.

Still, the long, hot afternoon dragged away, and when the sun dipped, and black darkness closed down upon the creek, the launch came clanking up to the beach. She brought two Canarios as well as Bill, the fireman, and Austin's voice was eager as he greeted the latter.

"Have you got the pump going yet?" he asked.

"No," said Bill. "Tom and Mr. Jefferson was packing something when I came away. He'd given her a spin, and found the engine blowing at a gland."

Austin asked him nothing further, but drove the launch at top speed through the blackness that shrouded the misty creek, and walked straight to where Jefferson was standing when he reached the *Cumbria*. The red glow from the open fire-door of the locomotive boiler fell upon him, and there were signs of tension in his face, while the red trickle from a hand he had apparently injured smeared his torn jacket. Steam was roaring from a valve beside him, and Austin could scarcely hear him when he turned to the donkey-man.

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"Shut the fire-door. She'll go now," he said. "I'll let her shake down for a minute or two, and then we'll give her everything."

He walked forward towards where the light of a lamp fell upon the casing of the pump, which looked like a huge iron drum considerably flattened in. Then he touched a valve, and the machine became animate with a low pulsatory wheezing, while something commenced to hum and rattle inside it. The sound swelled into a fierce rhythmic whirring, the great iron case vibrated, and Austin could feel the rails he leaned on tremble. Jefferson turned and looked at him with a little smile, while he laid a hand, as it were, affectionately upon the pump.

"Yes," he said, "I've made her go, and she's going to earn me eighty thousand dollars. She's drawing air just now. Heave your hat down, and see if she'll take it along."

Austin, who became sensible that a little draught was shaking his duck trousers, did as Jefferson suggested, and the big felt hat rolled and flopped in a ludicrous fashion along the deck. Then it seemed to spring forward into the blackness, and groping after it, he found it glued to the iron grid which was screwed to the end of a big pipe. It was with some little difficulty he tore it loose. Then he saw Jefferson swing up one hand.

"Easy, while she's getting her first drink; then, if she's spouting full, you can let her hum," he said, and turned to Austin. "Now, come down with me."

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They went down together into the musty hold, and when somebody lowered the big hose after them, Jefferson, standing upon the ladder, seized the rope, and looked up at the Canarios clustering round the hatch above.

"Where's that rake you made?" he said.

It was handed him, and Austin glanced down at the water, which glistened oilily under the light of a suspended lamp. It was thick with floating grease and strewn with fragments of rotten bags.

"Get hold and keep her clear!" said Jefferson, who thrust the rake upon him, and then waited a moment before he lowered the hose, while Austin, glancing round a moment, could see the faces of the men above them. They were intent, and almost as expectant as his comrade's.

Then the big pipe sank with a soft splash, and shook out its loose half-coil, as if alive, while it swelled. It grew hard and rigid, and the dim, oily water swirled and seethed about the end of it. In another moment there was a rush of floating objects towards it from the shadows. Strips of bagging, handspikes, clots of oil, and dunnage wood, came thicker and thicker, and Jefferson raised his voice.

"Let her hum!" he said.

The pipe palpitated as it further straightened itself, and now a hole opened in the oily water, and half-seen things came up with a rush from the depths of the flooded hold. Hundreds of little black kernels whirled and sank in the swing of the eddy, which grew wider as a deep, resonant hum descended from the deck above. It seemed to Austin that everything in the hold was coming to the top, but as he watched the bewildering succession of odds and ends that spun amidst the froth, Jefferson's voice rose harshly.

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"It's water she's wanting! Keep her clear!" he said.

Austin contrived to do it for a while, though now and then the whirling rush of bags and wood almost tore the rake away from him. He was kept busy for half an hour, while Jefferson stood leaning out from the ladder, and steadily watching the water. Then the American swung himself down, with his knife in his hand, and scratched the iron at its level.

"We'll know in another hour or two whether we're pumping out the *Cumbria* or pumping in the creek," he said. "If it's the latter, I've got to let up on the contract. I can't undertake to dry out this part of Africa."

Then he signed to one of the Canarios. "Come down. Ven aca, savvy, and take this rake."

They went up together, but as they passed along the deck Jefferson stopped once more to lay his hand upon the pump. It was running with a dull, rumbling roar, and the deck trembled about it.

"She's doing good work," he said. "Now we'll have comida. I daren't go back there for another hour."

They went into the deck-house, where the Spaniard who acted as steward was waiting them, but in passing, Jefferson made a sign to Tom, who stood in the glow from the fire-door, with a shovel in his hand.

"All she's worth!" he said.

They ate as a matter of duty, and because they needed all the strength the climate had left them, but neither had much appetite, and Austin knew that Jefferson was listening as eagerly as he was himself to the deep, vibrating hum that came throbbing through the open door. It was a relief to both of them to hear, the persistent jingling of a cup that stood unevenly in its saucer. The pump was running well, but there remained the momentous question, was it lowering the water? And when the meal was over, Austin glanced at Jefferson as he pushed his plate aside.

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"Shall I go down and look?" he asked.

"No," said Jefferson hoarsely. "Any way, if you do, don't come back and worry me. She's full up, fore and after holds and engine room—and there are things I don't stand very well. We'll give her two hours, and then, if she's doing anything worth while, the scratch I made will be dry."

Austin nodded sympathetically. "Under the circumstances," he said, "two hours is a long while."

Jefferson smiled, a curious, wry smile. "It's hard—the toughest thing one can do—just to keep still; but if I climbed up and down that ladder for two hours I'd probably break out, and heave somebody into the creek. There are things you have to get over once for all—and do it quick."

"I suppose there are," said Austin. "Still, it's the first time I've made the acquaintance of any of them, and I shouldn't have fancied one could get a thrill of this kind out of a centrifugal pump. There is, however, of course, a good deal at stake."

"Eighty thousand dollars," said Jefferson, "and all the rest of my life. You don't usually get such chances as the *Cumbria* is giving us twice."

Austin found that he, at least, could not keep still, however he tried, and he went out and paced up and down the slanted deck, where he fell over things, though he now and then endeavored to talk rationally to Tom the donkey-man. He did not find the attempt a success, but he saw that he was not the only one who felt the tension, for the Canarios, in place of resting, were clustered round the hatch, and apparently staring down the opening. Jefferson was still in the deck-house each time he passed, a gaunt, grim-faced object, with a lean hand clenched on an unlighted pipe, and at last Austin sat down on the deck beside the pump. He liked to feel the throb of it, but he remembered the half hour he spent there a long while afterwards.

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Then Jefferson came out of the deck-house, walking slowly, though Austin fancied it cost him an effort, and they climbed down the ladder together. The man with the rake stood on the opposite one across the hatch, and Austin felt his heart beat painfully as he raised the lantern he held and Jefferson stooped down. He straightened himself slowly, though the blood was in his face.

"Dry!" he said hoarsely. "She's lowering it. It's a sure thing, Austin. If the fever doesn't get us we'll see this contract out."

Then he turned, and they went up and back to the deck-house, while an exultant clamour broke out from the Canarios; but Jefferson's lean hand quivered a little when he laid it on the table as he sat down.

"If she has started any plates, they're not started much," he said. "Now, talk about anything you like, so long as it isn't the *Cumbria*. I've got to slacken down to-night."

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CHAPTER XVI

ELUSIVE GUM

It was in the small hours when Austin wakened, and, listening a moment, stretched his aching limbs with a little sigh of content. The odds and ends on the table beside him were rattling merrily, and a deep pulsatory humming rang stridently through the silence of the swamps. The pump was running well, for he could hear the steady splash of water falling into the creek, and once more a little thrill of exultation ran through him. He was not in most respects a fanciful man, for in him the artistic temperament was held in due subjection by a knowledge of the world and shrewd practical sense. Still, there were times when he vaguely recognised that there might, after all, be a reality behind the fancies he now and then indulged in with a smile, and that night it seemed to him that the big centrifugal pump was chanting a song of triumph.

He had tasted toil, and what toil really is only those know who have borne it in the steamy heat of the tropics, which saps the white man's vigour; while he had discovered what, artist as he was, he had not learned before: that, by way of compensation, man may attain a certain elusive spirituality by the stern subjugation of his body, even when it is accomplished by brutal manual labour. As the *Estremadura's* sobrecargo he had watched the struggle for existence between man and man with good-humoured toleration of its petty wiles and trickeries, but now it was the cleaner and more primitive struggle between man and matter he was called upon to take his part in with the faith in the destiny of his species which is capable of moving mountains, and not

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infrequently does so with hydraulic hose and blasting charges, as well as a few odd thousand tons of iron and water in a stranded steamer. Lying still a while, he heard the great pump hurling out its announcement of man's domination to swamp and forest, and then went peacefully to sleep.

He was astir with the dawn next morning, but when they went down the ladder into the hold he knew that the change in him had reached a further stage. Whether the water had sunk or not, he was going to see that fight out, and go back triumphant, or leave his bones in Africa. It was not alone to vindicate himself in Jacinta's eyes, for that, though it counted, too, seemed of less moment now; he was there to justify his existence, to prove himself a man, which many who have won honours in this world have, after all, never really done. As a sign of it, he was wholly practical when, hanging down from the ladder, he laid the fingers of one hand upon the scratch Jefferson had made on the iron. Then he held up the hand.

"Wet to the knuckles only," he said. "Last night the water was on the thumb."

They went up, and Jefferson looked at him keenly when they stood on deck; in fact, as he had done when Austin first clambered, half naked, out of the hatch.

"Yes," he said quietly, "she is heaving it out, and you have done more than start in. You mean staying with it now?"

Austin laughed. "I'm not sure how you know it, but I really think I do."

"No?" said Jefferson, with a twinkle in his eyes. "When it's in your voice, and stamped upon the rest of you. Well, I think we're going to float her, though it's perhaps not quite a sure thing yet. We seem to have bluffed off Funnel-paint, but the trouble is, you can't bluff the fever. In the meanwhile, we'll see if she's draining any out of the engine room."

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They went in, and stood on the top platform, looking down on the water, which, so far as they could discern, stood at much the same level as it had done. Jefferson gazed at it with an air of reflection.

"If the bulkhead's strained and started so the water could get in, I don't quite see why it shouldn't run out into the hold again, but there's evidently no suction that way," he said. "You see how that tool-case lid is floating. There's another point that strikes me. Those started plates don't seem to be letting very much water in."

"As you have already pointed out, there is a good deal it's a little difficult to understand about the whole thing."

"Well," said Jefferson gravely, "it doesn't matter in the meanwhile, and we'll probably find out by and by. The first thing we have to do is to lay hands on that gum, and until the water's lower we can't start in. The boys can lay off to-day. Well, what are you wanting, Bill?"

"Two of the Canariers down!" said the fireman, who appeared in the doorway. "They was looking groggy yesterday, an' one o' them's talking silly now. I think it's fever."

Austin looked at Jefferson, whose face grew a trifle grim. "Ah," he said, "it's beginning. Well, I had expected we'd have that to grapple with before very long. We'll go along and look at them."

They went, and found one of the men raving in the forecabin, while Austin, who did what he could for him and his comrade, which was very little, afterwards spent a day of blissful idleness stretched at full length on the settee in the skipper's room, with a damp-stained treatise on navigation. He had never imagined that he could peruse a work of that kind with interest, but it served its purpose, for he felt he must have something to fix his attention on. In the meanwhile the big pump hummed on, as it did for another day and night, until on the third morning Jefferson stopped it and turned steam on the winch again.

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"You have got to keep your eyes open as well as hustle, boys," he said, as he stood with his hand on the lever. "There'll be forty dollars, Spanish, for whoever finds the first bag of gum."

Austin made this clear to them, and they went down the ladder, but two men who had gone with them before were not there that day. The water had sunk, and tiers of rotting bags lay, half afloat, in it, giving out a sickening smell of fermentation. They were filled with little black nuts, the oleaginous kernels of the palm fruit from which the layer of oil had been scraped off, and these were evidently worth little in their damaged condition. Austin, however, had very little time to notice them in, for the winch above him rattled, and the day of feverish toil began.

The bags burst when they dragged them into piles and laid them upon the sling, while when the winch swung them up, a rain of kernels and slimy water came pattering and splashing down. Putrefying kernels floated up into every hole they made, and now and then a man sank waist deep among the crumbling bags. Still, there was no stoppage or slackening of effort. Forty dollars is a large sum to a seaman of the Canaries, who can bring up a family on one peseta, which is rather less than ninepence, a day, while the bonus contingent on getting the *Cumbria* off would set up most of them for life. They remembered it that day as they floundered and waded about the stifling hold, for the work of the big pump had renewed their ardour.

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Still, the task before them was one most men would have shrunk from. The heat below decks was suffocating, the smell of the steaming, fermenting mass of slime and oil and kernels nauseating. The water it swam in was putrescent, and the weight to be hauled out of it and sent up into the sunlight apparently enough to keep them busy for months ahead, though they had, as everybody

knew, very little time to move it in. It was to be a grim struggle between man and inert material, for unless the *Cumbria* was hove off when the rains came, it seemed very probable that she would stay there until she fell to pieces.

They set about it in silence, which, in the case of Spaniards, was a significant thing; but nobody had any breath to spare, and Austin gasped distressfully as he toiled, almost naked, in their midst. His hair was filled with grease, clots of oil smeared his shoulders, and the bags that burst as he lifted them abraded his dripping skin. Still, they went up, opening as they swung out of the dusky hold, and the winch rattled on, while there could be no rest for any man while sling succeeded sling.

He was half blinded by perspiration, the wounds on his raw hands had opened again, and there were now red patches on his uncovered breast and arms. His muscles had, however, grown accustomed to the strain since the first arduous day, and he did a man's part, as their comrade, with the rest. There were no distinctions down in the stifling hold. It was a community of effort for the one result, and again Austin wondered at the forethought of the fever-wasted man above who drove the hammering winch.

Jefferson was, beyond all question, boss; but with singular clearness of vision, or, perhaps, that higher, half-conscious faculty of doing the right thing, that characterises the leader of men, he had recognised that what he called bluff was of no service here, and had gone straight to the strength there is in simple human nature. There was, those untaught sailormen knew, no labour he was not ready to bear his part in, and no command was flung at them for a show of authority. Jefferson spent his strength and dollars freely, and while he asked no more than a hundred cents' worth for the latter, he got it with interest, a hundredfold.

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It grew hotter and hotter, and there were curiously mingled ejaculations of Latin prayer and imprecations that had somehow lost their sting. The man with calumniated ancestry took it as a jest, and amidst the roar of running chain and fierce rattle of the winch the work went on. The rains were coming, there was very much to be done, and human courage braced itself to the task. Hard hands were torn and bleeding, veins showed gorged on dusky foreheads, muscles rose and bunched themselves under the olive skin, and Englishman and Iberian gave freely all that was in them, the sweat of the hard-driven body and tension of controlling will. They were alone in the land of the shadow, with a deadly climate against them, but the conflict they were engaged in has been waged before by Spaniards and Englishmen in half the wilder lands.

Then the winch stopped suddenly, and Jefferson came backwards down the ladder. He alighted knee deep in water among the rotten bags, and all his observations were not recordable. He had put off conventionality, and was once more the reckless sailor and the optimistic American, so he spoke of the lower regions, and called the men who had stowed the *Cumbria's* cargo condemned loafers in barbarous Castilian and good American, while the olive-faced Canarios gasped and grinned at him.

"The man who packed those bags there should be hung," he said. "We can't break the bulk out until we've shifted most of them. Then I'll send you down the sling-tub, and we'll heave the stuff to —! It's sixty dollars now for the man who finds the gum."

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"No sign of it yet," said Austin. "They'd never have stowed it among the bulk kernels. They're worth something. Hadn't you better make sure of them?"

Jefferson laughed grimly. "They're worth—how do I know? Call it £12 a ton when they're not rotten. It's the gum we came for, and I'm going to find it if I tear the ballast tanks and limbeys out of her. Clear that bag bulkhead, and then stand by for the sling-tub. We'll heave every blue-flamed kernel over."

The tub came down by and by, in fact, two of them, and those who had no shovels bailed up the slimy kernels with their hats and hands; but each time the chain swung through the hatch the tub below was full. It was two o'clock when they desisted, and some of them were waist deep in water then, while soon after they came up the big hose splashed in again. There were steampipe collars to unbolt and pack, and bolt again, before that was done; while when Austin came upon Jefferson, he held up one hand from which the scalded skin was peeling.

"I can run the — winch if I drive her with my mouth and foot," he said. "Get the comida into you, and then back into the hold again. We're going to make her hum."

Austin glanced suggestively towards the men, who stood with backs still bent with weariness, about the entrance to the forecabin.

"I suppose so," he said. "Still, the question is, can they stand it long?"

Jefferson laughed harshly. "They'll have to. We have the blazing sun against us, and the evening fever-mist; in fact, 'most everything that man has to grapple with, and the worst of all is time. Still, they can't break us. We have got to beat them—the river, the climate, and all the man-killing meanness nature has in Western Africa."

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He stopped a moment, and, standing very straight, a haggard, grim-faced scarecrow, flung up his scalded hands towards the brassy heavens in a wide, appealing gesture. "When you come to the bottom of things, that's what we were made for. There's something in us that is stronger than them all."

Austin said nothing, though once more a little thrill ran through him as he slipped away quietly in search of his comida. What they were doing had, he felt, been sung in Epics long ago, and Jefferson had, it seemed, blundered upon the under-running theme. It was the recognition of the primal ban again, the ban that had a blessing for man to triumph in, and by it win dominion over the material world and all there is therein. He and his comrade were men whose creed was crudely simple, though it was also, on points they did not often mention, severe; but they bore the bonds of service, which are never worn without compensation, willingly, and the tense effort of will and limb had clarified and strengthened the vague faith in them until they were ready to attempt the impossible.

Still, Austin had little time for his comida. The men in the fore-castle were very sick indeed, and he packed them in foul blankets, and dosed them with green-lime water, boiling hot to start the perspiration, which was, he recognised, likely to accomplish more than his prescriptions. There were limes in Funnel-paint's village, and they had not scrupled to requisition them. One of the men lay still, moaning faintly through blackened lips, and the other, raving, called incoherently on saints and angels. It seemed to Austin, standing in that reeking den, that there was small chance for his patients unless they heard him. Two of those whose names he caught had once, he remembered, been, at least, fresh-water sailormen, and half unconsciously he also appealed to them. One creed appeared much the same as another in that dark land, and something in him cried out instinctively to the great serene influences beyond the shadow. When he had finished his work of mercy the Spaniards were stripping the covers off the after hatch, and he had scarcely a minute for a mouthful before he joined them to heave the kernels up by hand. They went up, basket after basket, and splashed into the creek, but there was no sign of a gum bag or package anywhere among them. Bill, who hove them out through the open gangway, once turned to grin at Austin, who stood next the hatch.

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"I've never been a millionaire, an' it's — unlikely that I'll ever be one, either; but I know what it must feel like now," he said. "Here are you an' me slingin' away stuff that's worth twelve pounds a ton, an' one o' them goes a long way with a man like me."

Austin said nothing. He had no breath to spare, but he thrust a brimming basket upon the fireman, and that did just as well. They toiled throughout that afternoon, under a broiling sun, but when the black darkness came again they had still found no gum. Then, as they ate together, Austin looked at Jefferson.

"You are sure the gum was really put into her?" he said.

"It was," said Jefferson, with a little grim smile. "Whether it's there now, or not, is another thing. We'll know when she's empty, and if we haven't found it then, we'll consider. Not a pound reached Grand Canary, and it's quite certain that the fellows who went—somewhere else—took none of it with them."

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CHAPTER XVII

AUSTIN GOES DOWN RIVER

A week had passed without their finding any gum, when one evening Austin stood beside Jefferson in the *Cumbria's* fore-castle. It felt as hot as an oven, though the damp fell in big drops from the iron beams and trickled down the vessel's unceiled skin, while a smoky lamp supplied it with insufficient illumination. The faint light showed the hazily outlined forms of the men sitting limp and apathetic, now the long day's toil was over, in the acrid smoke of Canary tobacco, and forced up clearly the drawn face of one who lay beneath it, gazing at Austin with a glitter in his uncomprehending eyes. Behind him other figures occupied a part of the shelf-like row of bunks, but they were mere shapeless bundles of greasy blankets and foul clothing, with only a shock of damp hair or a claw-like hand projecting from them here and there to show that they were human. Jefferson said nothing, but his face was a trifle grim, and he straightened himself wearily when one of the Spaniards rose and moved into the light.

"Señor," he said, with a little deprecatory gesture, "for ourselves we others do not complain, but these men are very sick, and the medicines of the Señor Austin do not make them better. One of them is my cousin, another my wife's brother; and there are those in Las Palmas and Galdar who depend on them. In a week, or, perhaps, a day or two, they die. Something must be done."

There was a faint approving murmur from the rest of the men. They had worked well, but the excitement of the search for the gum was wearing off, and the strain had commenced to tell. Jefferson smiled wryly as he glanced at Austin.

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"Hadn't you better ask him what can be done?" he said.

The Spaniard flung his arms up when Austin translated this. "Who knows?" he said. "I am only an ignorant sailorman, and cannot tell; but when we came here the Señor Austin promised us that we should have all that was reasonable. It is not fitting that men should die and nothing be done

to save them."

"I scarcely think it is," said Austin. "Still, how to set about the thing is more than I know. It must be talked over. We may, perhaps, tell you more to-morrow."

He touched Jefferson's shoulder, and they went out of the fore-castle and towards the skipper's room silently. When they sat down Jefferson looked hard at him.

"Well?" he said. "Two of them are your men."

Austin made a little sign of comprehension. "I don't remember what I promised them. I had trouble to get them, but I certainly told them the place wasn't a healthy one. That, however, doesn't convey a very sufficient impression to anybody who hasn't been here."

"No," and Jefferson smiled grimly, "I don't quite think it does. The point is that you feel yourself responsible to them, though I don't see why you should. A man has to take his chances when he makes a bargain of the kind they did."

Austin stretched himself on the settee wearily, and lighted a cigarette. He had been feeling unpleasantly limp of late, and his head and back ached that night.

"It's a little difficult to define what a bargain really is," he said. "Still, it seems to me that to make it a just one the contracting parties should clearly understand, one what he is selling, and the other what he is buying. In the case in question I knew what I was getting, but I'm far from sure the Canarios quite realised what they might have to part with." [Pg 185]

"That is not the business view."

"I am willing to admit it. I, however, can't help fancying that there is a certain responsibility attached to buying up men's lives for a few dollars when they're under the impression that it's their labour they're selling. In fact, it's one that is a little too big for me."

Jefferson sat silent for almost a minute, looking at Austin, who met his gaze steadily, with his eyes half closed.

"Well," he said, "it isn't the usual view, but there's something to be said for it. What d'you mean to do?"

"Put the sick men on board the launch and run them out to sea on the chance of picking up a West-coast liner, or—and it might suit just as well—one of the new opposition boats. From what I gathered at Las Palmas, the men who run them are, for the most part, rather a hard-up crowd, and you're usually more likely to get a kindness done you by that kind of people. We have nothing to pay their passage with, you see."

"You might get one oil puncheon into the launch. Still, you have to remember that men who go down with fever along shore often die, instead of coming round, when they get out to sea."

Austin smiled. "One would fancy that men who stay along shore when they have fever, as these fellows have it, die invariably."

Once more Jefferson sat silent a while, gazing at his comrade thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, with a little gesture, "I leave the thing to you. After all, it's quite likely that one's dollars aren't worth what you lay out to get them, now and then, but that's certainly not the question. The boat's not making the water I expected, but we haven't found the gum, and engine room and after hold are still almost full. The boiler, as you know, has two or three tubes blowing, and we have nothing to stop them with. That means she's wasting half her steam, and as we have to keep a full head for the pump and winch, the coal's just melting. By the time we heave her off there will be very little left, and I've no fancy for going to sea short of fuel and being picked up as salvage. It's a point that has been worrying me lately." [Pg 186]

"There is coal to be had at Sierra Leone."

"And there are a British Consul and Government authorities. You're loaded down to the water's edge with Shipping Acts, and the *Cumbria's* still upon your register. Do you suppose they are going to let her out again, as she is, if we once go in there?"

Austin fancied it was scarcely likely. The requirements of the paternal Board of Trade are, in fact, so onerous that English owners not infrequently register their ships under another flag; while it occurred to him that consul and surveyor would have a fit of indignant horror if they saw how the enactments were complied with on board the *Cumbria*.

"No, sir," said Jefferson. "She's going straight across to Las Palmas when she leaves this creek. That's Spanish, and a few dollars go a long way in Spain. Besides, it's not quite certain that we'll leave the creeks at all this season."

Austin straightened himself suddenly. "What do you mean?"

"Only that I'm not going home without the gum."

There was a little silence, and during it Austin endeavoured to adopt an attitude of resignation. It was his belief that the *Cumbria* would be floated, or the project given up, when the rains came, that had animated him through the toil he had undertaken. Another month or two would, he had [Pg 187]

expected, see the task accomplished; but now it might, it seemed, continue indefinitely, and he shrank from the thought of a longer sojourn in the land of shadow. Then, with a little effort, he slowly raised his head.

"To be candid, that is a good deal more than I counted on when I made the bargain," he said. "Still, I can't well go back on it now. There is coal to be had in Dakar, too, but it would cost a good deal to bring even a schooner load here, though we could, per contra, load up oil in her. Have you the money?"

Jefferson drummed with his fingers upon the table. "That's the trouble. I have a little left, but I'm not quite sure I could get it into my hands without the mailing to and fro of signed papers."

"Some of the West-coast mailboats call at Dakar. I might get the coal and a schooner on a bond there. Of course, the people would want a heavy profit under the circumstances."

"Three or four times as much as they were entitled to, any way," and a little glint crept into Jefferson's eyes. "Now, it's quite usual for the man who does the work to be glad of the odd scraps the man with the money flings him for his pains, but it's going to be different with this contract. I haven't the least notion of working here to make the other fellow rich. If we buy the coal it will be at the market value, cash down. The trouble is, I don't quite know where I'm going to get it."

"Well," said Austin, slowly, "a means of raising it has occurred to me. You see, as seems to have been the case with you, there is money in the family, and ethically I really think a little of it belongs to me. It is not—for several reasons—a pleasant thing to ask for it. In fact, I fancied once I'd have starved before I did so, but it couldn't be harder than what we have been doing here. One could cable to Las Palmas, and a credit might be arranged by wire with one of the banking agencies there."

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"Your people would let you have the money?"

Austin laughed, a trifle harshly. "Not exactly out of good-will, but, if I worded that cable cleverly, they might do it to keep me here. I don't know how it is in your country, but in ours they're seldom very proud of the poor relation. In fact, some of them would do a good deal to prevent his turning up to worry them. I think there are occasions when a man is almost warranted in levying contributions of the kind."

Jefferson's eyes twinkled. "You are a curious, inconsequent kind of man. You worry over those Spaniards who have no call on you, and then you propose to bluff your own people out of their money."

"If I had been one who always acted logically I should certainly not have been here. As it is, I'll start to-morrow, and wire my kind relations that, failing a draft for two hundred pounds, I'm coming home in rags by the first steamer. I almost think they'll send the money."

Jefferson stretched out a lean hand suddenly, and laid it on his comrade's arm. "It's going to hurt you, but you can't get anything worth while without that. You can send them back their money when we get her off; but if you let anything stop you now you'll feel mean and sorry all your life."

"Yes," said Austin, "I fancy I should. It's rather a pity, but one can't always be particular. In the meanwhile, I'll see Tom about the launch."

He went out, and, coming back half an hour later, threw himself down on the settee, and was fast asleep when Jefferson, who had been busy about the pump, came in and stood a moment looking down on him. Austin's face was worn, and thinner than it had been when he reached the *Cumbria*; the damp stood beaded on it, and his hair lay wet and lank upon his pallid forehead.

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"I guess the raising of that money is going to be about the hardest thing you ever did, but you'll do it," said Jefferson. "I've got the kind of man I want for a partner."

Austin, who did not hear him, slept on peacefully, and steamed away down river early next morning; while it was late on the second night, and the launch was out at sea, when he sat, very wearily, with his hand upon her helm, looking out across the long, smooth undulations. A half-moon hung low to the westward, and they came up, heaving in long succession from under it, ebony black in the hollows, and flecked with blinks of silver light upon their backs. Austin only saw the latter, for he was looking into the dusky blueness of the east, though it was only by an effort he kept himself awake. During the last few days a feeling of limp dejection had been creeping over him.

The launch was steaming slowly, with only a little drowsy gurgle about her propeller as she swung and dipped to the swell, though she rolled uneasily with the weight of the big oil puncheon high up in her. Bill, the fireman, was crouched, half asleep, beside the clanking engine, and two very sick men lay forward beneath a ragged tarpaulin. Though the surf had been smoother than usual, Austin did not know how he had brought them all out across the bar.

There were many stars in the heavens, and by and by, as he blinked at the soft darkness with aching eyes, he saw one that seemed unusually low down and moved a little. Then, shaking himself to attention, he made out a dim glimmer of green, and became sensible of a faint throbbing that crept softly out of the silence. He leaned forward and touched the fireman.

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"Open her out," he said. "That's a steamboat coming, and it looks as if she would go by well to the

south."

Bill pulled at a lever, the engine clanked faster, and the launch commenced to rail more sharply as she lurched over the long undulations with an increasing gurgle beneath her side. The sea was oily smooth, and she rolled southwards fast; but the steamer's lights were rising high, and the pounding of engines grew louder in a sharp crescendo, until they could hear the black water frothing under iron bows. Then the launch's whistle broke into a shrill scream. There was no answer, and Austin turned to the fireman again.

"Shake her up! There will not be another boat for a week!" he said.

Bill pulled the lever over a little further, and stirred the furnace, and the clanking grew louder, while the launch rolled more violently. When she swung up, Austin saw a strip of dusky hull that swayed and heaved in front of them, and then was suddenly lost to view again.

"She's not one of the mailboats, anyway. They'd be lighted, saloon deck and poop," he said. "It almost looks as if she would get away from us."

Bill opened the whistle full, and left it screaming while he sprang up on the side deck, a black figure holding high a strip of blazing waste. Its red glare streaked the water, and the burning oil dripped from it in a sparkling rain, while Austin felt his heart beat when the man flung it down with an imprecation. Then a deep, vibratory blast came trembling across the glimmering water, and he saw the piled-up foam fall away beneath the big iron bows.

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"They've seen us," he said. "She's standing by."

Five minutes later the launch lay lurching beneath the steamer's high, black side, while a man leaned out from her slanted bridge above, looking down into her.

"What d'you want?" he said. "I'm not going in for cargo unless it's worth while. We're tolerably full this trip."

"A passage," said Austin. "There are myself and two sick men. We're going to Grand Canary."

"What's the oil for?"

"To cover the ticket."

The skipper appeared to be gazing down at him in astonishment.

"Sixteen pounds' worth, at the most, for three men to Grand Canary! You have good nerves," he said.

"I can't go any further, and you see they're very sick."

The skipper was understood to say that his ship was not a several adjectived hospital, but Austin only smiled, for he was acquainted with that kind of man, and aware that he was, at least, as likely to do him a kindness as an elaborately got up mailboat's skipper.

"Well," he said, "if you won't have us, I'll take them back and bury them. It's tolerably sure to come to that. Two of us will not eat much, any way, and we'll be quite content to sleep on deck."

There was no answer for a moment, and then, as the bridge came slanting down, the man who leaned out from it laughed.

"It's a puncheon of oil to nothing, and I've been hard up myself," he said. "The next thing is, how the devil are you going to get them up? We've stowed away our ladder."

"Then it'll have to be a sling. I'll steady them up when she rises, and some of your crowd can hand them in."

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It was done with difficulty, for the steamer rolled with a disconcerting swing, and then Austin grasped Bill's hand before he went up the rope. A gong clanged sharply, the launch slid astern, and several seamen carried the two bundles of foul blankets away. While Austin watched them vacantly a hand fell upon his shoulder, and propelled him into a room beneath the bridge. Then he heard a harsh voice:

"There isn't any factory I'm acquainted with hereabouts. Where d'you get that oil from?" it said.

Austin sat down on the settee and blinked at the burly, hard-faced man in front of him.

"I don't know if you'll be astonished, but we really came by it legitimately," he said. "In fact, we got it out of a stranded steamer—one we're endeavouring to heave off, you see."

The skipper smiled as comprehension suddenly dawned on him. "Then you're one of the —— fools who bought the *Cumbria*?"

"I am. Still, I'm not sure that your opinion of us is quite warranted yet. If it isn't, you'll get more than the one puncheon for taking us across. In the meanwhile, I'm a little anxious about those men."

"They're all right. Pills will see to them. We have one. He probably killed somebody by accident, or did something of that kind, or he wouldn't be here. Directors had a notion we might pick up a few passengers. They, however, prefer the liners."

Austin laughed, and the skipper's eyes slowly twinkled. "The fact is, I don't blame them," he said. "Any way, you will lie down here until they get you a room in the poop ready."

He went out, and an hour or two later Austin was roused by a touch from a fitful sleep. A young man who stooped over him was regarding him intently.

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"Put that in your mouth?" he said.

Austin slipped the little glass tube between his lips, and the doctor nodded when he passed it back to him.

"Yes," he said, "you have a very promising case of fever coming on. Get up and lean on me; the sooner we pack you between the blankets the better."

Austin rose unsteadily, and found that he had some difficulty in walking when they went out upon the slanting deck. He was quite sure of that, but everything else that he did, or was done to him, during the next few days, was wrapped in obscurity. Still, he had a hazy notion of the doctor and another man half dragging him into a little room.

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CHAPTER XVIII JACINTA BECOMES INDIGNANT

It was fifteen days after he boarded the steamer when Austin reached Las Palmas in a condition which, at least, prevented him chafing at the delay as he otherwise would have done. On the second day something went wrong with the high-pressure engine, and the little, deep-loaded vessel lay rolling idly athwart the swell, while her engineers dismantled and re-erected it. Then the trouble they had already had with the condenser became more acute, so that they would scarcely keep a vacuum, and it also happened that the trade-breeze she had to steam against blew unusually fresh that season.

Austin, however, was not aware of this at the time. He lay rambling incoherently for several days, and when at last his senses came back to him, found himself too weak and listless to trouble about anything. He gained strength rapidly, for the swamp fever does not, as a rule, keep its victim prostrate long. It either kills him without loss of time, or allows him to escape for a season; but its effect is frequently mental as well as physical, and Austin's listlessness remained. He had borne a heavy strain, and when he went ashore at Las Palmas the inevitable reaction was intensified by the black dejection the fever had left behind. It seemed to him that he and Jefferson were only wasting their efforts, and though he still meant to go on with them, he expected no result, since he now felt that there was not the slightest probability of their ever getting the *Cumbria* off. It was a somewhat unusual mood for a young Englishman to find himself in, though by no means an incomprehensible one in case of a man badly shaken by the malaria fever, while one of Austin's shortcomings was, or so, at least, Jacinta Brown considered, a too complaisant adaptation of himself to circumstances. She held the belief that when the latter were unpropitious, a determined attempt to alter them was much more commendable, and not infrequently successful.

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In any case, Austin found Pancho Brown was away buying tomatoes when he called at his office, and the Spanish clerk also informed him that Miss Brown and Mrs. Hatherly had left Las Palmas for a while. He fancied they had gone to Madeira, but was not certain, and Austin, who left him a message for Brown and a letter Jefferson had charged him with to be forwarded to Miss Gascoyne, went on to the telegraph office more dejected than ever. Jacinta had, usually, a bracing effect upon those she came into contact with, and Austin, who felt he needed a mental stimulant, realised now that one of the things that had sustained him was the expectation of hearing her express her approval of what he had done. He had not looked for anything more, but it seemed that he must also dispense with this consolation.

He delivered one of the canarios, who was apparently recovering, to his friends, and saw the other bestowed in the hospital, and then, finding that he could not loiter about Las Palmas waiting an answer to his cable, which he did not expect for several days, decided to go across to Teneriffe with the *Estremadura*. There was no difficulty about this, though funds were scanty, for the Spanish manager told him he could make himself at home on board her as long as he liked, if he would instruct the new sobrecargo in his duties, as he, it appeared, had some difficulty in understanding them.

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On the night they went to sea he lay upon the settee in the engineers' mess-room, with Macallister sitting opposite him, and a basket of white grapes and a garafon of red wine on the table between them. Port and door were wide open, and the trade-breeze swept through the room, fresh, and delightfully cool. Austin had also an unusually good cigar in his hand, and stretched himself on the settee with a little sigh of content when he had recounted what they had done on board the *Cumbria*.

"I don't know if we'll ever get her off, and the astonishing thing is, that since I had the fever I

don't seem to care," he said. "In the meanwhile, it's a relief to get away from her. In fact, I feel I would like to lie here and take it easy for at least a year."

Macallister nodded comprehendingly. Austin's face was blanched and hollow, and he was very thin, while the stamp of weariness and lassitude was plain on him. Still, as he glanced in his direction a little sparkle crept into the engineer's eyes.

"So Jefferson made the pump go, and ran the forehold dry!" he said. "When ye come to think of it, yon is an ingenious man."

Austin laughed. "He is also, in some respects, an astonishing one. He was perfectly at home among the smart people at the Catalina, and I fancy he would have been equally so in the Bowery, whose inhabitants, one understands, very much resemble in their manners those of your Glasgow closes or Edinburgh wynds. In fact, I've wondered, now and then, if Miss Gascoyne quite realises who she is going to marry. There are several sides to Jefferson's character, and she has, so far, only seen one of them."

"Well," said Macallister, reflectively, "I'm thinking she will never see the rest. There are men, though they're no exactly plentiful, who can hide them, and it's scarcely likely that Jefferson will rive a steamboat out of the African swamps again."

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"Once is quite enough in a lifetime, but it's when the work is done, and he has to quiet down, I foresee trouble for Jefferson. I'm not sure Miss Gascoyne's English friends would altogether appreciate him."

Again Macallister nodded. "Still," he said, "what yon man does not know he will learn. I would back him to do anything now he has made that boiler steam. Then ye will mind it's no the clever women who are the easiest to live with when ye have married them, and there's a good deal to be said for girls like Miss Gascoyne, who do not see too much. It is convenient that a wife should be content with her husband, and not be wanting to change him into somebody else, which is a thing I would not stand at any price myself."

Austin grinned, for it was known that Macallister had, at least now and then, found it advisable to entertain his friends on board the *Estremadura* by stealth. The engineer however, did not appear to notice his smile.

"Ye will go back when ye get the money?" he said.

"Of course. I have to see the thing out now, though I don't quite understand how I ever came to trouble myself about it in the first place."

This time it was Macallister who grinned. "I have been in this world a weary while, and would ye pull the wool over my eyes? Ye are aware that the notion was driven into ye."

Austin was astonished, and a trifle annoyed, as he remembered a certain very similar conversation he had had with Jefferson. It was disconcerting to find that Macallister was as conversant with his affairs as his partner had shown himself to be, especially as they had both apparently drawn the same inference.

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"I wonder what made you say that?" he asked, with lifted brows.

Macallister laughed. "Well," he said drily, "I'm thinking Miss Brown knows, as well as I do, that ye would not have gone of your own accord."

"Why should Miss Brown have the slightest wish that I should go to Africa?"

"If ye do not know, how could ye expect me to? Still, it should be plain to ye that it was not for your health."

Austin raised himself a trifle, and looked at his comrade steadily. "The drift of your remarks is tolerably clear. Any way, because I would sooner you made no more of them, it might be as well to point out that no girl who cared twopence about a man would send him to the swamps where the *Cumbria* is lying."

"Maybe she would not. There are things I do not know, but ye will mind that Jacinta Brown is not made on quite the same model as Miss Gascoyne. She sees a good deal, and if she was not content with her husband she would up and alter him. I'm thinking it would not matter if it hurt the pair o' them."

"The difficulty is that she hasn't got one."

Macallister laughed softly. "It's one that can be got over, though Jacinta's particular. It's not everybody who would suit her. Ye are still wondering why ye went to Africa?"

"No," said Austin, with a trace of grimness. "I don't think it's worth while. Mind, I'm not admitting that I didn't go because the notion pleased me, and if Miss Brown wished me to, it was certainly because of Muriel Gascoyne."

"Maybe," said Macallister, with a little incredulous smile. He rose, and, moving towards the doorway, turned again. "She might tell ye herself to-morrow. She's now in Santa Cruz."

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He went out, apparently chuckling over something, and Austin thoughtfully smoked out his cigar. To be a friend of Jacinta Brown's was, as he had realised already, a somewhat serious thing. It

implied that one must adopt her point of view, and, what was more difficult, to some extent, at least, sink his own individuality. Macallister and Jefferson were, he fancied, perhaps right upon one point, and that was that Jacinta had decided that a little strenuous action might be beneficial in his case; but if this was so, Austin was not sure that he was grateful to her. He was willing to do anything that would afford her pleasure, that was, so long as he could feel she would gain anything tangible, if it was only the satisfaction of seeing Muriel Gascoyne made happy through his endeavours. In fact, what he wished was to do her a definite service, but the notion of being reformed, as it were, against his wishes, when he was not sure that he needed it, did not please him. This was carrying a friendly interest considerably too far, and it was quite certain, he thought, that he could expect nothing more from her. He almost wished that he had never seen her, which was a desire he had hovered on the brink of before; but while he considered the matter the trade-breeze was sighing through the port, and the engines throbbed on drowsily, while from outside came the hiss and gurgle of parted seas. Austin heard it all, until the sounds grew fainter, and he went to sleep.

It also happened that while he slept and dreamed of her, Jacinta sat with Muriel Gascoyne in the garden of a certain hotel on the hillside above Santa Cruz, Teneriffe. The house had been built long ago, evidently for a Spanish gentleman of means and taste, and its latest proprietor had sufficient sense to attempt no improvement on its old-world beauty. It stood on a terrace of the hillside, quiet, quaint, and cool, with its ancient, bronze-railed balconies, red-tiled roof, and pink-washed walls, but its garden of palms and oleanders was its greatest charm.

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On the night in question a full moon hung over the Cañadas' splintered rampart, and its soft radiance fell upon the white-walled city and smote a track of glittering silver across the vast plain of sea. The smell of oleanders and heliotrope was heavy in the air, and a cluster of blossoms swayed above Jacinta's shoulder. She was just then looking up at a Spanish officer in dark green uniform, who stood close by, with sword girt tight to his thigh. He had a dark, forceful face, with the stamp of distinction on it, but he received no encouragement, though he glanced at the vacant place on the stone bench suggestively.

"No," said Jacinta. "I do not think I shall go to-morrow, so you need not call for me. I have scrambled through the Mercedes Wood several times already, and we came here to be quiet. That is why we are sitting outside to-night. There are two or three tiresome people in the house who will insist upon talking."

It is seldom necessary to furnish a Spaniard, who is usually skilled in innuendo, with a second hint, and the officer took his departure gracefully. When he vanished, with jingling sword, into the shadow of the palms, Muriel looked at her companion.

"You meant me to stay?" she said.

"Of course," said Jacinta. "Still, I didn't mean you to let him see that I did, and I really did not kick you very hard. Any way, it doesn't matter. The great thing is that he is gone."

"You were anxious that he should go?"

"Yes," said Jacinta. "I feel relieved now. He is, in some respects, a very silly man. In fact, he has been wanting to marry me for ever so long."

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"Why?" said Muriel, and stopped abruptly. "Of course, I mean that he is a Spaniard, you know."

Jacinta laughed, and apparently indicated herself by a little wave of her fan. She was once more attired in an evening dress that appeared to consist largely of black lace, and looked curiously dainty and sylph-like in the diaphanous drapery. The moonlight was also on her face.

"The reason," she said, "ought to be sufficiently plain. He is, as you point out, certainly Spanish, but there really are a few estimable gentlemen of that nationality. This one was Governor or Commandante in some part of Cuba, and I believe he got comparatively rich there. They usually do. Still, he's a little fond of the casino, and is reported to be unlucky, while, in spite of my obvious disadvantages, I am the daughter of Pancho Brown."

She stopped with another laugh that had a faintly suggestive ring in it. "There are times when I wish I was somebody else who hadn't a penny!"

"But it can't be nice to be poor," said Muriel, looking at her with a trace of bewilderment in her big blue eyes.

"It is probably distinctly unpleasant. Still, it would be consoling to feel that your money could neither encourage nor prevent anybody you liked falling in love with you, and it would, in one sense, be nice to know that the man you graciously approved of would have to get whatever you wanted for you. You ought to understand that."

There was a trace of pride in Muriel's smile. "Of course; but, after all, there are not many men who can do almost anything, like—Harry Jefferson. Some of the very nicest ones seem quite unable to make money."

"I really don't think there are," and Jacinta's tone was, for no very apparent reason, slightly different now. "The nicest ones are, as you suggest, usually lazy. It's sad, but true. Still, you see, if ever I married, my husband would have to shake off his slothfulness and do something worth while."

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"But he mightn't want to."

"Of course," said Jacinta, drily. "He probably wouldn't. Still, he would have to. I should make him."

"Ah," said Muriel. "Do you know that you are just a little hard, and I think when one is too hard one is generally sorry afterwards. Now, I don't understand it all, but you once told me you had got something you wished for done, and were sorry you had. I fancied you were even sorrier than you wished me to know."

Jacinta sat silent a moment or two, with a curious expression in her face, as she looked out across the clustered roofs towards the sparkling sea. It was a custom she had fallen into lately, and it was always towards the east she gazed. Then she smiled.

"Well," she said, "perhaps I was, but it was certainly very silly of me."

Neither of them spoke again for a while, and by and by a man came out of the house bearing an envelope upon a tray. Jacinta tore it open, and Muriel saw the blood surge to her face as she spread out the telegraphic message. Then the swift colour faded, and there was only a little angry glint in her eyes.

"It's from my father, and good news for you," she said. "Tell Muriel Austin was here. Salvage operations difficult, but he left Jefferson, who expects to be successful, well. Forwarding letter."

"Ah!" said Muriel, with a little gasp, "you don't know what a relief that is to me. But you seem almost angry."

Jacinta laughed a trifle harshly. "I almost think I am. It isn't exactly pleasant to find one's self mistaken, and I had expected something better from Mr. Austin. The difficulties he mentions were evidently too much for him. You were quite right, my dear. There are not many men like Jefferson."

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Now Muriel Gascoyne had no very keen perceptions, and was, moreover, wrapped up in her own and Jefferson's affairs, or she might have seen that anger was not all that Jacinta was feeling. As it was, overcome by the relief the message had brought her, she quite failed to notice the pain in her companion's face or the quivering of her hands. In a minute or two Jacinta, who waited until she fancied she could do so without it appearing significant, rose and left her.

She, however, stopped on the terrace, and once more looked down on the glittering sea, with one hand closed at her side. Then, as though remembering something, she turned hastily.

"I could never have believed you were a coward—and you went out for me!" she said, and moved towards the hotel with a little air of resolution, as one who had made a painful decision.

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CHAPTER XIX CONDEMNED UNHEARD

A full moon hung over the white city, and the drowsy murmur of the surf broke fitfully through the music of the artillery band when Austin sat listlessly on a bench in the plaza of Santa Cruz. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and the plaza was crowded, as usual at that hour. Peon and officer, merchant and clerk, paced slowly up and down, enjoying the cool of the evening with their wives and daughters, or sat in clusters outside the lighted cafés. The band was an excellent one, the crowd gravely good-humoured, and picturesquely attired, for white linen, pale-tinted draperies, sombre cloth, and green uniform formed patches of kaleidoscopic colouring as the stream of humanity flowed by under the glaring lamplight and the soft radiance of the moon.

Austin had sat there often before he went to Africa, listening to the music and watching the spectacle; but neither had any charm for him that night. The laughter sounded hollow, the waltz the band was playing had lost its swing, and the streams of light from the cafés hurt his eyes and irritated him. The deep murmur of the sea alone was faintly soothing, and remembering how often he had thought of that cool plaza, with its lights and music, in the steamy blackness of the swamps, he wondered vaguely what had happened to him. The zest and sparkle seemed to have gone out of life, and he did not attribute it to the fact that the melancholia of the swamp belt was still upon him.

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He crossed the plaza, and sitting outside one of the cafés he had frequented, asked for wine. It was brought him, chilled with snow from the great peak's summit, but the greeting of the man who kept the café seemed for once devoid of cordiality, and the wine sour and thin. Still, the Spaniard stood a minute or two by his chair, and, as it happened, Jacinta passed just then with a dark-faced Spanish officer. He wore an exceedingly tight-fitting uniform, but he had a figure that carried it well, and an unmistakable air of distinction. Jacinta was also smiling at him, though she turned, and seemed to indicate somebody in the vicinity with a little gesture. As she did so her eyes rested for a moment upon Austin, who became for the first time unpleasantly conscious of

his haggard face and hard, scarred hands. There was, he realised, nothing in the least distinguished about him. Then it was with a faint sense of dismay he saw that Jacinta did not mean to recognise him, for she laughed as she turned to her companion, and he heard the soft rustle of her light draperies as they went on again.

"That is the Colonel Sarramento?" he said, as carelessly as he could, though there was a faint flush in his hollow face.

"It is," said his companion. "Colonel in the military service, though he has held other offices in Cuba. A man of ability, señor, and now it is said that he will marry the English merchant's daughter. Why not? The Señorita Brown is more Spanish than English, and she is certainly rich."

"I don't know of any reason," said Austin listlessly, and the man turned away. He had no wish to waste his time upon an Englishman who apparently did not appreciate his conversation.

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Austin sat still a little while, indignation struggling with his languor, for he was almost certain that Jacinta had seen him. He had never flattered himself that she would regard him as anything more than a friend who was occasionally useful, but he thought she might, at least, have expressed her appreciation of his latest efforts, and he was also a trifle puzzled. Jacinta, as a rule, would stop and speak to any of the barefooted peons she was acquainted with, and he had never known her to slight an acquaintance without a reason. It seemed only due to her to make quite sure she had intentionally passed him without recognition.

He rose and strolled round the plaza until he met her again face to face where a stream of garish light fell upon them both. She allowed her eyes to rest upon him steadily, but it was the look she would have bestowed on a stranger, and in another moment she had turned to the officer at her side. Then a bevy of laughing tourists passed between and separated them.

After that Austin strolled round the plaza several times in a far from amiable temper. He was stirred at last, and easy-going as he usually was, there was in him a certain vein of combativeness which had been shaken into activity in Africa. It was, he admitted, certainly Jacinta's privilege to ignore him; but there were occasions on which conventionalities might be disregarded, and he determined that she should, at least, make him acquainted with her purpose in doing so. He did not mean to question it, but to hear it was, he felt, no more than his due.

It was some time before he came upon her again, talking to a Spanish lady, who, seeing him approaching with a suggestion of resolution in his attitude, had sufficient sense to withdraw a pace or two and sign to another companion. Jacinta apparently recognised that he was not to be put off this time, for she indicated the vacant chairs not far away with a little wave of her fan, and when he drew one out for her sat down and looked at him.

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"You are persistent," she said. "I am not sure that it was altogether commendable taste."

Austin laughed a trifle bitterly, for the pessimistic dejection the fever leaves does not, as a rule, tend to amiability, and its victim, while willing to admit that there is nothing worth worrying over, is apt to make a very human display of temper on very small provocation.

"One should not expect too much from a steamboat sobrecargo," he said. "It is scarcely fair to compare him—for example—with a distinguished Spanish officer."

"I do not think you are improving matters," said Jacinta.

"Well," said Austin drily, "I have, you see, just come from a land where life is rather a grim affair, and one has no time to study its little amenities. I am, in fact, quite willing to admit that I have left my usual suavity behind me. Still, I don't think that should count. You contrived to impress me with the fact that you preferred something more vigorously brusque before I went out."

Jacinta met his gaze directly with a little ominous sparkle in her eyes and straightening brows. She had laid down her fan, and there was a cold disdain in her face the man could not understand. It was unfortunate he did not know how Pancho Brown had worded his message, for it contained no intimation that he was going back to Africa.

"It's a pity you didn't stay there," she said.

Austin started a little. He did not see what she could mean, and the speech appeared a trifle inhuman.

"It would please me to think you haven't any clear notion what those swamps are like," he said. "One is, unfortunately, apt to stay there altogether."

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"Which is a contingency you naturally wished to avoid? I congratulated you upon your prudence once before. Still, you, at least, seemed quite acquainted with the characteristics of the fever belt of Western Africa when you went out. Your friends the mailboats' officers must have told you. That being so, why did you go?"

"A persistent dropping will, it is said, in time wear away considerably harder material than I am composed of. Words are also, one could fancy, even more efficacious than water in that respect."

A trace of colour crept into Jacinta's face, and her brows grew straighter. The lines of her slight form became more rigid, and she was distinctly imperious in her anger.

"Oh, I understand!" she said. "Well, I admit that I was the cause of your going, and now you have

come to reproach me for sending you. Well, I will try to bear it, and if I do show any anger it will not be at what you say, but at the fact that one who I to some extent believed in should consider himself warranted in saying anything at all. No doubt, you will not recognise the distinction, but in the meanwhile you haven't quite answered my question. You were a free agent, after all, and I could use no compulsion. Why did you go?"

Austin's temper had grown no better during the interview, which was unfortunate for him, because an angry man is usually at a disadvantage in the presence of a woman whose indignation with him is largely tempered by a chilling disdain.

"That," he said, reflectively, "is a point upon which I cannot be quite certain, though the whole thing was, naturally, in most respects a piece of egregious folly. Still, your good opinion had its value to me, especially as it was very evident that I could never expect anything more. A little brutal candour is, I think, admissible now and then."

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The colour had faded out of Jacinta's face, but the sparkle was a trifle plainer in her eyes. "So you recognised that! Under the circumstances, it was wise of you, though how far you were warranted in telling me is a question we needn't go into now. It is a pity you ever went at all."

"In one sense I almost think it is," said Austin, gazing at her bewilderedly. "Still, there is a good deal I can't understand. I am in the dark, you see."

"Then I suppose I must try to make it clear to you. I am an essentially practical person, and any ardour you possess has hitherto been qualified by a very commendable discretion; but we are not very old, after all, and there is, fortunately, something in most of us which is occasionally stronger than the petty prudence we guide ourselves by. Now and then, as you gracefully suggest, it leads us into folly, which we have, perhaps, really no great reason to be sorry for. Well, for a little while you shook off the practical and apparently aspired after the ideal. You went out to Africa because you fancied it would please me, and it did. One may admit that a thing of that kind appeals to a woman's vanity. Still, of course, one could scarcely expect you to adhere to such a purpose. We have grown too wise to indulge in unprofitable sentimentality, and our knights errant do not come back upon their shields. They are practical gentlemen, who appreciate the comfort of a whole skin."

"I'm afraid you're confusing historical periods, and the times have certainly changed. They now use an empty gun case in Western Africa, I believe, and if they can't get that, any old blanket or piece of canvas that happens to be available."

"It should be a comfort to know that you need never anticipate anything so unpleasant."

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This time the colour suffused Austin's pallid face. It was clear that she was taunting him with cowardice in leaving Jefferson, and her contempt appeared so wholly unreasonable that he would make no attempt to vindicate himself. It did not appear likely to be successful in any case, and the pessimistic bitterness the fever leaves was still upon him.

"Well," he said quietly, "I had looked for a slightly different reception; but it presumably isn't dignified to complain, especially when it's evident it wouldn't do any good, while I scarcely think there is anything to be gained by extending our conversation. You see, I am, naturally, aware that my character is a somewhat indifferent one already. You will, no doubt, excuse me?"

Jacinta made him a little inclination over her lifted fan.

"If you will tell the Señora Anasona yonder that I am waiting, I should be much obliged," she said.

It was five minutes later when Austin was admitted to the cable office as a favour, and handed a despatch from a Las Palmas banking agency.

"Your draft will be honoured to the extent of £200," it ran.

He smiled grimly as he thrust it into his pocket, and, wandering round the plaza again, came upon Muriel Gascoyne and Mrs. Hatherly sitting in two of the chairs laid out in front of a hotel. He felt tempted to slip by, but remembered that he had a duty to Jefferson. Mrs. Hatherly shook hands with him, and though he fancied there was a restraint in her cordiality, Muriel turned to him impulsively.

"Tell me everything," she said. "The letter has not arrived."

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"There is a good deal of it," said Austin, with a smile.

"Then don't waste time."

Austin roused himself with an effort. Her tense interest and her simplicity, which, it seemed to him, had in it so much that was admirable, appealed to him, and he determined that she, at least, should know what Jefferson had done for her. The artistic temperament had also its influence on him, and he made her and her companion see the steaming swamps and feel the stress and strain of effort in the stifling hold, while it was his pleasure that Jefferson should stalk, a lean, dominant figure, through all the varied scenes. He felt, when he concluded, that he had drawn those sombre pictures well, and it would be Jefferson's fault if he did not henceforward pose before the girl's fancy as a knightly hero of romance. There were, naturally, difficulties to be overcome, for he recognised that she must be forced to comprehend that chivalric purposes must, nowadays, be wrought out by most prosaic means, and that the clash of the encounter occasionally leaves its

mark upon a man. Still, he saw that he had succeeded when the simple pride shone through the moisture that gathered in the girl's big blue eyes, and he was moved to sympathy when she rose with a little gasp.

"I must tell Jacinta. I don't feel quite able to thank you, Mr. Austin; but you will understand," she said.

She left them, and Mrs. Hatherly turned and looked at Austin very graciously.

"So you are going back?" she said.

"Of course," said Austin. "There is a Spanish boat to Las Palmas to-morrow, and nothing to keep me now I have got the money. I don't mind admitting that the asking for it was harder than anything I did in Africa."

The little lady nodded, with a very kindly light in her eyes. "Yes," she said, "I can understand that, but in one sense I am not exactly pleased. Why didn't you come to me?" [Pg 212]

"It sounds very ungracious, madam, but I am already in your debt, and one is naturally shy about asking favours of that kind from women. I almost think there are special reasons why it should be so in my case."

"That, presumably, means somebody has used you badly? Still, it really isn't wise to generalise too freely, and you were once good enough to promise that you would consider me as a friend of yours."

"I could scarcely have fancied you were particularly friendly a little while ago."

The little lady smiled again. "I offer you my sincere apologies, Mr. Austin. And now a question. Did you tell Jacinta what you have told us?"

"I certainly did not. To be candid, I hadn't the slightest encouragement. Miss Brown made it quite clear to me that she hadn't a trace of interest in any of my doings. In fact, she was kind enough to suggest it was rather a pity I escaped the fever, and hadn't come back upon my shield."

"For which she will probably be distinctly annoyed with herself by and by. I presume you must catch the Spanish steamer, Mr. Austin?"

"Of course. After all, I shall be glad to get back. People are not so very exacting in Africa, you see."

Mrs. Hatherly nodded, though there was a twinkle in her eyes. "Well," she said, "we will talk of something else in the meanwhile. I am alone just now, and you cannot decently leave me."

They discussed a good many things, and it seemed to Austin that his companion meant to keep him there, and was anxious to gain time. Still, he could see no reason for it, and failed to understand her remark about Jacinta, and he sat still with an effort until Muriel came back again. She appeared a trifle vexed about something. [Pg 213]

"I don't know what has happened to Jacinta, but she wasn't in the least sympathetic," she said. "She wouldn't even listen when I wanted to talk about Harry and the *Cumbria*."

"Where is she now?" asked Mrs. Hatherly.

"With the Señora Anasona. They are going back to Laguna directly, though she had, as you know, practically promised to stay with us to-night. The señora, it seems, wants to drive her across to her finca at Orotava to-morrow. It is very provoking."

Mrs. Hatherly changed the subject, and it was a minute or two later when she turned to Austin again.

"I suppose it is really necessary that you should cross to Las Palmas to-morrow," she said casually. "Couldn't you get there in the *Estremadura* before the West-coast boat sailed?"

"There are several things I have to do which can't well be arranged here."

"You would insist on getting them all done, even if you knew it would cost you something?"

"I really think I should. You see, Jefferson and the others are practically depending on me, and I daren't omit anything I want, whatever trouble it might cause me, although, as a matter of fact, I don't anticipate any, and it will be rather a relief to get away."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Hatherly. "Well, I suppose that is only what one would expect from you. Muriel, will you tell Jacinta that she has not shown me the lace she mentioned, and as I think I'll get the woman at Laguna to make me some, I want to see it before she goes away. I shall have to keep you another few minutes, Mr. Austin." [Pg 214]

Muriel disappeared into the crowd, and it was a little time before she came back again.

"Jacinta has just driven off with the señora," she said. "I can't quite understand why she didn't come to say good-bye."

Austin smiled drily. "I think I could guess her reason."

Mrs. Hatherly rose and held out her hand. "If you can come and see us to-morrow, please do so,"

she said. "If not, you will remember now that whatever happens I am one of your friends."

"I shall be glad to do so, madam," and Austin made her a little inclination. "Good friends are scarce, and there are apparently not many people who believe in me."

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CHAPTER XX

JACINTA MAKES NO EXCUSE

It was in the heat of the afternoon Mrs. Hatherly and Muriel drove into old-world Laguna, which stands high upon the hill slopes above Santa Cruz. It was built four hundred years ago, and remains but little changed, for its early prosperity ebbed away with the trade in the once famous vintages of Canary, so that it stood until a few years ago with the grass in its streets, a place of drowsy stillness, picturesque in its decay, cool, and by no means over clean. Beneath it the hillside drops, dusty and sun-scorched, to the sea; but on the plateau behind it are fields of tall sugar-cane, walnuts, eucalyptus, and vines, beyond which again the shoulders of the great peak are seamed by straggling pines. Still, when Mrs. Hatherly drove into it, Laguna was once more awakening, for the British tourist had arrived, with his wife and daughters, in blue veils and inartistic raiment that roused the peasants' wonder, besides cameras, and baggage by the carriage load; and when the tourist comes, quietness and the dignified simplicity of olden Spain melt before him.

The Señora Anasona, with whom Jacinta was then residing, however, belonged to the ancient order, and she had also placed herself and all her possessions at Mrs. Hatherly's disposal. The latter had already discovered that to be a friend of Jacinta's counted for a good deal in those islands. It secured one consideration in unexpected places, and opened doors at which the tweed-clad tourists' wives might knock in vain. The Castilian is somewhat behind the times, and, perhaps because he is seldom troubled with much of it, attaches rather less importance than some other people do to the possession of money. Muriel, however, was not certain why her aunt had undertaken that hot and dusty drive, although she had informed her that if there was a comfortable hotel in Laguna she might stay there a day or two, because she was not sure that Santa Cruz suited her, and she had been troubled with certain premonitory twinges in one shoulder. [Pg 216]

In any case, she faced the scorching sun uncomplainingly, and arriving at last before an iron-bound door in a blank white wall, was led through an ill-kept garden, where flowers rioted, a chaos of blazing colour, at their will, into a big, cool house, which seemed filled with slumbrous quietness. She was received by a very reposeful lady of middle age in inconveniently tight-fitting black silk, with the powder thick upon her pallid face. The Señora Anasona was, as is usual with Spanish women who have passed their third decade, somnolent in expression, and portly; but though they could only muster a very little indifferent French between them, she promptly set her guests at ease.

"This poor house and all there is in it are yours," she said. "The friends of the Señorita Jacinta are also mine. Since you have known this for some time, why have you stayed away so long?"

It was the usual conventional formula in Spain, but there was a certain stately graciousness in her gesture which Mrs. Hatherly had never seen quite equalled before. The latter attempted an appropriate reply in French, and then inquired for Jacinta, whereupon her hostess smiled.

"She is in the patio, and, perhaps, asleep," she said. "If not, it is likely that she will come in. I do not know. One does what one pleases always in this house of mine, and here one usually sleeps by the afternoon. What would you? It is a custom of the country, and there is nothing else to do. One can dream of the times when it was different with us and Spain." [Pg 217]

"One could fancy in this island that those days have not altogether passed away, or, at least, that they had left something behind," said Mrs. Hatherly. "One sees it in even your peons' courtesy, and the modesty of the women."

"You did not feel that in Las Palmas?"

"No," said Mrs. Hatherly. "I don't think I did."

The señora laughed. "Las Palmas is not Spanish now, my friend. They have coal wharves and harbour works, and heap up the pesetas there. There are, however, things we others would not exchange for silver. This house, for example. An Englishman would buy it and make it an hotel."

"Of course, you would not sell it him?"

The señora shook her head. "It is not mine," she said. "It belongs to the Anasonas who are dead. One of them built it four hundred years ago, and one of them has lived here always, until my husband, Colonel of Cazadores, died in Cuba. Now I live alone, and remember, until by and by my nephew comes here after me. The past is all we have in Spain, but one feels that, after all, it may

be worth more than the present—when one goes to Las Palmas."

Then a maid brought in a basket of grapes and a little wine, and it was some time later when the señora turned to Muriel.

"It seems that Jacinta is not coming in," she said. "Perhaps she would sooner see you alone in the patio. I do not know. Jacinta does not care about the conventions. She does what pleases her, and it is also very often the right thing. One descends from the veranda outside that window." [Pg 218]

Muriel smiled as she went out, for she was acquainted with Jacinta's habits, and was beginning to comprehend the customs of the land she lived in, where time is not considered, and it is always drowsy afternoon. Then, though she was not an imaginative person, she trod softly as she went down the steps to the patio, for the influence of the place laid hold on her. The little white town lay silent under the cloudless heavens, and had there been any movement of busy life there, which very seldom happened, the high white walls of the garden would have shut out the sound. The house was also built round the patio in a hollow square, and interposed a double barrier between the outer world and that space of flowers.

Over it hung bronze-railed balconies, and quaint verandas with old carved pillars and rich trellises smothered in purple bougainvillea, while there were oleanders and heavy scented heliotrope in the little square below. A fountain twinkled in the midst of it, and fat goldfish from Palma swam slowly round its marble basin; but all was old, artistic, ill cared for, and steeped in a silence which seemed filled with the reminiscences of bygone years. Even Jacinta, who lay in a big cane chair near the fountain, appeared in keeping with the atmosphere of the place, for she was dressed in gauzy Castilian black, which added a suggestion of old-fashioned stateliness to her somewhat slender figure, and an ebony fan of a kind not made nowadays lay across an open book she had apparently been reading. She looked up with a little smile when she saw Muriel, and languidly pointed to the canvas lounge beside her.

"It's comfortable, and I think it's strong," she said. "Any way, the señora regularly goes to sleep in it. I brought the lounges with me, because they don't have such things in Spain. I shall probably leave them here, and if they break down with the señora it is quite certain nobody will ever think of mending them. One folds one's hands and says that it doesn't matter at Laguna. You will begin to understand it if you stay here." [Pg 219]

Muriel laughed. "It's often a little hard to tell what you mean," she said. "You have been reading?"

"Mr. Prescott's history of the Spanish occupation of Mexico—you will, no doubt, be astonished at that?"

"I am. Still, I have read it, too."

Jacinta smiled as she unfolded her fan. "I have my moments of relaxation, and can be sentimental now and then. Sentiment, you see, is in the atmosphere here. One feels mediæval, as if all the old things of the olden days had come back again, miracles, and crowned virgins that fell from the clouds, valour and knightliness, and man's faith in woman. No doubt there were more, but I don't remember them. They have, of course, gone out of fashion long ago."

She spoke lightly, but there was a trace of bitterness in her voice that Muriel noticed.

"One doesn't find that atmosphere in the book. The men who went with Cortez were cruel as well as brutal."

"They certainly seem to have been so, which is one reason why they interest me. You see, the Spaniards seized these islands a little before they discovered Cuba, and I wanted to find out what the men who built these beautiful homes here were really like when they had work on hand. As one would have fancied, the grave, ceremonious Don who posed as a most punctilious gentleman at home became a very different kind of person when he went to Mexico. The original Adam showed up there. It's a useful lesson to any one silly enough to idealise the man she is going to marry." [Pg 220]

Muriel flushed a little. "I think I know what you mean. Mr. Austin tried to convey the same impression when he told me what they were doing on board the *Cumbria*. Still, he went a good deal further than you do. He made me understand that, though there are things that could only be done rudely and almost brutally, it was often only what was ideal in the men who did them that sent them to the work at all."

"Yes," said Jacinta drily. "I fancy he would do it rather well. Mr. Austin is not much of an artist, and would never be a great one; but he has the capacity of understanding, or, perhaps, I should say imagining things. Still, the pity is that he usually stops there. He doesn't want to do them, and though he once very rashly tried, he was not long in discovering that the work was a good deal too hard for him. I really think you should be glad there is a trace of primitive—we'll be candid, and call it brutality—in Harry Jefferson."

Again the colour showed in Muriel's face. "It isn't," she said. "It's only natural forcefulness; but we needn't go into that. I wonder why you are so angry with Mr. Austin?"

"Angry?" and Jacinta raised her brows. "Oh, dear no! Still, there are points on which he did not quite come up to my expectations, and after the admonitions I have wasted on him I feel a little

annoyed with him."

"Still, isn't that a trifle unreasonable? What could he have done that he hasn't done? He was ill and worn out, but he wouldn't even stay a day after he got the money."

"What money?" and there was a sharp insistency in Jacinta's tone.

"The money to buy the coal with. They found they hadn't enough, you know."

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"I don't."

"Well," said Muriel, "it is really your own fault. You wouldn't let me tell you about it in the plaza. Mr. Austin had to borrow the money from his English relatives, though I think it hurt him horribly to ask them. When he found they would send it he had to catch the first African steamer."

Jacinta straightened herself suddenly, and gazed at Muriel with astonishment and dismay in her face.

"So he meant to go back all the time?" she said.

"Of course," said Muriel, and Jacinta, sitting back again, sat very still, though her companion noticed that one hand had closed tightly on her fan.

"When was he to go?" she asked, with a curious quietness.

"In a day or two. He is in Las Palmas now."

Then there was a curious silence for almost a minute, and Jacinta, who could not rouse herself to break it, was glad to see that Muriel had evidently not remembered that her only information about Austin's doings was that contained in her father's message. There was no sound but the soft splashing of the fountain, and Jacinta found the stillness becoming intolerable. It was a relief when Muriel, who felt that her company was not appreciated, rose.

"Perhaps the señora will expect me to go back," she said. "Are you coming?"

"I am not," said Jacinta. "I have no doubt your aunt will come out to see me presently."

Muriel looked a little puzzled. "You will not mind my going?"

"Of course not," and Jacinta laughed somewhat curiously. "I have, as you see, a work on Mexico to keep me company."

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Muriel left her, and she lay still in the chair listening to the fountain and gazing straight in front of her, until Mrs. Hatherly came down the veranda stairs alone half an hour later. She sat down and looked at Jacinta steadily.

"I suppose you know why I have come to Laguna to-day?" she said.

"Yes," said Jacinta quietly. "Still, I hadn't the faintest notion a little while ago. I shall try to bear anything you may think fit to say to me. Mr. Austin, I understand, is a friend of yours."

The little lady smiled, for she saw that Jacinta was clever enough to make no excuses, and she appreciated her candour as well as her good sense.

"Well," she said, "I want you to tell me why you sent him to Africa."

"For one thing, because Muriel was once very kind to me. Mr. Jefferson was down with fever, and I fancied that, in any case, he could do a good deal more with a comrade there. Still, that was not all. There were other reasons."

"Naturally. It is gratifying to discover how far a man's devotion will carry him."

A little flash crept into Jacinta's eyes, but it faded again. "I suppose I deserve that, but you are wrong. It wasn't to soothe my vanity."

"No?" and there was a suggestion of incredulity in Mrs. Hatherly's smile. "Still, one may be excused for pointing out that it really looks very like it."

Jacinta made a little movement with her fan. "You can't think worse of me than I do of myself; but I scarcely fancy I did wrong in sending him. He was wasting his life here, and I thought I knew what there was in him. I wanted to rouse it—to waken him. You see, I am talking very frankly."

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"In that case it must have cost you something to send him to Africa?"

The colour showed plainly in Jacinta's face. "I think that is another question. One, too, which you could scarcely expect me to answer you."

"I'm afraid it was not very delicate," and Mrs. Hatherly's eyes grew gentler. "Still, didn't you feel that you were presumptuous?"

"Of course; but I have always done what pleased me, and made others do it, too. It usually turned out well, you know. I have, however, come to grief this time, and it would almost be a relief if somebody would shake me."

Mrs. Hatherly smiled. "I fancy the feeling will do you good. Still, if you were right in sending Mr. Austin out, it is just a little incomprehensible."

"Then you don't know how I treated him?"

"No," said Mrs. Hatherly. "At least, not exactly. He only admitted that you did not seem very pleased to see him. Still, I am an old woman, and that naturally conveyed a good deal to me. Perhaps you do deserve shaking, but I want to be kind."

Jacinta turned to her with the colour in her cheeks and a haziness in her eyes.

"I taunted him with being a coward and finding the work too hard for him. The man was ill and jaded, but I had no mercy on him. He said nothing; he never told me he was going back. How was I to know? The night my father's message came I felt I could have struck him. If I had done so, he would probably not have felt it half so much as the bitterness I heaped upon him."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Hatherly. "It was, perhaps, natural under the circumstances, but there is a good deal that you are responsible for."

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"What do you mean by under the circumstances?"

Mrs. Hatherly smiled. "I have not the slightest doubt that you quite understand, my dear. The question, however, is how you are going to set it right?"

Jacinta shivered a little. The colour had already ebbed from her face, which was a trifle more pallid than usual.

"It is a thing I may never be able to do," she said. "That is what makes it so hard. You see, a good many men go out to Africa, and so few come back again. If it hadn't been for that I don't think I should have admitted what I have done, but I feel I must have somebody's comprehension—if I can't expect sympathy."

"You have mine, my dear," and Mrs. Hatherly laid a beautiful thin hand gently upon her arm. "Besides, I think Mr. Austin will understand how it came about when he goes back to Africa."

Jacinta straightened herself slowly. "Well," she said, "that may happen, and in any case I know that I sent him, and he was glad to go."

She met the little lady's sympathetic gaze steadily. "Still, that is so very little, after all."

Mrs. Hatherly smiled reassuringly. "My dear," she said, "I think you do not quite understand all that man is yet. In spite of the climate he and his comrade are going to be successful."

Then she turned, and Jacinta rose, for the Señora Anasona and Muriel were coming down the stairway.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE PICTURES

Austin had been gone a fortnight when Jacinta and Muriel Gascoyne sat under the lee of the *Estremadura's* deck-house one morning, on their way to Las Palmas. Above them the mastheads swung languidly athwart a cloudless sweep of blue, and the sea frothed in white incandescence about the lurching hull below as the little yacht-like steamer reeled eastwards with a rainbow in the spray that whirled about her bows. Astern of her the Peak's white cone gleamed above its wrappings of fleecy mist, and ahead on the far horizon Grand Canary swam a purple cloud.

Jacinta was dressed ornately in the latest English mode, and it seemed to Muriel that she had put on conventional frivolity along with her attire. Indeed, Muriel had noticed a change in her companion during the last few days, one that was marked by outbreaks of flippancy and somewhat ironical humour. An English naval officer leaned upon the back of her chair, and a tourist of the same nationality stood balancing himself against the rolling with his hand on the rail that ran along the deck-house. The latter was looking down at Macallister, who sat upon the deck with a little box in front of him.

"I brought up the two or three sketches ye were asking for, Mr. Coulstin," he said. "The saloon's full of jabbering Spaniards, and the messroom's over hot."

The tourist screwed the glass he wore more tightly into his eye. "If they're equal to the one I saw in the N. W. A. store I may be open to make a purchase," he said. "I think you told me you were acquainted with the artist, Miss Brown?"

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"I believe I did," said Jacinta, who was conscious that Macallister was watching her languidly. "You will, however, no doubt be able to judge his pictures for yourself."

Coulston made a little humorous gesture. "I am not a painter, and I could scarcely venture to call myself a connoisseur. Still, I buy a picture or two occasionally, and the one I mentioned rather took my fancy. A sketch or two of that kind would make a pleasant memento."

"One would fancy that a good photograph would be more reliable, as well as cheaper," said the naval officer.

Coulston reproachfully shook his head. "I'm afraid we differ there," he said. "Leaving out the question of colour, a photograph is necessarily an artificial thing. It wants life and atmosphere, and you can never put that into a picture by a mechanical process. Only a man can feel, and transmute his impressions into material. Accuracy of detail is, after all, by comparison, a secondary consideration, but perhaps I had better pull up before my hobby makes a bolt of it."

"I have heard of people riding a hobby uncomfortably hard," said Jacinta reflectively.

"That, I think, is, to be accurate, seldom what happens. If a man has a genuine hobby, it never needs spurring. It is, in fact, unpleasantly apt to run away with him on the smallest provocation. Are steamboat men addicted to making sketches, Mr. Macallister?"

"No," said Macallister, grinning. "At least its not the usual thing, but I once sailed with another of them who did. He was second engineer, and would draw the chief one day. It was very like him, so like that it cost the man his job, and a wife as well. Says he, 'How could ye expect me to idealise a man with a mouth like yon?'"

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"But how did that affect his wife?" asked the officer.

Macallister grinned more broadly, but it was Jacinta he looked at.

"Ye see," he said, "he had not got one then. He was second engineer, and would have gone chief in a new boat if he'd stayed with that company. The young woman was ambitious, and she told him she would not marry him until he was promoted, on principle. He was a long while over it after he lost that berth, and then—also on principle—he would not marry her."

Jacinta laughed, though Muriel fancied she had seen a momentary hardening of her face.

"She probably deserved it, though one can't help concluding that she wouldn't feel it much," she said. "That is one of the advantages of being a practical person; but hadn't you better get the drawings out?"

Macallister took out a sketch in water-colour and held it up. It showed a strip of a steamer's deck, with the softened sunlight beating down through an awning upon a man in skipper's uniform who lay, cigar in hand, in a hammock that swung beneath the spars. He was, to judge from his expression, languidly contented with everything, and there was a big glass of amber-coloured liquid on the little table beside him, and a tier of bottles laid out upon the deck. Beneath it ran the legend, "For men must work."

"That," said Jacinta, "is, at least, what they tell their wives."

The tourist gazed at the drawing, and then turned to her. He was, as she had discovered already, a painfully didactic person.

"The conceit," he said, "is a somewhat happy one, though the sketch is, it seems to me, a little weak in technique. As we admitted, one difference between a photograph and a painting is that the artist records his own sensations in the latter, and stamps it with, at least, a trace of his individuality. In that respect the sketch is, I fancy, characteristic. The artist, one could imagine, was in full sympathy with his subject—the far niente—but I am, no doubt, getting prosy."

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For no very apparent reason a little flush of colour crept into Jacinta's face, and Macallister, who saw it, chuckled as he took out another sketch.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "I never met a man who could do nothing more gracefully than Mr. Austin, but I'll let ye see the rest of them, since they're in my charge to sell. Mr. Austin, who wants the money, took a sudden notion he'd go to Africa, and, if they've had a quick run, he's now humping palm oil puncheons in a stranded steamer's hold. I'm thinking it will be a big change for him."

The naval officer laughed softly. "From what I know of the tropics I fancy you are right. In fact, it's rather difficult to imagine the man I met at the bull fight doing that kind of thing at all. Salvage work is necessarily hard under any circumstances, and anywhere, but the last place I would care to attempt it in is Western Africa. What sent—him—there?"

"Ye must not ask me," and a little twinkle, for which Jacinta longed to shake him, crept into Macallister's eyes. "Now, there are clever folks who will look at a man, or maybe talk to him awhile, and then label him, thinking they know just what to expect of him. It does him no great harm, and it pleases them, until one day he does something that astonishes them in spite of his label. Then they're apt to get angry with him. A man, ye see, is, after all, not that unlike an engine. Ye cannot tell what may be going on in the inside of him, and when the result's distressing it's most often the fault of injudicious handling."

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Jacinta, to whom he apparently directed his observations, contrived to regard him with a little smile, and he proceeded to extricate another sketch, a canvas this time.

"This one is different," he said.

Coulston, who apparently concurred with him, gazed at the picture with a trace of astonishment. It showed a big cargo lancha lurching out, deep-loaded, through a fringe of tumbling surf with

four men straining at the ponderous oars. The wet rags they wore clung about their limbs, and there was weariness in their grim, brown faces. Bent backs and set lips had their significance, and the sketch was stamped with the suggestion of endurance and endeavour. Yet, as those who saw it felt, there was triumph in it, too, for while the rollers came seething in to hurl her back the lancha was clawing off the shore.

"It's good!" said the navy man. "It's unusually good. Those fellows are played out, and they know if they slacken down for a moment she'll roll over with them or go up on the beach. The sea's running in against her—one finds out by trying it how hard it is to pull off against a surf—but they're driving her out. Presumably, that's what you call the motive of the thing."

The tourist nodded appreciatively. "Yes," he said. "In spite of certain faults in drawing, it's well worked out. What puzzles me is how the man who did the other one came to feel it as he evidently did. One could fancy he had had a revelation, and that in some respects he was a different man when he painted this. I'll offer you five guineas for it, Mr. Macallister."

"Then," said Macallister, promptly, "ye can have it. Eight guineas for the two, if ye would like the other one. There are two or three more of them here ye might care to look at." He stopped a moment, and added, as if in explanation: "I'm anxious to do what I can for Mr. Austin. Many's the time I've stole his wine and sold his clothes." [Pg 230]

He undid a package, and, first of all, took out a photograph of a young girl with a comely English face, which Jacinta glanced at somewhat sharply. Then she became intent when there followed several rudimentary pencil and pastel sketches of herself, until Macallister handed Coulston a picture. He turned from it to Jacinta, and looked at her with a steadiness a young woman less accustomed to masculine criticism would probably have found disconcerting.

She lay smiling at him in the canvas lounge, very pretty and very dainty, with conventional indifference expressed even in her pose. She was, he fancied, a woman who knew her world thoroughly, and had the greater influence therein because she seldom asked too much from it. Then he glanced again at her portrait almost incredulously, for it showed the little shapely head held well erect, the red lips straightened and firmly closed, and the glow of a strenuous purpose in the eyes. Stooping, he laid the picture on her knees with a little smile.

Jacinta laughed softly. "Yes," she said, "of course, I know what you mean. I am essentially modern and frivolous, and not in the least like that. Still, you see, all of us have our serious moments now and then, although it is probably fortunate they don't last long."

"Ah," said Coulston, wilfully neglecting his opportunity, "I almost fancy a light breaks in on me. One could entitle this inspiration, and it is, you know, possible to transmit it occasionally. I wonder whether it would make the idea clearer if we placed the three pictures together. Mr. Macallister will permit me?" [Pg 231]

He set up the first sketch of the steamboat skipper against the lifeboat skids, and gazed at it critically. "Assuming that a picture contains something of its painter's ego, you will observe how the idea of petty indulgence and his appreciation of sensual comfort is impressed on one," he said. "Now we will set up the other sketch of the sailormen. There you see restraint, tense effort, abnegation—and victory—in one sense a spiritual triumph over the body. It is an interesting question how the man who painted both could have been brought to grasp what Lieutenant Onslow calls the motive of the last one; but if we might venture to place another picture between."

Jacinta raised her head sharply, and there was an ominous sparkle in her eyes. "No," she said, with quiet incisiveness, "I would sooner you didn't. There are certainly men whose hobby, now and then, runs away with them. Macallister, will you put that portrait back again?"

She handed it him face downwards, for the others had not seen it, and Lieutenant Onslow turned to the tourist.

"I don't quite understand, but I fancy Miss Brown doesn't approve of vivisection any more than I do," he said. "It really isn't decent to turn anybody inside out."

"I wonder," said Coulston, ignoring him, "if you would mind my offering to buy the three?"

He was looking steadily at her, but Jacinta contrived for a moment to catch Macallister's eye. So swift was the flashed glance that the tourist did not notice it, but Jacinta could convey a good deal with a look, and the engineer was a man of considerable intelligence.

"That one is not for sale," he said.

"No," said Onslow, who held up a strip of pasteboard and a sheet of brown paper, "I scarcely think it is. In fact, you don't appear to have noticed that there's a seal on this part of it, and instructions that this particular packet is not to be opened." [Pg 232]

It seemed to Muriel that a trace of colour once more crept into Jacinta's face, but Macallister surveyed the wrappings the officer handed him with a grin.

"It is not that difficult to slice a seal off and stick it back again," he said. "It's also a thing Mr. Austin should have remembered. Many a garafon of wine has he seen opened."

"So you know that trick!" Onslow laughed. "I'm inclined to think it's one that has now and then

been practised upon our mess."

Just then Mrs. Hatherly appeared on deck, and the group broke up. Muriel joined her aunt, Macallister, accompanied by the tourist, went down the ladder with the box of sketches under his arm, while Jacinta and Lieutenant Onslow were left alone. The latter stood with his hand on the lifeboat skids, looking down on her gravely. He was a well-favoured young man, with an honest, sun-bronzed face.

"I am," he said, "as you know, going out to take over command of a West-coast gunboat in a day or two, and it is more than probable that I shall not have an opportunity like this again. You see, Nasmyth and I have had a very good time in these islands, and we feel that we owe it largely to you. In fact, it's perfectly clear to us that things would have been very different if you hadn't taken us under your gracious protection. I just want to say that we recognise it, and feel grateful."

"Well," said Jacinta, reflectively, "I am rather glad you do. Gratitude that is worth anything carries a certain sense of obligation with it."

"Of course!" and Onslow smiled. "Only give me the chance of doing anything I can for you."

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"Do you know whereabouts on the West-coast the Delgado Island lies?"

"I can readily find out."

Jacinta glanced at him sharply, and had no doubt concerning the eagerness in his face. If there was anything he could do to please her it would certainly be done.

"There is a stranded steamer somewhere up a creek behind that island, and I think the men who are trying to salve her have a good many difficulties to contend with. Among other things, I fancy the niggers are worrying them."

"Ah!" said Onslow. "Our ships are not, as a rule, permitted to take any part in commercial ventures, but there are, of course, exceptions to everything. According to my instructions, I am also to avoid all unpleasantness with the seaboard niggers unless they have been provoking the authorities. Still, I would like to ask if any of the men on board that steamer is a friend of yours?"

"One of them is Miss Gascoyne's affianced lover, and she is a very old friend indeed. However, since you are apparently unable——"

Onslow checked her with a little smile. "I'm not sure you are really willing to let me off, and if you were, I shouldn't be pleased, while I scarcely think you have answered my question very frankly, either. That, however, doesn't matter. It is permissible for the commander of a coast patrol gunboat to send a pinnace in to survey a little known creek or channel, and her crew would, of course, be guided by circumstances if they came upon a stranded steamer."

"I presume you would not care to earn Muriel's undying gratitude by being a trifle more definite?"

"No," said Onslow, with twinkling eyes. "I esteem Miss Gascoyne's good opinion, but I really couldn't go any further to win yours. As I pointed out, one would be guided by circumstances; but men on board stranded steamers have been supplied with drugs and provisions, as well as lent naval artificers to advise them as to repairs. I have even heard of a gunboat's launch carrying out their hawsers and anchors."

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Jacinta rose with a little smile. "I think one could leave it with confidence to your discretion, and since it seems very likely that you will come across that steamer, I should be pleased to have your views as to the selection of a few comforts and provisions."

Onslow favoured her with them, and, as it happened, met Macallister when at last he went down the ladder.

"Ye are going out to Africa, too?" said the latter, with a grin. "She has been giving ye sailing instructions?"

Onslow looked at him grimly. "Well," he said, "what the devil has that to do with you?"

"Oh, nothing. Just nothing at all. Still, because I see ye are willing, I would have ye know that there are—two—men from Grand Canary on board yon steamer already."

Onslow smiled a trifle drily. "My dear man, I'm not altogether an ass," he said.

In the meanwhile Muriel strolled back towards Jacinta, and glanced at her with a suggestion of astonishment in her face as she sat down.

"You are different from what you were a little while ago," she said.

Jacinta laughed. "I daresay I am. I had, as a matter of fact, sunk into a state of pessimistic apathy, which naturally found expression in ill-humoured pleasantries lately, but I have been getting to work again. It has rather a bracing effect, you see. In the meanwhile, it might be advisable for you to make yourself as nice as possible to Lieutenant Onslow, who is now coming up on deck again. Go and ask him to show you a flying fish, or something."

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Muriel went, for she had discovered that there was usually a sufficient reason for most of what

Jacinta did, and the latter lay still in her chair.

"There is," she said, "still a fly in the amber. I wonder what he wanted with that photograph, though, after all, he didn't think it worth while carrying to Africa."

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CHAPTER XXII

FUNNEL-PAINT'S PROPOSITION

Deep stillness hung over the dingy mangroves, and there was not a breath of air astir, while Austin, who lay among the palm oil puncheons beside the creek, was oppressed by a sense of suffocation. A few yards away two Spaniards lay, apparently asleep, huddled, shapeless heaps of ragged clothing, beneath a strip of tarpaulin raised on poles, and it was then, though there was no sun visible, a little past the hottest part of the afternoon. A yellow vapour that seemed suffused with heat had obscured the heavens for a week or more, and the swamps lay sweltering beneath it waiting for the rain. Austin longed for it ardently, for there was an almost unendurable tension in the atmosphere.

He had shaken off the fever, but he was worn and dazed by toil, for the strain was not without its effect upon him, and he had become subject to curious tricks of fancy. He had brought the coal from Dakar, and it now lay piled upon a down river beach; but he had obtained only two or three men, and the steamy heat of the swamp belt had melted the sustaining energy out of the *Cumbria's* company. Individually, he felt that it was a hopeless struggle they were making. They had untrammelled nature against them, and, he could almost fancy, the malevolent spirits of the bush the negroes believed in. A man, he admitted, could believe in anything in that country, and he had of late been troubled by a feeling that something sinister and threatening was hovering near him.

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He was unpleasantly conscious of it then, which was partly why he lay raised on his elbow, with his eyes fixed on the bush that shut in the narrow strip of land. It rose before him, laced with tangled creepers, mysterious, and shadowy, and it seemed to him that somebody or something was watching him from its dim recesses. He had been conscious of the same sensation when he plodded with a Spanish seaman along the narrow trail to the dug up beach, an hour earlier, but it was stronger now, and instinctively he slipped his hand into a pocket where the pistol he had bought in Grand Canary lay. Then he laughed in a listless fashion, for they had seen no more of the negroes since the blowing up of the headman's house, and he felt that he had not them to fear. There was, in fact, no tangible cause for apprehension at all.

Presently something seemed to materialise amidst the shadows where the creepers streamed from a cottonwood in dense festoons, and, lying still, with fingers closing on the pistol, he could almost fancy he made out a dim human form. There was, at least, one black patch among the leaves that suggested greasy naked skin. It vanished again, however, and Austin, who felt his heart beating, abused the intolerable glare the sand flung up that dazzled his vision, and then stiffened himself in tense watchfulness as for a moment he made out a pair of rolling eyes. The creepers rustled, a twig snapped, and he was about to call out, when one of the Canarios raised himself a trifle.

"Ave Maria!" he said, with drowsy hoarseness, and, though the words are frequently used to express astonishment in his country, it was evident that he meant them as a pious appeal.

In any case, the creepers became suddenly still again, and Austin, who rose a trifle stiffly, found nothing when he pushed his way through the midst of them. There was no sound in the steamy bush, not a leaf seemed bruised or bent, and he went back again, with the perspiration dripping from him. Nevertheless, he was annoyed to notice that the Canario was watching him curiously.

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"Nothing!" he said, with a dramatic gesture. "Nothing that one can see."

"What do you mean?" asked Austin sharply.

The Canario flung out an arm again. "Who knows! Though one cannot see it, it comes now and then. There are evil things in this land of the devil, and the saints are very far away. This is no place for them."

Austin sat down again and took out his pipe. He felt that there was nothing to be gained by continuing the discussion, for of late he had become almost superstitiously apprehensive himself. He lay watching the bush for another hour, and then, though it was the last thing he had intended, went to sleep. He had borne a heavy strain, and his will was weakening.

It was dark when he was awakened by a splash of paddles as the *Cumbria's* surfboat crept up the creek with the relief watch, and another hour had passed when they made the craft fast alongside the gangway and climbed wearily on board the steamer. There was no sound or light on board her, for half the crew were sick, and the pump had stopped. She lay, a black mass, amidst the sliding mist, and he stumbled over the kernel bags upon her slanted deck as he

groped his way to his room in the poop. It was seldom he or Jefferson slept soundly now, and as they only awakened each other, Austin had moved to a room aft.

He lighted the oil lamp and flung himself, dressed as he was, into his berth, but found he could not sleep, though he could not remember how long he lay awake listening. He could hear mysterious splashings in the forest and the low gurgle of the creek, while now and then a timber creaked, or a drop of moisture fell from the iron beams with a splash that startled him. At last, when his eyes were growing heavy, there was a different and very faint sound on deck, and as he raised himself the door that stood a little open swung back gently. The lamp was still burning, for he found the light comforting, as white men are occasionally apt to do in that country, and it was with a little gasp of relief he felt for the pistol beneath his pillow as Funnel-paint came in. He was almost naked, and the water ran from him, but the strip of cloth about his loins was bound by a leather belt, with a sheath hung to it such as seamen wear, and the knife from the latter gleamed in his wet hand. He, however, dropped it upon the deck, and squatted on the water-ledge that rose a foot beneath the door. Austin watched him quietly, for he was, at least, not afraid of Funnel-paint.

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"What the devil do you want?" he said.

"Halluf them gum," said the negro, with a wicked grin.

"How are we to give it you when we haven't found a bag of it?"

The negro grinned again. "S'pose I done tell you where him lib?"

"If you knew why didn't you get it for yourself?"

Funnel-paint shook his head. "Them book I got savvy—I no savvy make him tell me," he said. "You dash me halluf them gum you get them book."

Austin lay silent, resting on one elbow, for a moment or two. He knew that book means anything which is written on in that country, and it occurred to him that if the gum had been hidden ashore, it was very probable that the man who buried it had made a rough sketch or other record of the spot. The document, it was conceivable, might have come into the negro's possession. Still, he was suspicious.

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"There's another boy who speaks English in the headman's village," he said.

"Him only dam bushman—no savvy book, no savvy anyt'ing. Him them headman's boy. Headman he want everyt'ing."

"Ah!" said Austin, who was more dubious about his visitor's good faith than ever, since it was clear that it was his intention to trick his confederate out of his share of the plunder. "I suppose, since you swam off, you haven't the book about you?"

The negro let one eyelid droop a little. "You t'ink black man one dam fool?"

"No," said Austin, reflectively, "if you understand me, I should rather call you an infernal rogue. Any way, you lib for get out one time, and come back to-morrow. I'll palaver with them other white man by then, savvy?"

Funnel-paint unobtrusively laid a wet prehensile toe upon the haft of the knife, but Austin, who was careful not to betray the fact, noticed it.

"Them other white man he do go dash me anyt'ing," he said decisively. "I savvy him. S'pose you done tell him you no go catch them book?"

"Then how do you fancy I'm going to give you half the gum without his knowing?"

Funnel-paint grinned unpleasantly. "Bimeby them white cappy man he die," he said, as though he were sure of it. "White man sick too much in dis country. I savvy."

Austin contrived to hold in check the indignant wrath he felt. A man's life, he was quite aware, was worth very little in those swamps; and, because he placed some small value on the one that belonged to him, it was evidently advisable to proceed circumspectly. Funnel-paint was, he recognised, a diplomatist in his way, and had said very little, though that was sufficient to show Austin what his proposition meant. It was, at least, clear that he was to ask no questions if anything unexpected happened to Jefferson, and in reward of this he would be permitted to carry off half the gum. It appeared that Funnel-paint was sure of its existence, or he would never have ventured to creep on board at night at all, and Austin decided that since he certainly could not be trusted, the boldest course was best. The rage he felt also prompted him to it, and he lay still, considering, with a hand beneath the pillow, and a flush in his face, while the negro squatted, huge and motionless, on the door-ledge, watching him with a little cunning smile. It seemed to Austin that it would simplify matters considerably if he could secure Funnel-paint's person, though he could not quite see how it was to be done, especially since it was evident that the negro would be no use to them dead.

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In the meanwhile there was deep stillness without, intensified by the oily gurgle of the creek, until Austin fancied he heard another faint and stealthy sound on deck. Funnel-paint did not appear to notice it, which was, it seemed to Austin, significant, for he sat still, though with a scarcely perceptible motion he drew the knife a little nearer to him with his toe. Austin decided that the proposition he had made was, after all, probably a blind, and the friends he had expected

were now arriving.

"Keep still!" he said abruptly, whipping out the pistol.

The negro started, and would apparently have fallen backwards in his alarm had he not seized the edge of the cushion on the settee in a wet hand. Then he gazed at Austin as though in bewilderment or consternation.

"Bushman lib!" he said.

He glanced towards the open ring of the port, and for a second Austin turned his eyes in the same direction, but that was long enough, for the big cushion of the settee fell upon his head, and he rolled over under it. It was a moment or two before he had flung it from him and sprung out of his berth, and then there was no sign of Funnel-paint, though he could hear a rush of feet and the sound of a scuffle on deck. They were also booted feet, and Austin ran out into the black darkness beneath the poop. He could see nothing for a moment, but he heard a hoarse ejaculation that was followed by a splash in the creek. Then a shadowy figure grew out of the blackness, and he dropped the pistol to his side at the sound of an English voice.

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"All right, Mr. Austin?" it said.

"I am," said Austin. "Is that you, Bill?"

The half-seen man assured him that it was, and then followed him back into the lighted room, where he sat down and held up a hand from which a red trickle dripped down his arm.

"The dam brute's got away," he said. "P'r'aps you could fix this up for me."

Austin lugged a little chest out from under the settee, and glanced at the injured hand. "Nothing serious, though I have no doubt it stings," he said. "You were in one sense lucky in getting it there. How did you happen to come along?"

"It was my watch," said Bill. "I had just come down from the bridge-deck when I thought I heard talking, and that brought me here as quietly as I could. If I'd had the sense to take my boots off I'd have had him. I gripped him by the rail, but he shoved the knife into my hand and slung himself over."

Austin bound his hand up, and then looked at him thoughtfully.

"I don't think there's anything to be gained by letting the others know," he said. "Any way, I'd consider it a favour if you said nothing about the thing until I've talked it over with Mr. Jefferson."

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Bill grinned comprehendingly. "I'll tell Tom, but nobody else. We have our own little row with the vermin, and the next time I get my grip on him there'll be an end of him!"

He went out, and by and by Austin contrived to go to sleep, while it was next day, and they sat in the dripping engine room, from which the water was sinking, when he told Jefferson what had passed. The latter listened thoughtfully, and then broke into a little hollow laugh.

"It seems to me that you missed your chance," he said. "Funnel-paint knows a good deal—I have guessed that for some time—but he has found out he can't get at the gum without one of us helping him, at last. That is probably why he has left us alone so long. He wasn't sure whether there was any of it on board the ship, and was, naturally, willing that we should decide that point for him."

"What would he gain by that?" asked Austin.

"The gum!" and Jefferson laughed again, but not pleasantly. "He's an inconsequent devil, but he seems to have scraped up a little sense as he went on with the game. You see, white men are apt to die off suddenly in this country, and I scarcely think that anybody who could make trouble knows we're here. Any way, there's no unusual need for worry. It only means double watches."

"Still, one could fancy you had a good deal on your mind."

"I have. We have stripped this ship all but the engine room to the ballast tanks—there was, you may remember, a manhole lid lifted on the forward one, which may account for some of the water getting in—and the five hundred dollars I raised the offer to hasn't produced a pound of gum. Half the men are down now, and we can't send them all away, while even if we wanted to they're most of them unwilling to go. They're as keen on their share—and it's quite a big one—as I am. Then we'll have the rains on us in a week or two."

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Austin sat silent awhile. He knew that the feverish search for the treasure had stirred the cupidity of the Latins until they were as determined on finding it as their leader. Nothing else was thought of, the sick men raved of it, and, in any case, those who had held out so long and staunchly had their percentage on the value of the steamer's hull and cargo to gain. It meant comparative affluence to the barefooted sailormen. That, however, was only one side of the question, after all, for while their willingness was evident, their physical capacity for work was lessening every day.

"The rains will flood every beach," he said. "If we don't find the gum before they come, what then?"

"If it's necessary, we'll stay here until the water falls again. That is, at least, some of us will."

Austin rose up slowly with a little sign of comprehension. Two men had been buried while he was away, and he did not think that many of them would be left there to see the waters fall.

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CHAPTER XXIII

FUNNEL-PAINT MOVES AGAIN

A week had slipped by since the negro's visit, and Austin and Jefferson were sitting late in the skipper's room. There had been no change in the weather, and it was then, if possible, hotter than ever. The muggy land breeze had died away, and a thick woolly mist shut the stranded steamer in. Door and ports were open wide, but the oil lamp that hung beneath the beams burned unwaveringly, and the ray of light that streamed out from the doorway made the blackness outside more apparent. The big pump was running behind the deck-house, and its deep vibratory humming rang startlingly through a stillness so intense that it seemed unnatural, as it hurled the water out of the engine room.

Austin sat huddled in a corner, attired only in duck trousers, and torn singlet which came no lower than his elbows, and, for want of buttons, fell open at his neck. He had an unusually clean skin, and his sun-scorched lower arms and scarred hands, with the battered knuckles and broken nails, emphasised by contrast the clear whiteness of his half-covered chest. That night it was beaded with perspiration, for which he was sincerely thankful, since there are times in the tropics when the healing moisture fails to find its way through the fevered skin, and its afflicted owner burns in torment.

Jefferson sat on the little table, a blackened pipe in his hand, and the listless pose of both suggested that the last trace of energy had been sapped out of them. At last Austin laughed, hollowly and dejectedly.

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"I don't know why we're sitting here saying nothing when we have to begin again at five o'clock to-morrow, but I don't feel like sleep," he said. "In fact, I scarcely think I've slept for more than a couple of hours at a time since I came back again. I suppose I ought to be in the fore-castle now—four or five of them seemed very sick when I last looked in—but there's an abominable tension in the air that makes any exertion out of the question."

Jefferson nodded. "You can't do anything for them, and there's nobody we could spare to send with them down river," he said. "They've got to take their chances with the rest of us now, and it seems to me one might figure them out as three or four to one if the rains don't come. Still, if you don't want to do anything, why can't you keep still?"

"I don't know," and Austin, who had been rolling a damp cigar in his fingers, flung it down. "If that pump stopped I should probably make an exhibition of myself. The hum and thump it makes has a soothing effect on me. It's suggestive. Even here man has something to say. I don't know whether you understand me."

Jefferson looked at him curiously. "I guess I do. I'd mix myself a good strong pick-me-up if I were you. You have had something on your mind the last day or two."

"I have," said Austin. "I'm afraid of that infernal Funnel-paint, I think. I can't help a fancy that we haven't done with him yet; and, though the connection isn't very apparent, the fact that the first thing we came across after landing when I came out was a dead nigger, insists on obtruding itself on my recollection. Bill told me he was singularly unpleasant to look at."

Jefferson contrived to laugh. "You take that pick-me-up, and in the meanwhile let up on your reminiscences. Things of that kind aren't cheerful—and I'm worried by one or two of them myself."

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Austin, who stooped and picked up the cigar, settled himself afresh on the settee after lighting it, and half an hour dragged by. Neither of them felt the least sign of drowsiness yet, and the jingle of the odds and ends in the rack, and tremble of the stout teak house, was, as he had said, vaguely reassuring. The big pump was pounding on in spite of the climate, and neither heat nor fever had any effect on steam. Then he looked up sharply, and Jefferson straightened himself, for a faint sound of footsteps came out of the darkness. They were slow and dragging, as though somebody was groping his way warily towards the light.

"On deck!" said the American. "What d'you want? Are you there, Wall-eye? Que hay?"

There was no answer, but the shuffling steps drew nearer, slowly and falteringly, as though whatever made them was but indifferently capable of motion. There was also something unpleasantly suggestive about them, and Austin now sat very straight, while he saw that Jefferson's lips were pressed together. There was no apparent reason why they should shrink from what was coming, but Austin, at least, felt his nerves tingling. He was overwrought, and

white men are apt to become fanciful when they work too hard in the fever swamps. It is a land where one realises the presence of influences beyond the definition of human reason, and he afterwards admitted that he was afraid.

"Mil diablos!" said Jefferson. "Ven aca! What are you after, outside there?"

There was still no answer, though a clatter of booted feet now rose from the iron deck. It drowned the other footfalls, and Austin found that clang of nailed shoes curiously reassuring. Then a figure that swayed from side to side emerged from the blackness and stood mowing in the stream of light.

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"Good Lord!" said Jefferson, with horror in his voice. "Slam that door to. Keep it out!"

Austin rose with a sense of sudden sickness, but the figure had moved again, and now stood with one foot inside the room and a horrible hand on the door-jamb, leering at them. It had the shape of a man, but the resemblance ended there, for there was no sign of human intelligence in the awful face. The thing had no eyebrows, the hair had almost gone, and nose and cheeks were formless with corruption, while naked chest and arms were smeared with festering scars. Austin stood still, shivering, with one hand clenched hard on the table, until Jefferson snatched a glinting object from his bunk.

"Good Lord!" he said again. "It's coming in!"

The figure seemed to brace itself for another move forwards, and Austin saw Jefferson straighten himself slowly with a big pistol in his hand. He did not remember what his comrade said, but the negro seemed to recoil instinctively before his fierce ejaculation, and, lurching backwards, faded into a formless shadow in the gloom again. Then Jefferson's hand fell upon Austin's shoulder.

"Shake yourself! There's something to be done," he said. "They have a light forward, and we can't have—that thing—groping among them in the forecabin."

They went out, and as they did so a sudden glare of light sprang up. Tom, the donkey-man, had lighted the air-blast lamp he used when anything had to be done to pump or boiler at night, and its smoky radiance showed that Jefferson's shouts had roused the Spaniards. They were clustered, half dressed, about the head of the ladder which led to the bridge deck, with consternation in their shadowy faces, glancing at one another as though afraid to move a step further. Tom leaned against the rail, holding up the lamp, and the thing that had the shape of a man sat gibbering on a coil of hawser in the midst of the bridge deck. The eyes of all who stood there were fixed upon it, but nobody seemed anxious to come any nearer.

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Jefferson, standing very straight, opened the breech of his pistol, ran a finger across the back of the chamber, and then closed it with a little snap which, though the pump was humming, sounded startlingly distinct. His lips were tightly set, and his face was very grim. The loathsome figure on the rope mowed and grinned at him.

"I suppose the thing was human—once," he said. "Still, we can't have it here. These complaints are contagious, one understands, but I wish it hadn't happened. He's too like a man."

He dropped the pistol to his side, as though his nerve had momentarily failed him, and Austin, who suddenly grasped his purpose, sprang forward as he raised it again.

"Hold on!" he said. "Do you realise what it is you propose to do?"

Jefferson turned to him slowly, and there was a curious stillness among those who watched them. Austin was glad of the hum of the big pump and the pounding of the engine, for he felt that silence would have made the tension unendurable. Then Jefferson smiled, a little wry smile.

"I know," he said, a trifle hoarsely, "it isn't nice to think of, but it's no more than happens to a superfluous kitten—and it's necessary. Heaven knows what the poor devil suffered before he came to this, and we don't want to. He's animate carrion without reason or sensibility now. It was only the light brought him here when Funnel-paint somehow sent him within sight of us."

Austin saw that this was true. There was no glimmer of human intelligence in the creature's wandering gaze, but he still bore the shape of a man, and that counted for a good deal, after all.

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"Jefferson," he said, "it can't be done!"

His comrade looked at him with half-closed eyes. "Would you wish to live if you looked like that, or do you want the rest of us to find out what he went through? I'm responsible for those men yonder—and it's only antedating the thing a month or two. The life is almost rotted out of him. Stand clear! We must get it over!"

It was evident that the Spaniards understood what he meant to do, and a murmur of concurrence rose from them, for they knew a little about the more loathsome forms of skin diseases. Men who might have escaped from the sepulchre walk abroad in the hot Southern countries, where restraint is unknown and salt fish is a staple food, but, though they have often themselves to blame, the innocent also suffer in Western Africa, and none of those who stood by, tense and strung up, had ever seen a man who looked quite as this one did.

Then, as Jefferson raised his pistol, Austin seized him by the shoulder and shook him in a sudden outbreak of fury.

"You're right," he said, "but you shall not do it! You hear me? Put the ---- thing down!"

Then there was a sudden clamour, and as the Canarios ran forward Jefferson struggled vainly. Austin never knew where his strength came from, but in another moment the pistol slipped from his comrade's hand, and, reeling backwards, he struck the deck-house. Austin stood in front of him, with hands clenched, and the veins swollen high on his forehead, panting hard.

"It has come to this," he said. "If you move a step, I'll heave you over the rail! I've strength enough to break your back to-night!"

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Jefferson straightened himself slowly, and waved back the others who were clustering round. Then he smiled, and made a little gesture of resignation.

"I believe you have, but that's not quite the point," he said. "It's the only thing you have ever asked me, and, if nothing else will satisfy you, you shall have him. You don't suppose it isn't a relief to me? The question is, what you're going to do with him? You see, he can't stay here."

That, at least, was evident, and for a moment or two Austin gazed about him stupidly as he grappled with the difficulty. The stricken man still squatted, unconcerned, upon the hawser, mowing and grimacing, while he clawed at the hemp in a fashion that suggested the antics of a pleased animal, with swollen hands. The rest stood still, well apart from him, with expectancy overcoming the repulsion they felt. Then Tom, the donkey-man, who was nearest the rail, held up his flaring lamp.

"There's the canoe he come in still alongside aft," he said.

Austin gasped with relief. "Heave down a bunch of the red bananas we got up the creek," he said. "He'll know they are good to eat."

It was done, and Jefferson smiled again grimly.

"That," he said, "is easy. Still, have you figured how he is to be gotten into the canoe? You are hardly going to make him understand what he is to do."

"There's only one way. He must be put into it. Under the circumstances, it's only fitting that I should undertake the thing."

"No!" and Jefferson's voice rang sharply. "Not you! Offer any of the rest of them fifty dollars!"

Austin smiled. "To take a risk I'm responsible for? I think not. I went sufficiently far when I brought some of them here. Besides, it's comforting to remember you mayn't be right about the thing being contagious, after all."

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Jefferson looked at him hard a moment, with the fingers of one hand closed, and then made a little sign.

"Well," he said, "if you feel it that way, there's probably nothing to be gained by protesting. There are disadvantages in being leader."

Austin turned and touched the negro with his foot, while he pointed to the ladder.

"Get up! You lib for canoe one time!" he said.

The negro mowed and gibbered meaninglessly, and Austin, stooping, grasped his shoulder, which was clean. With an effort he dragged him to his feet, and, while the rest fell back from them, drove the man towards the head of the ladder. Then one of them slipped, and there was a cry of horror from the rest as the negro clutched the white man, and they rolled down the ladder into the darkness below together. Tom ran towards the rail with his lamp, and as Jefferson leaned out from them he saw Austin shake off the negro's engirdling grasp.

"Get up!" he said hoarsely, and stirred him with his foot again.

The man rose half upright, stumbled, and, straightening himself, moved towards the open gangway with a lurch. Then he vanished suddenly and there was a crash below. Austin leaned out through the opening, and his voice rose harsh and strained:

"Come down, one of you, and cut this warp! The devil's hanging on!" he said.

Wall-eye, the Canario, sprang down with his knife, and when Austin climbed back to the bridge deck the men clustering along the rails saw a canoe with a shadowy object lying in the stern of her slide through the blaze of radiance cast by the blast-lamp and vanish into the blackness outside it. Then Tom put out the light, and a hoarse murmur of relief rose out of the darkness.

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A minute or two later Austin stood, a trifle grey in face, in the doorway of the skipper's room, and stepped back suddenly when Jefferson approached him.

"Keep off!" he said. "Give me the permanganate out of the side drawer. I left it there. Miguel, bring me the clothes you washed out of my room in the poop, and fill me a bucket."

The last was in Castilian, and one of the Canarios went scrambling down the ladder, while when he came back with an armful of duck clothing Jefferson held out a jar to his comrade.

"No!" said Austin sharply. "Put it down!"

Jefferson did as he was bidden, and Austin, who stripped the thin garments from him and flung them over the rail, shook the permanganate into the bucket, and then, standing stark naked, when it had dissolved, sluiced himself all over with the pink solution. It was ten minutes later when he stepped into the room, dripping, with a wet rag about his waist, and shook his head when Jefferson handed him a towel.

"I think not," he said. "If there's any efficacy in the thing, I may as well let it dry in. After all, it's consoling to remember that it mayn't be necessary."

Jefferson's fingers quivered as he leaned upon the table. "No. Of course not!" he said, and added, inconsequently: "I don't think I'm unduly sensitive, but a very little thing would turn me deadly sick."

Austin struggled into his duck trousers, and Jefferson, whose face was also a little more pallid than usual, glanced at him again. [Pg 254]

"You have a beautiful skin," he said. "It's most like a woman's. There's good clean blood in you."

"It's one of my few good points," and Austin's smile suggested comprehension. "I haven't been particularly indulgent in any direction, considering my opportunities, and I'm rather glad of it now. One could fancy that the man who seldom let one slip would be unusually apt to get the promised wages in this country."

He dragged his singlet over his arms, and a little twinkle slowly crept into Jefferson's eyes.

"Well," he said, "you carry your character with you. How long has the restraining influence been at work on you?"

"You are a little outside the mark," and a faint flush showed in Austin's hollow cheeks. "I am, as you know, not a believer in the unnecessary mortification of the flesh, but there's a trace of the artistic temperament, if that's the right name for it, in me, and it's rather apt to make one finickingly dainty."

Jefferson smiled drily. "That doesn't go quite far enough. I've seen men of your kind wallow harder than the rest. Still, whatever kept you from it, you can be thankful now."

Austin went on with his dressing, and then took a little medical treatise out of a drawer. He spent some time turning over it before he looked up.

"There's nothing that quite fits the thing here, and from what the West-coast mailboat men told me, crawl-crawl must be different," he said. "In the meanwhile, it wouldn't do any harm to soak myself in black coffee."

He was about to go out when Jefferson stopped him. "This is a thing that is better buried, but there's something to be said. From my point of view, and it's that of the average sensible man, I was right; but yours goes higher, and in one way I am glad of it. I just want to tell you I'm satisfied with my partner!" [Pg 255]

Austin smiled at him. "We'll both be guilty of some sentimental nonsense we may be sorry for afterwards if we continue in that strain, my friend. Still, there's one thing to consider. Although I couldn't help it, what I did was, of course, absurd, if you look at it practically, and things of that kind have their results occasionally."

Jefferson seemed to shiver, and then clenched a hard, scarred fist.

"We won't think of it. Your blood's clean," he said. "But if, after all, trouble comes—I'll get even with that damned Funnel-paint if I spend my life in Africa trailing him, and have to kill him with my naked hands!"

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CHAPTER XXIV

AUSTIN FINDS A CLUE

The grey light was growing clearer, and the mangroves taking shape among the fleecy mist, when Austin stood looking down upon the creek in the heavy, windless morning. There was no brightness in the dingy sky, which hung low above the mastheads, but the water gleamed curiously, and no longer lapped along the steamer's rusty plates. It lay still beneath her hove-up bilge, giving up a hot, sour smell, and Jefferson, who came out of the skipper's room, touched Austin as he gazed at it.

"The stream should have been setting down by now. Something's backing up the ebb," he said. "A shift of wind along the shore, most likely. The rain's coming!"

Austin glanced up at the lowering heavens, but there was no change in their uniform greyness, and no drift of cloud. The smoke of the locomotive boiler went straight up, and the mist hung

motionless among the trees ashore. Still, there was something oppressive and portentous in the stillness, and his skin was tingling.

"If it doesn't come soon we'll not have a man left," he said. "It isn't in flesh and blood to stand this much longer."

"Then," said Jefferson drily, "the sooner we get to work the better. There's a good deal to do, and you're not going to feel it quite so much once you get hold of the spanner."

The pump had just stopped, and Tom came towards them, rubbing his greasy hands with a cotton rag, as they moved in the direction of the engine room. The lower part of it was dripping when they went down, and a foot or two of water still lay upon the floor-plates where they met the depressed side, but it was evident that another hour's work of the big pump would leave the place almost dry. Austin sat down on a tool-locker lid, with Jefferson standing beside him, but Tom floundered away towards the stoke-hold, and they could hear him splashing in the water. When he reappeared with a blinking lamp he crawled up the slippery ladder as though working out a clue, while it was several minutes before he came back and leaned against a column opposite Jefferson with the look of a man who had not found quite what he had expected. [Pg 257]

"Sea-cocks shut!" he said. "Ballast tank full-way cock is screwed up, too. Of course, they could have closed that with the overhead screw-gear. You'll remember that manhole cover was off the forward section."

Jefferson glanced at Austin, though it was Tom he spoke to. "Did you expect to find them open?"

"Well," said the donkey-man, "to be quite straight, I did."

"I wonder why?"

Tom glanced at him with a little suggestive grin. "She has two plates started, but with the boiler blowing away half her steam we haven't very hard work to run all that came in that way down, and her bilge pump would have kept her clear. What I want to know is, what all that water was doing in her?"

"Ah," said Jefferson, "you must ask another. I guess nobody's going to find the full answer to that conundrum. There are only two or three men who could have told us, and we're not going to have an opportunity of worrying them about it, unless we get the fever, too." [Pg 258]

"Well," said Tom, "the mill's looking good, but it's about time we made a start on her and got the cylinder covers off and hove the pistons up. It's quite likely we'll want to spring new rings on them. There should be some of the spanners in that locker, Mr. Austin."

Austin rose and lifted the lid, while Tom held the lamp, but the first thing he saw was a sodden book. He drew it out, dripping, and opened it; but while a good many of the pulpy pages had fallen out, there were enough left to show that it was one of the little tables of strengths and weight of materials an engineer often carries about with him. There was a rather wide margin round the tabulated figures, and as he vacantly pulled out one of the wet pages he noticed a little close pencil writing upon a part of it.

"Hold that light nearer, Tom. Here's something that looks interesting," he said. "'Buried Jackson this morning—memo hand his share over to Mary Nichol.'"

He signed Tom to move the light again. "There follows an obliterated address, and the words, 'scarcely think she'll ever get it. My left arm's almost rotten now.'"

He stopped again a moment, and his face had grown hard when he went on: "You see, the thing—is—contagious, and that devil Funnel-paint, or somebody, has played the same trick before. I wonder if the man who wrote this looked quite as bad as the nigger did."

"Hold on!" said Jefferson sharply. "I guess none of us have any use for that kind of talking, and you swilled yourself with permanganate, any way."

"The result will probably be the same, whether one thinks of it or not. You will, however, notice that the man's name was Jackson, and the woman's Mary Nicol."

It was evident that this was a forced attempt to break away from the subject, and though Tom grinned, it was in a sickly fashion. [Pg 259]

"That's no how astonishing. She was the last," he said. "Hadn't you better turn over, and see if there's any more of it?"

Austin contrived to lift another of the pulpy pages, and once more the close writing appeared, but it was difficult to make out, and their faces were close together when Tom lowered the lamp. They showed curiously grave, as well as hollow, in the smoky light, for there was reason for believing that the man who had made those notes was dead, and it was clear that the horrible thing which had stricken him might also come upon them.

"The last of the bags buried this afternoon," Austin read. "Watson took a new bearing. W. half N. to the cottonwood, with twist of creek in line. Forty paces—he made it thirty-nine. Graham says one packet left in the old place where the niggers got scent of it, and the quills on the second islet; memo, it makes £50 to me."

He dropped the book, and Tom came near letting go the lamp, while for a moment or two afterwards they stared at one another. Austin was quivering a little, but Jefferson made a restraining gesture as he laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Steady! I guess we've got the clue," he said. "There are two islets two or three leagues back down the creek. You passed them coming up. Still, what do they put up in quills?"

"Gold-dust! The niggers bring it down from the Western Soudan, and I believe they're ostrich quills. One of the trader fellows told me a good deal about them over a dinner at the Metropole. A bushman had once stuck him with a lot of brass filings. Are you going down to look for them?"

Jefferson, it was evident from his face, laid a strong restraint upon himself.

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"No," he said, with curious quietness. "Funnel-paint knows nothing about these islets yet, or he wouldn't have come to you, and it's my first business to heave this steamer off. To do it we'll want her engines, and there's a heavy job in front of us before we start them. The rains won't wait for any man."

He broke off, for a glare of blue light fell through the open frames above and flooded the engine room. It flickered on rusty columns and dripping, discoloured steel, and vanished, leaving grey shadow behind it, amidst which the smoky lamplight showed feeble and pale. Then there was a crash that left them dazed and deafened, and in another moment was followed by a dull crescendo roar, while a splashing trickle ran down into the engine room. The glass frames quivered under the deluge, and one could almost have fancied that the heavens had opened. Jefferson whirled round and gripped the donkey-man's arm, shaking him as he stood blinking about him in a bewildered fashion.

"If you tell any of the rest what you have heard, I'll fling you into the creek! And now up with you, and bring every man who is fit to work. There's no time to lose," he said.

Tom made for the ladder, and Austin, who went with him, carrying the book, was drenched before he reached the skipper's room. The air was filled with falling water that came down in rods, and blotted out the mangroves a dozen yards away. Steam rose from the sluicing deck, the creek boiled beneath the deluge, but there was no longer any trace of the insufferable tension, and he stood a moment or two relaxing under the rush of lukewarm water that beat his thin clothing flat against his skin. Then he splashed forward to the forecastle, where Tom had little difficulty in rousing the men. They crawled out, gaunt and haggard, in filthy rags, some of them apparently scarcely fit to stand, for the rain had come, and every inch the water rose would bring them so much nearer home. There was no need to urge them when they floundered into the engine room, and hour after hour they strained and sweated on big spanner and chain-tackle willingly, while the big cylinder-heads and pistons were hauled up to the beams. The one thought which animated them was that the engines would be wanted soon.

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It mattered little that platform-grating and slippery floor-plates slanted sharply under them, and each ponderous mass they loosened must be held in with guy and preventer lest it should swing wildly into vertical equilibrium. That was only one more difficulty, and they had already beaten down so many. So day after day they worked on sloping platforms, slipping with naked feet, and only grinned when Tom flung foul epithets, and now and then a hammer, at one of them. Much of what he said was incomprehensible, and, in any case, he was lord supreme of the machinery; and Bill, whose speech was also vitriolic, acted as his working deputy. The latter had served as greaser in another steamer, and for the time being even Jefferson deferred to him.

They stripped her until the big cylinders stood naked on their columns, and the engine room resembled the erecting shop of a foundry, and then the work grew harder when the reassembling began. Since the skeleton engines slanted, nothing would hang or lower as they wanted it, and they toiled with wedge and lever in semi-darkness by the blinking gleam of lamps, while the rain that shut the light out roared upon the shut-down frames above. It was very hot down in the engine room, and when a small forge was lighted to expand joints they could not spring apart, and to burn off saponified grease, men with less at stake would probably have fancied themselves suffocated. Still, each massive piece was cleaned and polished, keyed home, or bolted fast, and, when the hardest work was over, the slope of the platforms lessened little by little as the *Cumbria* rose upright. It was evident to all of them that the water was rising in the creek.

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In a month her deck was almost leveled, but the muddy flood that gurgled about her still lay beneath her corroded water line, and Jefferson seized the opportunity of laying out an anchor to heave on before the stream ran too strong. The launch's boiler had given out, and they lashed her to the surfboat, with the hatch covers as a bracing between, but they spent an afternoon over it before Jefferson was satisfied, and the thick, steamy night was closing in when they warped the double craft under the *Cumbria's* forecastle. It rose above them blackly, with a blaze of flickering radiance over it where the blast-lamp hurled a shaft of fire upwards into the rain. Floundering figures cut against the uncertain brilliancy, voices came down muffled through the deluge, and there was a creaking and groaning as the ponderous stream anchor swung out overhead.

Austin stood, half naked, on the platform between launch and surfboat, with the water sluicing from him, and though he had toiled since early dawn, he was sensible only of a feverish impatience, and no weariness at all. He had had enough of the dark land, and what they were about to do was to ensure a start on the journey that would take them out of it. It grew rapidly darker, the long hull faded, and the flare of the lamp alone cut, a sheet of orange and saffron, against the blackness above them. Jefferson's voice fell through it sharply.

"Stand by!" he said. "We'll ease her down!"

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There was a fresh groaning and creaking. Something big and shadowy that racked the complaining chain descended towards them, and then there was a scuffle and a shout on the deck above. Austin heard the rattle of running chain and a hoarse cry.

"Jump on it!" Jefferson's voice ran out, fierce with alarm. "Nip the slack around the bollard. Hang on! Oh, hang on, until he gets a turn!"

Feet shuffled about the light, there was stertorous gasping, another cry, and a scream, and again Jefferson's voice broke through the confused sounds:

"Stand from under—for your life!" it said.

The warning was unnecessary, for the Canarios were already crouching forward in the surfboats bottom, and as Austin sprang in among them there was a whirr and a crash. The craft swayed beneath him; he could feel her dipping in the flood, but she rose with a staggering lurch, slanted slightly, and held down by something huge and heavy.

"Are you still on top there?" Jefferson asked.

"We seem to be," said Austin. "Something's gone, but it's too dark to see. How d'you come to let her go with a run?"

"Wall-eye let her surge too soon," said Jefferson. "He was getting an extra turn on, and nipped his hand in. She has 'most wrung it off him. Handspike your anchor where you can tilt her clear before we slack cable."

They contrived to do it somehow, with the flare that was lowered from the cat-davit dropping blazing oil about them, and then coiled down a length of the ponderous cable. One of the twin craft was tilted to the water's edge now, and still the massive iron links came clanking down. Then, as the last fell with a crash, Jefferson leaned out over the rails above.

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"Bend the wire on below the break. You'll want a clear link for the shackle when we couple her up," he said. "Hang on to your anchor until you're in the mangroves on the other bank. We want to heave towards deep water out in the stream."

More barefooted men came swinging down the hanging wire, and they slid away into the blackness, bumping against the steamer's plates. The twin craft were top-heavy, and lurched in the grip of the stream. It was a minute or two before they had cleared the *Cumbria*, and by then they were almost under her quarter; while when they had crept away from her a fathom or two all of them knew there was a task in front of them that would severely tax all their strength.

They had the uncoiling wire rope to drag them back into line, the stream swept them down a fathom for every one they made ahead, and, as ill luck would have it, bore upon the launch's pressed down side so that they could hear the water gurgling into her in ever faster swirl. Still, they had to reach the opposite bank, or be hauled back to commence the task again, and, gasping and panting, they heaved on the wet rope that led into the rain ahead. Most of them were used to work of that kind, but during the first five minutes Austin felt his arms grow weary and nerveless, and the veins distend on his forehead, while a curious singing commenced in his ears. He choked with every fresh grasp he laid upon the rope, and a Canario behind him gasped out breathless snatches of Castilian obscenity.

Still, in spite of all they could do, the blaze of red light leaping in the rain showed that they were making nothing, and now and then the rope ran out again through their clinging hands. There was no sign of the mangroves on the opposite bank, while the tilt of the platform grew steeper, and it was evident that the launch was filling under them. Then, little by little, the wire rope that ran out into the darkness astern commenced to curve—they could hear the swirl of the stream across it—and after another five minutes' tense effort they swung into a slacker flow or reflex eddy. There was, however, no slackening of the strain, and it was not until a dim, black wall rose up above them that Austin loosed his grasp upon the rope, and, floundering and stumbling in the rain and darkness, they strove to clear the anchor.

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It went over with a mighty splash, the platform rose with a jerk under them; then, as they backed clear, there was a rattle of cable, and they seized the wire. The lashed craft swung like a pendulum athwart the stream, the rattling winch hauled them back fathom by fathom to the *Cumbria*, while, when he had crawled on board her, Austin dropped limply, and a trifle grey in face, on to the settee in the skipper's room.

"Well," he said, "that's done, though I think a little more of it would have made an end of me. It is rather an astonishing thing, but while I felt fiercely anxious to get that anchor out before we started, it hardly seems worth the trouble now."

"We couldn't heave her off without it," said Jefferson. "That means going home—eventually."

"I suppose it does," said Austin, with a little mirthless smile. "Still, I haven't any home, you see, and I'm not sure that a lazar hospital of some kind isn't what is awaiting me. You will remember the encouraging words that fellow left—'My arm's almost rotten now.'"

Jefferson slowly clenched one scarred hand. "That's a thing we are neither of us strong enough to think about. It's a little too horrible—it couldn't happen!"

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"It's scarcely likely in your case, at least. He didn't put his arm round you, and I had nothing worth mentioning on that night. Men do die rotten, and I fancied once or twice I felt a suggestive tingling in my skin."

Jefferson seemed to be holding himself in hand with a struggle, but Austin smiled.

"Well," he said, "if it comes at all, it will get the right one. I'm not going home to be married. In fact, I was told that it would be rather a graceful thing to come back upon my shield, though I don't know that I would like to do so looking as that nigger did. In the meanwhile, I had, perhaps, better see to Wall-eye's hand."

He went out into the darkness, and Jefferson stood still, with his lips set tight, leaning on the table. He was, in some respects, a hard man, and his sojourn in Africa had not roused his gentler qualities, but just then he felt an unpleasant physical nausea creeping over him again.

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CHAPTER XXV

HOVE OFF

The rain came down in sheets, and the mangrove roots were hidden by the yellow flood, when Jefferson stood, dripping, on the *Cumbria's* bridge. Her iron deck was level, the stumpy pole masts ran upright into the drifting mist, and a column of black smoke floated sluggishly from her rusty funnel. Dingy vapour also rose from the slender one of the locomotive boiler, and cables—hemp and wire and chain—stretched between the mangroves and the steamer's bow and stern. Jefferson, leaning heavily on the bridge rails, considered them each in turn. He shivered a little, though the rain was warm, and his wet face looked unusually gaunt and worn; but his eyes were intent and steady, for at last all was ready for the supreme effort of heaving the *Cumbria* off.

He looked down when Austin stopped at the foot of the ladder. His face and hands were black, and the thin singlet, which was all he wore above his duck trousers, seemed glued to him.

"Hadn't you better keep inside the wheelhouse until we start the mill?" he said.

Jefferson smiled drily. "Do you think you could? What are you wandering up and down the deck for?"

"I'm not. I've been firing the locomotive boiler, and spent the last twenty minutes in the fore-castle. It isn't as dry as it should be there."

He spoke lightly, though there was a suggestion of tension in his voice, and it was evident that both of them were anxious. Indeed, Jefferson fancied that his comrade found it difficult to stand still at all.

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"Well?" he said.

"There are a third of them I daren't turn out, and two or three of the others who are down with Tom look a good deal shakier than I care about. Still, you see, I couldn't keep them in. They've had about enough of this country, and I don't blame them. You can figure on about half of us as reasonably effective, but what everybody wants to know is, when we are to begin."

"When you can give me eighty pounds of steam. Then we'll shake her up for an hour or two with reversed propeller, and heave on everything when you get up to the hundred. Still, although we have blown a good deal of the mud out forward, I expect she'll want another fifty before she'll move."

Austin glanced at the gap in the forest beneath the bows, across which the shattered mangroves were strewn. He and Jefferson had gone over all this before, but since he had stopped by the ladder they must talk of something, for silence would have been intolerable just then.

"I'll go down and stir them up, though I'm not sure that they need it," he said.

He disappeared round the deck-house, and now there was nobody to see him, Jefferson paced feverishly up and down the bridge, until Wall-eye, the steward, came pattering barefoot along the deck, with his arm in a sling. Jefferson stopped him with a sign.

"Slip into Mr. Austin's room, and bring me the thermometer he keeps in the little case," he said. "As usual, no comprenny? Casetta de cuero, very chiquitita."

The man went away, and when he came back Jefferson, who went into the wheelhouse, sucked the little clinical thermometer gravely for a minute or two. Then he frowned as he looked at it.

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"Ninety-nine, point something. I guess it's coming on again," he said. "Well, one can go on working when it's a good deal more than that, especially when he has to."

He came out, and, leaning down, dropped the case into the hands of the man below.

"Put it back, and don't let Mr. Austin know," he said. "Señor Austin no savvy, you comprenny?"

Wall-eye grinned as he went away. He could, of course, hold his tongue, but the little case was sodden already, and it could not have got so wet as that in Austin's room.

In the meanwhile Austin had gone down to the stoke-hold. The place was dimly lighted, and insufferably hot, for, with the *Cumbria* stationary, no more air came down the ventilator shafts than the fires would draw, and they were burning sulkily. In fact, it was only by strenuous labour that steam could be raised at all. Here and there the pale flicker of an oil lamp emphasised the gloom, though there were three half-moon patches of brightness in each of the two boilers, until a fierce red glow beat out as Tom, the donkey-man, flung open a furnace door. Then Austin gained some impression of his surroundings.

The bent figures of half naked men with shovels were forced out of the shadows. Another man, dripping with perspiration, pushed a clattering truck, and several more lay, apparently inert, upon the floor-plates, with water thick with coal grime trickling from them. Only two of them were professional firemen, and all were weakened by the climate or shaken by the fever, while as the red light touched them, Austin could see how worn they were, and the suggestive hollows in their uncovered skin. There are also things which it is unfit that a white man should do, and firing in a calm in the tropics is one of them. Austin, however, had little time to look about him in, for Tom thrust an iron bar into one of the Spaniards's hands.

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"Stand by with the bucket, you. Now, out with the clinker!" he said.

It is probable that the last man addressed did not understand what was said, but he knew how to clean a fire, and stood, half crouching, before the furnace, with face averted, while he plied the bar. There was a rattling beneath the grate-bars and an overpowering wave of heat, in the midst of which the man stood bowed, with thin garments scorching and his hair frizzling visibly. Austin could hear his gasping breath, and became possessed by a sense of futile indignation. Toil of that kind was, he felt, more than could be expected of anything made in the image of a man. Then the Canario let the bar fall clanging, and seized another, while the heat grew more intense when he raked out the ash and glowing clinker from the flaming tunnel. Austin shrank back with a hand upon his eyes and singlet singeing, and his voice broke through Tom's cry of "Damp her down!"

"Por misericordia," he said, "echadle agua!"

Somebody swung a bucket, and a cloud of steam whirled up; but the man who had cleaned the fire let his scraper fall, and lurching with a half strangled cry, went down amidst the vapour. He lay with scorched chest and arms on the floor-plates, making little stertorous noises, until Tom, who tore the bucket from his comrade's hands, flung the rest of its contents over him.

"Drag him away!" he said, and turned to Austin. "He's the second one, but he'll come round by and by. Did you come down to look on or give us a hand?"

He flung open another door, and Austin took a shovel from a weary man. He had studied the art of firing up on deck, where it was considerably cooler, before the locomotive boiler, but he discovered that the work now demanded from him was an entirely different matter. The heat was overpowering, the bed of glowing fuel long, and it was only by the uttermost swing of shoulders and wrench of back and loins that he could effectively distribute his shovelful. He felt his lowered face scorching, and the sweat of effort dripped from him, but he toiled on in Berserker fury while Tom encouraged him.

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"Spread it!" he said. "Next lot well down to the back end. You needn't be afraid to move yourself. Keep her thin!"

Austin wondered whether he had any eyebrows left when that furnace was filled, but it was done at last, and then there was coal to be trimmed from the bunkers. The dust that whirled about the shovels blackened and choked him, but he worked on savagely. Every man was needed, with half the Spaniards sick, and he felt that if this was the cost of success it was not fitting that he should shirk his part in it. Social distinctions counted for nothing there; the barriers of creed and nationality had also melted. They were all privates in that forlorn hope, with death as the penalty of failure, and while they could not be more, none of them that day dared be less, than men.

He never remembered all he did. There was a constant clanging of shovels, whirring of coal trucks, and slamming of iron doors that opened to let out fiery heat and radiance and take the flying fuel in. Men came and went like phantoms, gasping, panting, groaning now and then, and the voice of their leader rose stridently at intervals. He was a man of low degree, and his commands were not characterised by any particular delicacy, but he was the man they needed, and when he emphasised his instructions with a grimy hand, and now and then the flat of the shovel, nobody resented it. During one brief interlude he found breath for a deprecatory word or two with Austin.

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"If she was doing her eight or ten knots it wouldn't be as hard as this," he said. "Then the ventilators would cool her down. The fires won't burn themselves now—you have got to make them; but you'll find her steam sweet and easy when she's going up the trades head to breeze."

"I wonder," said Austin grimly, "how many of us will be left when she gets there."

Then Bill, who had been busy at the locomotive boiler, came down the ladder with a message, and he and Tom vanished into the engine room, while Austin, who greatly desired to go with

them, put a restraint upon himself. For some minutes he felt his heart beat as he listened to a premonitory wheezing and panting, and then his blood seemed to tingle as this merged into the steady rumble of engines. The faint quiver of the floor-plates sent a thrill through him, and he drew in a great breath of relief when beam and angle commenced to tremble. The rumbling grew steadily louder, the whirl of the reversed propeller shook the ship, and it was evident that the engines were running well.

After that, however, the work became harder still, for the big cylinders must be fed, and it was with a sensation of thankfulness that he had not broken down beneath the strain Austin dragged himself up the ladder when a message was brought him that he was wanted to drive the after winch. It was raining heavily, but he found it a relief to feel the deluge beat upon his beaded face and scorched skin, though he could scarcely see the mangroves to which the wire that ran from the winch drum led. It was shackled to a big bridle, a loop of twisted steel that wound in and out among a rood or two of the stoutest trees. The winch was also powerful, and it remained to be seen whether it would heave the *Cumbria* out of her miry bed, or pull that portion of the watery forest up bodily. A great cable that slanted back towards him rose out of the water forward in a curve, and he could dimly see Jefferson's lean figure outlined against the drifting mist high up on the bridge. On the forecastle beyond it more shadowy men stood still, and Austin wondered whether their hearts beat as his did while they waited. The man beside him stooped ready, with body bent in a rigid curve, and bare, stiffened arms, clenching the wire that led to the winch-drum. There was a minute's waiting, and then Jefferson, moving along the bridge, flung up a hand.

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"Heave!" he said.

Austin felt his pulses quicken and a curious sense of exultation as he unscrewed the valve, for it seemed to him that flesh and blood had borne the strain too long, and now they had steel and steam to fight for them. The deck beneath him quivered as the screw whirled faster, and he could see the poop shaking visibly. Then the winch wheezed and pounded, and there was a groaning forward as the rattle of the windlass joined in. Wire and hemp and studded chain rose ripping from the river, creaked and groaned and strained, but when they had drawn each curve out they could get no inch of slack in. Austin clenched his fingers on the valve-wheel, but his eyes were fixed on the lonely figure pacing feverishly up and down the bridge, and just then he felt all the bitterness of defeat. The rattle forward died away, and though the winch still whirred and hammered, none of the wire rope ran over the drum into the crouching Spaniard's hands. The tension lasted for some minutes, and then Jefferson's voice came down harshly through the rain.

"Let up!" he said. "Get down, half of you, and see if you can help them with the firing. We'll try her again when you have raised more steam."

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There was, by contrast, a curious silence when the roar of steam died away, and the thudding of the big engines below decks sank to a lower pitch. The men who could be spared went down in a body, and toiled for another hour in a frenzy. The fierce Latin blood was up; they knew it was the last round, and they would not be beaten now. The throbbing blast which rushed skywards from the blow-off valve when they came up again showed what they had done, and Austin walked aft, singed and blackened, to his winch, with his heart in his mouth. It must be now or never, for it was clear to him that the men were making their last effort, and the boilers would not bear another pound of steam.

The windlass was groaning horribly when he opened the valve, and the whole ship trembled with the whirring of the screw. He saw the drums spin round futilely for a moment or two, and then the Spaniard, who crouched behind one of them, howled, as a foot of the uncoiling wire came back to his hands. Simultaneously, the groaning of the windlass changed to a clanking rattle, and no sound had ever seemed half so musical to Austin. The ship shook beneath him, and creaked in all her frame, while the hammering and rattling swelled into a frantic din as she commenced to move. He felt as though he were choking, and his sight momentarily failed him; but as yet the battle was not quite won, and closing blackened fingers on the valve-wheel, he watched the rope come home with dazzled eyes. It ran in faster and faster; he could hear the great stud-cable splashing and grinding as it came in, too, and for five breathless minutes he held himself to his task, feeling the *Cumbria* creep down stream, stern foremost, under him. Then her pace grew faster, and the clanging of his winch seemed to deafen him, until at last a shrill-pitched voice fell through the din.

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"Bastante!" it said. "She's clear now! 'Vast heaving!"

Then the tension slackened as the long, rusty hull swung out into midstream, and flesh and blood were left shaken, and, as yet, unable to recover from the suddenly lifted strain in the silence, as winch and engines stopped. Tom, the donkey-man, was chanting some incoherent ribaldry forward; here and there a Canario howled or flung up dripping arms; while the one beside Austin sat down upon the hatch and rocked himself to and fro as he called upon the Queen of Heaven. Only Jefferson stood very still, a tall, lean figure, on the bridge, with his torn and drenched clothing sticking to him, and Austin leaned heavily upon his winch. He did not wish to move, and was not sure he could have done so had he wanted to. The *Cumbria* was clear afloat, and they had won; but there was nothing he could say or do which would sufficiently celebrate that triumph.

Jefferson gave them five minutes to recover their balance, and then his voice came down again. The windlass clanked its hardest, wire hawsers splashed, and the *Cumbria* had swung across to

the opposite forest when the big anchor rose to her bows. In the meanwhile the surfboat had been busy, too; and when the winch whirred again they slid away, stern foremost, with propeller churning slowly, against the muddy stream. It was twenty minutes later when, with a roar of running cable, the anchor plunged once more, and she brought up abreast of the creek where the coal and oil were stored. Jefferson came down from his bridge and sat down on the table in the skipper's room when Austin flung himself on to the settee, with the water trickling from him.

"Well," he said, "we have floated her, but there's still a good deal to be done. There are the coal and oil to get on board, and then we have to find the gum."

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Austin looked up at him with a little smile.

"That's rather a prosaic epilogue when one comes to think of it," he said.

"Then you can paint a picture of it when you get home, if you fancy it worth while," said Jefferson drily.

"I don't think it would be," and Austin smiled again. "After all, a picture either goes beyond or falls a long way short of the real thing, and the subject's rather too big for me. Man's domination symbolised by a staggering scarecrow with a fireman's shovel."

Jefferson dropped his hand on his shoulder, and gripped it hard. "Well," he said, "you can drive a winch and sling a palm oil puncheon like a sailorman. I guess that's 'most as useful as the other thing, any way."

"Ah!" said Austin, "you're skirting rather a big question, but we are practical now. Are you going to dig the gum up before you heave in cargo?"

"I'm not. It seems to me it's safer where it is in the meanwhile, so long as Funnel-paint doesn't know where to look for it. If you'll give me a dose of quinine I'd be obliged to you."

Austin glanced at him sharply. "Have you any special reason for asking for it?"

"I've been in the rain quite a long while now, and it's a good deal wiser to head off a fever than wriggle out of its clutches once it gets a good grip on you. One gets cautious in this country."

Austin said nothing further, for he was by this time well acquainted with his comrade's characteristics, but he was not quite contented with the latter's reason when he lugged out the medicine chest.

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CHAPTER XXVI

JEFFERSON FINDS THE GUM

A half-moon shone in a rift between the massed banks of cloud when Austin stood looking down into the trench four of the Spaniards were digging. It ran partly across the islet, which was small and sandy, intersecting another excavation that had a palm at one end of it, while a half-rotten cottonwood, from which orchids sprang, stood in line with the trench the men were toiling in. They were shovelling strenuously, and the thud of the sand they flung out jarred on the silence, for the night was very still. Austin could hear the creek lapping on the beach, and the deep humming of the *Cumbria's* pump, softened by the distance. She lay, with a light or two blinking fitfully on board her, half a mile away, ready at last for sea. Then he glanced at Jefferson, who stood close beside him, shivering a little, though the night was hot, as he leaned upon a shovel.

"We have been at it, at least, a couple of hours," Austin said suggestively.

Jefferson laughed. "And we'll be here this time to-morrow unless we find the case. There's only one on this islet, that fellow said, and, as I tried to point out, the men who buried it probably wanted to get the thing done quickly. They'd have run a line from the two trees, and either dumped the case at the intersection or a few paces outside it on a given bearing. If we don't strike it in a few minutes we'll work a traverse."

Ten minutes passed, and then one of the Canarios cried out excitedly as he struck something with his shovel. Austin saw his comrade's hands quiver on the shovel-haft in the moonlight, but that was all, and next moment two of the Spaniards fell on hands and knees in the sand. They flung it up in showers with their fingers, while Austin, by an effort, stood very still, for he felt that he might do things he would be sorry for afterwards if he let himself go. The Latins were panting in their eagerness, and wallowing rather like beasts than men amidst the flying sand. Then one of them, who dragged something out, hove it up and flung it at Austin's feet with a gasp of consternation.

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"Ah, maldito! Es muy chiquitita!" he said.

Austin set his lips as he glanced at his comrade, whose face grew suddenly hard.

"Yes," he said, with portentous quietness. "It is remarkably small, and by the way he hove it up there can't be very much in it."

They stood still a moment, looking down at the little wooden case, while the Spaniards clustered round them, with eyes that gleamed in the moonlight, breathing unevenly. Then Jefferson said: "Light that blast-lamp, and we'll open it."

Austin's fingers trembled, and he wasted several matches before the sheet of flame sprang up. Then he fell furiously upon the case with a hammer and splintered the lid. He plunged his hand in and took out a quill, which he twisted until it burst, and spilled a little heap of gleaming grains in his palm.

"It's gold," he said.

"Empty the lot!" said Jefferson, and his voice was hoarse. "Your hat is big enough. It will all go into it."

There was a low murmur from the Spaniards when Austin obeyed him, and he handed the wide-brimmed hat to Jefferson.

"Would you make it four pounds?" asked the latter.

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"I certainly would not."

Jefferson laughed harshly. "Then it's probably worth some £200," he said. "It's rather a grim joke, considering what has no doubt been done for the sake of it."

He laid the hat down, and one of the Spaniards, glancing at the little pile of quills, broke into a torrent of horrible maledictions, while Austin, who said nothing, gazed at his comrade until the latter made a curious little gesture.

"There is still the gum," he said.

Austin smiled sardonically. "If you can still believe in it you are an optimist of the finest water. Any way, we'll go and look for it. It will be a relief to get done with the thing."

They waded to the surfboat, which lay close by on the beach, and slid down stream to an adjacent island, where they had no difficulty in finding the tree the man who made the note in the engineers' tables had alluded to. The moon had, however, sunk behind a cloud, and they toiled by the light of the blast-lamp for half an hour, until once more one of the Canarios struck something with his shovel. They dragged it out with difficulty, and found it to be a heavy, half-rotten bag, with something that appeared to be a package of plaited fibre inside it. Other bags followed, and hope was growing strong in them again when they had disclosed at least a score. Jefferson looked at Austin with a little smile in his eyes.

"There's a couple of hundred pounds, any way, in each of those bags, and if the man who told me was right, that stuff is worth anything over £100 the ton," he said. "So far as we have prospected, this strip of sand is full of them. It's going to be more profitable than gold-mining. We'll get this lot into the surfboat first. Put that lamp out."

Austin did so, and they staggered through a foot or two of water with the bags on their backs. Some of them burst as they carried them, but the fibre packages remained intact, and the big boat was almost loaded when Austin, who was breathless, seated himself for a moment on her gunwale. He could see by the silvery gleam on the cloud bank's edge that the moon was coming through again, and he was glad of the fact, for he had stumbled and once fallen heavily under his burden when floundering through the strip of thorny brushwood which fringed the beach. Still, he agreed with Jefferson that it was not advisable to use the big blast-light any longer than was absolutely necessary, for they both had an unpleasant suspicion that they had not done yet with Funnel-paint. It was, indeed, for that reason they had made the search at night and used the surfboat, which could be paddled almost silently, instead of the launch, though Tom had repaired her boiler, and she was then lying alongside the *Cumbria*, with steam up, ready.

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The black hull of the latter was faintly visible, and as he glanced at it he fancied that a puff of white steam sprang up where he supposed the locomotive boiler to be. A moment later a thin, shrill scream rang through the stillness, and one of the Spaniards, startled by the sound, fell heavily against the boat with the bag he was carrying. Austin made a sign to Jefferson, who was staggering across the beach with a bag upon his back.

"They're whistling," he said. "I fancy I can hear the launch coming."

There was another hoarser scream, and when it died away a low thudding sound crept out of the darkness. Austin swept his gaze upriver, but could only see the shadowy mangroves, for the moon had not come through yet.

"Funnel-paint!" said Jefferson, breathlessly. "There are four more bags in sight. We'll get her afloat before we go for them."

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They did it up to their waists in water, and it cost them an effort, for the big boat was heavy now; and then, though the Spaniards glanced longingly at the *Cumbria*'s blinking lights, Jefferson insisted upon their carrying down the bags. When that was done, nobody lost any time in getting on board; and, grasping the paddles, they drove her out into the stream.

"Paddle!" said Jefferson grimly. "I guess it's for your lives!"

It is probable that the Spaniards did not understand him, but they did what they could, for while the clank of the launch's engines grew louder the sound of paddles was also rapidly drawing nearer. There were, however, very few of them, and the boat was big, so that Austin gasped with relief when at last the little steamer swept round her stern.

"Stand by for the line!" said Tom, who sprang up on her deck. "They can't be far off. It's ten minutes, any way, since we first heard their paddles."

The tow-line was caught, and tightened with a jerk, and the surfboat went upstream with the yellow water frothing about her, while Austin could hear the rhythmic thud of paddles through the clank of hard-pressed engines. Jefferson said nothing, but stood rigidly still, with hands clenched on the big steering oar, until they drove alongside the *Cumbria*.

"Up with you, Tom, and see they whip those bags in!" he said. "I want the case you'll find under the settee in my room, too. You'll sing out for two or three men who can be relied on, Austin."

"What are you going to do?" asked Austin.

Jefferson laughed unpleasantly. "Head the devils off from the island, any way, and, if it's necessary, obliterate some of Funnel-paint's friends. It's fortunate the launch has twice the speed of any canoe."

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He clambered on board the launch, and when a few more men came scrambling down, swung her out before they could decide whether it would be wiser to climb back again. After that, he left the helm to Austin, and moving towards the engine, opened the valve wide.

"Head her for the islet. If they have had anybody watching us in a canoe, they'll go there first," he said.

Austin made a sign of comprehension, but said nothing until his comrade, sitting down, opened the case he had asked for. Then he became possessed by unpleasant apprehensions as he saw Jefferson take out several rolls of giant-powder with fuses attached to them. They looked exactly like candles now, only the wicks were black, and unusually long. Sitting still, very grim in face, he tied one or two together, and then nipped a piece or two off the fuses with his knife.

"I guess it would be as well to make sure," he said.

"Of what?" asked Austin.

"That they'll go off when I want them," and Jefferson laughed a little grating laugh. "I've had them ready for some while, and took a good deal of trouble timing the fuses. Now, the effect of giant-powder's usually local, and I figure one could throw these things far enough for us to keep outside the striking radius. They'd go better with a little compression, but there's a big detonator inside them which should stir them up without it. If these two sticks fell upon a nigger they wouldn't blow him up. They'd dissolve him right into gases, and it's quite probable there wouldn't be any trace of him left."

Austin asked no more questions. Worn as he was by tense effort and the climate, kept awake as he had been to watch when he might have slept at night, and troubled by vague apprehensions that the loathsome plague might be working in his blood, he was ready, and, perhaps, rather more than that, to turn upon the man who had made their heavy burden more oppressive still. Indeed, it would have been a relief to him to feel the jump of a rifle barrel in his hand, but from Jefferson's scheme he shrank almost aghast. To run amuck, with flashing pistol or smashing firebar, among the canoes, would have appeared to him a natural thing, but the calculating quietness of his comrade, who sat so unconcernedly, making sure that the rolls of plastic material should not fail, struck him as wholly abnormal, and a trifle horrible. Pistol shot, machete slash, and spear thrust, were things that one might face; but it seemed beyond toleration that another man should unloose the tremendous potentialities pent up in those yellow rolls upon flesh and blood.

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He was, however, quite aware that there was nothing to be gained by protesting, and while Jefferson went on with his grim preparations he turned his gaze upriver towards the approaching canoes. He could see them clearly, black bars that slid with glinting paddles athwart a track of silvery radiance, for the half-moon had sailed out from behind the cloud. They were coming on in a phalanx, five or six of them, and the splash and thud of the paddles rose in a rhythmic din. He swung the launch's bows a trifle down stream, to run in between them and the island.

Then he turned again, and saw Bill, the fireman, watching Jefferson. The light of the engine lantern was on his face, and it showed wry and repulsive with its little venomous grin. Forward, the Spaniards were clustered together, and they were, by their movements, apparently loosening their wicked knives; but they showed no sign of consternation, and Austin became sensible of a change in his mood. It seemed to him that he and they had grown accustomed to fear, and felt it less in the land of shadow. If they were to be wiped out by a spear thrust, or Jefferson's giant-powder, which seemed equally likely, nothing that he could do would avert it; but by degrees he became possessed by a quiet vindictive anger against the man who had forced this quarrel on them when their task was almost done. There were, he fancied, fifty or sixty men in the canoes, and he felt a little thrill of grim satisfaction as he reflected that if he and his comrades went under they would not go alone. In fact, he could almost sympathise with Jefferson.

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In the meanwhile the canoes were drawing level with them as they approached the islet. He could see the wet paddles glinting, and the naked bodies swing, while presently Jefferson, who made Bill a little sign to stop the engine, stood up on the deck. The case of giant-powder lay open at his feet, and Bill laid a glowing iron on the cylinder covering. The men in the canoes ceased paddling, and while the craft slid slowly nearer each other there was for a moment or two an impressive silence, through which Austin fancied he could hear a faint rhythmic throbbing. Then Jefferson, who cut one of the rolls of giant-powder through, flung up his hand.

"Where you lib for, Funnel-paint?" he shouted.

"Them beach," said the negro, and his voice reached them clearly. "We done come for them gum. You lib for 'teamboat before we cut you t'roat!"

"Then I'm going to put the biggest kind of Ju-Ju onto you," said Jefferson. "You savvy how I blow up them headman's house? If you don't want to be blown up like it, lib for up river one time, and be — to you!"

There was probably only one man among them who partly understood him, but his gesture was fierce and commanding, and the confused splashing of paddles suggested that some, at least, of the negroes were impressed. Two of the canoes moved backwards against the stream, and while Funnel-paint cried out in his own tongue, Jefferson stooped.

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"Touch that on the iron, Bill," he said.

In another moment he stood very straight again with a dim object that sparkled in his hand, and then hurled it at the island. It fell amidst the brushwood, out of which there sprang a sheet of flame that was followed by a detonation and a great upheaval of flying sand. Then the paddles splashed confusedly, and in another minute or two the canoes were a hundred yards away. After that there was silence, broken only by the voice of Funnel-paint, who seemed to be flinging reproaches at his friends, and a faint, dull throbbing which Austin fancied was a trifle plainer than before. Then Jefferson laughed as he took up another stick of giant-powder.

"That seems to have scared them, but if they come back again they'll get the next one in the middle of them," he said.

"Listen!" said Austin, holding up his hand. "Can't you hear engines?"

Jefferson swung round sharply, and the scream of a whistle came shrilly across the water from the *Cumbria* just then. It was answered by another of a deeper tone, and a blaze of blue light sprang up, apparently out of the creek. It showed a black shape that wallowed through a mass of piled up foam.

"A launch!" said Jefferson. "A fast one!"

"No," said Austin. "A pinnacle. A gunboat's pinnacle. Ah! the canoes are going."

There was a sudden thudding of paddles, and the canoes melted into the darkness as the moon sailed behind a cloud again; but the whirr and thump of engines drew nearer, and Jefferson reached down for the lantern.

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"Well," he said, "a good deal depends upon what country she belongs to, and it's quite likely we're going to have trouble. Still, we have got to face it now."

He waved the lantern, and while the whirr of engines slackened a voice came out of the darkness.

"Launch ahoy! Is that the *Cumbria* yonder?" it said in excellent English.

Austin took the lantern from Jefferson with a soft laugh.

"I'll take charge now—you see, I'm acquainted with my countrymen's little peculiarities," he said, and raised his voice a trifle. "It is. If you don't mind steaming that far, we should consider it a pleasure to do anything we can for you."

"If you have no great objections, I'll come on board now," said the other man. "Starboard a little! Start her slow!"

There was a whirring of engines, a little, very trim pinnacle crept up alongside, and a young man in immaculate white uniform stepped on the launch's deck.

"Ah!" he said, "Mr. Austin! I've had the pleasure of meeting you before. What has become of the niggers?"

"Which niggers?" asked Jefferson, carelessly.

The young officer looked at him with a little dry smile, and it was evident that his eyes were keen, for he made a sign to Bill, who was about to secrete the giant-powder.

"I am," he said, "under the impression that you know a good deal more about them than I do. We have rather good glasses, and I certainly made out four or five canoes. May I ask what that stuff is yonder?"

"It is what, I believe, is called in America giant-powder," said Austin. "We found it useful in blowing the mangroves up."

"Quite so," said the officer. "In fact, we heard the detonation. Still, I daresay there are several things we should like to ask each other about, and you suggested going across to your steamer."

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"I did," said Austin. "We should be glad of your company for to-night, at least, though I'm afraid we can't offer you much to eat. This is my partner, Jefferson—Lieutenant Onslow."

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CHAPTER XXVII

AUSTIN'S TOAST

An hour had passed since their first meeting, when Austin, Jefferson, and two navy men sat round a little table that had been laid out upon the *Cumbria's* bridge deck. It was slightly cooler there than it was below, besides which the mess-rooms reeked with damp and mildew. A lamp hung from one of the awning spars above them, and its light fell upon the men's faces and the remnants of the very frugal meal. The handful of bluejackets who came up in her had apparently gone to sleep beneath an awning on the flooring of the pinnace, which lay alongside, but a sharp clinking rose from the lighted engine room, where a couple of naval artificers were busy with Tom, the donkey-man. The gunboat's surgeon, who had been round the forecastle, was talking to Austin, while her commander lay opposite Jefferson, immaculately neat, in a canvas chair.

"Our tale," he said, "is a very simple one. As we didn't seem to be wanted anywhere just now, we moored ship snugly in the bight behind the island, and decided to get a little painting done. She was getting rusty along the water-line, and one can't get at it well when she's washing through a swell, you know. Under the circumstances, I seized the opportunity to do a little rough surveying. We are expected to pick up any information that may be of use to the Admiralty hydrographers."

Jefferson lay very limply in his chair, but his eyes twinkled appreciatively. "Well," he said, "I guess that would look all right in the log, but any one who had seen you start surveying would wonder why you brought those cases of provisions as well as engine oil and packing, and two or three ingots of bearing metal. We were uncommonly glad to get them and see the artificers, though I'm not sure your Admiralty would approve of the way you're squandering its stores."

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Onslow laughed. "We are not forbidden to offer assistance to any one in want of it, and the provisions, at least, do not belong to our parsimonious Lords. In fact, they were handed me at Las Palmas by a friend of yours, on the off chance of our falling in with you. Of course, I could not exactly promise that you would get them, though I had reasons for believing the thing was possible."

Jefferson filled a wineglass, and thrust the bottle across the table.

"I think I know the lady's name," he said. "This is the first wine I've drunk since I came to Africa, and it will probably be the last until I get out of it again. To-morrow it's going forward to the sick men in the forecastle. The lady who sent it is not going to mind my passing the kindness on."

"I venture to think she would approve," and Onslow glanced at Austin. "In fact, I couldn't quite help a fancy she intended it as a peace-offering. Miss Brown is, as you are probably aware, capable of conveying an impression without saying anything very definite, and the one I received from her was that she felt she had been a trifle hard on somebody. I should, of course, not have presumed to mention it had it not been borne in on me that it was not intended I should keep that impression entirely to myself. If I have been mistaken I must apologise to her and both of you."

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Jefferson stood up with the wineglass in his hand, and the others rose with him.

"This," he said, "is a little out of my usual line, but it's her wine we're drinking, and I can't quite let the occasion pass. To Her Serene Excellency, the cleverest woman in the Canaries, who hasn't forgotten us!"

Austin stood opposite him, a ragged, climate-worn skeleton, with a little flush in his haggard face, and he looked at the gunboat's commander.

"My comrade hasn't gone quite far enough," he said. "The Queen, who can do no wrong!"

Then the glasses were emptied, and there was a moment's silence when they sat down. Three of them were, after all, somewhat reserved Englishmen, who had, for once, allowed their thoughts to become apparent; and Commander Onslow, who felt that he had, perhaps, exceeded his somewhat delicate commission, was distinctly displeased with himself. He had had a certain conversation with Mrs. Hatherly, who had been rather frank with him, before he left the Canaries, and the attitude of the ragged adventurer who had proclaimed his unwavering devotion to the woman who had sent him there appealed to him, so much so, in fact, that it made him uncomfortable. It was, he felt, advisable to change the subject.

"Considering everything, it was, perhaps, as well we turned up when we did. You see, those niggers don't belong to us," he said. "I was, I may admit, rather thankful when they disappeared, since it might have made a good deal of trouble if we had taken a hand in. Now you understand

that, you may be willing to tell me what you purposed doing with the giant-powder."

Jefferson laughed grimly. "If you had come five minutes later I'd have blown half of them to the devil. We, at least, can't afford to be particular."

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"You had, presumably, a reason? I wonder if you have any objections to telling us the rest of it in confidence?"

Jefferson, who lighted a cigar, told him the story, and Onslow lay back in his chair, listening with grave attention, while the surgeon leaned forward with elbows on the table. At last Onslow shook his head.

"It's interesting, exceedingly," he said. "Still, I don't think I'd recommend you to tell it in quite that shape to everybody. It would probably make trouble, and you mightn't find anybody very willing to believe you. Things of that kind don't happen now—at least, they're not supposed to—and I fancy it would prove a good deal more convenient just to mention the simple facts. You bought the steamer stranded, and, with considerable difficulty, got her off."

"We had practically decided on doing no more than that already," said Austin. "Still, I wonder if, now you have heard the story, one could ask your views?"

Onslow smiled drily. "I haven't any, and if I were you, I wouldn't worry about anything beyond the financial aspect of the affair. Nobody is likely to thank you, and the only men who could tell you what happened are dead, you know."

Austin saw that Jefferson also recognised that the advice was good, and, changing the subject, he spoke to the surgeon. The latter looked thoughtful.

"I can't tell you what that man was afflicted with," he said. "There are several African diseases we are not acquainted with, and a good many of their troubles are supposed to be contagious. Of course, you could apply to the College of Tropical Diseases they've lately started in Liverpool, if you are really interested."

"I am," said Austin. "In fact, I'm very much so, indeed. You see, I had practically nothing on, and he got his festering arms round me."

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The surgeon looked at him gravely. "I scarcely think you need worry, but if you have to do any rough work I would endeavour to avoid any lacerated bruises, and, as far as possible, keep your skin unbroken."

"It's a little difficult on board this steamer. There are several raw patches on my arms now."

The surgeon promised to attend to them, but just then Onslow turned to Jefferson.

"Have you opened up any of the gum yet?" he asked.

Jefferson said he had not, and was rather anxious to do so, whereupon Onslow and the surgeon offered to accompany him, and they went down the ladder together to where the bags still lay upon the forward hatch.

"I shouldn't wonder if you were right about its value," said the surgeon, when Jefferson held up the lantern one of the Spaniards had handed him. "We took a Senegal Frenchman down the coast last trip, and he had rather a craze upon the subject. There is, I understood from him, a particular gum the niggers find somewhere between here and the head of the Niger, for which one could get almost what he liked to ask from the makers of special high-class varnishes. In fact, the man said that one of them who had been trying it told him that it must be used in certain processes whatever its cost might be. The only trouble was that it appeared very difficult to get hold of, except in the smallest quantities; but perhaps your Frenchman had got on the track of it."

Austin tore one of the bags, which were very rotten, across, and then slit the fibre package beneath it. The surgeon, who stooped beside him, was the first to thrust his hand into the opening.

"The nodules seem very uniform in size," he said, and then stood up suddenly, with astonishment in his face. "I'm almost afraid that somebody has been beforehand with you."

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"What do you mean?" asked Austin, still tearing at the package.

The surgeon turned and gazed hard at Jefferson. "This is certainly not gum. It looks very like an ordinary palm kernel."

He held up a little, round, black object, and Jefferson's face grew grim, while he clenched one hand. Then he wrenched the knife from Austin and fell on his knees, ripping at the fibre package savagely. It opened beneath the steel, and when its contents poured out on deck he rose with a little bitter laugh. There was no doubt whatever. They were palm kernels. A curious silence followed, during which Jefferson leaned against the rail, looking down upon the bags with expressionless eyes, until he made a little gesture.

"Well," he said, very quietly, "it seems we have had our trouble for nothing. You may as well open the rest of them."

Austin was not sure how he contrived to do it. He felt suddenly limp and feeble, but holding himself in hand by an effort, he slit the remaining bags, and flooded the deck with kernels. There

was nothing else, and the kernels appeared half rotten.

"This must be a little rough on you," said Onslow, with a trace of awkwardness. "I understand you expected to find more of the stuff yonder."

"I did," said Jefferson. "Funnel-paint can have it now. We have had about enough of this country, and if your artificers fancy we could trust that starboard boiler, we'll set about raising steam to take her out first thing in the morning."

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Onslow made a little gesture of sympathy. "I almost think it is the wisest thing you can do," he said. "In the meanwhile, it is getting late, and we have a long trip in front of us to-morrow. I have no doubt you don't feel much like entertaining anybody just now."

He and the surgeon withdrew to the rooms prepared for them, and when Austin, who went with them, came back, he stood a moment by the doorway of the one beneath the bridge which Jefferson now occupied alone. The latter looked up at him with half-closed eyes.

"We have the oil and the ship—and that will have to be enough," he said, and then straightened himself with a fierce gesture. "Get out, and sleep—if you feel like it. The thing has shaken me, and I'm not sure I'm very well."

Austin went away, but it was almost daylight before sleep came to him, and he had only been on deck an hour when their guests departed in the morning. Jefferson, who bade them good-bye at the gangway, stood leaning on the rail while the pinnacle steamed away, and then walked, with curious heaviness, towards his room. He crawled into his bunk when he reached it, and lay there, while Austin looked down on him with concern.

"I've had the fever on me for quite a while, and at last it has gripped me hard," he said. "I'll probably be raving in an hour or two. Get steam up as soon as you're able, and take her out of the devilish country."

Austin was very busy between his comrade's room, forecandle, and stoke-hold during the rest of that day, and he had very little time for rest at night, but though half the men were sick, and his own limbs were aching portentously, it was with a little thrill of exultation he climbed to the bridge early on the following morning. The windlass was rattling on the forecandle, Wall-eye stood by the winch astern, and the surfboat was sliding towards the mangroves, where a big wire hawser was made fast, in the rain. Austin was not a professional sailor, but he could handle surfboat and steam launch, and in the good days had sailed his yacht along the coast at home. He also had confidence in the grizzled, olive-faced Spaniard who stood gravely behind him, gripping the steering-wheel.

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The anchor came home to the bows at last, somehow the fever-worn men on the forecandle hove it in; the after winch hammered when he made a sign, and the long, rusty hull moved backwards towards the forest as her head swung slowly round. There was a splash of dripping wire, and he swung up an arm with a cry of "Largo!"

Then the winch rattled furiously, a gong clanged below, and a wild, exultant shouting went up when the *Cumbria's* engines commenced to throb. The gaunt, hollow-faced men who stood, dripping, in the rain, had borne everything but cold, and now they were going home. Austin felt his eyes grow hazy for a moment as he leaned upon the rails, and then, with a little shake of his shoulders, he fixed his gaze steadily upon the mangroves that came sliding back to him ahead. He had, he felt, a task that would demand all his attention in front of him.

They slid down stream unchecked until the afternoon, and the *Cumbria* steered handily, which, since there were awkward bends to swing round, was fortunate for all of them; but Austin had misgivings when at last they approached one that appeared sharper than the rest, for he could only see the close ranks of dingy mangroves in front of him as he gazed into the rain and mist. The creek was too narrow to swing the steamer to an anchor, and it was evident that if she was to get around the bend at all he must go at it hard, for the yellow stream was running fast with them, and unless she steamed faster the vessel would not steer. He signed to the helmsman, who edged her in near one bank to gain a little room; and then set his lips tight as he clenched his telegraph and rang for full speed ahead. It was consoling to remember that Tom was below, for a good donkey-man is, as a rule, more to be trusted than a junior engineer.

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Ahead, the oily current was sliding through the mangroves as well as among them, covering all their high-arched roots, and he knew that there were a good many feet of water there, for the creek was full, and he had heard of steamers going full tilt into the watery forest at such times. Still he breathed unevenly as he watched the dingy trees slide past one another, for the bend was opening very slowly, and there was a long tongue of mangroves close in front of him. The bridge planks were trembling beneath him now, and he could hear the thud-thud of the hard-driven screw; but the stream seemed to be running very fast at the bend, and, glancing round, he saw something very like fear in the face of the man who held the wheel. When he looked ahead again the long tongue of mangroves seemed flying towards him.

He strode to the end of the bridge and glanced down at the lift of rusty side. There was a good deal of it above the water, for the *Cumbria* was loaded easily, and she was also, he was very glad to remember, light of draught. He could not check her with an anchor under foot. She would only swing to it, and that would land her among the mangroves broadside on. If he backed his propeller he would as surely go ashore, and his face grew very grim as he made the helmsman a

little sign. Since he must strike the forest, he would strike it fair, as hard as the engines could drive her, bows on; and he thrust down the telegraph once more for the last pound of steam.

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The throb of plank and rail grew sharper, the trees seemed rushing at the fore-castle, the helmsman gazed forward with drawn face over his moving wheel, and a shouting broke out on deck. Austin, however, did not move at all, save when he raised a hand to the helmsman. Once more, easy-going artist as he was, the Berserker fit was upon him, and it was with a light only one or two of his friends had ever seen there in his eyes he hurled her full speed at the forest.

She struck it, with a crash that flung two or three of the Spaniards staggering, and it crumpled up before her. Mangrove boughs came streaming down on her grinding fore-castle, torn limbs clutched at rail and stanchion, and were smashed by them. Mire was whirled aloft by the thudding screw, and Austin, gripping his telegraph, laughed a harsh laugh as he saw that she was going through. How thick that belt of trees was, or what water flowed among their roots, he did not know, but he remembered that he had found no bottom among them in other places with a boathook, now and then.

In another few moments the white-stemmed trunks fell aside again, and they drove out once more into clear and swiftly-flowing water. Then the Spaniards howled together, and Austin, twining his hand in the lanyard, unloosed the whistle, and hurled back a great vibratory blast at the beaten forest. It was, he admitted afterward, a somewhat feeble thing, but he said he felt the occasion demanded something then.

After that they had no great difficulty, and by nightfall they drove her out with sluicing decks over the smoking bar, dipping the bleached and rotten ensign to the little white gunboat that lay rolling behind the island. Then Austin felt a great weight lifted off him as he flung himself into a canvas chair upon his bridge. There was now only open sea in front of them, and he had seen that the big pump could keep the water down. He felt that he could contrive by some means to make Las Palmas.

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CHAPTER XXVIII IN COMMAND

Austin was quite aware that he had his work cut out when he was left in command of the *Cumbria*, with half her crew sick, and her skipper raving deliriously. He knew very little about medicine, and certainly no more about what he termed the astronomical side of navigation, and after several attempts decided that it was beyond his ability to take an accurate solar observation. There were, however, other, though not very reliable, means of approximately ascertaining the ship's position which he was acquainted with, and he nerved himself afresh for a grapple with what most men would, under the circumstances, have considered insuperable difficulties.

He had two Spaniards who could be trusted to keep the steamer more or less on the course he gave them, while the *Cumbria* steered handily, which is more than all steamers do. There was a large-scale chart, considerably mildewed, but still legible, in the skipper's room, as well as a pilot guide to the West African coast, while the patent log that towed astern to record the distance run appeared to be working accurately. He could thus, it was evident, depend in some degree upon what is termed dead reckoning, which is comparatively reliable in the case of short distances run in the vicinity of a high, well lighted coast. The one the *Cumbria* steamed along was, however, not lighted at all, and most of it scarcely rose a foot above sea-level, while when he had ruled the line she was presumed to be travelling on across the chart, and pricked off the distance the patent log told him she had run, there remained the question how far the tide and the Guinea stream had deflected it, and whether the steering and her compasses could be trusted.

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It was also rather an important question; and when he had, on several occasions, peered for an hour at a time through Jefferson's glasses in search of a cape or island which the chart indicated should be met with, and saw only a hazy line of beach, or a dingy smear on the horizon which might be mangroves, or, quite as likely, a trail of mist, the probability of his ever reaching the Canaries seemed very remote indeed. There would, he fancied, be no great difficulty in obtaining a mate and two or three seamen from one of the steamers he came across, but in that case the strangers would expect half the value of the *Cumbria*'s hull and cargo, and very likely make their claim to it good. He was also aware that more experienced skippers than he was had put their ships ashore upon that coast. But what troubled him most was the fact that if he lost sight of it, or found no point that he could identify, he would have nothing to start from when he must boldly head her out across the open ocean.

She had rolled along at six to eight knots, with the big pump going, for several days, when a trail of smoke crept out of the Western horizon. Austin watched it anxiously, and when at last a strip of black hull and a yellow funnel grew into shape beneath it, summoned the donkey-man, and with his assistance, which was not especially reliable, worried over the signal code painted on the flag rack in the wheel-house when he had stopped the engines. It was almost obliterated, and

most of the flags themselves were missing; but between them they picked out sundry strips of mildewed bunting and sent them up to the masthead. The little West-coast mailboat was close alongside now, and flags also commenced to flutter up between her masts, while her whistle screamed in long and short blasts. Austin, anxious as he was, laughed a little.

"That is apparently the Morse code, and it's unfortunate that neither of us understands it," he said. "I presume it means that they can make nothing of our flags, and one could hardly blame them. Any way, we have got to stop her."

Tom grinned as he pulled an armful of tattered ensigns out of a locker. "This one should do the trick," he said. "I'd start the whistle."

Austin drew the lanyard, and when the ensign blew out on the hot air Union down, the mailboat stopped, and, considering that they were steamboat men, her crew had a white gig over in a very creditable time. She came flying towards the *Cumbria* with four negroes at the oars, and when she slid alongside a young mate in trim white uniform came up a rope.

"You might have slung me the ladder down," he said, gazing about him in blank astonishment. "Paint is evidently scarce where you come from. I've seen smarter craft in a wrecker's yard. Still, I can't stop here talking. What do you want?"

"A doctor, for one thing," said Austin, to gain time.

"We have half the crew down in the forecabin."

The mate walked to the rails and shouted to his boat-boys, while, when the gig slid away, he pointed up at the drooping flags as he turned to Austin.

"I suppose it's artistic, the colouring, I mean," he said.

"Still, it's a trifle difficult to make out by either code." Austin laughed. "Come into my room and have a drink. There are one or two things I want to ask you."

Five minutes later he spread a mildewed chart on the table as they sat with a bottle of Jacinta's wine before them.

"Now," he said, "if you will tell me exactly where we are, I'd be much obliged to you."

"You don't know?" and the mate looked at him curiously.

"Since you can't undertake any salvage operations with the mails on board, I don't mind admitting that I'm far from sure. You see, we have only one navigator, and if you were forward just now you would hear him raving. I've got to take her somehow—on dead reckoning—to the Canaries."

The mate opened his mouth and gasped. "Well," he said simply, "may I be ----!"

"I suppose that's natural, but it isn't much use to me. I've been creeping along the coast, so far, but it's evident that if I stick to it I won't reach Las Palmas. I want a definite point from which to make a start for the ocean run."

The mate pulled a pin out of the chart, and, measuring with the dividers, stuck it in again. "You're not quite so much out as I expected you would be," he said. "It's a straight run to the Isleta, Grand Canary. Whether you'll ever get there with the compass and the patent log is another matter, though, of course, if you go on long enough, you'll fetch some part of America. I don't want to be unduly inquisitive, but you will have lost, at least, an hour of our time before I put Pills on board again, and I really think there is a little you should tell me."

Austin briefly outlined his adventures, and when he had finished the mate brought his fist down with a bang on the table.

"Well," he said, "you have evidently excellent nerves of your own, and I'm not quite so sure as I was that you'll never get her home. I don't mind admitting now that at first I thought you were crazy. It's evident that your compass and patent log are all right, but you'll have to get your latitude and longitude, at least, occasionally, and I'll bend on some signals any skipper you come across would understand. If he's particularly good-natured he might chalk it on a board."

He stopped a moment with a little sardonic smile. "As a matter of fact, it's not quite so unusual a question as you might suppose."

Austin thanked him profusely, and felt a good deal easier when he and the mailboat's doctor, who arrived presently and gave him good advice, went away. Then, with a blast of her whistle, the *Cumbria* steamed on to the West again, and it was three or four days later, and she was plunging along with dripping forecabin at a little over six knots against the trades, when Austin had trouble with Jefferson. He was asleep in his room, aft, and, awakening suddenly, wondered for a moment or two what was wrong, until it dawned on him that it was the unusual quietness which had roused him. Then he sprang from his berth and hastened out on deck, for it was evident that the engines had stopped.

There was clear moonlight overhead, and the ship was rolling heavily, while as he looked forward a clamour broke out beneath the bridge, where grimy men came scrambling up from the stoke-hole gratings. It was light enough for him to see their blackened faces and their excited gestures.

Other men were, he fancied, from the pattering on the iron deck, also moving in that direction from the fore-castle; but what most astonished him was the sight of a gaunt white figure pacing up and down the bridge. While he gazed at it, Wall-eye came running towards him breathlessly.

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"The Señor Jefferson has stopped the ship!" he said. "He has a pistol, and Maccario, who is shut up in the wheel-house, shouts us that he will go back to Africa again!"

Austin, who knew a little about malarial fever by this time, ran forward, and met Tom at the foot of the bridge ladder. The latter laid a grimy finger on his forehead significantly.

"Right off his dot! I don't know what's to be done," he said. "It would be easier if he hadn't that pistol."

A gong clanged beneath them while they considered it, and Tom shook his head. "He has been ringing all over the telegraph, from full speed to hard astern," he said. "I don't know if he'd give you the pistol, but when I got half way up the ladder he said he'd put a bullet into me. Any way, if you went up and talked to him while I crawled up quiet by the other ladder, I might get him by the foot or slip in behind him."

Austin was by no means anxious to face the pistol, but it was evident that something must be done, and he went up the ladder as unconcernedly as he could. When he reached the head of it Jefferson beat upon the wheel-house window with his fist.

"What's her head to the westwards for?" he said. "Port, hard over! Can't you hear inside there?"

The steering engine rattled, and it was evident that the helmsman was badly afraid, but in another moment Jefferson had swung away from the wheel-house, and was wrenching at the telegraph again.

"What's the matter with these engines?" he said. "I want her backed while I swing her under a ported helm. I'll plug somebody certain if this is a mutiny."

He opened the big revolver, and closed it with a suggestive click, while it cost Austin an effort to walk quietly along the bridge. Jefferson's eyes were glittering, his hair hung down on his face, which was grey and drawn, dark with perspiration, and his hands and limbs were quivering. His voice, however, although a trifle hoarser, was very like his usual one, so much so, in fact, that Austin found it difficult to believe the man's mind was unhinged by fever. He whirled round when he heard Austin, without a trace of recognition in his eyes.

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"Now," he said, "why can't I get what I want done?"

"You're very sick," said Austin quietly. "Hadn't you better go back to bed?"

Jefferson laughed. "Yes," he said, "I guess I am, or these brutes wouldn't try to take advantage of me. Still, in another minute you're going to see me make a hole in somebody!"

He leaned heavily on the bridge rails, with the pistol glinting in his hand, and Austin endeavoured to answer him soothingly.

"What do you want to go back to Africa for?" he said. "There wouldn't be any difficulty about it if it was necessary."

"Funnel-paint's there. They brought me away when I was sick, or I'd have killed him." He made a little gesture, and dropped his hoarse voice. "You see, I had a partner who stood by me through everything, and Funnel-paint sent down a — rotting nigger!"

"Your partner's all right," said Austin, who saw that Jefferson was as far from recognising him as ever. "I've excellent reasons for being sure of it."

Jefferson leaned towards him confidentially, with one hand on the rails.

"It hasn't come out, but it's bound to get him. The nigger had his arms round him. Then he'll have to hide in a dark hole where nobody can see him, while the flesh rots off him, until he dies."

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Austin could not help a shiver. He knew the thing might happen, and he realised now that it had also been in Jefferson's mind. Still, it was, in the meanwhile, his business to get the pistol from the latter, and then put him in his berth, by force, if necessary.

"The difficulty is that you can't kill a man twice," he said. "I seem to have a notion that you hove a stick of dynamite into Funnel-paint's canoe."

"I could have done, and I meant to, but my partner was with me. I had to humour him. That man stood by me."

Austin stood still, looking at him, a little bewildered by it all. The mailboat doctors and some of the traders he had met at Las Palmas had more than once related curious examples of the mental aberration which now and then results from malarial fever. Still, Jefferson, whom he had left scarcely fit to raise his head in his bunk, was now apparently almost sensible; and, what was more astonishing, able, at least, to walk about. Then, when he wondered how he was to get his comrade down from the bridge, the latter turned to him with a sudden change of mood.

"You're keeping me talking while they play some trick on me," he said. "All right! In another moment you'll be sorry."

The pistol went up, and Austin set his lips while a little shiver of dismay ran through him. The ladder he had come up by was some distance away, the wheel-house, at least, as far, and he stood clear in the moonlight, realising that the first move he made would probably lead to Jefferson squeezing the trigger. Then, with sudden bitterness, he remembered what, it seemed, was in his blood, and felt astonished that he should be troubled by physical fear. It would be a swifter and cleaner end if his comrade killed him there. That consideration, however, only appealed to his reason, and the reflection came that Jefferson would probably never shake off the recollection of what he had done; and, knowing it was safest, he braced himself to stand motionless, while the perspiration dripped from him, steadily eyeing the fever-crazed man.

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"If you will let me tell you why we are steaming west it would save a good deal of trouble," he said, as soothingly as he could, though his voice shook. "You see, you were too sick to understand, and you're not very well yet."

Jefferson, somewhat to his astonishment, seemed willing to listen, but he was, unfortunately, far from the side of the bridge below which Austin surmised that Tom was crouching. He risked a glance round, but the helmsman evidently dare not leave the wheel-house, for which Austin could not blame him, and the Spaniards stood clustered together gazing up at them from below. Austin decided that if he signed or called to them Jefferson would use the pistol, though he fancied that one of them was trying to make him understand something.

Then suddenly a shadowy form glided out from behind the wheel-house, where Jefferson could not see it. There was a rush of feet, and a spring, and Jefferson went down heavily with another man, who wound his arms round him. They rolled against the bridge rails, and a breathless voice called to Austin.

"Get hold of the pistol!" it said.

Austin wrenched it from his comrade; men came scrambling up the ladder, and in another moment or two they had Jefferson helpless, and set about carrying him to his room. When they laid him in his berth his strength seemed to suddenly melt away, and he lay limp and still, only babbling incoherently. Austin ventured to give him a sedative, and then, leaving Wall-eye to watch him, went out on deck. Tom, who was waiting for him, made a little deprecatory gesture.

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"I'm sorry, Mr. Austin, but he never came near my side of the bridge," he said. "If I had got up he'd have dropped me with the pistol, and that wouldn't have done much good to anybody."

"Of course not," said Austin. "I was uncommonly thankful when Bill got hold of him. Send him along to my room, and then start your engines."

In another two or three minutes the *Cumbria* was steaming west again, and Bill, the fireman, stood, somewhat sheepishly, in the doorway of Austin's room.

"I owe you a good deal, and when the time comes I'll endeavour to remember it," said the latter. "Still, I don't want Mr. Jefferson ever to know anything about the thing. You did it cleverly."

Bill grinned. "Well," he said, "I'm quite glad I did. I felt I had to do something for my five pounds, any way."

It dawned upon Austin that once or twice, when he had somewhat risky work to do, Bill had been near him.

"What five pounds?" he asked.

"The five pounds she shoved into my hand one night on board the *Estremadura*—no—the fact is, I'm feeling a little shaky, and I don't quite know what I'm saying. The getting hold of Mr. Jefferson has upset me. When you think of it, it's only natural."

"Then it has come on very suddenly," said Austin. "You seemed all right a moment or two ago. Am I to understand that somebody gave you five pounds to look after me?"

It was evident to Bill that there was nothing to be gained by further reticence, and he edged out of the doorway, grinning more broadly than ever.

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"Well," he said, "I guess she meant you, though she said it was both of you. Still, you won't tell her, or I sha'n't get any more."

He had vanished before Austin could ask another question, but the matter was quite clear to the latter, and his face grew hot while a little thrill of satisfaction ran through him as he recognised that Jacinta had felt it worth while to do what she could to ensure his safety. Then he remembered something else, and his face grew hard as he pulled off his jacket and glanced at his bare arm.

He had torn and abraded it heaving in oil and coal, and the gunboat's surgeon had warned him that it was advisable to keep his skin unbroken. There were several half-hardened scars upon it now, and another had been torn away when he fell against the rail in a heavy lurch a day or two earlier. He had worn no jacket at the time. He had since noticed a curious tingling sensation in that part of his arm, and, holding it nearer the lamp, he saw that the flesh was inflamed about the wound. There was no doubt about the fact. When he pressed it with his thumb all the lower arm was sore, and he let it fall limply to his side, and sat down with a little groan. The horrible thing he shrank from had, it seemed, come upon him. He sat very still for half an hour, grappling with a

numbing sense of dismay, and then, with a little shake of his shoulders, went back to the bridge, for he had still a duty to his comrades.

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CHAPTER XXIX

AUSTIN IS MISSING

It was a fine morning, and the signal, "Steamer approaching from the South," was flying from the staff high up on the Isleta hill, when Pancho Brown's boat lay heaving on the smooth swell at the entrance to Las Palmas harbour. Mrs. Hatherly, Jacinta, and Muriel sat in the stern-sheets, and beyond them two barefooted Canarios were resting on their oars, while two or three miles away a smear of smoke that half hid a streak of dusky hull moved towards them across the shining sea. Brown was watching it attentively with a pair of marine glasses in his hand.

"You have brought me off several times for nothing, but I almost think our friends have turned up at last," he said. "Of course, from Lieutenant Onslow's cable she should have been here several days ago, but it's very likely the engines would give them trouble. Any way, we'll know in ten minutes or so. There's the *Sanidad* going off."

A launch crept out from the mole, and behind her in the harbour boats were being got afloat. Coaling clerks, tobacco and wine merchants, and a miscellaneous crowd of petty dealers, were waiting to step on board, but two, at least, of Pancho Brown's party had no eyes for them. They were watching the incoming steamer rise higher out of the shining sea, and wondering if she was the one they had for the last few days looked for with tense anxiety. They had Onslow's cable from Sierra Leone, and the skipper of a big tramp which had come in for coals reported that a small British steamer had asked him for the latitude and longitude a week before. Nothing, however, had since been heard of her, and Jacinta had found the last three or four days as trying as Muriel did. The latter had, however, borne the suspense bravely, and displayed a sublime confidence in her lover which Jacinta, for no very obvious reason, found almost exasperating at times.

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"Can't we go out a little?" she said at last.

Brown made a sign to the Canarios, who dipped the oars, and as they slid past the *Carsegarry*, which lay with steam blowing off, and a water barge alongside, Captain Farquhar leaned over her rails. He had come in for coal on his way to Liverpool the previous day, and had spent part of the night with Brown.

"I really think that is the *Cumbria*," he said. "Any way, she's much the kind of boat Jefferson described to me, and so far as I can make out they have a big boiler on deck. I suppose you are going off to her?"

Brown said they were, and Farquhar glanced at the boat hesitatingly. "I'd very much like to come with you, but I can't leave just now," he said. "Still, we won't have filled our tanks up for an hour or two, and you might tell Mr. Austin that I certainly expect him to pull across and see me. In fact, although we have steam up, I'll wait until he does."

Brown made a sign of comprehension, and the boat slid away, while when she stopped again outside the harbour the eyes of all on board her were fixed upon the steamer. She had also stopped, and lay rolling wildly, with the yellow flag at her foremast-head and the *Sanidad* launch alongside her; but in another minute or two the flag came fluttering down, and she moved on again towards the harbour. Brown signed to the oarsmen to turn the boat's head.

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"There's no doubt that she's the *Cumbria*, and they can't have had anything very bad on board," he said.

In another five minutes the *Cumbria* crept up with them, rolling wickedly, with the big pump thudding on her deck, and a stream of water spouting from her side. Rags of awnings fluttered about her, her funnel was white with salt crust, for the trade-wind blows strong at that season, and the blistered paint had peeled from her corroded sides. Her story was written upon her so that even the girls could read, and both felt that no plainer testimony was needed to the courage of the men who had brought her home. Then they saw them, Jefferson leaning out, gaunt and blanched in face, from the bridge rails, and Austin standing amidst a group of haggard men on the fore-castle. Jacinta's heart was beating a good deal faster than usual, and she saw the sudden tears rise to her companion's eyes; but as the long, rusty hull forged past them Austin made no sign. He stood looking straight in front of him, until he turned to the men about him who were busy with the anchor.

"He can't have seen us," said Muriel, with astonishment in her tone, and then touched Brown's arm. "Tell them to row their hardest, please."

The Canarios bent their backs and the boat swept forward, for the steamer had already passed ahead of them. Jacinta sat unusually still, watching her, sensible at once of a vague dismay and a

thrill of pride. She had understanding as well as imagination, and the sight of that rusty vessel and the worn faces of the men upon her deck had stirred her curiously. It was, she felt, a notable thing they had done, and she was, she knew, responsible for the part one of them had played in it. He had come home with credit, a man who had done something worth while, and had doubtless learned his strength. She could not fancy him frittering his life away after that; but still she was perplexed, and a trifle anxious, for it seemed that he must have seen them, and he had made no sign. She had, on her part, twice passed him without recognition in the Plaza at Santa Cruz, and her heart smote her as she remembered it; but he was not a vindictive man, and must by that time have realised the misapprehension she had been under concerning him. For that, at least, she would ask his forgiveness in another few minutes, and her face burned as she wondered what he would say to her.

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Then she saw the white wash of the *Cumbria's* propeller as it whirled astern, and there was a roar of running chain, while two or three minutes later they were making their way up the lowered ladder amidst a crowd of petty dealers when Jefferson came across the deck, driving the latter aside. Jacinta saw that it cost Muriel an effort to hide her consternation at his appearance, but in another moment she was smiling at him with shining eyes, and the haggard man's arms were about her. That the deck was crowded with Spaniards did not seem in the least to matter to either of them. Jacinta, who would not have done as much, felt a little thrill of sympathy, and, it was significant, looked round for Austin. There was, however, no sign of him.

Then Jefferson, still holding Muriel's arm, drew them out of the press, and there was a general offering of congratulations and grasping of hands.

"I am," he said, "uncommonly glad to be back again, though I'm not sure we'd have ever got here except for Austin. I have only been on my feet the last day or two, and he did everything."

"Where is he?" said Muriel, seeing that Jacinta would not ask.

"Across at the *Carsegarry*. At least, he told me he was going when he recognised her."

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"Without coming to shake hands with us?" said Muriel, who flashed a covert glance at Jacinta.

"I understand from one of these fellows that Farquhar is just going to sea, and it's very probable that Austin heard it, too. I have no doubt he'll be back again in five minutes."

"You will come ashore with us, and we will expect you and Mr. Austin to make my house your home in the meanwhile," said Brown.

"I shall be very glad," said Jefferson. "You will, however, have to excuse me for an hour or two. I have our Consul to see, and a good many things to do before I can call my time my own. I wonder if you could get me a tartana?"

"Mine is waiting at the Mole," said Brown.

It was an hour later when they took their places in the vehicle, but though Brown bade the driver wait a minute or two, there was no appearance of Austin. Just then the *Carsegarry* crept down the harbour, and with a sonorous blast of her whistle steamed out to sea.

"There is no boat coming. He must have landed on the other mole, and, perhaps, met somebody he couldn't get away from," said Brown. "I'll leave word that we are expecting him, and no doubt he'll turn up soon after we get home."

They drove away, and that afternoon sat together in Brown's cool patio. The noise of the bustling city was deadened by the tall white walls, over which there shone a square of cloudless blue, and the scent of flowers was heavy in the shadowy space below. Jefferson lay, attired becomingly once more, in a big cane chair, with a little smile of content in his hollow face, and a pile of fruit, and a flask of wine, on the table in front of him. The others sat about him, and a fountain splashed behind them in the shadow.

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"A very little of this will make me well," he said. "In fact, it is already a trifle difficult to believe that I could scarcely lift myself in my berth a few days ago. I think it was the sight of Gomera that cured me. You see, I was a little doubtful about Austin finding the Canaries, and when they came to tell me they could see the Peak, Wall-eye, who was watching me, ran out."

"What was he watching you for?" asked Muriel.

"To see I didn't get up. I had my chance then, and I crawled out of my berth. I believe I fell over several things before I got out on deck, and then I knew we were all right at last. There was the Peak—high up in the sky in front of us, with Gomera a blue smudge low down at its feet. We ran in under the lee, and, because they were played out, and Tom had trouble with his engines, stayed there three days."

He stopped a moment, with a little laugh. "I think Austin was 'most astonished as I was to find he'd brought her home. He'd been running four or five days on dead reckoning, and wasn't much more than a hundred miles out."

"I wonder where he is," said Brown.

Jefferson looked a trifle perplexed, and it was evident that others of the party had asked themselves the same question, for there was a moment's silence until Muriel spoke.

"If he doesn't come soon I shall feel very vexed with him; but we want to hear how you got the steamer off," she said.

Jefferson commenced his tale diffidently, but, because Austin had worked in the sombre background—more effectively than he could do already—the rest listened with full comprehension. His unvarnished narrative was, however, striking enough, and, save for the splashing of the fountain, and his low voice, there was a suggestive silence in the patio, until he stopped abruptly when he came to the scene in which Austin pleaded for the negro.

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"The man wasn't fit to look at," he said.

"But why did Mr. Austin go near him?" asked Muriel, with a little shiver.

"To save his life," said Jefferson, awkwardly. "You see, we couldn't have him there—and he really wasn't a man then. The thing he had we believed contagious, and somebody had to put him into his canoe."

Muriel gazed at him with an expression of perplexity, and it was clear that she did not quite understand what had taken place on the night in question, which was, however, not astonishing. Brown appeared a trifle uncomfortable, and Jefferson was sincerely thankful when Jacinta broke in.

"Of course," she said. "He couldn't have stayed there. Mr. Austin put him into his canoe?" She stopped for a moment, and her voice seemed to change a trifle. "Did he find it necessary to touch him?"

"He did. In fact, the nigger got hold of him. One of them slipped on the bridge deck ladder and they rolled down it together."

Again there was silence, and all of them looked at Jefferson, who saw the question in Jacinta's eyes.

"No," he said. "Nothing came of it, though for a week or so I was horribly afraid. It isn't men like Austin who take that kind of thing, and it's possible it mayn't have been infectious, after all."

Muriel heard Jacinta softly draw in her breath, as though she had been under a strain which had suddenly relaxed. Then a little colour crept into her face and a sparkle into her eyes.

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"Yes," said Jefferson, though nobody had spoken, "it was a daring thing. More, in fact, than I would have done. My partner has the cleanest kind of real hard sand in him."

He turned to Muriel with a little deprecatory gesture. "I had more at stake than he had—and I was afraid that night."

Jacinta sat still a while, a trifle flushed in face, for the scene Jefferson had very vaguely pictured had stirred her to the depths. The man whom she had sent forth had done more than she would ever have asked of him, and the gallantry of the action brought a dimness to her eyes. Then she remembered that it was not done recklessly, for he had, it seemed, decided calmly, which must have made it inexpressibly harder. There were, she could imagine, circumstances in which a man might more or less willingly risk his life, but the risk Austin had taken was horrible, and he stood to gain nothing when he quietly recognised the responsibility he had taken upon himself. It was with an overwhelming sense of confusion she remembered the jibes she had flung at him concerning his discretion, and yet under it there was still the sense of pride. After all, it was to please her he had gone to Africa.

"Well," said Jefferson quietly, "you are pleased with him?"

Jacinta met his gaze unwaveringly, and her voice had a little thrill in it.

"Does it matter in the least whether I am pleased or not?" she said. "Still, since you ask, I scarcely think I have heard of anything that would surpass what he did that night."

Jefferson made her a little inclination. "I am," he said gravely, "not sure that I have, either."

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He went on with his story, but Jacinta scarcely listened to it, for she was wondering why Austin had not come, and waiting expectantly for the time when she could, in self-abasement, endeavour to wipe what she had said from his memory. Still, he did not come, and it was half an hour later when a barefooted boatman was shown into the patio. He had an envelope in his hand, and turned to Brown.

"The Englishman who was in the *Estremadura* gave me this on board the *Carsegarry*," he said. "I am sorry I could not bring it before, but several steamers I had to go to came in, and then it was some time before I found out that the Señor Jefferson had gone home with you."

When he went away Brown handed Jefferson the note, while the latter, who opened it, straightened himself suddenly and seemed to be struggling with some emotion. Then he passed it to Jacinta.

"You have good nerves, Miss Brown," he said. "If I had known it would come to this, I think I would have left the *Cumbria* there."

Jacinta took the letter in a steady hand, but her face grew a trifle blanched as she read.

"I am going home with Farquhar," the message ran. "I could hardly go in a passenger boat, and he is fixing me up a room by myself. I didn't care to tell you when you were just shaking off the fever, but one of my arms feels very much as that engineer said his did. I am going to see if one of the big specialists or the Tropical Disease men can do anything for me."

Jacinta sat quite still a minute, and then slowly rose.

"It is horrible, but I suppose even a purpose of the kind he had does not exempt one from the consequences," she said. "There are things to attend to. You will excuse me just now."

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They looked at one another when she left them, and then Brown turned to Jefferson.

"I wonder if you have any objections to showing me that note?" he said.

"It doesn't seem to be here," said Muriel. "What can she have done with it?"

"Don't worry about looking," said Jefferson sharply. "I can remember it. It has, in fact, shaken a good deal of the stiffness out of me."

Muriel gasped with consternation when he told them, and by and by the group broke up, while it was a somewhat silent party that assembled for comida an hour later. Jacinta, it was evident, had very little appetite, though she contrived to join in the somewhat pointless conversation, and it was not until late that night Brown came upon her alone on the flat roof. She was leaning on the parapet, and looking out across the sea, but her eyes were turned northwards now, and she did not hear him until he gently laid a hand upon her shoulder. Then she turned and looked at him with despair in her face. She had not expected him, or he would not have seen it, though there was clear moonlight above them.

Brown sat down on the parapet, and, taking off his gold-rimmed glasses, held them in his hand.

"I think I understand, my dear, and I have something to say," he said.

Jacinta made no disclaimer. For one thing, she saw it would have been useless, and she had no strength left in her then.

"Is it worth while?" she asked. "Would anything that you could say change what has happened?"

"No," said Brown, reflectively, "I scarcely think it would. Still, I would like to mention that we really don't know the thing is incurable. In fact, it may be a malady which is readily susceptible to the proper treatment, and he has done wisely in going to England."

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A little gleam of hope crept into Jacinta's eyes. "I had hardly dared to think of that," she said.

"Well," said Brown, "I really fancy the thing may not be as serious as you and Mr. Jefferson, perhaps naturally, seem to fear. Now, as you know, I was going to England about the new fruit contracts in a week or two, and there is no particular reason why I shouldn't go the day after to-morrow. I should make it my business to see Mr. Austin has the best advice which can be got from the specialists in that country. Only, my dear, I want to ask a very plain question. Supposing he is cured—what then?"

"I'm afraid you must shape the question differently," and a trace of colour crept into the whiteness of Jacinta's face.

"Then I will tell you what I know. You sent that man to Africa, and he went because he was in love with you. He is also a man I have a considerable liking for—and you are my only child. I am getting old, and would like to see you safely settled before I go. There are," and he made a little gesture, "occasions on which one must speak plainly."

Jacinta's face was crimson at last, but she in no way attempted to question the correctness of the announcement he had made.

"Mr. Austin, at least, never told me what you seem to be so sure about—and it is scarcely likely that he will ever do so now," she said.

Brown smiled a little, and tapped the palm of his hand with his glasses.

"My dear," he said, "I think you know better. Of course, you would never have admitted so much as you have done if I had not had you at a disadvantage to-night. Well, the first thing is to see what can be done to cure him. Only, if he comes back, you will, I suppose, know your mind?"

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He looked at her steadily, and, when Jacinta lowered her eyes, laid his hand gently on her arm again.

"I sail by the yellow-funnel boat the day after to-morrow," he said.

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CHAPTER XXX

JACINTA CAPITULATES

The *Carsegarry* was not a fast vessel. Like most of the ocean tramp species, she had been built to carry the largest possible cargo on a very moderate consumption of coal, and speed was a secondary consideration. She had also been in the warmer seas for some time, with the result that every plate beneath her water-line was foul, and as she fell in with strong northwest breezes, she was an unusually long while on the way to Liverpool. Austin was thus not astonished to find a letter from Jefferson, written four or five days after he left Las Palmas, waiting him at Farquhar's brokers, which made it evident that his comrade had got to work again.

He smiled a trifle grimly as he read it, for he fancied that its optimistic tone had cost Jefferson—who alluded to his apprehensions about his arm very briefly—an effort, for the fact that he was asked to cable as soon as he had seen a doctor appeared significant. The rest of the letter concerned financial affairs.

"We have had a rough preliminary survey, and the result is distinctly encouraging," he read. "After making a few temporary repairs I expect to bring her on to Liverpool, and there is every reason to believe we can dispose of her for a good round sum. I could have got £10,000, ex-cargo, as she lies here. Palm oil, it also appears, is scarce and dear, at up to £30 the ton, from which it seems to me that your share should approximate £7,000. I have to mention that Brown is on his way to Liverpool and wants you to communicate with him at the address enclosed."

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This was satisfactory as far as it went. The only trouble was that Austin was very uncertain whether he would live to spend what he had so hardly earned. His arm had become exceedingly painful during the voyage, and after a consultation with the ship broker he telephoned an eminent specialist.

"I will expect you at two o'clock," the doctor said. "If it appears advisable, we can, of course, avail ourselves, as you suggest, of any views the Tropical Disease men may favour us with. In the meanwhile, I will arrange for a gentleman who has made considerable progress in similar researches to meet you."

Austin went out of the broker's office with three hours to spare, and wandered aimlessly about the city in a state of tense suspense. He felt that he could not sit still, and in any case he was dubious as to whether he was warranted in going back to the hotel. Indeed, he wondered whether he had any right to be at large at all, and after a while hung about the wharves, where there was less chance of any one coming into perilous contact with him. He had never spent such a morning in his life, and decided that what he had done and borne in Africa was not worth mention by comparison. Still, the hours dragged by, and at last he set out for the specialists' surgery without daring to wonder what the result would be, and found two gentlemen awaiting him there. One of them, who had grey hair and very keen eyes, motioned him to a chair.

"Now," he said, "before we proceed to an examination it might be better if you told us concisely what happened to you in Africa."

Austin, who sat down, did so, and wondered a little that he was able to speak coherently and quietly, for every nerve in him seemed tingling with tense anxiety. Then the man with the grey hair asked him a few terse questions about the negro's appearance, and when he had described it as well as he could remember, glanced at his companion.

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"Do you recognise the symptoms?" he said.

"No," said the other man, who was younger. "There are one or two complaints not unusual in that country which appear to somewhat resemble it, but they are seldom so virulent. I would like to talk to Mr. Austin about it later, but in the meanwhile——"

"Exactly," and the specialist made a little gesture. "Mr. Austin is, no doubt, anxious to hear our opinion. If you will permit me——"

He drew the jacket gently over Austin's swollen arm, and the latter, who held it out, bare to the shoulder, felt the perspiration start from him as he watched the doctors bend over the limb. They said nothing for a space of seconds, and Austin fancied he would remember that time while he lived. Then, to his astonishment, the grey-haired man glanced at his companion with a little smile.

"I fancy this case has lost its special interest to you?" he said.

The other man nodded. "It has," he said. "Our views evidently coincide."

"I would venture to point out that any decision you may have arrived at is, naturally, of considerable importance to me," said Austin, a trifle sharply.

The specialist smiled again. "I expect you will be pleased to hear that it is not a peculiarly African disease you are suffering from. It is, in fact, no more than a by no means infrequent form of blood poisoning."

Austin gasped, and felt his heart beat furiously from relief, and the specialist waited a moment or two before he went on. "It is evident that you had several lacerations on your lower arm—made by corroded iron, or something of the kind."

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"I tore the skin rather frequently working cargo, and when the scars had partly healed opened up rather a nasty wound by falling on the steamer's rail."

"Exactly. The result is not astonishing in the case of a man weakened by fever who has attempted to work harder than is advisable in a country like the one you mention. In the meanwhile, this arm is going to give you trouble, and I should recommend you to go into the private ward of the — hospital. I will telephone them if that would suit you?"

Austin said he placed himself in the doctor's hands, and half an hour later was being driven to the hospital, where the other man, who was apparently anxious to know more about the negro, asked permission to visit him. He also came in due time, but, so far as Austin could ascertain, never quite decided what the negro was suffering from, though he admitted that there were African troubles of the kind which were infectious.

In the meanwhile, Austin realised how much he needed rest, and how heavy the strain he had borne had been. He did not even want to read, and was languidly content to sit still and think of nothing, until one day, when it was evident that his arm was healing, a nurse came in to announce a visitor.

"If it's that doctor man, you can tell him I can't remember anything more about the nigger, and don't mean to try," he said.

The nurse laughed. "It isn't," she said. "It's a little gentleman with gold-rimmed spectacles."

Austin started. "Ah!" he said. "Will you please tell them to send him in?"

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In a few more minutes Brown came in, and, sitting down, shook his head reproachfully.

"You have really given your friends a good deal of anxiety, and I was almost afraid I would have to go back without learning what had become of you," he said. "Still, though I know the thing isn't, fortunately, what you thought it was, the first question is, how are you?"

"Recovering," said Austin, with a smile. "I understand that my arm will be all right again very shortly. It was a very usual trouble. As you seem to recognise, I let my imagination run away with me."

"I am very pleased to hear it. Why didn't you cable?"

"I understood that you had left Las Palmas, and Jefferson was on the point of doing so. I could scarcely suppose there was any one else who cared enough about what happened to me to make it necessary."

Brown looked at him with a curious little smile which Austin found disconcerting. "There are Mrs. Hatherly and Muriel. I almost think Jacinta would have liked to know that you and Jefferson were under a misapprehension, too. Still, that is, perhaps, not very important, after all. I suppose Jefferson told you that he expects to get a good deal for the *Cumbria* and her cargo?"

"I was pleased to hear that my share might amount to £7,000."

Brown took off his glasses and held them in one hand, which, as Austin knew, was a trick of his when he had anything on his mind.

"I am going to take a liberty," he said. "Have you decided yet what you will do with it?"

"No. That was one of the points I meant to wait a little before grappling with."

"Well," said Brown, reflectively, "there is something I could suggest, but I would like to ask another question." He stopped a moment, and tapped the palm of one hand with his glasses. "Why did you go out to Africa?"

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"Wouldn't the chance of winning £5,000, which was what Jefferson estimated my share would be, appear a sufficient reason?"

"No," said Brown drily. "Not to me. When he first made you the offer you wouldn't go."

"I went, however, when I heard that he was sick. It was then a very natural thing. That ought to satisfy you."

"I scarcely think it does."

"Then, if I had any other reasons, though I am not exactly admitting it, they concern myself alone."

Brown made a little gesture. "Well," he said, "I don't suppose it matters in the meanwhile. You have once or twice asked my advice, and now you have some £7,000, and, I understand, don't know how to lay it out to the best advantage."

"Exactly. I don't feel the least desire to undertake the heaving off of any more steamers."

Brown leaned forward, and tapped his hand with the glasses. "An enterprising man could do a good deal with £7,000. It would, for example, buy him, we'll call it, a third share in a certain rather profitable fruit and wine business in Las Palmas. That is, of course, on the understanding that he devoted his whole time and energy to it."

Austin gazed at him in blank astonishment for a moment or two, and then a red flush crept into his face.

"I fancy a third share in the business you are evidently alluding to would be worth a good deal more than that," he said.

"Probably," said Brown, with a trace of dryness. "That is, I might get more for it, but I have no intention of offering it to everybody. I would like to ask your careful attention for a minute or two, Mr. Austin."

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He stopped a moment, and his tone had changed when he proceeded. "There is nothing to be gained by hiding the fact that I am getting old, and I begin to feel that I would like to take my life a little more easily," he said. "Indeed, I want somebody I could have confidence in to do the hardest work for me. I made the business—and I am a little proud of it. It would not please me to let go of it altogether—and, as a matter of fact, I have been warned that if I retired to England, the climate would probably shorten my life for me. You are, perhaps, aware that I came out to the Canaries originally because my constitution is not an excellent one."

He stopped again, and added, with a certain significance: "I have, however, been told that my ailments are not likely to prove hereditary. Well, as I mentioned, I do not want to give the business up entirely, and it would be a matter of grief to me to see it go to pieces in the hands of an incompetent manager. That is why I have made you the offer."

Austin met his gaze steadily, though the flush was still in his face. "I scarcely think anybody would call me an enterprising business man, that is, at least, from the conventional English point of view."

Brown chuckled softly. "I believe you know as well as I do that a man of that kind would not be of the least use in Spain. They would drive him crazy, and he would probably have insulted half his clients past forgiveness before he had been a month among them. Now, you understand the Spaniards, and, what is as much to the purpose, they seem to like you."

Austin sat still, looking at him, and at last he saw that Brown's reserve was breaking down. His hands seemed to be trembling a little, and there were other signs of anxiety about him.

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"I don't know why you have made me that offer, sir," he said. "There must be plenty of men more fitted to be the recipient of it."

"It is, at least, wholly unconditional," and Brown made a little gesture that curiously became him. "I may say that I had already satisfied myself about you, or I should never have made it."

"Then," said Austin, a trifle hoarsely, "I can only thank you—and endeavour to give you no cause for being sorry afterwards that you fixed on me."

They had a little more to say, but the nurse appeared during the course of it and informed Brown that the surgeon was coming to dress Austin's arm.

"Just a minute," said the latter. "Will you be kind enough to pass me that pad and pencil?"

She gave it to him, and he scribbled hastily, and then tore off the sheet and handed it to Brown.

"I wonder if that message meets with your approval, sir?" he said.

Brown put on his glasses, and smiled as he read: "Miss Brown, Casa-Brown, Las Palmas. Ran away without a cause. Almost well. May I come back as your father's partner?"

Brown chuckled softly, though there was a curious and somewhat unusual gentleness in his eyes.

"It has my full approbation, though, considering the cable company's charges, isn't it a trifle loquacious?"

"Does that matter?" asked Austin.

Brown laughed, and grasped the hand he held out. "No," he said, "I don't suppose it does. After all, these things only happen once in the average lifetime. Well, I must evidently go now, but I will come back to see what Jacinta says to-morrow."

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He went out, and that night Austin got Jacinta's answer.

"Come!" was all it said, but Austin was well content, and, though he was not a very sentimental man, went to sleep with the message beneath his pillow.

It was, however, rather more than three weeks later when, as a yellow-funnelled mailboat slid into Las Palmas harbour, Austin, leaning down from her rail, saw Jacinta and Mrs. Hatherly in one of the crowding boats below. The little lady discreetly remained where she was, and when Jacinta came up the ladder Austin met her at the head of it. She flashed a swift glance into his face, and then for a moment turned hers aside.

"Ah!" she said, "you have forgotten what I said to you, and you are really well again?"

Austin laughed, a quiet, exultant laugh. "I was never particularly ill, but you know all that, and we have ever so much more pleasant things to talk about," he said. "In the meanwhile, I fancy we are blocking up the gangway."

Holding the hand she had given him, he drew her behind the deck-house masterfully, and looked down on her with a little smile.

"I almost think you are pleased to see me back," he said.

"Ah!" said Jacinta, "if you only knew what the past few weeks have cost me."

Austin, laying both hands on her shoulders, stooped and kissed her twice. "That was worth going to Africa for, and if Jefferson had only bought the *Cumbria* sooner I would have ventured to do as much ever so long ago."

There was apparently nobody else on that side of the deck-house, and Jacinta, who did not shake his grasp off, looked up at him with shining eyes.

"You are quite sure of that?" she said.

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"The wish to do so was almost irresistible the first time I saw you. It has been growing stronger ever since."

Jacinta laughed softly, though the crimson was in her cheeks. "Still, you would have mastered it. You were always discreet, you know, and that was why at last I—who have hitherto told all my friends what they ought to do—had to let some one else make it clear how much I wanted you. Now, you are going to think very little of me after that?"

"My dear," said Austin, "you know there was only one thing which could have kept me away from you."

"As if that mattered," and Jacinta laughed scornfully. "Now, stoop a little, though, perhaps, I shouldn't tell you, and if you hadn't gone to Africa, of course, I shouldn't have done it. I knew when you went away how badly I wanted you—and I would have done anything to bring you back, however much it cost me."

A couple of seamen carrying baggage appeared from behind the deck-house just then, which naturally cut short their confidences, and Austin made his way with Jacinta's hand upon his arm towards the boat. He was a trifle bewildered, as well as exultant, for this was quite a new Jacinta, one, in fact, he had never encountered before. She gave him another proof of it when he made an observation that afforded her the opening as they were rowed across the harbour.

"No," she said, quite disregarding Mrs. Hatherly, "I am not going to give you any advice or instructions now you belong to me. After managing everybody else's affairs successfully for ever so long I made a deplorable mess of my own, you see."

"Then what am I to do when we have difficulties to contend with?" said Austin. "We may have a few now and then."

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"You," said Jacinta sweetly, "will have to get over them. I know you can do that now, and I am just going to watch you and be pleased with everything. Isn't that the correct attitude, Mrs. Hatherly?"

The little lady beamed upon them both. "It is rather an old-fashioned one, my dear," she said. "Still, I am far from sure that it doesn't work out as well as the one occasionally adopted by young women now."

THE END.

Transcriber's Note: The following typographical errors present in the original edition have been corrected.

In Chapter II, "**Don Erminio**," said Jacinto, "**evidently doesn't approve of his dinner.**" was changed to "**Don Erminio**," said Jacinta, "**evidently doesn't approve of his dinner.**", **A bit doosoor on the coal trade is one thing, but you was—insultin'** was changed to **A bit doosoor on the coal trade is one thing, but yon was—insultin', as he steamer rolled** was changed to **as the steamer rolled**, and **our launcha ready** was changed to **our lancha ready**.

In Chapter III, **Erminio Oliviera, the *Estremeduro's* captain** was changed to **Erminio Oliviera, the *Estremedura's* captain**, and **if Jacinto ever does** was changed to **if Jacinta ever does**.

In Chapter IV, **it also occured to him** was changed to **it also occurred to him**.

In Chapter V, **a schooner load of onions** was changed to **a schooner load of onions**, and a missing quotation mark was added after **painting little pictures on board the *Estremedura***.

In Chapter VI, **as he drew in under the *Estremedura's* side** was changed to **as he drew in under the *Estremedura's* side**, and **Isn't that sufficient.** was changed to **Isn't that sufficient?**

In Chapter VII, **his silk-covered beast** was changed to **his silk-covered breast**, **escaped anihilation** was changed to **escaped annihilation**, and **didn't appear to have any legitimate connection** was changed to **didn't appear to have any legitimate connection**.

In Chapter VIII, **the negroes who crosesd it** was changed to **the negroes who crossed it**, and **somebody seized his soulders** was changed to **somebody seized his shoulders**.

In Chapter IX, **drifted etherially athwart** was changed to **drifted ethereally athwart**.

In Chapter X, **acompanied the rhythmic splash of oars** was changed to **accompanied the rhythmic splash of oars**.

In Chapter XI, **the blurr of steamy mangroves** was changed to **the blur of steamy mangroves**, **swoopd down beneath** was changed to **swooped down beneath**, and **"Who the devil are you poisoning?"** was changed to **'Who the devil are you poisoning?'**.

In Chapter XIII, a missing period was added after **winch commenced to fire his blood**.

In Chapter XV, a quotation mark was deleted before **Those salvage men are specialists**.

In Chapter XVI, a quotation mark was added after **Last night the water was on the thumb**.

In Chapter XVII, a missing quotation mark was added after **"Well**, and before **he said**, **"it isn't the usual view**, and a missing quotation mark was added after **The trouble is, I don't quite know where I'm going to get it.**

In Chapter XIX, **admissable now and then** was changed to **admissible now and then**, **he recognised thath she must be forced** was changed to **he recognised that she must be forced**, **the girls' big blue eyes** was changed to **the girl's big blue eyes**, and a missing quotation mark was added before **Couldn't you get there in the *Estremadura***.

In Chapter XX, a missing quotation mark was added after **"Well**, and before **said Muriel**, **"it is really your own fault**, a quotation mark was deleted before **Eight guineas for the two**, and a period was changed to a question mark after **the Delgado Island lies**.

In Chapter XXI, **That, I think, is, to be acurate** was changed to **That, I think, is, to be accurate**.

In Chapter XXII, **one of the Canorios raised himself a trifle** was changed to **one of the Canorios raised himself a trifle**, and a quotation mark was deleted after **not afraid of Funnel-paint**.

In Chapter XXIII, a quotation mark was added after **makes any exertion out of the question**, a quotation mark was deleted before **Offer any of the rest of them**, and **clenched a hard, scared fist** was changed to **clenched a hard, scarred fist**.

In Chapter XXIV, **even Jefferson deferrd to him** was changed to **even Jefferson deferrd to him**, **as the Cumbria rose upright** was changed to **as the *Cumbria* rose upright**, **In a month her deck was almost leved** was changed to **In a month her deck was almost leveled**, **You will remember the encouraging words that fellow left—"My arm's almost rotten now."** was changed to **You will remember the encouraging words that fellow left—"My arm's almost rotten now."**, and **slowly clenched one scared hand** was changed to **slowly clenched one scarred hand**.

In Chapter XXV, **he keeps in the litle case** was changed to **he keeps in the little case**, **beam and angle comenced to tremble** was changed to **beam and angle commenced to tremble**, and **Wire and hemp and studded chain rosed** was changed to **Wire and hemp and studded chain rose**.

In Chapter XXVI, a missing question mark was added after **Put that lamp out.**, **keep outside the straking radius** was changed to **keep outside the striking radius**, **Austim became sensible of a change in his mood** was changed to **Austin became sensible of a change in his mood**, and **a faint rythmic throbbing** was changed to **a faint rhythmic throbbing**.

In Chapter XXVII, quotation marks were added after **keep your skin unbroken**. and **You may as well open the rest of them**.

In Chapter XXVIII, **the *Cumbria* steerd handily** was changed to **the *Cumbria* steered handily**, and **the distance run appeared to be working acurately** was changed to **the distance run appeared to be working accurately**.

In Chapter XXX, **an dinformed Brown that the surgeon** was changed to **and informed Brown that the surgeon**.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOR JACINTA ***

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