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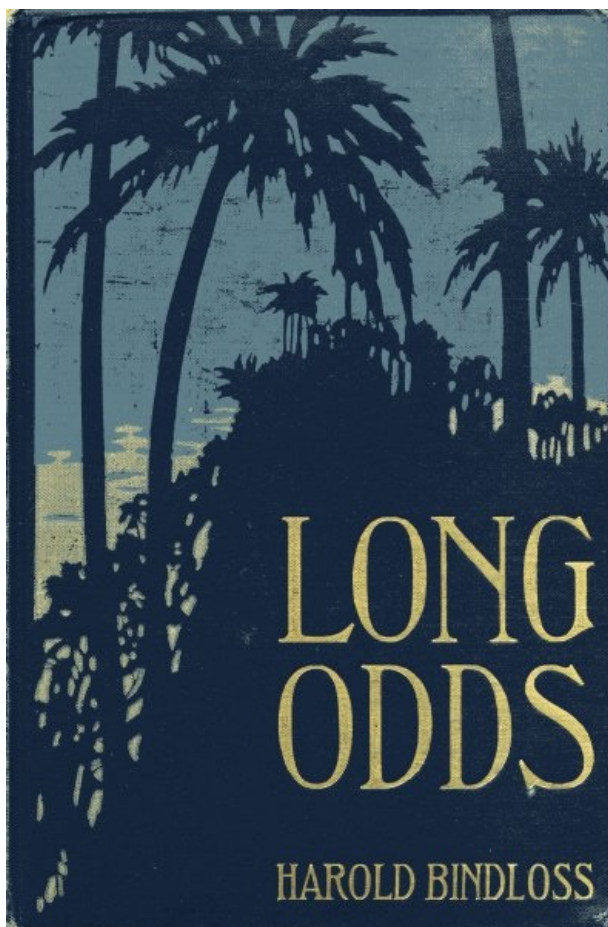
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LONG ODDS



"He watched her go down the stairway."—[See page 279.](#)

LONG ODDS

By
HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF "ALTON OF SOMASCO," "THE CATTLE-BARON'S DAUGHTER," "THE
MISTRESS OF BONAVENTURE," "WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE," "DELILAH OF
THE SNOWS," ETC.



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LONG ODDS

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CHAPTER I THOMAS ORMSGILL

It was towards the middle of a sweltering afternoon when Commandant Dom Erminio roused himself to wakefulness as he lay in his Madeira chair on the veranda of Fort San Roque, which stands beside a muddy river of Western Africa. As a rule Dom Erminio slept all the afternoon, which was not astonishing, since there was very little else for him to do, and if there had been he would conscientiously have refrained from doing it as long as possible. It is also very probable that any other intelligent white man similarly circumstanced would have been glad to spend part, at least, of the weary day in merciful oblivion. San Roque is one of the hottest places in Africa, which is saying a good deal, and at night a sour white steam, heavy with the exhalations of putrefaction, rises from the muddy river. They usually bring the white man who breathes them fever of one or several kinds, while even if he endures them scatheless the steamy heat melts the vigor out of him, and the black dejection born of it and the monotony crushes his courage down. San Roque is scorched with pitiless sunshine during part of the year, but it is walled in by never-lifting shadow, for all round the dark forest creeps close up to it.

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On the afternoon in question the Commandant's rest was prematurely broken, because his dusky major-domo had not had the basket chair placed where it would remain in shadow, and a slanting shaft of sunlight struck hotly upon the sleeper's face. A dull throbbing sound also crept softly out of the heavy stillness, and it was a sound which usually promised at least an hour or two's distraction. Dom Erminio recognized it as the thud of canoe paddles, and sat upright in his chair looking about him drowsily, a little, haggard, yellow-faced man in white uniform, with claw-like hands whose fingers-ends were stained by tobacco. He lived remote from even such civilization as may be met with on the coast of Western Africa, with a handful of black soldiers and one white companion, distinctly on sufferance, since the fever and certain tribesmen who showed signs of resenting the white men's encroachments might at any time snuff him out. He was, however, of Iberian extraction, and it was characteristic of him that he did not concern himself greatly about the possibility of such a catastrophe or consider it worth while to take any steps to avert it which he might perhaps have done.

As he glanced round he saw the straggling line of stockade which was falling down in places, for,

being what he was, it had not occurred to him to mend it; the black soldiers' thatched quarters; and the ramshackle residency, which was built in part of wood and in part of well rammed mud. Beyond them rose the forest, black and mysterious, cleft by the river's dazzling pathway, and a faint look of anticipation crept into Dom Erminio's eyes as the thud of paddles grew louder. The river was one stage of the road to civilization, and he could not quite give up the hope that certain political friends in his own country would remember him some day. Then his look of interest died away, for it became evident from the beat of paddles that the occupants of the approaching canoe were traveling faster than any one in the Government service usually thought it worth while to do. Besides that, the Government's messengers were not addicted to traveling at all in the heat of the afternoon.

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"Ah," he said, with a wave of his unlighted cigarette which was vaguely expressive of resignation, "it is the Englishman Ormsgill or the American missionary. Perhaps, by a special misfortune, it may be both of them."

His companion, who leaned upon the balustrade, nodded, for Englishmen and Americans are not held in great esteem in that country, nor are missionaries of any kind. They see too much, and some of them report it afterwards, which, when now and then the outer world pricks up its ears in transient interest or indignation, is apt to make trouble for everybody. Still, the Lieutenant Luiz was a lethargic man and a philosopher in his way, so he said nothing, though he waved the comely brown-skinned girl who had been sitting near him back into the house. There was, at least, no occasion to provide a weapon for the enemy, and Marietta had made several attempts to run away lately.

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Commandant Erminio smiled approvingly. "What one suspects does not count," he said. "In this land of the shadow one suspects everything and everybody. There are even envious and avaricious men on the coast down yonder who fling aspersions at me."

If Lieutenant Luiz had been an Englishman he would probably have grinned, but he was too dignified a gentleman to do anything of that kind, though there was a faint twinkle in his languid dark eyes. Then a canoe swung into sight round a bend, and slid on towards the landing with wet paddles flashing dazzlingly. Four almost naked negroes swung them, but another man, who wore white duck and a wide gray hat also plied a dripping blade just clear of the awning astern, which was a very unusual thing in that region.

"It is certainly the Englishman Ormsgill," said Dom Erminio. "That is a man the fever cannot kill, which is, perhaps, a pity." Then he waved his cigarette again. "Still, it is possible that Headman Domingo will settle with him some day."

The canoe slid up to the pile-bound bank, and the two white men who got out strode towards the residency, which was characteristic, since on a day of that kind an Iberian would certainly have sauntered. The first of them was tall, and thinner even than most white men are who have had the flesh melted from them in tropical Africa. His face was hollow, though he was apparently only some thirty years of age, but it was the face of a strong-willed man, and there was a certain suggestion of optimism in it and his eyes, which was singularly unusual in the case of a man who had spent several years in that country. Even nature is malignant there, and man is steeped in lust and avarice and cruelty, but in spite of this Watson Nares was an optimist as well as an American medical missionary.

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He returned the Commandant's greeting, which was punctiliously courteous, and sitting down in the chair a negro brought for him, waited until his companion, who had turned to give an order to the canoe boys, came up. The latter was of average height, a strongly built man of about the missionary's age, with a brick red face, fair hair thinned by fever, and wrinkles about his gray eyes. They were steady, observant eyes, though a half-cynical, half-whimsical twinkle crept into them now and then, as it did when he glanced towards the Commandant. The latter would have clapped his shoulder, but he avoided the effusive greeting with a certain quiet tactfulness which was usual with him.

"The padre and I are going back to the concession," he said in Portuguese. "If you have any hammock boys we would like to borrow them."

The Commandant said that this was unfortunately not the case. Two of his carriers had dysentery, and another a guinea worm in his leg; and there was only the little twinkle in Ormsgill's eyes to show that he did not believe him.

"Besides," said Lieutenant Luiz, "the country is not safe. There is a rumor that the Abbatava men are watching the lower road."

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Ormsgill laughed, though he fancied that Dom Erminio had flashed a quick glance at his subordinate before the latter spoke.

"Still, I scarcely think the Abbatava people will trouble me, and in any case some of them would be sorry if they did," he said. "Well, since you have no carriers we will get on again. It is a long way to the concession, and Lamartine is very ill. I brought up the padre to see if he could do anything for him."

Dom Erminio shrugged his shoulders. "It is a wasted effort, which is a thing to be regretted in this land, where an effort is difficult to make. Lamartine has been ill too often, and if he is ill again he will certainly die. As you have heard, the bushmen are in an unsettled state, and there

are several sick men here. It is, perhaps, convenient that the Señor Nares should stay at San Roque."

He made a little suggestive gesture which seemed to indicate that the road was unsafe, turning towards his subordinate as though for confirmation, but once more Ormsgill fancied there was a warning in his glance.

"Of a surety!" said the Lieutenant Luiz. "Lamartine is probably not alive by now. Still, if the Señor Nares insists on going it is well that he should take the higher road."

In the meantime the canoe boys had unrolled a canvas hammock and lashed it to its pole. Nares stood up as they approached the veranda stairway with the pole upon their wooly crowns.

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"I will come back and look at your sick," he said. "We have only the one hammock, Ormsgill."

Ormsgill smiled. "There is nothing very wrong with my feet, and I haven't had a dose of fever for some time. It isn't your fault that you have one now."

He made the two officers a little inclination as he took off his hat, and Nares, who shook hands with them, crawled into his hammock. He, at least, had the fever every two or three months or so. Then the boys struck up a marching song as they swung away with their burden into the steamy shadow, and the Commandant leaned on the balustrade listening with a little dry smile until the crackle of trampled undergrowth and sighing refrain died away.

"When one desires to encourage such men it is generally wise to point out the difficulties," he said. "One would fancy that they were fond of them, especially the Señor Ormsgill, who is of the kind the customs of this world make rebels of."

"And the other?" asked Lieutenant Luiz, who had, not without reason, a respect for the wisdom of his superior. He had found that it was, in some ways at least, warranted.

The Commandant lighted his cigarette, and watched the first smoke wreath float straight up into the stagnant air. "He would be a martyr. It is a desire that is incomprehensible to you and me, but there are others besides him who seem to cherish it—and in this land of the devil opportunities of satisfying it are generally offered them."

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He looked at Lieutenant Luiz, and once more the latter's face relaxed into the nearest approach to a grin his sense of dignity allowed. One could have fancied there was an understanding of some kind between the men.

In the meanwhile Nares' bearers were plodding down a two-foot trail walled in by thorny underbrush and festoons of as thorny creepers that flowed down in tangled luxuriance between the towering cottonwood trunks. There was dim shade all about them, and the atmosphere was like that of a Turkish bath, steamy and almost insufferably hot, only that there was in it something which checked instead of accelerated the cooling perspiration. Now and then the bearers gasped, and Ormsgill's face was flushed as he walked beside the hammock.

"We should get through by to-morrow night if we take the lower road," he said. "I believe that would be advisable, though I'm not quite sure of it. At least, it's the nearer one, and Lamartine was going down hill very fast when I left him. In fact, he sent two of the boys to the Mission for Father Tiebout. In one way, the thing's a trifle invidious, but, you see, Lamartine is of his persuasion."

Nares smiled. "I'm to have the care of his body, and Father Tiebout of his soul. Well, we have fought as allies on those terms before, and I guess I don't mind."

"You're quite sure? After all, in one way, the soul of Lamartine would be something of a trophy."

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The American looked up at him with a faint kindling in his eyes. "Tiebout has so many to his credit—and he could afford to spare me this one. Still, at least, I can heal the body, if I am called in in time."

"Which is a good deal. Especially in a land where it is singularly difficult to believe that men have souls at all."

Nares shook his head. "If I didn't feel quite so played out I'd take your challenge up," he said. "Guess we'll join issue on that point another time. You mentioned once or twice that Lamartine was very sick?"

"There's about one chance in twenty we get there before he's dead. It's one of the reasons I'm taking the lower road. It's the nearest."

It was characteristic that Ormsgill did not state that it was also one of the reasons he had traveled for four days and most of four nights under an enervating heat. Lamartine was an alien of dubious character, and in some respects distinctly uncongenial habits, but Ormsgill had not spared himself to give his comrade that one chance for his life.

"Didn't Lieutenant Luiz' recommendation count?" asked Nares.

"No," said Ormsgill, reflectively. "I don't think it did. At least, not as he meant it to, though I've been trying to worry out what he did mean exactly. One thing's certain. He wasn't prompted by any solicitude for our safety. You see, he might have been counting on my distrust of him, or my

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usual obstinacy, and wanted me to take the higher road after all. Or he may have been playing another game. I don't know. That's why we'll take the nearest way and not worry. When you're in doubt, it's generally wisest to do the obvious thing."

Nares made a little drowsy gesture of concurrence. "Straight to the mark—and you get there now and then. At least, it can't be the wrong path—and if one doesn't finish the journey it's only a falling out by the way. A good many of us have done that in this country."

Ormsgill said nothing. He had somewhere buried deep in him a vague, unformulated faith which, however, seldom found expression of any kind in words, and was tinged with a bitterness against all conventional creeds, which was not altogether astonishing in the case of a man who had lived as he had done in the dark land. Still, he had traveled four days and nights to bring his sick comrade the assistance he felt would arrive too late and now, when he dragged himself along dead weary through the steamy shade, he had reasons for surmising that there was peril somewhere down the winding trail.

Nares was asleep when they passed the forking and held on by the lower road, and Ormsgill did not tell the boys that he had seen a huddled black figure lying a few yards back among the undergrowth. He did not even stop to look at it. Labor is in demand in that country, and when it is supplied by a dusky contractor who collects the raw material in the bush the unfortunate who sickens on the long march from the interior usually dies. Transport on the human head makes provisions costly in a devastated country, and it is not economy to feed a man who will bring one nothing in. A white man, as everybody knows, may not own or sell a slave in any part of Africa under European control, but he must have labor, and there are in practice ways of getting over the obvious difficulty. They are not ways which are discussed openly, and, so far as one can ascertain, are by no means satisfactory to the negro for whose benefit they are sometimes said to be devised. In this, and a few other matters, the negro's opinion is not, however, deferred to. It is his particular business to gather rubber for the white man and grow his cocoa, and the fact that he is not as a rule content to recognize this obligation is very seldom taken into consideration.

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It had been dark two hours, and the bearers could go no further without a rest, when Ormsgill camped on a ridge beneath tall tufted palms at least a hundred yards from the trail. There was a reason for this, and also for the fact that he allowed no fires to be made, though of all things the negro loves a cheerful blaze. The powers of evil are very real to him, which is by no means astonishing considering the land he lives in. The boys sat huddled about the empty hammock among the palms, while the two white men lay upon a waterproof ground sheet some fifty yards apart from them and nearer the trail. Ormsgill had had very little sleep during the last four nights, but he was very wide awake then, and a good magazine rifle, which had been smuggled through San Roque without the Commandant's notice, lay across his knees.

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He was listening intently, but could hear nothing except an occasional rustling among the creepers and the heavy splash of moisture on the leaves. Nor could he see very much, for though here and there a star shown down between the towering trunks, a sour white steam hung almost a man's height about the dripping undergrowth. Save for the splash of moisture it was so still that Nares, with imagination quickened by the tension the fever had laid upon his nerves, could almost fancy he could hear things growing. The growth, at least was characteristic of the country in that it was untrammled, luxuriant, and destructive rather than beneficent. Orchids and parasites sucked the life blood from the trees, and threw upon their ruin; creepers strangled them and tore them down half-rotten. It was a mad, cruel struggle for existence, and Ormsgill, whose hot hands were clenched upon the rifle, clearly recognized that man must take his part in it. As a matter of fact, he was not averse to doing so. There was a vein of combativeness in him, and circumstances had hitherto usually forced him well to the front when there was trouble anywhere in his vicinity.

What he and Nares talked about was of no particular consequence. They were men whose inner thoughts only became apparent now and then, and their conversation largely concerned the merits of certain Congolese cigars. By and by, however, Nares stopped abruptly, as a hand that evidently did not belong to his companion touched his arm, but it was characteristic of him that he did not start. He looked round instead, and saw an indistinct and shadowy figure rise out of the undergrowth. It pointed up the trail, and Ormsgill, who seemed to listen for a moment or two, nodded.

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"I really think Lieutenant Luiz meant us to take the other road," he said. "That must be Domingo bringing down another drove, and as it is evidently a big one it is just as well we didn't meet him on the trail. Domingo doesn't like either of us, and he has been getting truculent lately."

Nares said nothing, and a faint patter of naked feet that grew steadily louder crept out of the silence. It was dragging and listless, the shuffle of weary and hopeless men; and it was evident that the hammock boy who sank down again into the undergrowth close beside Ormsgill was badly afraid. Five minutes later a shadowy figure appeared among the trees below them where the mist was thinner, grew a trifle plainer as it slipped across an opening and vanished again, but there were others behind, and for several minutes a row of half-seen men flitted by. Here and there one of them draped in white cotton carried a flintlock gun, but the rest were half-naked, and last of all a few plodded behind a lurching hammock. They went by without a sound but the confused patter of weary feet upon the quaggy trail, and left an impressive silence behind them when they plunged into the gloom again.

Then Ormsgill smiled grimly as he tapped the breech of his rifle.

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"If homicide is ever justifiable it would have been to-night," he said. "One could hardly have missed that bulge in Domingo's hammock, and the longing to drive a bullet through it was almost too much for me."

Nares made no attempt to rebuke him. "That man," he said, "is permitted to be—one must suppose as part of a great purpose. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they do their work thoroughly."

"It seems so," and Ormsgill laughed a little bitter laugh. "Anyway, the stones are wet with blood, and a good many of us have passed between them. One wonders now and then how long the downtrodden will endure that terrible grinding."

"It is for a time only. Day and night the cry goes up in many tongues."

"And the gods of the heathen cannot hear; and those of the white men may, it seems, be propitiated by masses in the cathedral and stained windows bought with cocoa and rubber dividends. Well, one must try to believe that Domingo's laborers enlisted for the purpose of being taught agriculture by the white men of their own free will. At least, that is the comfortable assurance usually furnished the civilized powers, and as they have their own little problems to grapple with they complacently shut one eye. I only wonder how many played-out niggers' throats Domingo has cut on the way. In the meanwhile, Lamartine is dying, and we may as well get on again."

He called to the hammock boys, who still seemed afraid, and in another five minutes the little party was once more floundering onwards through the silence of the steamy bush.

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CHAPTER II RESTITUTION

Darkness had closed down suddenly on the forest, but it was hotter than ever in the primitively furnished general room of Lamartine's house, where the lamp further raised the already almost insupportable temperature. There was also a deep, impressive silence in the bush that shut the rickety dwelling in, though now and then the sound of a big drop splashing upon a quivering leaf came in through the open window with startling distinctness. Lamartine, the French trader, was dead, and had been buried that afternoon, as was customary, within an hour or two after the breath has left his body. His career, like that of most men in his business, had not been a very exemplary one, but he had, at least, now and then shown that he possessed certain somewhat fantastic and elementary notions of ethics, which he was in the habit of alluding to as his code of honor. It was, as Father Tiebout, who had once or twice given him spiritual advice when he was very sick of fever, admitted, a rather indifferent one, but very few white men in that country had any code at all, and, as the good padre said, it was possible that too much would not be expected from any one who had lived in that forest long.

In any case, Lamartine had gone to answer for the deeds that he had done, and the three men who had buried him and had constituted themselves his executors sat about his little table with the perspiration dripping from them. There was Nares, gaunt and hollow-faced, weak from fever and worn with watching; Father Tiebout, the Belgian priest, little, and also haggard; and Ormsgill, the gray-eyed, brown-faced Englishman, who sat looking at them with set lips and furrowed forehead. Their creeds were widely different, but men acquire a certain wide toleration in the land of the shadow, where it is exceedingly difficult to believe in any thing beyond the omnipotence of evil.

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It was, perhaps, characteristic that it was the priest who tore up certain papers Ormsgill had selected from the pile upon the table.

"I do not think that anything would be gained by allowing them to come under the notice of the authorities," he said. "I am not sure that they might not consider they invalidated the trifling bequest to the Mission, which with good management should enable us to rescue a few more of the heathen."

"A very few!" and Ormsgill smiled. "The market's stiff now Domingo has practically a monopoly as purveyor. Converts will be dearer. One understands that you buy most of yours."

Father Tiebout's eyes twinkled good-humoredly. "One must use the means available, and it is, at least, something if we can save their bodies. But to proceed, our companion will agree with me that repentance must be followed by restitution or reparation. In the case of the friend we have buried one must take the will for the deed, and the will was there. Restitution may also be efficacious if it is vicarious. As you know, it was the thought of the woman from the interior that most troubled Lamartine."

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Ormsgill glanced at Nares, for both had heard some, at least, of the dying man's words on that subject, but for a time the American looked straight in front of him. Then he turned to Ormsgill.

"He seemed to expect you to make that restitution for him. Tell us what you know. Most of it will not be news to Father Tiebout, but I haven't his advantages."

"The affair is easily understood. Lamartine bought the girl from the man who ran the labor supply business before Domingo. She was decidedly good-looking, a pretty warm brown in color, and had the most intelligent eyes I've ever seen in an African. The curious thing is that I believe Lamartine was genuinely fond of her. In any case, he was furious when one of the boys laid what looked like very conclusive evidence of her unfaithfulness before him. He meant to administer the usual penalty."

Father Tiebout made a little gesture. "Ah," he said, "these things happen. One can only protest."

"Well," said Ormsgill dryly, "as you know, they didn't in this case. I nearly broke his wrist, but I took the pistol from him. You see, I rather believed in the girl's innocence. Lamartine compromised the thing by handing her on to Herrero—though he would take no money for her. He had, as he was rather fond of mentioning, his code of honor. There was a trying scene when Herrero sent for her. The girl flung herself down and clung to Lamartine's knees. It seemed she was fond of the man, and didn't want to go away, which was, as it happens, wise of her. Though she was probably not aware of this, Herrero trains the women who take his fancy with the whip."

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He stopped a moment and glared at Nares. "I have no doubt the padre knows the rest. Lamartine found out not long ago that the boy had lied, and remembered a little too late that Herrero would in all probability beat the girl to death in one of his outbreaks. He made him a very tempting offer if he would send her back, but Herrero apparently wanted to keep her, and while negotiations were in progress Lamartine fell sick. I naturally don't know what he told the padre, but he once or twice assured me that if he knew she could be sent back safe to her people in the bush he would die more contentedly. In fact, improbable as it may seem in this country, the thing was worrying him badly."

It was significant that Nares, who was something of an optimist, appeared by his expression to consider the fact that such a thing should have troubled Lamartine very improbable indeed, but Father Tiebout smiled contemplatively. His profession gave him, as had been suggested, advantages which Nares did not enjoy, and he was a wise man in his way.

"Lamartine," he said, "desired to make restitution—but to do it in his own person was not permitted him."

Then he turned, and sat still with his eyes fixed on Ormsgill, as though waiting. It was, in fact, an occupation he was accustomed to, for one who would see the result of his efforts must as a rule wait a long while in Africa.

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Ormsgill met his gaze thoughtfully, with steady gray eyes, and it was a moment or two before he spoke.

"Whether a vicarious reparation will be of any benefit to the soul of Lamartine I naturally do not know," he said. "It is enough for me that he and the padre seemed to fancy it might be, and, as it happens, I owe Lamartine a good deal. This is why I practically promised to undertake his responsibility. I am not sure that either of you know I first arrived in this Colony trimming coal among the niggers in a steamer's stokehold."

Father Tiebout made a little gesture with his hands which seemed to imply that there was very little he was not acquainted with, and Ormsgill went on—

"Still, I do not think you know I was quietly compelled to abandon the service of a British Colony for a fault I never committed. My friends at home very naturally turned against me. I had brought them discredit—and it did not matter greatly whether I was guilty. How I made a living afterwards along this coast does not concern you; but I went down in one sense as far as a white man may, and the struggle has left a mark that will never quite come out on me. Still, I met with kindness from other outcasts and benighted heathen, as one usually does from the outcast and the trodden on, and, when I was flung ashore after nearly pounding the life out of a brutal second engineer, Lamartine, who had gone down to the coast on business, held out a hand to me. As I said, I feel that I owe him a little."

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He stopped for a moment with a little grim smile. "Herrero has gone South somewhere, taking the girl with him, but if she is alive I think I can promise that he will give her up. After that it would not be so very difficult to send her back to where she comes from in the bush."

"For the repose of the soul of Lamartine!" and Nares glanced at Father Tiebout, with a challenge in his eyes.

The little priest's gesture seemed to imply that he declined to be drawn into a controversy, and it was Ormsgill who answered the American.

"To discharge a debt—among other reasons—and as a protest. I have been driven to exhaustion myself more than once. Have you any hope at all to offer these African people, I mean in this world, padre?"

Father Tiebout smiled. "Yes," he said simply. "One does what one can, and waits patiently. How long, I do not know, but slowly or suddenly, in our time, or in the time of these people's children, the change will come."

He looked at Nares, the man of action, who bore with waiting ill, and he, flushed with fever, laid a hand that was clenched hard upon the table.

"You expect them to endure to the second generation. I tell you that they are forging spears in the interior now. A little more, and they will come down and wipe out every bush mission and garrison, and can we blame them, who stand by and tolerate the abominable traffic in black men's souls and bodies? There was more excuse for the old-time slavery. Horrible as it would be, one could almost welcome the catastrophe which would force the outside world to recognize what white men are doing here."

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There were, perhaps, men in the outside world who knew it already, and could suggest no remedy. After all, labor is essential to the prosperity of any African colony, and while in some which are ruled as justly as circumstances permit the negro is offered wages for his services, and can go home with his earnings when he likes, there are others where more drastic measures are adopted. There the labor purveyor collects the white man's servants in the bush, and it is not the business of the Administration to inquire whether they are prisoners of war or have been sold by their friends. They are bound down to toil for a term of years, and if they die off during it few troublesome questions are asked. The African climate is an unhealthy one, as everybody knows.

In the meanwhile neither of Nares' companions said anything for a space. They were thinking of the same thing, each in his own way, while the dense steamy blackness of the African night shut them in. Ormsgill, who had been driven until the sweat of anguished effort dripped from him, wondered vaguely what a man with brains and nerve and money might do on the negroes' behalf in spite of the opposition of a corrupt administration. The priest was also wondering how much he could accomplish with Lamartine's bequest, very little of which would, however, in all probability, be allowed to remain in his hands, though he knew that it would in any case not go very far, for he was one who recognized that the new beneficent order must be evolved slowly, here a little and there a little, with other men to carry out what he had begun. Father Tiebout seldom rode a tilt at impossibilities, as Nares and Ormsgill occasionally did. He was a wise man, and knew the world too well. At last Nares made a little gesture of weariness.

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"Well, the thing may happen, but that hardly concerns us in the meanwhile, and our work here is done. I wonder if you remember that you haven't read the letters Father Tiebout brought up, Ormsgill?"

Ormsgill had, as it happened, quite forgotten them. He had arrived worn out with a long and hasty journey, and Nares and he had then kept close watch beside his comrade's bed. When at last their watch was over there was still much to be done, and now for the first time he had leisure to open the packet the priest had handed him. He took out a stiff blue envelope with an English postmark, and gazed at it heavy eyed and vacantly before he broke the cover. Then he slowly straightened himself in his chair, and incredulity gave place to bewilderment as he read the letter he shook out. Lamartine's death had left him an outcast and one obnoxious to constituted authority again. Five minutes ago he had not known what his next step would be, but the stiff legal writing held out before him dazzling possibilities. Then he laid down the letter, and turned to his companions with a curious little laugh.

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"The thing is almost incredible," he said. "A man who I was told would never forgive the discredit I brought upon the family has died in England and left me what looks very like a fortune. The other letters may bear upon it. You'll excuse me."

They watched him in silence for ten minutes, and there was a faint flush in his bronzed face when he quietly rose and took out a photograph from a little tin box.

"Padre," he said, "you are the wisest man I know, and, though distinctions are invidious, Nares is, I think, the honestest. That is why I am going to put a case before you. Well, I had a good upbringing, and I think my English friends expected something from me before I was flung out of the British service and became a pariah. After that I never troubled them again, which was no doubt a cause of satisfaction to everybody. There was, however, a thing I had to do which was not easy, and this picture should make it clear to you. It was arranged that we should be married when I had brought my laurels home from Africa."

He handed Nares the photograph. "When I was made a scapegoat I gave her back her liberty. It is now intimated that she has not so far profited by it."

Nares bent over the portrait of a young and very comely English girl, and saw only the fresh, innocent face, and the smiling eyes. Then he handed it to the little haggard priest, who had a deeper understanding, and saw a good deal more than that.

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"It is a beautiful face," he said when Father Tiebout had gazed at it steadily, but the latter said nothing, and turned towards Ormsgill, as though still ready to give him his attention, which he seemed to understand.

"It is more than four years since I saw her, and I have spent them with the outcasts," he said. "You can realize what effect that has upon one, padre. The stamp this country sets on the white man is plain on you, but you have not lived here as I have been forced to do. Well, I think the woman is still the same, and I have greatly changed. I do not know my duty."

Father Tiebout sat silent for at least a minute, looking reflectively at the man before him. Ormsgill was young still, but his lean face was furrowed, and there was a suggestiveness in the

lines on it. He had seen death and pestilence, human nature stripped naked, and unmentionable cruelty; and the priest was quite aware that one cannot live with the outcast, in Africa, and remain unchanged. Then he looked at the photograph again, for he knew that the four years had also had their effect upon the woman.

"Ah," he said, "we all grow, some towards the beneficent light, and some in the blighting shadow. The training and the pruning we are subjected to also has its effect. Her people?"

"I almost think you would consider them children of this world," said Ormsgill dryly.

"And you have been left a good deal of money?"

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Ormsgill told him what the amount was, and once more the priest said nothing for awhile. Quiet and unobtrusive as he was, he never forgot that he was one of the vanguard of the Church militant, and was ready to use with skill any weapon that was offered him. It was also necessary to thrust hard now and then, and he knew that in his hands the man who had lived with the outcast and the oppressed would prove a reliable blade. Ormsgill, as he recognized, had capacities. Still, his counsel had been asked, and he would answer honestly, knowing that he could afford to do it if his knowledge of human nature, and the girl's face, had not deceived him. After all, he fancied, whatever he said the result would be the same, and he was playing a skillful game of which the stakes were black men's bodies, and, perhaps, human souls.

"With a sum like that there is so much that one could do," he said. "With discretion—you understand—here and there a little. Domingo put down, women dying at their tasks redeemed and enfolded in the shelter of the Mission, men with brutal masters set at liberty, and concessions where they are driven to death suppressed. One could also bring about a reckoning with corrupt authority. When admonition is of no service one may try the scourge."

He saw the little glint in Ormsgill's eyes, and made a deprecatory gesture with his hands. "Still, you have asked for counsel, and you have another duty. With us marriage is not a social contract, and the promise that precedes it is almost as sacred. You are pledged to this Englishwoman if she has not released you, and that you are changed will not matter if she loves you. It is your duty to go back to her."

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Nares looked up and nodded. "Of course!" he said. "You must go."

Ormsgill's forehead was furrowed, and the perspiration stood in beads on it. The love that had driven him out to win his spurs in the land of shadow still in some degree, at least, remained with him; but he was conscious of the change in him which the girl with her upbringing might well shrink from. He had lived with the outcasts until he had become one of them, a hater of conventional formulas and shams, while there had crept into his nature a trace of the somberness of the dark land. What, he wondered, would the sunny-tempered English girl he had left make of such a man. Still, as the priest had said, his duty was clear, and, what was perhaps more, his inclination marched with it. He straightened himself suddenly with a little resolute jerk of his shoulders.

"I will start for the coast to-morrow, and go to Grand Canary," he said. "As it happens, she is there now with her people. Still, before I go, padre, I will arrange with the casa Sarraminho to hand you the equivalent of £200 sterling. With that you can buy the liberty of the woman Lamartine gave Herrero, and use what is left over as you and Nares think fit. If Herrero will not part with her, or you find the thing too difficult, I will come back for a while and undertake it myself. After all, it is my affair. I owe it to Lamartine."

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Then he took the little photograph and replaced it in the tin box, after which he walked quietly past them and out of the room while, when they heard him go down the veranda stairway, Father Tiebout looked at his companion with a curious smile.

"Four years!" he said. "It is a space in a woman's lifetime, and every year leaves its mark on us. It is decreed that we must grow, but we do not all grow the same."

In the meanwhile Ormsgill stood in the little compound with the sour white steam drifting past him. The forest rose out of it, a great black wall, and its hot, damp smell was in his nostrils. It was a heady savor, for something that goes with the smell of the wilderness sinks deep into the hearts of those who once allow it to enter, and is always afterwards a cause of disquietude and restlessness to some of them. Ormsgill had had his endurance and all the courage he was born with taxed to the uttermost in that steamy shade, but now when he was about to leave it he found the smell of its tall white lilies and the acrid odors of corruption stirring and shaking him. At last, with a little jerk of his shoulders, which was a trick he had acquired from Lamartine, he turned and went back to the lighted room again.

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CHAPTER III

HIS OWN PEOPLE

The velvet dusk that crept up from the eastwards was held in check by the brightening flood of moonlight on the sea when Ormsgill leaned on the balustrade of the veranda outside the *Hotel Catalina* in Grand Canary. Close in front of him the long Atlantic swell broke upon the hammered beach with a drowsy rumbling, and flung a pungent freshness into the listless air, for the Trade breeze had fallen dead away. The fringe of surf ran southwards beside the dim white road to where the lights of Las Palmas blinked and twinkled in the shadow the great black peaks flung out upon the sparkling sea.

Ormsgill, who had turned from its contemplation at the sound of a voice he recognized, had, however, no longer any eyes for the prospect. He had arrived on an African mail-boat two hours earlier, and had somehow missed the girl whose voice had sent a little thrill through him. She had, it seemed, gone in through one of the long, lighted windows instead of by the door, but the horse she had just dismounted from was still standing with another, which carried a man's saddle, just below the veranda. Ormsgill could see that it was one of the sorry beasts the Spaniards hire to Englishmen, but it was also jaded and white with lather.

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"These English have no consideration," said the peon who held its bridle, to a comrade. "This horse is old, but when I brought it here it was not more than a very little lame. Now it is certain I cannot hire it to anybody to-morrow. They were at Arucas, which for a horse of this kind is a long way, but they came home by the barranco and across the sand heaps at the gallop. The Señorita must not be late for dinner. *Vaya!* it is a cruelty."

The matter was, perhaps, not a great one in itself, but it had a somewhat unpleasant effect upon Ormsgill, who knew that the Iberian is not as a rule squeamish about any cruelty that the lust of gain renders it necessary to inflict upon his beast. The horse, as he could see, had certainly been ridden hard, and was very lame. The thing jarred on him, and as he leaned on the veranda waiting until the message he had left to announce his arrival should be delivered, a scene he had looked upon in the dark land forced itself upon his recollection. It was a line of jaded men staggering under the burdens on their heads through an apparently interminable sea of scorched and dusty grass. There was little water in that country at the season, and they dragged themselves along, grimed with the fibrous dust, in torments of thirst, with limbs that were reddened by the stabbing of the flinty grass stems. Then rousing himself he drove the suggestive vision from his brain and entered the hall of the big hotel.

It blazed with light, there was music somewhere, and already conventionally attired men and elaborately dressed women were descending the stairway, and appearing by twos and threes from the corridors. They were for the most part Englishmen and women, but Ormsgill was a little astonished to feel that instead of arousing sympathy their voices and bearing jarred on him. Their conversation appeared to have no point in it, and their smiles were meaningless. They seemed shallow and artificial, and he had lived at high pressure, face to face with grim realities, in the land of the shadow. He stood a little apart, quietly regarding them, a lonely figure in plain white duck with a lined brown face, until a burly man in the conventional black and white strode up to him.

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"I'm uncommonly glad to see you, Tom," he said. "Ada will be down in a minute. I left her and her mother almost too startled to understand that you had arrived. The man you gave your message to had just brought it in. You should have let us know what boat you were sailing by. But I mustn't keep you talking. You have just time to change your things."

Ormsgill shook hands with him, but was conscious of a lack of enthusiasm as he did it that irritated him. He had once considered Major Chillingham a very good fellow, but now there seemed to be something wanting in his characteristic bluff geniality. Ormsgill could not tell what it was, but he felt the lack of it.

"I suppose there is," he said with a smile. "Still, you see, I haven't anything to change into. In fact, my present outfit is a considerably smarter one than the get-up I have been accustomed to dining in."

Chillingham's gaze was at first expressive of blank astonishment, and there was a sardonic gleam in Ormsgill's eyes. "You must try to remember that I've got out of the way of wearing evening clothes. I think I'd made it clear that I have been down in the depths the past four years."

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His companion's red face flushed a trifle, but he laughed. "Well," he said, "that's one of the things we needn't talk about, and I'm not sure that everybody would be so ready to mention it." Then he drew back a trifle. "Tom, you're greatly changed."

Ormsgill nodded. "Yes," he said, "I dare say I am. In several ways the thing's not unnatural."

After that Chillingham discoursed about English affairs, and though it appeared to cost him a slight effort Ormsgill made no attempt to help him. He stood still, perfectly at his ease, but for all that conscious that he was an anachronism in such surroundings, while the men and women who smiled or nodded to his companion as they came into the hall cast curious glances at him. This duck-clad man with the lined face and steady eyes was clearly not of their world, which was, in the case of most of them, an essentially frivolous one.

At last he turned, and strode forward impulsively as the girl he waited for came down the stairway in a filmy dress of lace-like texture that rustled softly as it flowed about her. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed, warm in coloring, and her face, which was as comely as ever, had a certain hint of disdain in it. That, however, did not strike Ormsgill then, for she flushed a little

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at the sight of him, and laid a slim white hand in his.

"Tom," she said, "I am very glad, but why didn't you cable? Still, you must tell me afterwards. We are stopping the others, and mother is waiting to speak to you."

Ormsgill was conscious of a faint relief as he turned to the tall lady who stood beside the girl, imposing and formal in somber garments. The meeting he had looked forward to with longing, and at the same time a vague apprehension, was over. He had, he felt, been reinstated, permitted to resume his former footing, and the manner of the elder lady, which was quietly gracious, conveyed the same impression. Then Mrs. Ratcliffe sent her brother, the Major, on to see that places were kept for them together, and Ormsgill was thankful that the dinner which was waiting would render any confidential conversation out of the question for the next hour. He wanted time to adjust himself to the changed conditions, for a man can not cut himself adrift from all that he has been accustomed to and then resume his former life just as he left it, especially if he has dwelt with the outcast in the meanwhile.

A chair had been placed for him between Ada Ratcliffe and her mother, while Major Chillingham sat almost opposite him across the long table. The glow of light, glitter of glass and silver, scent of flowers and perfumes, and hum of voices had a curious effect on him after the silence of the shadowy forest and the primitive fashion in which he had lived with Lamartine, and some minutes had passed before he turned to the girl at his side.

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"I was a little astonished to hear that you were in Las Palmas," he said.

Ada Ratcliffe looked at him with a smile, and a slight lifting of her brows. She was perfectly composed, and in one way he was glad of that, though he vaguely felt that her attitude was not quite what he had expected.

"Astonished only?" she said. "As you would have had to change steamers here and wait a few days it would probably have taken you two weeks more to join us in England. At least, so the Major said."

Ormsgill felt he had deserved this, for he had recognized the inanity of the observation when he made it. It was evident that his companion had recognized it, too. Still, it is difficult to express oneself feelingly to order.

"I should have said delighted," he ventured.

The girl smiled again, and he felt that he had chosen an injudicious word. "In any case, it isn't in the least astonishing that we are here. It is becoming a recognized thing to come out to Las Palmas in the winter, and I believe it is a good deal cheaper than Egypt or Algeria. That is, of course, a consideration."

"It certainly is," broke in the lady at her side. "When they are always finding a new way to tax us in, and incomes persist in going down. Tom is fortunate. It will scarcely be necessary for him to trouble himself very much about such considerations."

Ormsgill for the first time noticed the signs of care in Mrs. Ratcliffe's face, and the wrinkles about her eyes. Neither had, he fancied, been there when he had last seen her in England nearly five years earlier, but the change in her was as nothing compared to that in her daughter. Ada Ratcliffe was no longer a fresh and somewhat simple-minded English girl. She was a self-possessed and dignified woman of the world, but what else she might be he could not at the moment tell. He blamed himself for the desire to ascertain it, since he felt it was more fitting that he should accept her without question as the embodiment of all that was adorable. Still, he could not do it. The four years he had spent apart from her had given him too keen an insight.

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"Well," he said, "there are people who believe that the possession of even a very small fortune is something of a responsibility."

"That," said Mrs. Ratcliffe, "is a mistake nowadays. There are so many excellent organized charities ready to undertake one's duties for one. They are in a position to discharge them so much more efficiently."

Ormsgill did not reply to this, though there was a faint sardonic twinkle in his eyes. He was not, as a rule, addicted to passing on a responsibility, but he remembered then that he had handed a little Belgian priest £200 to carry out a duty that had been laid on him. The fact that he had done so vaguely troubled him. Mrs. Ratcliffe, however, went on again.

"One of the disadvantages of living here is the number of invalids one is thrown into contact with," she said. "I find it depressing. You will notice the woman in the singularly unbecoming black dress yonder. She insists on drinking thick cocoa with a spoon at dinner."

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One could have fancied that she felt this breach of custom to be an enormity, and Ormsgill wondered afterwards what malignant impulse suddenly possessed him. Still, the worthy lady's coldly even voice and formal manner jarred upon him, while the pleasure of meeting the girl he had thought of for four long years was much less than he felt it should have been. He resented the fact, and most men's tempers grow a trifle sharp in tropical Africa.

"Well," he said dryly, "one understands that it is nourishing, and, after all, we are to some extent cannibals."

"Cannibals?" said Mrs. Ratcliffe with a swift suspicious glance which seemed to suggest that she was wondering whether the African climate had been too much for him.

"Yes," said Ormsgill, "cocoa, or, at least, that grown in parts of Africa where the choicest comes from, could almost be considered human flesh and blood. Any way, both are expended lavishly to produce it. I fancy you will bear me out in this, Señor?"

He looked at the little, olive-faced gentleman in plain white duck who sat not far away across the table. He had grave dark eyes with a little glint in them, and slim yellow hands with brown tips to some of the fingers, and was just then twisting a cigarette between them. Ormsgill surmised that it cost him an effort to refrain from lighting it, since men usually smoke between the courses of a dinner in his country. There was a certain likeness between him and the Commandant of San Roque, sufficient at least, to indicate that they were of the same nationality, but the man at the table in the *Catalina* had been cast in a finer mold, and there was upon him the unmistakable stamp of authority. [Pg 37]

"One is assured that what is done is necessary," he said in slow deliberate English. "I am, however, not a commercialist."

"You, of course, believe those assurances?"

The little white-clad gentleman smiled in a somewhat curious fashion. "A wise man believes what is told him—while it is expedient. Some day, perhaps, the time comes when it is no longer so."

"And then?"

A faint, suggestive glint replaced the smile in the keen dark eyes. "Then he acts on what he thinks himself. Though I can not remember when, it seems to me, senhor, that I have had the pleasure of meeting you before."

"You have," said Ormsgill dryly. "It was one very hot morning in the rainy season, and you were sitting at breakfast outside a tent beneath a great rock. Two files of infantry accompanied me."

"I recollect perfectly. Still, as it happens, I had just finished breakfast, which was, I think, in some respects fortunate. One is rather apt to proceed summarily before it—in the rainy season."

Ormsgill laughed, and the girl who sat beside the man he had spoken to flashed a swift glance at him. She was dressed in some thin, soft fabric, of a pale gold tint, and the firm, round modeling of the figure it clung about proclaimed her a native of the Iberian peninsula, the Peninsula, as those who are born there love to call it. Still, there was no tinge of olive in her face, which, like her arms and shoulders, was of the whiteness of ivory. Her eyes, which had a faint scintillation in them, were of a violet black, and her hair of the tint of ebony, though it was lustrous, too. She, however, said nothing, and Major Chillingham, who seemed to feel himself neglected, broke in. [Pg 38]

"I'm afraid you were at your old tricks again, Tom," he said. "What had you been up to then?"

"Interfering with two or three black soldiers, who resented it. They were trying to burn up a native hut with a couple of wounded niggers inside it. I believe there was a woman inside it, too."

Chillingham shook his head reproachfully. "One can't help these things now and then, and I don't know where you got your notions from," he said. "It certainly wasn't from your father. He was a credit to the service, and a sensible man. You can only expect trouble when you kick against authority."

Ormsgill looked at Ada Ratcliffe, but there was only a faint suggestion of impatience in her face. Then, without exactly knowing why, he glanced across the table, and caught the little gleam of sardonic amusement in the other girl's violet eyes. She, at least, it seemed, had comprehension, and that vaguely displeased him, since he had expected it from the woman he had come back to marry, instead of a stranger. Then the man with the olive face looked up again. [Pg 39]

"You have it in contemplation to go back to Africa?"

"No," said Ormsgill, who felt that Mrs. Ratcliffe was listening. "At least, I scarcely think it will be necessary."

"Ah," said the other, with a little dry smile, "It is, one might, perhaps, suggest, not advisable. There are several men who do not bear you any great good will in that country."

Ormsgill laughed. "One," he said, "is forced to do a good many things which do not seem advisable yonder, and I have one or two very excellent friends."

Then he turned to Ada Ratcliffe, and discoursed with her and her mother on subjects he found it difficult to take much interest in, which was a fresh surprise to him, for he had considered them subjects of importance before he left England. The effort he made to display a becoming attention was not apparent, but it was a slight relief to two of the party when the dinner was over. Another hour had, however, passed before he had the girl to himself, and they sauntered down through the dusty garden and along the dim white road until they reached a little mole that ran out into the harbor. The moon had just dipped behind the black peaks, and they sat down in the soft darkness on a ledge of stone, and listened for a while to the rumble of the long Atlantic swell that edged to the strip of shadowy coast with a fringe of spouting foam. Both felt there was a good deal to be said, but the commencement was difficult, and it was significant that the man gazed westwards—towards Africa—across the dusky heaven, until he looked round when his [Pg 40]

companion spoke to him.

"Tom," she said quietly, "you have not come back the same as when you went away."

"I believe I haven't," and Ormsgill's voice was gentle. "My dear, you must bear with me awhile. You see, there are so many things I have lost touch with, and it will take me a little time to pick it up again. Still, if you will wait and humor me, I will try."

He turned, and glanced towards a great block of hotel buildings that cut harsh and square against the soft blueness of the night not far away. The long rows of open windows blazed, and the music that came out from them reached the two who sat listening through the deep-toned rumble of the surf. It was evident that an entertainment of some kind was going on, but Ormsgill found the signs of it vaguely disquieting.

"One feels that building shouldn't be there," he said. "They should have placed it in the city. It's too new and aggressive where it is, and the ways of the folks who stay in it are almost as out of place."

He stopped a moment with a little laugh. "I expect I'm talking nonsense, and it's really not so very long since that kind of thing used to appeal to me. After all, there must be a certain amount of satisfaction to be got out of purposeless flirtation, cards, dining, and dancing."

It was not very dark, and, when he looked round, the shapely form of his companion was silhouetted blackly against the sky on the step above him. There was something vaguely suggestive of an impatience that was, perhaps, excusable in her attitude.

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"Oh," she said, "there is not a great deal. I admit that, but one must live as the others do, and have these things to pass the time. You know there is nothing to be gained by making oneself singular."

Ormsgill smiled, though once more the smell of the wilderness, the odors of lilies and spices, and the sourness of corruption, was in his nostrils. Men grappled for dear life with stern and occasionally appalling realities there, and he was one in whom the love of conflict had been born.

"No," he said, "I suppose there isn't. At least, it usually involves one in trouble, and, as you say, one must have something to pass the time away. Still, Ada, for a while you will try to put up with my little impatiences and idiosyncrasies. No doubt I shall fit myself to my surroundings by and by."

Ada Ratcliffe had a face that was almost beautiful, and a slim, delicately modeled form in keeping with it, but perhaps they had been given her as makeweights and a counterbalance for the lack of more important things. At times, when her own interests were concerned, she could show herself almost clever but she fell short of average intelligence just then, when a sympathetic word or a sign of comprehension would have bound the man to her.

Leaning a little towards him she laid her hand on the sleeve of his duck jacket. "I would like you to do it soon," she said. "Tom, to please me, you won't come in to dinner dressed this way again."

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There was a suggestion of harshness in Ormsgill's laugh, but he checked himself. "Of course not, if you don't wish it. If there is a tailor in Las Palmas I will try to set that right to-morrow. Now we will talk of something else. You want to live in England?"

It appeared that Ada did, and she was disposed to talk at length upon that topic. She also drew closer to him, and while the man's arm rested on her shoulder discussed the house he was to buy in the country, and how far his means, which were, after all, not very large, would permit the renting of another in town each season. He listened gravely, and saw that there were no aspirations in the scheme. Their lives were evidently to be spent in a round of conventional frivolities, and all the time he heard the boom of the restless sea, and the smell of the wilderness, pungent and heady, grew stronger in his nostrils. Then he closed a hand tighter on the shoulder of the girl, in a fashion that suggested he felt the need of something to hold fast by, as perhaps he did.

"There is one point we have to keep in view, for the thing may be remembered against me still," he said. "I was turned out of the service of a British Colony."

"Ah," said the girl, "I felt it cruelly at the time, but, after all, it happened more than four years ago—and not very many people heard of it."

Ormsgill sat still a minute, and his grasp grew a trifle slacker on her arm. "I told you I didn't do the thing they accused me of," he said.

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"Of course! Still, everybody believed you did, and that was almost as hard to bear. The great thing is that it was quite a long while ago. Tom," and she turned to him quickly, "I believe you are smiling."

"I almost think I was," said Ormsgill. "Still, I don't know why I should do so. Well, I understand we are to stay here a month or two, and we will have everything arranged before we go back to England."

It was half an hour later when his companion rose. "The time is slipping by," she said. "There is to be some singing, and one or two of the people we have met lately are coming round to-night. I must go in and talk to them. These things are in a way one's duty. One has to do one's part."

Ormsgill made no protest. He rose and walked quietly back with her to the hotel, but his face was a trifle grave, and he was troubled by vague misgivings.

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CHAPTER IV THE SUMMONS

The month Ormsgill spent at Las Palmas was a time of some anxiety to Mrs. Ratcliffe. He had, as she complained to her brother, no sense of the responsibility that devolved upon a man of his means, and was addicted to making friends with all kinds of impossible people, grimy English coaling clerks, and the skippers of Spanish schooners, and, what was more objectionable, now and then bringing them to the hotel. He expressed his regret when she pointed out the undesirability of such proceedings, but, for all that, made no very perceptible change in his conduct.

Major Chillingham as a rule listened gravely, and said very little, for his sister was one who seldom welcomed advice from anybody, and though not a brilliant man he was by no means a fool. On the last occasion he, however, showed a little impatience.

"Well," he said, "he seems to have got hold of a few first-class people, too. There is that Ayutante fellow on the Governor's staff, and the Senhor Figuera, the little, quiet man with the yellow hands, is evidently a person of some consequence in his own country. You can't mistake the stamp of authority. After all, it's no doubt just as well he and the girl have gone. Tom seemed on excellent terms with them."

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Mrs. Ratcliffe looked indignant. "A Portuguese with a powdered face, and no notion of what is fitting!"

"An uncommonly good-looking one," and the Major grinned. "A woman with brains enough to get the thing she sets her mind on, too, and I have rather a fancy that she was pleased with Tom. Still, that's not the question, and anyway she's back again in Africa. Now, if you'll take advice from me you'll keep a light hand on him, and not touch the curb. If you do he's quite capable of making a bolt of it."

"That," said the lady, "would be so disgraceful as to be inconceivable—when Ada has waited more than four years for him."

Her brother's eyes twinkled. "In one way, I suppose she did. Still, of course, Urmston didn't get the Colonial appointment he expected, and, one has to be candid, young Hatherly seemed proof against the blandishments you wasted on him."

"A marriageable daughter is a heavy responsibility," said Mrs. Ratcliffe with a sigh.

"No doubt," said the Major. "That is precisely why I recommended the judicious handling of Tom Ormsgill. If he hasn't quite as much as you would like, it's enough to keep them comfortably, and in several ways he's worth the other two put together. The man's straight, and quiet. In fact, I'm not sure I wouldn't prefer him with a few more gentlemanly dissipations. They act as a safety valve occasionally."

His sister raised her hands in protest, and Chillingham withdrew with a chuckle, but she was rather more gracious to Ormsgill than usual that day, and during the next one accompanied him with her daughter and one or two acquaintances in a launch he had borrowed to look at the wreck of a steamer which had gone ashore a night or two earlier. The unfortunate vessel afforded a somewhat impressive spectacle as she lay grinding on the reef with the long yeasty seas washing over her, and the little party spent some time watching her from the launch which swung with the steep, green swell.

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It was, however, very hot and dazzling bright, and no protests were made when Ormsgill, who it seemed knew all about steam launches, leaned forward from the helm and started the engines. The little propeller thudded, and they slid away with a long, smooth lurch across the slopes of glittering water that were here and there flecked with foam, for the beach they skirted lies open to the heave of the Atlantic. The Trade breeze fanned their faces pleasantly, and Ada Ratcliffe sat almost contented for the time being at Ormsgill's side. It was refreshing that hot day, to listen to the swish of sliding brine, and there was a certain exhilaration in the swift smooth motion, while she realized that the man she was to marry appeared to greater advantage than he did as a rule in the drawing room of the big hotel.

He was never awkward, or ill at ease, but she had noticed—and resented—the air of aloofness he sometimes wore when he listened to her companions' pointless badinage and vapid conversation. Now as he sat with a lean brown hand on the tiller controlling the little hissing craft he seemed curiously at home. There was also, as generally happened when he was occupied, a suggestion of reserved force in his face and attitude. He was, she realized, a man one could have confidence in when there were difficult things to be done. This however, brought her presently a vague

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dissatisfaction, for she felt there were certain aspects of his character which had never been revealed to her, and she was faintly conscious of the antagonism to and shrinking from what one cannot quite understand which is not infrequently a characteristic of people with imperfectly developed minds.

The fresh Trade breeze which blew down out of the harbor from the black Isleta hill was, however, evidently much less pleasant to the Spanish peons who toiled at the ponderous sweeps of an empty coal lighter the launch was rapidly drawing level with. She was floating high above the flaming swell, and the perspiration dripped from the men's grimy faces as they labored, two of them at each of the huge oars. Indeed Ormsgill could see the swollen veins stand out on their wet foreheads, and the overtaxed muscles swell on their half-covered chests and naked arms, for the barge was of some forty tons, and it was very heavy work pulling her against the wind. She had evidently been to a Spanish steamer lying well out beyond the mole, and there was, as he noticed, no tug available to tow her back again, while the sea foamed whitely on a reef close astern of her. It was only by a strenuous effort that the men were propelling the big clumsy craft clear of the reef, and there were signs that they could not keep it up much longer.

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He glanced at the little group of daintily attired, soft-handed men and women on board the launch, to whom the stress of physical labor was an unknown thing, and then looked back towards the coal-grimed toilers on the lighter. As yet they worked on stubbornly, with tense furrowed faces, under a scorching sun, taxing to the uttermost every muscle in their bodies, but it seemed to him that the lighter was no further from the reef. He flung an arm up, and hailed them, for he had acquired a working acquaintance with several Latin languages on the fever coast.

"You can't clear that point," he said. "Have you no anchor?"

"No, señor," cried one of the peons breathlessly. "The tug should have come for us, but she is taking the water boat to the English steamer."

Ormsgill turned to his companions. "You won't mind if I pull them in? They're almost worn out, and it will not detain us more than ten minutes."

One of the men made a little gesture of concurrence which had a hint of good-humored toleration in it, but Mrs. Ratcliffe appeared displeased, and Ada flushed a trifle. One could have fancied she did not wish the man who belonged to her to display his little idiosyncrasies before her friends.

"One understands that all Spaniards avoid exertion when they can," she said. "Perhaps a little hard work wouldn't hurt them very much."

There was a slight change in Ormsgill's expression. "I fancy the men can do no more."

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Then he waved his hand to the peons. "Get your hawser ready."

He was alongside the lighter in another minute, but she rolled wildly above the launch, big and empty, and the sea broke whitely about her, for now the men had ceased rowing she was drifting towards the reef. The hawser was also dripping and smeared with coal dust when Ormsgill, who seemed to understand such matters, hauled it in, and while the sea splashed on board the launch, streams of gritty brine ran from it over everything. Then he stirred the little furnace with an iron bar before he pulled over the starting lever, and a rush of sparks and thin hot smoke poured down upon his companions as the little craft went full speed ahead. Ada, perhaps half-consciously, drew herself a little farther away from him. There was coal grit on his wet duck jacket, and he had handled hawser and furnace rubble like one accustomed to them, in fact as a fireman or a sailor would have done. That was a thing which did not please her, and she wondered if the others had noticed it. It became evident that one of them had.

"You did that rather smartly," he said.

Ormsgill's smile was a trifle dry. "I have," he said, "done much the same thing before professionally."

There was a struggle for the next few minutes. Launch and lighter had drifted into shoal water while they made the hawser fast, and the swell had piled itself up and was breaking whitely. The little launch plunged through it with flame at her funnel and a spray-cloud blowing from her bows, and as she hauled the big lighter out yard by yard a little glint crept into Ormsgill's eyes. Ada Ratcliffe almost resented it, for he had never looked like that at any of the social functions she had insisted on his taking a part in, but her forbearance was further taxed when they crept slowly beneath the side of a big white steam yacht. A little cluster of men and daintily dressed women sat beneath the awning on her deck, and one or two of them were people her mother had taken pains to cultivate an acquaintance with.

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One man leaned upon her rail and looked down with a little smile. "Have you been going into the coal business, Fernside?" he said. "Considering the figure they charged Desmond it ought to be a profitable one."

The man in the launch he addressed laughed, and Ormsgill towed the lighter on until at last he cast the tow rope off, and a very grimy peon stood upon her deck. He took off his big, shapeless hat, and as he swung, cut in black against the dazzling sea, there was in his poise a lithe gracefulness and a certain elaborate courtesy.

"Señor," he said, "our thanks are yours, and everything else that belongs to us. May the saints watch over you, and send you a friend if ever your task is too heavy and the breakers are close beneath your lee."

Ormsgill took off his hat gravely, as equal to equal, but he smiled a little as the launch swept on. [Pg 51]

"Well," he said, "after all, I may need one some day."

They were back in the hotel in another half-hour, and Mrs. Ratcliffe took him to task as they sat on the shady veranda. Ormsgill lay back in his big Madeira chair, with half-closed eyes, and listened dutifully. He felt he could afford it, for the few minutes of tense uncertainty when he had hauled the lighter out of the grasp of the breakers had been curiously pleasant to him.

"There was, of course, no harm in the thing itself," she said at last.

"No," said Ormsgill with an air of deep reflection, "I almost think that to save a fellow creature who is badly worn out an effort he is scarcely fit to make isn't really very wrong. Still, the men were certainly very dirty—I suppose that is the point?"

The lady, who looked very stiff and formal in the black she persisted in wearing, favored him with a searching glance, but there was only grave inquiry in his steady eyes.

"The point is that things which may be commendable in themselves are not always—appropriate," she said.

"Expedient—isn't it?" suggested Ormsgill languidly.

"Expedient," said Mrs. Ratcliffe with a little flush in her face. "In this world one has to be guided by circumstances, and must endeavor to fit oneself to that station in life to which one has been—appointed."

"I suppose so," said Ormsgill. "The trouble is that I really don't know what particular station I have been appointed to. I was thrown out of the Colonial service, you see, and afterwards drove a steam launch for a very dissolute mahogany trader. Then I floated the same kind of trees down another river with the niggers, and followed a few other somewhat unusual occupations. In fact, I've been in so many stations that it's almost bewildering." [Pg 52]

His companion got away from the point. She did not like having the fact that he had been, as he expressed it, thrown out of the Colonial service forced upon her recollection.

"One has, at least, to consider one's friends," she said. "We are on rather good terms with two or three of the people who came out with Mr. Desmond, whom I have not met yet, in the *Palestrina*. In fact, Ada is a little anxious that you should make their acquaintance. You will probably come across them in England."

"Well," said Ormsgill cheerfully, "I really don't think Dick Desmond would mind if I took up coal heaving as an amusement. He isn't a particularly conventional man himself."

"You know him?"

"Oh, yes. I know him tolerably well."

"Then didn't you consider it your duty to go off and call upon him?"

"I suppose it was," said Ormsgill meditatively. "Still, as a rule, I rather like my friends to call on me. I've no doubt that Dick will do it presently. He only arrived here yesterday, as you know. The people he brought out came on from Teneriffe, I think. Somebody told me the *Palestrina* lay a week there with something wrong with her engines." [Pg 53]

Mrs. Ratcliffe smiled approvingly at last. "Yes," she said, "in one way the course you mention is usually preferable. It places one on a surer footing."

Then she discussed other subjects, and supplied him with a good deal of excellent advice to which he listened patiently, though he was sensible of a certain weariness and there was a little dry smile in his eyes when she went away. As it happened, Desmond, who owned the *Palestrina*, came ashore that evening and was received by Mrs. Ratcliffe very graciously. The two men had also a good deal to say to each other, and the meeting was not without its results to both of them.

It was late the following afternoon when a little yellow-funneled mail-boat with poop and fore-castle painted white steamed into the harbor with awnings spread, and an hour or two later a waiter handed Ormsgill a letter. His face grew intent as he read it, and the curious little glint that Ada Ratcliffe had noticed when he towed the coal lighter clear of the surf crept back into his eyes. It was also significant that, although she and her mother were sitting near him on the veranda, he appeared oblivious of them when he rose and stepped back through an open window into the hotel. Five minutes later they saw him stride through the garden and down the long white road.

"I think he is going to the little mole," said Ada. "I don't know why he does so, but when anything seems to ruffle him he generally goes there." [Pg 54]

Then she flashed a quick questioning glance at her mother. "That letter was from Africa. I saw the stamp on it."

Mrs. Ratcliffe shook her head. "I don't think there is any reason why you should disturb yourself," she said. "After all, one has to excuse a good deal in the case of men who live in the tropics, and though the ways Tom has evidently acquired there now and then jar on me I venture to believe he will grow out of them and become a credit to you with judicious management. It would, perhaps, be wiser not to mention that letter, my dear."

Ada said nothing, though she was a trifle uneasy. She had seen the sudden intentness of Ormsgill's face, and was far from sure that he would submit to management of any kind. Nobody acquainted with her considered her a clever woman, but, after all, her intelligence was keener than her mother's.

In the meanwhile Ormsgill sat down on the steps of the little mole. It was pleasantly cool there, and he had already found the rush and rumble of frothing brine tranquilizing, though he was scarcely conscious of it as he took out the letter and read it again. It was from the missionary Nares.

"Father Tiebout has just come in very shaky with fever," he read. "It appears that Herrero, who will not let her go, has gone back towards the interior with the woman Lamartine gave him, and has been systematically ill-using her. There is another matter to mention. Soon after you went Domingo seized the opportunity of raiding Lamartine's station, and took all the boys away while we were arranging to send them home as you asked us to do. It will, in view of the feeling against us, be difficult or impossible to bring the thing home to him, but I understand from Father Tiebout that you engaged the boys for Lamartine and pledged your word to send them home when the time agreed upon expired. Father Tiebout merely asked me to tell you. He said that if you recognized any responsibility in the matter you would not shrink from it."

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Ormsgill crumpled up the letter and sat very still, gazing into the dimness that was creeping up from Africa across the sea. The message was terse, and though the writing was that of Nares he saw the wisdom of Father Tiebout in it. Nares when he was moved spoke at length and plainly, but the little priest had a way of making other folks do what he wanted, as it were, of their own accord, and without his prompting them.

It grew rapidly darker, but Ormsgill did not notice it. The deep rumble of the surf was in his ears, and the restlessness of the sea crept in on him. He had heard that thunderous booming on sweltering African beaches, and had watched the filmy spray-cloud float far inland athwart the dingy mangroves, and a curious gravity crept into his eyes as he gazed at the Eastern haze beyond which lay the shadowy land. Life was intense and primitive there, and his sojourn in the big hotel had left him with a growing weariness. Then there was the debt he owed Lamartine, and the promise he had made, and he wondered vaguely what Ada Ratcliffe would say when he told her he was going back again. She would protest, but, for all that, he fancied she would not feel his absence very much, though there were times when her manner to him had been characterized by a certain tenderness. As he thought of it he sighed.

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By and by a boat from the white steam yacht slid up to the foot of the steps, and a man who ascended them started when he came upon Ormsgill. He was tall and long-limbed, and his voice rang pleasantly.

"What in the name of wonder are you doing here alone?" he asked.

"I think I'm worrying, Dick," said Ormsgill. "The fact is, I'm going back yonder."

Desmond looked hard at him—but it was already almost dark. "Well," he said, "we're rather old friends. Would it be too much if I asked you why?"

"Sit down," said Ormsgill. "I'll try to tell you."

He did so concisely and quietly, and Desmond made a little sign of comprehension. "Well," he said, "if you feel yourself under an obligation to that Frenchman I'm not sure it isn't just as binding now he's dead."

"I was on my beam-ends, without a dollar in my pocket, when he held out his hand to me. Of course, neither of us know much about these questions, and, as a matter of fact, it's scarcely likely that Lamartine did, but he seemed to believe what the padre told him, and there's no doubt it was a load off his mind when he understood I'd have the woman set at liberty."

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Desmond sat silent for a minute. Then he said, "There are two points that occur to me. Since you are willing to supply the money, can't the priest and the missionary arrange the thing?"

"Nares says they can't. After all, they're there on sufferance, and every official keeps a jealous eye on them. You couldn't expect them to throw away all they've done for several years, and that's very much what it would amount to if they were run out of the Colony."

"Then suppose you bought the woman back, and got those boys set free? From what I've heard about the country somebody else would probably lay hands on them again. Since the Frenchman has broken them in they'd be desirable property."

"That's one of the things I'm worrying over," said Ormsgill reflectively. "I had thought of running them up the coast and turning them loose in British Nigeria. They'd be reasonably well treated, and get wages at the factories there. Still, I'd have some trouble in getting them out of the country, especially as I'm not greatly tempted to buy the boys. If I was it's quite likely that

Domingo, who is not a friend of mine, wouldn't let me have them. You see, I'd have to get papers at the port, though there are plenty of lonely beaches where one could get a surf-boat off. I had a notion of trying to pick up a schooner at Sierra Leone or Lagos."

Again Desmond said nothing for a few moments. Then he laughed. "Well," he said, "there's the *Palestrina*, and when we shake her up she can do her fourteen knots. You can have her for a shooting expedition at a pound a month. Now don't raise any—nonsensical objections. I'm about sick of loafing. The thing would be a relief to me."

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"There's your father," said Ormsgill suggestively.

"Just so! There's also the whole estimable family, who have made up their minds I'm to go into Parliament whether I'm willing or not. Well, it seems to me that if I'm to have a hand in governing my country it will be an education to see how they mismanage things in other ones."

Then the scion of a political family who could talk like a fireman, and frequently did so, laughed again. "If I get into trouble over it it will be a big advertisement. Besides, it's two years since I had a frolic of any kind. Been nursing the constituency, taking a benevolent interest in everything from women's rights to village cricket clubs, and I'm coming with you to rake up brimstone now. After all, though I've had no opportunity of displaying my abilities in that direction lately, it's one of the few things I really excel in."

Ormsgill was far from sure that this was what he desired, but he knew his man, and that, for all his apparent inconsequence, he was one who when the pinch came could be relied upon. Then Desmond's effervescence usually vanished, and gave place to a cold determined quietness that had carried him through a good many difficulties. This was fortunate, since he was addicted to involving himself in them rather frequently.

"Well," said Ormsgill, "I'll be glad to have you, but it's rather a big thing. I think they're expecting you at the hotel. We'll talk of it again."

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He rose, and as they went back together Desmond said reflectively. "I suppose you understand that it's scarcely likely your prospective mother-in-law will be pleased with you?"

"I wasn't aware that you knew her until you came across her here," said Ormsgill.

"I didn't. My cousins do. Perhaps you won't mind my saying that they seem a little sorry for you. From what they have said about Mrs. Ratcliffe it seems to me that you may have trouble in convincing her of the disinterestedness of your intentions."

Ormsgill felt that this was very probable, though he said nothing.

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CHAPTER V

A DETERMINED MAN

It was the following afternoon when Ormsgill stood on the wide veranda outside Mrs. Ratcliffe's room. That lady sat somewhat stiffly facing him in a big basket chair, while her daughter lay close by in one of canvas with her eyes also fixed upon the man languidly. She was dressed in white, and looked very cool and dainty, though her face was almost expressionless. In fact, her attitude was characterized by a certain well-bred serenity which is seldom without its effect when it is an essential part of the person who exhibits it, though a passable imitation of it may be cultivated.

Then one sometimes wonders what may lie behind it, though an attempt to ascertain is not always advisable. In some cases there is nothing, and in others things which it is wiser to leave unseen.

Ormsgill had, as it happened, been busy that morning with an English lawyer whom he had met at the hotel, and had taken him over to the office of the Vice-Consul, who signed a document the lawyer drew out. He had also made other preparations for a journey, but he had sent the priest no word that he was going back to Africa. This, he felt, was not necessary, since Father Tiebout would expect him. He leaned bareheaded against the rails, with the furrows showing plainly on his bronzed face, while the Trade breeze, which was fresh that afternoon, swept the cool veranda and piled the long Atlantic swell rumbling on the beach. He could see the spray fly high and white, and the dust whirl down the glaring road that led to the Spanish city, and once more he felt his blood stir in harmony with the throb of restless life in the frothing sea. Still, the task before him was difficult, and he set about it diffidently.

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It was, as he realized, a very lame story and one open to serious misconception that fell from his lips. He could, of course, say nothing in favor of Lamartine's mode of life, though it was by no means an unusual one, and he had to mention it. The subject was a somewhat delicate one in itself, but it was not that alone which brought a faint flush to his face. Mrs. Ratcliffe's pose grew perceptibly primmer as he proceeded, and he recognized that any confidence she might have had

in him was being severely shaken. Still, he had not expected her to understand, and he glanced at her daughter with a certain anxiety. The girl's languid indifference was less marked now, for there was a spot of color in her cheek, and her lips were set disdainfully. Ormsgill closed one lean hand a trifle, for these things had their significance, and he had expected that she, at least, would have found his assurance sufficient.

"I think you will agree with me that I must go," he said.

Mrs. Ratcliffe's tone was sharp and she looked at him steadily.

"I'm afraid I don't," she said. "The man was on your own showing an altogether depraved person."

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"No," said Ormsgill dryly. "I should be sorry to admit as much. But if he had been, would that have rendered a promise to him less binding?"

"Yes," said the elder lady sturdily. "If he really felt any remorse at all—of which I am very dubious—he brought it upon himself. One cannot do wrong without bearing the consequences. Still, I do not suppose it was penitence. It was more probably pagan fear of death. The man, you admit, was under priestly influence. Of course, if he had been brought up differently—"

Ormsgill could not help a little smile. "He would have considered repentance sufficient, and left the woman to bear the consequences? Somehow I have a hazy notion that restitution is insisted on. But if we dismiss that subject there are still the boys. You see, I pledged myself to send them home again."

Ada Ratcliffe looked up, and her expression was quietly disdainful. "Half-naked, thick-lipped niggers. Would it hurt them very much to work a little and become a trifle civilized? One understands that there is no actual slavery in any part of Africa under European control."

Ormsgill winced, and it was, perhaps, only natural that Mrs. Ratcliffe should not understand why he did so. Then his face grew a trifle hard, but he answered quietly.

"I have no doubt there are folks who would tell you so, but there is, at least, something very like it in one or two colonies," he said. "Still, that is not quite the point."

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The girl laughed. "I am a little afraid there is no point at all."

She rose languidly, and the way she did so suggested collusion, though Ormsgill had not noticed that her mother made her any sign. She swept past him with a swish of filmy fabric, and he turned to the elder lady, who made a little gesture of resignation.

"It seems," she said, "you are determined to go, and in that case there is something to be said. As you are bent on exposing yourself to the hazards of a climate I have heard described as deadly, one has to consider—eventualities."

"Exactly!" and Ormsgill found it difficult to repress a sardonic smile. "I have endeavored to provide against them in the one way possible to me. An hour ago I handed Major Chillingham a document which will place Ada in possession of a considerable proportion of my property in six months from my death. The absence of any word from me for that period is to be considered as proof of it. I have no relatives with any claim on me, and I think I am only carrying out an obligation."

"You are very generous," and his companion's tone was expressive of sincere satisfaction. "Though it is, of course, painful, one is reluctantly compelled to take these things into consideration."

She said rather more to the same effect, and the man's face, which was a trifle hard when she went away, suggested that some, at least, of her observations had jarred on him. He was also somewhat astonished to find Ada waiting for him when he strolled moodily into the big drawing-room.

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"Tom," she said, "you won't go back there, after all. I don't want you to."

There was a tinge of color in her cheeks and a tense appeal in her eyes, and for a moment Ormsgill was almost tempted to forget his promise and break his word. It seemed that she did care, though he had scarcely fancied that she would feel the parting with him very much a little while ago, and something suggested that she was apprehensive, too. He stood very still, and she saw him slowly close one of his hands.

"My dear," he said, "I have to go."

The girl looked at him steadily a moment, and then made a little hopeless gesture of resignation.

"In that case I should gain nothing by attempting to urge you," she said with a curious quietness. "Still, Tom, you will write to me when you can."

Ormsgill was stirred, as well as a trifle astonished. She had seldom shown him very much tenderness, and he had said nothing that might lead her to believe that he was undertaking a somewhat dangerous thing or that the country was especially unhealthy. Still, he could not help feeling that she was afraid of something. Then, as it happened, they heard her mother speaking to somebody in the corridor, and making him a little sign she slipped out softly. Ormsgill sat

where he was, wondering why she had done so, until a rustle of dresses suggested that she and the people she had apparently spoken to had moved away. Then he went out, and met Desmond in front of the hotel.

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"Been having it out with Mrs. Ratcliffe?" he said. "I saw you on the veranda. Found it rather difficult? I couldn't stand that old woman."

"It was not exactly pleasant," said Ormsgill, dryly.

Desmond grinned. "Told her what you were going back for—and she didn't believe a word of it? As a matter of fact, you could hardly expect her to. Still, you needn't be unduly anxious. It wouldn't matter very much what you did out there. She might be horrified when she heard of it, but she wouldn't let you go."

The blood rose to Ormsgill's face. He fancied his companion was right in this, but it suggested another thought, and it appeared impossible that the girl's views should coincide with her mother's. It was painful to feel that she might have placed an unfavorable construction upon his narrative, but that she should believe him a libertine and still be willing to marry him because he was rich was a thing he shrank with horror from admitting. He was aware that women now and then made such marriages, but although he did not as a rule expect too much of human nature, he looked for a good deal from the woman he meant to make his wife. He could not quite disguise the fact that there were aspects of her character which did not altogether please him.

"Well," he said grimly, "we will talk about something else. You are still determined on going with me?"

"Of course," said Desmond.

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Ormsgill took him into his room, and by and by unrolled a chart upon the table.

"There's shelter off this beach in about six fathoms under the point," he said. "She will roll rather wildly, but the holding's excellent, and a surf-boat could get off most days in the week. As some of the mail-boat skippers will probably see you and mention it, you will call and report yourself to the Commandant and the customs on your way down the coast. Bring one or two of them off to dinner and inquire about the sport to be had. As a matter of fact, there is something to shoot a few days' march back from the beach, and there is no reason why you shouldn't go after it."

"You haven't said very much about yourself," observed his companion.

"I'm going direct by mail-boat. There is to be no apparent connection between us. If you are at the beach by the date I mentioned and wait there fourteen days, it will be sufficient. If I don't join you by that time something will have gone radically wrong."

"Then," said Desmond cheerfully, "I'll fit the whole crowd out down to the firemen with elephant guns and rifles, and go ashore to fetch you, if we have to sack every bush fort in the country."

Ormsgill only laughed, and going out together they swung themselves on a passing steam tram and were whirled away to the steamship offices in the Spanish city through a blinding cloud of dust.

Two days later Ormsgill boarded a yellow-funneled steamer, which crept out of harbor presently with the Portuguese flag at the fore, and faded into a streak of hull and a smoke trail low down on the dazzling sea. From the veranda of the hotel, Ada Ratcliffe watched it slowly melt, with her lips tight set and a curious look in her eyes, until when the blue expanse was once more empty she rose with a little sigh. There was, of course, nothing to be gained by sitting there disconsolate, and she had to array herself becomingly for an excursion to a village among the black volcanic hills. She also took a prominent part in it very gracefully, while a quiet brown-faced man leaned on a little wildly-rolling steamer's rail, looking southwest across the dazzling white-flecked combers towards the shadowy land.

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He reached it in due time, and one afternoon two or three days after he arrived at a little decadent city, sat talking to the olive-faced gentleman he had met at the Las Palmas hotel. The latter now wore a very tight white uniform, and a rather high and cumbrous kepi lay on the chair at his side. He was singularly spare in figure; his face, which was a trifle worn and hollow, was in no way suggestive of physical virility, and the brown-tipped fingers of the hand which rested on his knee very much resembled claws; but, as Major Chillingham had noticed, he wore the unmistakable stamp of high authority.

"Ah," he said in Portuguese, "you are not as most of your countrymen, and seem to understand that haste is not always advisable—especially in this land."

Ormsgill smiled a little as he gazed down on the straggling city. The room he and his companion sat in had no front to it. A row of slender pillars with crude whitewashed arches between them served instead, and he could look out on the curiously jumbled buildings below. Some were of wood and had red iron roofs and broad verandas, others of stone, or what appeared to be blocks of sun-baked mud, and these were mostly glaringly whitewashed and roofed with tiles, though a few were flat topped. Some stood in clusters, but as a rule there were wide spaces, strewn with ruins and rubbish, between them. Scarcely a sound rose from any of them. Here and there a white-clad figure reclined in a big chair on a veranda, and odd clusters of negroes, some loosely draped in raw colors, and some half-naked, slept in the shadow. Everything was so still that one

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could have fancied the place was peopled by the dead. Beyond the long strip of land across the harbor the glaring levels of the Atlantic stretched away, and the hot air quivered with the dull insistent roar and rumble of the surf.

"It is certainly as I suggested," said the little olive-faced gentleman. "You have been here three days, and I do not even know what you expect from me yet."

"It is very little. A concession of exploitation in the country inland."

"In which district?"

Ormsgill mentioned it, and his companion looked at him with a little smile. "The request can be granted, but I gave you good advice once before, and I venture to offer it again. This Africa is not a healthy country, and it is not, I think, advisable that you should stay here, especially up yonder in the bush. There are gentlemen of some importance there whom you have offended, and we are, it seems, not all forgiving. It is, perhaps, a fact to be deprecated, but one to be counted on."

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"One has occasionally to do a thing that doesn't seem advisable," said Ormsgill reflectively.

"In this case the reasons cannot be financial. I heard of your good fortune in Las Palmas."

Ormsgill was not pleased at this, but he laughed. "A little money is not always a fortune. Perhaps it would be permissible for me to express my pleasure that your administrative genius has been recognized?"

Dom Clemente made him a little grave inclination. "I hold authority, but the man who does so seldom sleeps on roses, especially in this country. Well, you still want the concession of exploitation, though the region you mention is not a productive one?"

"There are articles of commerce which come down that way from the interior."

Dom Clemente looked at him steadily. "Ah," he said, "if one could tell what went on there. Still, as you say, there are things we have need of that come down from the interior."

Ormsgill's face was expressionless, though he was not pleased to see a little smile creep into his companion's eyes, but just then another man of very dusky color came up the outside stairway with a big clanking sword strapped on to him, and Dom Clemente rose.

"I make my excuses, but the permit will be ready to-morrow," he said. "In the meanwhile my daughter, who is in the patio, would thank you for several courtesies at Las Palmas."

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Ormsgill turned away, and went down to the little pink-washed patio which was filled with straggling flowers and was, at least, comparatively cool. The girl who lay in a big chair did not rise, but signed to him to take another near her side, and then looked up at him with big violet eyes. It did not occur to Ormsgill that there was any significance in the fact that the only two chairs in the patio should be close together, but it struck him that Benicia Figuera was a very well-favored young woman, and very much in harmony with her surroundings. Colorless as her face was, there was a scintillation in her eyes, and a depth of hue in her somewhat full red lips, which with the sweeping lines of her lightly-draped, rounded form suggested that there was in her a full measure of the warm and vivid life of the tropics. Her voice was low and quiet, and her English passable.

"I believe my father has been giving you good advice," she said.

"Why should you think that?" asked Ormsgill, lightly.

His companion's gesture might have meant anything. "You feel the advice is excellent, but you do not mean to take it? It is not a thing you often do. In one way I am sorry."

Ormsgill laughed. "Might one ask why you should take so much interest in an obstinate stranger?"

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The girl moved her hands, which were white and very shapely, in a fashion which seemed to imply a protest. Ormsgill noticed that they had also the appearance of capable hands, and he fancied that their grasp could be tenacious.

"Ah," she said, "there were little courtesies shown us at Las Palmas, things that made our stay there pleasanter, and I think there was, perhaps, no great reason why you should have done them for my father." Then her eyes twinkled. "I am not sure that all your friends were very pleased with you."

Ormsgill did not smile this time. He recollected now that Ada Ratcliffe had been distinctly less gracious and her mother more formal than usual after one or two of the trifling courtesies he had shown Dom Clemente and the girl, but it had not occurred to him to put the two things together.

"I wonder," he said reflectively "how you come to speak such excellent English."

The girl laughed.

"My mother's name was O'Donnel, though she was rather more Portuguese than I am. She was born in the Peninsula. It seems I have gone back two or three generations. They assured me of it once in Wicklow. Still, all that does not interest you. You are going into the interior."

Ormsgill said he was, and the girl appeared thoughtful for a moment or two.

"Then one might again advise you to be careful. There are, at least, two men who do not wish you well. One of them is a certain Commandant, and the other the trader Herrero." [Pg 72]

"I wonder if you could tell me where the trader Herrero is?"

"If I can I will send you word to-morrow."

Ormsgill thanked her and took his leave ceremoniously, but he was a little annoyed to find that his thoughts would wander back to the cool patio as he strolled through the dazzling, sun-scorched town. He felt it would have been pleasant to stay there a little in the shadow, and that Benicia Figuera would not have resented it. There was something vaguely attractive about her, and she had Irish eyes in which he had seen a hint of the reckless inconsequent courage of that people. This, he reflected, did not concern him, and dismissing all further thought of her he went about his business. Still, when the concession was sent to him next morning the negro who brought it also handed him a little note. It had no signature, and merely contained the name of a certain village on the fringe of the hills that cut off the coast levels from the island plateaux.

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CHAPTER VI

DESMOND MAKES AN ADMISSION

Two months had slipped by since Ormsgill and his carefully chosen carriers had vanished into the steamy bush which climbs the slopes of the inland plateaux, when the *Palestrina* steamed in towards the straggling, sun-scorched town. She came on at half-speed, gleaming ivory white, in a blaze of brightness, with a man strapped outside her bridge swinging the heavy lead, until Desmond, who swept the shore line with his glasses, raised his hand. Then the propeller whirled hard astern and she stopped amidst a roar of running chain. Next the awnings were stretched across her aft, and after a beautiful white gig sank down her side, a trimly uniformed crew pulled Desmond ashore to interview the men in authority.

He found them courteous. Though that is not a coast which English yachts frequent, one had called there not very long before, and they had a pleasant recollection of the hospitality they had enjoyed on board her. Besides, it was very soon evident that this red-faced yachtsman was not one of the troublesome Englishmen who demand information about social and political matters which do not concern them. Desmond took the authorities off to dinner, and showed them his sporting rifles and one or two letters given him by gentlemen of their own nationality whom he had similarly entertained at Funchal Madeira. His young companion with the heavy sea-bronzed face was even more ingenuous, and there was no doubt that the wine and cigars were excellent.

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Strangers with any means were also singularly scarce in that town, and its rulers finding Desmond friendly made much of him, and supplied him freely with the information he required respecting the localities where one might still come across big game. He was, in fact, a social success, and contrived to spend a fortnight there very pleasantly. Still, there was one of his new friends who considered it advisable to take certain precautions, which came indirectly to the knowledge of the latter's daughter.

It also happened that Desmond's companion, Lister, who went ashore alone now and then, enjoyed himself in his own fashion. He was a young man whose tastes and idiosyncrasies had caused his friends at home some anxiety, and they had for certain reasons prevailed upon Desmond to take him to sea for a few months out of harm's way. Lister submitted unwillingly, but he discovered that even that sweltering African town had pleasures to offer him, and determined on making the most of them.

It was a very hot evening when he sat in the patio of a little flat-topped house which bore a legend outside announcing that it was a *caffee*. A full moon hung above the city and flooded half the little square round which the building rose with silvery light. The summit of the white walls cut sharply against the cloudless blue, and the land breeze flowed in through a low archway heavy with heat and smells. Now and then the roar of the Atlantic surf swelled in volume and rolled across the roofs in a deep-toned rumbling. Lister, however, naturally noticed very little of this.

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He lay in a Madeira chair near a little table upon which stood several flasks of wine and glasses, as well as a bundle of cigarettes. A lamp hung above him, and his light white clothing displayed the fleshiness of his big, loosely-hung frame. His face was a trifle flushed, and there was a suggestive gleam in his eyes when he glanced towards the unglazed square of lighted window behind which a comely damsel of somewhat dusky skin was singing to a mandolin, but the occasional bursts of hoarse laughter made it evident that the lady had other companions, and there was then a little but rather painful punctured wound in one of Lister's hands. She had made it that afternoon with a slender silver-headed strip of steel which she wore in her dusky hair, and Lister could take a hint when it was plain enough.

As it happened, a partial acquaintance with one or two Latin languages had been drilled into him in preparation for a certain branch of his country's service to which prejudiced persons had eventually denied him admission, and he had afterwards acquired sundry scraps of Portuguese in Madeiran wine-shops. As the result of this, his companions understood part, at least, of what he said. Two of them who had very yellow hands and somewhat crisp black hair were shaking dice upon the table, while a third lay quietly in a basket lounge watching the Englishman with keen dark eyes. The latter threw a piece of paper money down on the table.

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"It's against me," he said. "I'll double on the same odds you don't shake as high again. Pass your friend the wine, Dom Domingo."

The quiet man made this a trifle plainer, and thrust the wine flask across the table, but Lister did not notice that one of the others looked at him as if for permission or instructions before he flung the dice back into the box.

"One who knows the game would not give quite such odds," he said in passable French. "It is the cards you play on board the steamer?"

"No," said Lister, who had consumed a good deal of wine, "not often. I wish we did. It would pass the time while we lie waiting off your blazing beaches."

"Ah," said the little man, "you wait for somebody, then?"

Lister's little start was quite perceptible, but he grinned. "You can't go inland without taking somebody who knows the way. I think I told you we were going up country to kill big game."

"But certainly!" and the other spread out his hands. "This is, however, not the season when one usually sets out on such a journey. It would be wiser to make it in a month or two. For good heads you must also go inland a long way. You start from—?"

"The Bahia Santiago," but Lister recollected next moment, and looked at his companion truculently with half-closed eyes. "It seems to me you have a good many questions to ask. Besides, you stop the game."

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The little man waved his hand deprecatingly, and answered one of the others' inquiring glance with a just perceptible motion of his head.

"Your pardon, señor," he said. "It was good advice I gave you about the odds."

He rose and slowly sauntered across the patio, but Lister did not notice that he stopped in the black shadow of the archway. Neither did the other men, one of whom shook the dice again.

"Ah!" he said. "The luck is once more against you."

Lister poured himself out another glass of wine. He was feeling a trifle drowsy, and the patio was very hot, but he wished to rouse himself enough to watch one of the player's thick-fingered yellow hands. Then flinging down another piece of paper money he reached out and took the box himself. His lips had shut tight, and though his face had flushed more deeply his eyes were keen.

They threw twice more while the other man, who appeared to relinquish his share in the proceedings, good-humoredly looked on, and then Lister leaned forward suddenly and seized the yellow hand. The box fell with a clatter, and Lister clutched one of the little spotted cubes that rolled out upon the table. Then the player's companion swung out his right arm with a flick of his sleeve, and Lister caught the gleam of steel. Loosely hung and a trifle slouching as he was, he was big, and had, at least, no lack of animal courage. He said nothing, but he flung the man whose hand he held backward upon the table, which overturned in front of his companion, and snatching a heavy wine flask from one close by, swung it by the neck.

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The man with the knife was a moment recovering his footing, and then he moved forward, half-crouching, with a cat-like gait. The veins rose swollen on Lister's forehead, but he stood still, and his big red hand tightened savagely on the neck of the heavy vessel, which held a quart or two. The tinkle of the mandolin had ceased abruptly, and for a few moments there was not a sound in the little patio. Then there was a sharp command, and the man with the knife slunk backward, as a figure moved quietly out of the shadow beneath the archway. It was the man who had questioned Lister, and he laid his hand upon the flask the latter held.

"With permission I will take it from you," he said. "It is, I think, convenient that you go back to your steamer."

Lister fancied that he was right, and when three or four men who had now come out from the lighted room made way for them he followed his companion out through the archway. The latter called to a man in dilapidated white uniform, and they proceeded together to where a boat was waiting. They put Lister on board her, and stood still a minute or two watching while a couple of negroes rowed him off to the *Palestrina*. Then one of them laughed.

"There are many fools in this world but one has perhaps no cause to pity them," he said. "It is as a rule their friends they bring to grief."

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Twenty minutes later he called at Dom Clemente's residence, and was not exactly pleased when he was shown into the presence of Benicia Figuera.

"My father is on board the yacht. You have come about the Englishman you have been watching?"

she said.

The man made a little deprecatory gesture. "It is not permissible to contradict the señorita."

Benicia laughed. "It would not be worth while, my friend. You will leave your message."

"It is a report for Dom Clemente," and again the man spread out his hands. One could have fancied he felt it necessary to excuse himself for such an answer.

"Then," said the girl, "it is, as I think you know, quite safe with me."

There was no smile in her eyes this time, and her companion thought rapidly. Then, after another gesture which expressed resignation, he spoke for some three or four minutes until the girl checked him with a sign.

"If Dom Clemente has any questions to ask he will send for you," she said. "If not, you must not trouble him about the matter. I think you understand?"

It was evident that the man did so, for he went out with a respectful gesture of comprehension, and then turned and shook a yellow fist at the door which closed behind him. He could foresee that to do as he was bidden might involve him in difficulties, but Benicia Figuera was something of a power in that country, and he knew it was seldom advisable to thwart her. She, as it happened, sat still thinking for a time, and as the result of it when Desmond's gig went ashore next morning a negro handed one of her crew a little note. That afternoon Desmond dressed himself with somewhat unusual care before he was rowed ashore, and on being ushered into a white house by a uniformed negro was not altogether astonished to find Benicia Figuera waiting for him alone in a big cool room. He had met her in Las Palmas, and she smiled at him graciously as she pointed to a little table where wine and cigarettes were laid out.

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"They are at your disposal. Here one smokes at all times and everywhere," she said.

Desmond sat down some distance away from her, for as he said afterwards, she was astonishingly pretty as well as most artistically got up, and he was on his guard.

"I almost fancy it is advisable that I should keep my head just now, and it already promises to be sufficiently difficult," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Dom Clemente is presumably not at home. That is why you sent for me?"

Now the compliments men offer a lady in the Iberian Peninsula are as a rule artistically involved, but the girl laughed.

"He will not be back until this evening, but the excellent Señora Castro in whose charge I am is now sitting on the veranda," she said. "You need not put your armor on, my friend. It would be useless anyway."

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"Yes," said the man reflectively, "I almost think it would be."

"And my intentions are friendly."

Desmond spread his hands out as the men of her own nationality did. "The assurance is a relief to me, but I should feel easier if you told me what you wanted. After all, it could not have been merely the pleasure of seeing me."

Benicia nodded approvingly. His keenness and good-humored candor appealed to her. It was also in some respects a pleasure to meet a man who could come straight to the point. Her Portuguese friends usually spent an unreasonable time going around it.

"Well," she said, leaning forward and looking at him with eyes which he afterwards told Ormsgill were worth risking a fortune for, "I will tell you what I know, and I leave you to decide how far it is desirable for you to be frank with me. In the first place, you are not going inland to shoot big game. You are going to wait at the Bahia Santiago for somebody."

Desmond's face grew a trifle red. "If I had Lister here I think I should feel tempted to twist his neck for him."

The girl laughed. "It would be an interesting spectacle. I suppose you know that last night he broke a man's wrist?"

"I did not," said Desmond dryly. "When he amuses himself in that way he seldom tells me—but, to be quite frank, I've almost had enough of him. It's rather a pity the other fellow didn't break his head. Still, perhaps, that's a little outside the question."

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"The question is—who are you going to wait for at the Bahia Santiago?"

"Ah," said Desmond, "I almost think you know."

Benicia smiled. "It is, of course, Mr. Ormsgill. He is a friend of yours. Now, as you can recognize, it is in my power or that of my father to involve you in a good many difficulties. I wish to know what Ormsgill went inland for. It was certainly not on a commercial venture."

Desmond thought hard for the next half-minute. He was a man who could face a responsibility, and it was quite clear to him that Miss Figuera already knew quite enough to ruin his comrade's project if she thought fit to do so. Still, he felt that she would not think fit. He did not know how

she conveyed this impression, or even if she meant to convey it, for Benicia Figuera was a lady of some importance in that country, and, as he reflected, no doubt recognized the fact. She sat impassively still, with her dark eyes fixed on him, and there was a certain hint of imperiousness in her manner, until he suddenly made his mind up.

"Well," he said, "I will try to tell you, though there are, I think, people who would scarcely understand the thing."

He spoke for some ten minutes, and Benicia sat silent a while when at last he stopped abruptly. Then she made a little gesture of comprehension.

"Yes," she said simply, "I think your friend is one of the few men who could be expected to do such things." Then she laughed. "The girl he is to marry, the one I saw in Las Palmas, is naturally very vexed with him?" [Pg 83]

"That," said Desmond gravely, "is a subject I scarcely feel warranted in going into. Besides, as a matter of fact, I don't know. There is, however, another point I am a little anxious about."

"The course I am likely to take?" and Benicia rose. "Well, it is scarcely likely to be to your disadvantage, and I think you are wise in telling me. Still, as you see, I do not bind myself to anything."

Desmond stood up in turn, and made her a little grave inclination. "I leave it in your hands with confidence. After all, that is the only course open to me."

"Yes," said Benicia, "I believe it is. Still, you seem to have no great fear of me betraying you."

"I certainly haven't," said Desmond. "I don't know why."

His companion laughed, and held out her hand to him, and in a few more minutes Desmond was striding down the hot street towards the beach. When he reached the boat he turned a moment and looked back towards the big white house.

"It looks very much as if I'd made a fool of myself, and spoiled the whole thing, but I don't think I have," he said.

It was two or three hours later, and darkness had suddenly closed down on the sweltering town, when the scream of a whistle broke through the drowsy roar of the surf as a mail-boat ringed with blinking lights crept up to the anchorage. Then Desmond sent for Lister, and drew him into the room beneath the bridge. [Pg 84]

"There doesn't appear to be anything very much for that boat, and she'll probably clear for the north to-morrow," he said. "You had better get your things together."

Lister gazed at him with astonishment in his heavy face. "I don't quite understand you," he said.

"The thing's perfectly simple. You're going north in her. In one or two respects I'm sorry I have to turn you out, but, to be quite straight, you're not the kind of man I want beside me now. You're too fond of company, and have a—inconvenient habit of talking in your cups."

Lister flushed. "I presume you are referring to my conversation with that slinking yellow-handed fellow I came across last night? He was a little inquisitive, but I didn't tell him anything."

"No," said Desmond dryly, "I don't suppose you did. It's often the points a man of your capacity doesn't mention one deduces the most from. He generally makes it evident that he's working away from them. That, however, wouldn't strike you, and any way it doesn't affect the case. I'm sorry I can't offer to accommodate you on board the *Palestrina* any longer. I told your folks I'd keep an eye on you, but it's becoming too big a responsibility."

Lister gazed at him almost incredulously. "Of course, I'll have to go if you really mean it. Still, I would like to point out that in some respects you're not exactly a model yourself."

"That," said Desmond dryly, "is a fact I'm naturally quite aware of. I like a frolic now and then as well as most other men, but I've sense enough not to indulge in it when I'm out on business. The trouble is that what you have done you will very probably do again, and that wouldn't suit either me or Ormsgill. I'm afraid you'll have to take the boat north to-morrow." [Pg 85]

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CHAPTER VII

ORMSGILL KEEPS HIS WORD

Forest and compound were wrapped in obscurity, and the night was almost insufferably hot, when Nares, who had arrived there during the afternoon, sat in a room of the Mission of Our Lady of Pity. The little, heavily thatched dwelling stood with the mud-built church and rows of adherents' huts on the shadowy frontier of the debatable land whose dusky inhabitants were then plotting a grim retribution for their wrongs, and on the night in question black, impenetrable

darkness shut it in. Though the smell of wood smoke was still in the steamy air, the cooking-fires had died out an hour ago, and there was no sound from any of the clustering huts. Nares, who sat, gaunt and worn in face, by an open window, could not see one of them. Still, he was looking out into the compound, and his attitude suggested expectancy. One could have fancied that he was listening for something.

"My boys heard in the last village we stopped at that there was another party coming up behind us, and it's quite likely that there is," he said. "The bushmen are generally right in these things. I've seen a whole village clear out half a day before a section or two of troops arrived, though it's hard to understand how they could possibly have known."

Father Tiebout, who lay in a canvas chair with the perspiration trickling down his forehead, smiled. "There are many other things beyond our comprehension in this country," he said, with a trace of dryness. "We have our senses and our reason. The negro has them, too, but he has something more—shall we call it the blind instinct of self-preservation? It is, at least, certain that it is now and then necessary to him. So you did not come by San Roque or the new outpost?"

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"I did not. Still, how did you deduce it?"

The priest spread out his hands. "It is simple. One does not find an inhabited village within easy reach of a fort, my friend. The cause for that is obvious. You are listening for the other party?"

"Anyway, I was wondering whose it could be."

Father Tiebout smiled. "If there is a white man with the boys it is Thomas Ormsgill. I have been expecting him the last week. He will be here within the next two—if he is alive."

He spoke with a quiet certainty, as though the matter admitted of no doubt, and Nares added,

"Yes," he said, "that is a man who keeps his promise, but you could give him another week. One knows when the mail-boats arrive, but there might be difficulties when he got ashore. Anybody who wishes to go inland is apt to meet with a good many, especially if he isn't looked upon with favor by the Administration."

Father Tiebout said nothing further. It was almost too hot to talk, though the silence that brooded over the little gap in the forest was unpleasantly impressive. It would not be broken until the moon rose and the beasts awoke. There were also times when Nares, who was not a nervous man, felt a curious instinctive shrinking from the blackness of the bush. It was too suggestive. One wondered what it hid, for that is a land where the Powers of Darkness are apparently omnipotent. It is filled with rapine and murder, and pestilence stalks through it unchecked.

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At last a faint sighing refrain stole out of the silence, sank into it, and rose again, and Nares glanced at his companion, for he recognized that a band of carriers were marching towards the mission and singing to keep their courage up.

"I think you're right. They're coast boys," Father Tiebout said.

It was some ten minutes later when there was a patter of naked feet in the compound, and a clamor from the huts. Then a white man walked somewhat wearily up the veranda stairway into the feeble stream of light. It was characteristic that Nares was the first to shake hands with him, while Father Tiebout waited with a little quiet smile. Ormsgill turned towards the latter.

"Have you a hut I can put the boys in? That's all they want," he said. "They're fed. We stopped to light our fires at sunset."

The greeting was not an effusive one in view of the difficulties and privations of the journey, but neither of Ormsgill's companions had expected anything of that kind from him. It was also noticeable that there was none of the confusion and bustle that usually follows the arrival of a band of carriers. This was a man who went about all he did quietly, and was willing to save his host inconvenience. The priest went with him to a hut, and the boys were disposed of in five minutes, and when they came back Ormsgill dropped into a chair.

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"Well," he said, "I'm here. Caught the first boat after I got your letter. I think it was your letter, padre, though Nares signed it."

"At least," said Father Tiebout, "we both foresaw the result of it. But you have had a long march. Is there anything I can offer you?"

"A little cup of your black coffee," said Ormsgill.

Nares laughed softly. "He's a priest, as well as a Belgian. I believe they teach them self-restraint," he added. "Still, when I saw you walking up that stairway I felt I could have forgiven him if he had flung his arms about your neck."

"You see I had expected him," and Father Tiebout set about lighting a spirit lamp.

"With a little contrivance one can burn rum in it," he added. "There are times when I wish it was a furnace."

Ormsgill smiled and shook his head. "You and other well meaning persons occasionally go the wrong way to work, padre," he said. "Would you pile up the Hamburg gin merchants' profits, or encourage the folks here to build new sugar factories? You can't stop the trade in question while

the soil is fruitful and the African is what he is."

"What the white man has made him," said Father Tiebout.

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"I believe the nigger knew how to produce tolerably heady liquors and indulged in them before the white man brought his first gin case in," said Ormsgill reflectively. "In any case, Lamartine was a trader, which is, after all, a slightly less disastrous profession to the niggers here than a government officer, and I did what I could for him. From your point of view I've no doubt I acquired a certain responsibility. Could you do anything useful with £200 or £300 sterling, padre?"

"Ah," said the little priest, "one cannot buy absolution."

Nares smiled. It was seldom he let slip an opportunity of inveigling Father Tiebout into a good-humored discussion on a point of this kind. "I fancied it was only we others who held that view," he said. Then he turned to Ormsgill. "He is forgetting, or, perhaps, breaking loose from his traditions. After all, one does break away in Africa. It is possible it was intended that one should do so."

"Still," persisted Ormsgill, "with £300 sterling one could, no doubt, do something."

Father Tiebout, who ignored Nares' observations, tinkered with his lamp before he turned to Ormsgill with a little light in his eyes. "Taking the value of a man's body at just what it is just now one could, perhaps, win twenty human souls. Of these three or four could be sent back into the darkness when we were sure of them. Ah," and there was a little thrill in his voice, "if one had only two or three to continue the sowing with."

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"In this land," said Ormsgill, "the reaper is Death. Their comrades would certainly sell them to somebody or spear them in the bush. The priests of the Powers of Darkness would see they did it."

"Where that seed is once sown there must be a propagation. One can burn the plant with fire or cut it down, but it springs from the root again, or a grain or two with the germ of life indestructible in it remains. Flung far by scorching winds or swept by bitter floods, one of those grains finds a resting place where the soil is fertile. Here a little and there a little, that crop is always spreading."

Ormsgill turned to Nares. "You could do something with the sum alluded to?"

Nares shook his head, and there was a shadow of pain in his lean face. "I am not fixed as Father Tiebout is," he said. "His faith is the official one. They dare not steal his followers from him. Besides, I have never bought the body of a man. Sometimes I heal them, and if they are grateful they are driven away from me." He broke off for a moment with a curious little laugh. "I am an empty voice in the darkness that very few dare listen to. Still, I will take a case of London packed drugs from you."

The Belgian spread his thin hands out. "Four villages snatched from the pestilence! It was his care that saved them. How many men's bodies he has healed he can not tell you, but I think that a careful count is kept of all of them."

"Well," said Ormsgill quietly, "there is £600 to your joint credit in Lisbon. You should get the bank advices when the next mail comes in. You can apportion it between you."

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Nares stood up with a flush in his worn face, and spoke awkwardly, but Father Tiebout sat very still. A little glow crept into his eyes, and he said a few words in the Latin tongue. Then Ormsgill thrust his chair back noisily and moved towards the lamp.

"I almost think that coffee should be ready," he said.

Father Tiebout served it out, and when the cups were laid aside Nares looked at Ormsgill with a little smile.

"You have not been long away, but one could fancy you were glad to get back again," he said.

Ormsgill's face hardened. "In some respects I am. The folks I belonged to were not the same. My views seemed to pain them. It cost them an effort to bear with me. Still, that was perhaps no more than natural. One loses touch with the things he has been used to in this country."

"Sometimes," said Father Tiebout, "one grows out of it, and that is a little different. Our friend yonder once went home, too, but now I think he will stay here altogether, as I shall do, unless I am sent elsewhere."

Nares smiled. "The padre is right, as usual. I went home—and the folks I had longed for 'most broke my heart between them. It seemed that I was a failure, and that hurt me. They wanted results, the tale of souls, and I hadn't one that I was sure of to offer as a trophy. One, they said, could heal men's bodies in America. As you say, one falls out of line in Africa."

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There was a wistfulness which he could not quite repress in his voice, and Ormsgill nodded sympathetically.

"Oh," he said, "I know. It hurts hard for awhile. We are most of us the cast-offs and the mutineers here. Still, in one respect, I sometimes think Father Tiebout's people are wiser. They don't ask for

results."

The little priest once more spread his hands out. "The results," he said, "will appear some day, but that is not our concern. It is sufficient that a man should do the work that is set out for him. And now we will be practical. Have you any news of Herrero?"

"He is a hundred miles north of us in Ugalla's country, and I am going on there. You will have to find me a few more carriers. It was Miss Figuera told me."

"Perhaps one can expect a little now Dom Clemente is in authority. He is honest as men go in Africa, and at least he is a soldier. Well, you shall have the carriers in a week or so."

Ormsgill laughed. "I want them to-morrow. There is a good deal to do. I have the boys Domingo stole to trace when I have bought the woman back from Herrero."

"Bought!" said Father Tiebout with a twinkle in his eyes. "If Herrero is not willing to sell?"

"Then," said Ormsgill dryly, "I shall have considerable pleasure in making him."

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He stretched himself wearily with a little yawn. "And now we will talk about other matters."

It was an hour later when he retired to rest and, hot as it was, sank into sound sleep within ten minutes, but although he rose early and roused the little priest to somewhat unusual activity, several days had passed before his new carriers were collected and ready to march. They were sturdy, half-naked pagans, and appeared astonished when he gave them instructions in a few words of the bush tongue and bore with their slow comprehension instead of applying the stick to their dusky skin, which was what they had somewhat naturally expected from a white man.

He shook hands with Nares and Father Tiebout in the sloppy compound early one morning when the mists were streaming from the dripping forest, and looked at the little priest with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I haven't asked you how you got those boys," he said. "Still, it must have cost you something to secure the good will of whoever had the privilege of supplying them."

He turned to Nares as if to invite his opinion, which was unhesitatingly offered him. The latter, at least, would make no compromise.

"It certainly did," he said. "I am glad you did not ask me to hire you the boys. The system under which he obtained them is an iniquity."

Father Tiebout smiled. "The object, I think, was a pious one. One has to use the means available."

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"Anyway," said Ormsgill, "the responsibility and the cost is mine."

The priest shook his head. "At least, you can take this gift from me," he said. "It is not much, but one does with pleasure what he can."

It was offered in such a fashion that Ormsgill could only make his grateful acknowledgments, though he had grounds for surmising that the gift would cost the giver months of stringent self-denial, and there was already very little sign of luxury at the Mission. Then he called to his carriers, who swung out of the compound with their burdens in single file, slipping and splashing in the mire. The two men he had left behind stood watching them until the last strip of fluttering cotton had vanished into the misty forest when Father Tiebout looked at his companion with a little smile.

"One could consider the venture our friend has undertaken a folly, but still I think he will succeed," he said. "One could almost fancy that the Powers above us hold the men who attempt such follies in their special keeping."

Nares, as it happened, had been almost uncomfortably stirred during the last ten minutes, but he was Puritan to the backbone, and usually endeavored, at least, to prevent what he felt carrying him away. He was also as a rule ready to join issue with the little priest on any point that afforded him an opportunity.

"There is a difficulty," he said. "I'm not sure he would admit the existence of all the Powers you believe in. There are so many of them. One would fancy that faith was necessary."

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Father Tiebout smiled at him again. "Ah," he said, "they who know everything have doubtless a wide charity."

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CHAPTER VIII

THE BONDSWOMAN

A small fire burned on the edge of the ravine, flinging out pale red flashes and an intolerable

smoke, for the wood was green and wet. It had been raining heavily, and the whole forest that rolled down the slopes of the plateau was filled with a thick white steam. Filmy wisps of it drifted out of the darkness which hid the towering trunks, and streamed by the girl who crouched beside the fire cooking her white lord's evening meal. She was comely, though her face and uncovered arms were of a warm brown. A wide strip of white cotton fell from one shoulder, and half revealed the slenderness of her shapely form. It also covered certain significant discolored bruises on the soft brown skin. The look in her eyes just then, perhaps, accounted for them, for it vaguely suggested intelligence, and a protest against her fate, in place of the hopeless apathy which, after all, saves the native of that country a great deal of trouble. He has been taught drastically that any objection he might reasonably make would certainly be futile and very apt to produce unwished-for results.

A wall of dripping forest rose above the fire, but behind the girl the ground sloped sharply to the brink of a swollen river which rose in the plateaux of the interior, and a little, tattered tent was pitched on the edge of the declivity. In front of it two somewhat ragged white men lay listlessly upon a strip of waterproof ground sheeting. They were worn with travel and a long day's labor, for they had been engaged since sunrise in raft building and ferrying their equipment and trade goods across the river, and, as it happened, had lost most of their provisions in the process. They were of widely different birth and character, and cordially disliked each other, though they had both first seen the light in Africa and community of interest held them together.

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Gavin was tall and lean and hard, with an expressionless bronzed face, the son of an English ostrich farmer who had married a Boer woman. He had come into that country on foot with one other survivor of the party he had started with after a difference of opinion with the Boer administration. The others had died with their oxen during their two years' wandering in the wilderness. His companion Herrero passed for a Portuguese, though his hair would curl and his lips were a trifle thick. He was spare in form, and his face was of a muddy yellow with the stamp of sensuality and cruelty in it. He had also been drinking freely, though that is not as a rule a Latin vice, and was still very wet from his labors in the river. He had lower legs like broomsticks, and his torn, drenched trousers clung tightly about his protuberant knees.

"One could fancy that we have been bewitched," he said. "Trouble has followed us all the journey. There was a native woman who looked at us as we left San Roque, and she made a sign."

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Gavin laughed contemptuously. "The loads," he said, "were too heavy. It is not economical to overdrive these cattle. One must remember the trek-ox's back."

Herrero blinked at the forest with something that suggested apprehension in his eyes, and it was not difficult to fancy that it and all it held was hostile to the white man. It seemed to crowd in upon him menacingly as the fire leapt up, vague, black, and impenetrable, an abode of unformulated terror and everlasting shadow.

"I have brought up the same loads with fewer boys before," he said. "They did not fall lame or die, as some of these have done. It is known that there is black witchcraft in this bush. There are white men who have gone into it and did not come out again."

"They were probably easier with their carriers than is advisable," and Gavin smiled grimly as he dropped a big hand on a cartridge in his bandolier. "This is a certain witchcraft cure. Still, you have to make your mind up. We can not go on, and take all the trade goods, without provisions."

His companion raised one shoulder in protest against the trouble fate had heaped upon them, for the trade goods were worth a good deal in the country that lay before them.

"It takes almost as much to keep a man in strength whether he marches light or loaded," he said. "It would ruin me if we left any more behind. Boys are scarce just now. One could, perhaps, get provisions in another week's march."

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"The boys can not make it," and it was evident that Gavin was languidly contemptuous of his comrade's indecision. "You must leave a few here or you will lose half of them on the way."

He, at least, could face a crisis resolutely, but it was clear that he, too, regarded the carriers as chattels that had a commercial value only, for he was quite aware that, since that was one of the sterile belts, those who were left behind would in all probability die. The men whose fate they were discussing lay among the wet undergrowth apart from them, and Herrero, who appeared to be glancing towards them, raised himself a trifle suddenly.

"Something moves. There in the bush," he said.

"One of the boys," said Gavin, who saw nothing, though his eyes were keen. "Lie down. You have been taking more cognac than is wise lately."

Herrero shrugged his shoulders. "There is always something in the bush. It comes and goes when the boys are asleep," he said. "It is not pleasant that one should see it."

Gavin scarcely smiled. He was growing a trifle impatient with his comrade, who could not recognize when it was necessary to make a sacrifice, and he was ready for his meal. By and by Herrero called to the girl, who filled a calabash from the iron cooking pot hung above the fire, and laid it down in front of him with two basins. The trader lifted a portion of the savory preparation in a wooden spoon and smelled it.

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"The pepper is insufficient. How often must one tell you that?" he said, and rising laid a yellow hand upon her arm.

The girl shrank back from him, but he followed her, still holding her arm, and nipped it deeply between the nails of his thumb and forefinger. He did it slowly, and with a certain relish, while his face contracted into a malicious grin. For a moment a fierce light leapt into the girl's eyes, but the torturing grip grew sharper, and it faded again. The man dropped his hand when at last she broke into a little cry, and stooping for the calabash she went back towards the fire. Gavin, who had looked on with an expressionless face, turned to his comrade.

"If you do that too often I think you will be sorry, my friend," he said. "She will cut your throat for you some day."

"No," said Herrero, "it is not a thing that is likely to happen if one uses the stick sufficiently."

His companion smiled in a curious fashion, but said nothing. His mother's people had long ruled the native with a heavy hand, and he had no hesitation in admitting that leniency is seldom advisable. Still, he recognized that in spite of his apathetic patience one may now and then drive the negro over hard, so that when life becomes intolerable he somewhat logically grows reckless and turns upon his oppressors in his desperation, which was a thing that Herrero apparently did not understand.

In the meanwhile the girl crouched silently by the fire, stirring the blistering peppers into the cooking pot, a huddled figure robed in white with meekly bent head and the marks of the white man's brutality upon her dusky body. Every line of the limp figure was suggestive of hopelessness. She might have posed for a statue of Africa in bondage. Still, as it happened, she and the boys who lay apart among the dripping undergrowth glanced now and then towards the forest with apathetic curiosity. Gavin's ears were good, but, after all, he had not depended upon his hearing for life and liberty, as the others had often done, and their keenness of perception was not in him. They knew that strangers were approaching stealthily through the bush. Indeed, they knew that one had flitted about the camp for some little while, but they said nothing. It was the white man's business, and nothing that was likely to result from it could matter much to them.

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The fire blazed up a little, but, save for its snapping and the roar of the swollen river, there was silence in the camp, until Gavin rose to one knee with a little exclamation. He had heard nothing, but at last his trained senses had given him a sub-conscious warning that there was something approaching. Just then the girl stirred the fire, and the uncertain radiance flickered upon the towering trunks. It drove an elusive track of brightness back into the shadow, and Herrero scrambled to his feet as a man strode into the light.

He stopped and stood near the fire, dressed in thorn-rent duck, with the wet dripping from him and a little grim smile in his face, and it was significant that although he had nothing in his hands Gavin reached out for the heavy rifle that lay near his side. Strangers are usually received with caution in that part of Africa, and he recognized the man. As it happened, the girl by the fire recognized him, too, and ran forward with a little cry. After all, he had been kind to her while she lived with Lamartine, and it may have been that some vague hope of deliverance sprang up in her mind, for she stopped again and crouched in mute appeal close at his side. Ormsgill laid a hand reassuringly upon her brown shoulder.

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"Ormsgill laid a hand reassuringly upon her brown shoulder."—[See page 103.](#)

He had not spoken a word yet, and there was silence for a moment or two while the firelight flared up. It showed Gavin watching him motionless with the rifle that glinted now and then on his knee, Herrero standing with closed hands and an unpleasant scowl on his yellow face, and the boys clustering waist-deep in the underbrush. Then the trader spoke.

"What do you want?" he said.

"This woman," said Ormsgill simply. "I am willing to buy her from you."

Herrero laughed maliciously. "She is not for sale. You should not have let her slip through your fingers. It is possible you could have made terms with Lamartine."

Ormsgill disregarded the gibe. Indeed, it was one he had expected.

"That," he said, "is not quite the point. Besides, one could hardly fancy that you are quite correct. Everything is for sale in this part of Africa. It is only a question of the figure. You have not heard my offer."

"In this case it would not be a great temptation," and Herrero's grin was plainer. "The girl is now and then mutinous, and that lends the affair a certain piquancy. When she has been taught submission I shall probably grow tired of her and will give her to you. Until then the breaking of her in will afford me pleasure. In fact, as I have never been defied by a native yet I feel that to fail in this case would be a stain on my self-respect." [Pg 104]

"I almost think my offer would cover that," said Ormsgill dryly. "It seems to me your self-respect has been sold once or twice before."

Herrero disregarded him, though his face grew a trifle flushed. "Anita," he said, "come here."

The girl rose when Ormsgill let his hand drop from her shoulder, and gazed at him appealingly. Then as he made no sign she turned away with a little hopeless gesture, moved forward a few paces, and stopped again when the trader reached out for a withe that lay on the ground sheet not far from where he stood.

"It would," he said with a vindictive smile, "have saved her trouble if you had stayed away."

"Stop," said Ormsgill sharply, and striding forward stood looking at him. "You have shown how far you would go, which was in one way most unwise of you since you have made it a duty to take the girl from you. What is more to the purpose, it will certainly be done. There are two ways of obtaining anything in this country. One is to buy it, and the other to fight for it. I am willing to use either."

Herrero who saw the glint in his eyes, backed away from him, and flashed a warning glance at Gavin, who turned to Ormsgill quietly. [Pg 105]

"I am," he said in English, "willing to stand by, and see fair play, since it does not seem to be altogether a question of business. Still, if it seems likely that you will deprive me of my comrade's

services I shall probably feel compelled to take a hand in. He has a few good points though they're not particularly evident, and I can't altogether afford to lose him."

Herrero, who glanced round the camp, waved his hand towards the boys. "I will call them to beat you back into the bush."

Ormsgill raised his voice, and there was a sharp crackling of undergrowth, while here and there a dusky figure materialized out of the shadow.

"As you see, they have guns," he said.

Gavin smiled and tapped his rifle. "Still, they can't shoot as I can. Hadn't you better send them away again, and if you have any offer to make Mr. Herrero get on with it? One naturally expected something of this kind."

Ormsgill made a little gesture with his hand, and the men sank into the gloom again.

"Well," he said, "for the last week I have been trailing you, and as I did not know how long I might be coming up with you, I have plenty of provisions. Yours, it is evident from one or two things I noticed, are running out, and you can't get through the sterile belt without a supply. It was rather a pity the San Roque people burned the village where you expected to get some. I'm open to hand you over all the loads I can spare in return for the girl Anita."

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"How many loads?"

Ormsgill told him, and Gavin nodded, "It is a reasonable offer," he said. "I will engage that our friend makes terms with you. Bring in the provisions, and you shall have the girl."

Herrero protested savagely until his companion dryly pointed that since his objections had no weight he was wasting his breath. Then Ormsgill turned away into the bush, and came back with a line of half-naked carrier boys who laid down the loads they carried before the tent. After that he touched the girl's shoulder, and pointed to the hammock two of the boys lowered.

"You are going back to your own village," he said.

The girl gazed at him a moment in evident astonishment, and then waved her little brown hands.

"I have none," she said. "It was burned several moons ago."

It was evident that this was something Ormsgill had not expected, and was troubled at, and Gavin, who watched him, smiled.

"If she belongs to the Lutanga people, as one would fancy from her looks, what she says is very likely correct," he said. "One of the plateau tribes came down not long ago and wiped several villages out. Domingo told me, and from what he said the tribe in question is certainly not one I'd care about handing over a woman to. She would probably have to put up with a good deal of unpleasantness if she went back there. Besides, it seems to me that what you had in view would scarcely be flattering to the lady. It isn't altogether what she would expect from her rescuer."

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Ormsgill had already an unpleasant suspicion of the latter fact, for woman's favor is not sought but purchased or commanded in most parts of Africa. Still, he once more pointed to the hammock, and walked behind it without a word when the bearers hove the pole to their wooly crowns.

Then as they flitted into the shadowy bush Gavin turned to Herrero with a little laugh. "There are a few men like him, men with views that bring them trouble," he said. "My father was one. He threw away a big farm on account of them. He would not make obeisance to his new masters when his nation turned its back on him. That, however, is a thing one could scarcely expect you to understand."

Then he called one of the boys and sent him to the fire. "And now we will have supper. After all, I'm not very sorry you lost that girl, my friend."

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CHAPTER IX

ANITA BECOMES A RESPONSIBILITY

It was two weeks later when Ormsgill reached the Mission with his boys, footsore, ragged, and worn with travel. He had avoided Anita's hammock as far as possible on the way, and it was with a certain relief he saw her safely installed in one of the dusky adherents' huts. Then he arrayed himself in whole, clean clothes, and when he had eaten sat on the shadowy veranda talking with his host, a somewhat ludicrous figure since Father Tiebout's garments were several sizes too small for him. It was then the hottest part of the afternoon. The perspiration trickled down their faces, and the little priest blinked when he met the blazing sunlight with dazzled eyes.

They spoke in disjointed sentences, sometimes mixing words of three languages, but it was

significant that although neither expressed himself with clearness his companion seldom failed in comprehension, for priest and rash adventurer were in curious sympathy. Both of them had borne heat, and fever, and bodily pain, and proved their courage in a land where the white man often sinks into limp dejection. Each had also in his own way done what he could for the oppressed, and had, perhaps, accomplished a little here and there. It was, however, inevitable that their conversation should turn upon the girl Anita.

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"I had not heard of the raid up yonder," said the priest. "I am not sure that I am sorry. After all, one hears enough. Still, it no doubt took place. Herrero's companion would have no motive for deceiving you. The question is what is to be done with the woman. To be frank, she cannot stay here."

"Why?" and Ormsgill's face grew a trifle grave, for Anita was rapidly becoming a cause of anxiety to him.

His companion made a little gesture. "She would prove an apple of discord; she is too pretty. One must not expect too much of human nature, and one wife alone is permitted. There is not now a boy she could marry. In the second place, Herrero would probably attempt to seize her here."

It occurred to Ormsgill that Anita might not be anxious or even willing to marry anybody. In fact, he felt it would be an almost astonishing thing if she was. Still, he realized with a vague uneasiness that it is, after all, very often difficult to foresee the course a woman would adopt.

"Then," he said, "I don't know what can be done with her."

"You are not one who would leave a task half finished?"

"At least, I cannot turn this woman adrift."

Father Tiebout wrinkled his brows. "There is, I think, only one place where she would be safe, and that is on the coast. There are also friends of mine who could be trusted to take good care of her in the city, and she could be sent down from the San Thome Mission. It is, however, a long journey."

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"If it is necessary," said Ormsgill, "I must make it."

His companion's little gesture seemed to indicate that he believed it was, and Ormsgill dismissed the subject with a smile.

"In that case I will start again to-morrow," he said.

He set out in the early morning, taking two letters from Father Tiebout, one for the man who directed the San Thome Mission, and one to be sent on from there to certain friends of his host's on the coast, and it was two days later when he lay a little apart from his carriers in a glade in the bush. Blazing sunshine beat down into it. There was an overpowering heat, and a deep stillness pervaded the encircling forest, for the beasts had slunk into their darkest lairs in the burning afternoon. The snapping of the fire made it the more perceptible, and Ormsgill could see the blue smoke curl up above a belt of grass behind which the boys were cooking a meal. Anita, who was with them, would, he knew, bring him his portion, and in the meanwhile he felt it was advisable to keep away from her. She had talked very little with him during the last two days, but that was his fault, and he fancied that she failed to understand his reticence. In fact, the signs of favor she had once or twice shown him had rendered him a little uncomfortable.

For all that, his face relaxed into a little dry smile as he wondered what the very formal Mrs. Ratcliffe would think of that journey. He remembered that he had always been more or less of a trial to his conventional friends even before he had been dismissed from his country's service for an offense he had not committed, but he was one of the men who do not greatly trouble themselves about being misunderstood. It is a misfortune which those who undertake anything worth doing have usually to bear with.

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He was, however, a little drowsy, for they had started at sunrise and marched a long way since then. There was only one hammock, which somewhat to the carriers' astonishment Anita had occupied, for this was distinctly at variance with the customs of a country in which nobody concerns himself about the comfort of a native woman. It would also be an hour before the boys went on again, and he stretched himself out among the grass wearily, but, for all that, with a little sigh of content. He had found the restraints of civilization galling, and the untrammelled life of the wilderness appealed to him. The need of constant vigilance, and the recognition of the hazards he had exposed himself to, had a bracing effect. It roused the combativeness that was in his nature, and left him intent, strung up, and resolute. The task he had saddled himself with had become more engrossing since it promised to be difficult.

He did not think he slept, for he was conscious of the pungent smell of the wood smoke all the time, but at last he roused himself to attention suddenly, and looked about him with dazzled eyes. He could see the faint blue vapor hanging about the trunks, and hear the boys' low voices, but except for that the bush was very still. Yet he was certainly leaning on one elbow with every sense strung up, and he knew that there must be some cause for it. What had roused him he could not tell, but he had, perhaps, lived long enough in that land to acquire a little of the bushman's unreasoning recognition of an approaching peril. There was, he knew, something that menaced him not far away.

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For a moment or two his heart beat faster than usual, and the perspiration trickled down his set face, and then laying a restraint upon himself he rose a trifle higher, and swept his eyes steadily round the glade. There was one spot where it seemed to him that the outer leaves of a screen of creepers moved. He did not waste a moment in watching them, but letting his arm fall under him rolled over amidst the grass which covered him, for it was evidently advisable to take precautions promptly. Just as the crackling stems closed about him there was a pale flash and a detonation, and a puff of smoke floated out from the creepers.

Ormsgill was on his feet in another moment, and running his hardest plunged into them, but when he had smashed through the tangled, thorny stems there was nobody there, and except for the clamor of the boys the bush was very still. Still, this was very much what he had expected, and looking round he saw the print of naked toes and a knee in the damp soil before his eyes rested on the brass shell of a spent cartridge. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand, recognizing it as one made for a heavy, single-shot rifle of old fashioned type, which had its significance for him. He fancied his would-be assassin had been lent the rifle by a white man who in all probability knew what he meant to do with it. Then he glanced at the cartridge again, and noticed a slight outward bending of its rim. There was a portentous little glint in his eyes as he slipped it into his pocket.

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"Some day I may come across the man who owns that rifle," he said.

He stood still for another few moments, grim in face, with his jacket rent, and a little trickle of blood running from one hand which a thorn had gashed. Every nerve in him tingled with fierce anger, but he knew that the man who runs counter to established customs has usually more than misconception to face in Africa, especially if he sympathizes with the oppressed, and he was one who could wait. Then the boys came floundering through the undergrowth, one or two with heavy matchets, and one or two with long flintlock guns, but Ormsgill, who recognized that pursuit would certainly prove futile even if they were willing to undertake it, drove them back to the fire again.

"We will start when I have eaten," was all he said.

Anita brought him his meal, and stood watching him curiously while he ate, but Ormsgill said nothing, and in half an hour they went on again and spent the rest of that day and a number of others floundering amidst and hacking a way through tangled creepers in the dim shadow of the bush. It was a relief to all of them when at last the thatched roofs of San Thome Mission rose out of a little opening into which the dazzling sunlight shone. Ormsgill was received by an emaciated priest with a dead white face and the intolerant eyes of a fanatic, who supplied him and the boys with a very frugal meal and took Anita away from him. Then he read Father Tiebout's letters, and after he had done so sat with Ormsgill on the veranda.

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"Father Tiebout vouches for you—and your purpose," he said, watching his companion with doubt in his eyes.

"If he had not done so I should probably not have been welcome?" said Ormsgill, smiling.

The priest made a little gesture which seemed to imply that he did not intend to discuss that point. "The girl would be safe with the people he mentions. They are good Catholics."

"I am not sure that is quite sufficient in itself," said Ormsgill reflectively. "Still, Father Tiebout would scarcely have suggested sending her to them unless he had felt reasonably certain that they would show her kindness."

His companion's face hardened. "They are people of blameless lives. There are, perhaps, two or three such in that city. You could count upon the woman receiving kindness from them, but one would have you quite clear about the fact that my recommendation is necessary. It is, of course, in my power to withhold it, and if it is given you will undertake not to claim the woman again?"

Ormsgill looked at him with a little smile. "I have no wish to claim her, though I have only that assurance to offer you, and I must tell you that I am going to the coast. There are, however, one or two conditions. She must be treated well, and paid for her services."

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"That would be arranged. It is convenient that she should understand what would be required of her. I will send for her."

Ormsgill made a sign of concurrence, and in another five minutes Anita stood before them, slight and lithe in form, and very comely, but with apprehension and anxiety in her brown face. The priest spoke to her concisely in a coldly even voice, and it was evident that the course he mentioned was one she had no wish to take. Then he turned from her to Ormsgill as she stretched out her hands with a little gesture of appeal towards the latter.

"It is your will that I should go away and live with these people?" she said.

Ormsgill knew that the priest was watching him, and that there was only one answer, but he shrank from uttering it. The girl's eyes were beseeching, and she looked curiously forlorn. She was a castaway without kindred or country, one who had lived the untrammelled life of the bush, and he feared that she would find the restraints of the city intolerably galling.

"It is," he said gravely.

The girl stood very still a moment or two looking at him, and Ormsgill felt the blood creep into his

face. He was, in all probability, the only man who had ever shown her kindness, and he recognized that she too had misunderstood his motives and regarded him as rather more than her rescuer. Then as he made no sign she flung out her hands again, hopelessly this time, and slowly straightened herself.

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"I go," she said simply and turned away from them.

Ormsgill watched her cross the compound, a forlorn object, with the white cotton robe that flowed about her gleaming in the dazzling sunlight, and then turn for a moment in the shadowy entrance of a palm-thatched hut. He was stirred with a vague compassion, but putting a firm restraint upon himself he sat still, and the girl turning suddenly once more vanished into the dark gap. It also happened that he never met her again.

"One's powers are limited, Father. After all, there is not much one can do for another," he said.

The priest looked hard at him, and then made a little grave gesture. "It is something if one can ease for a moment another's burden. I have, it seems, to ask your pardon for a misconception that was, perhaps, not altogether an unnatural one, Señor."

Ormsgill saw little more of him during the day, and started for the coast early next morning. He had only accomplished half his purpose, and that in some respects the easier half, but it was necessary for him to procure further supplies and communicate with Desmond. Before he started, however, he sent home most of the boys Father Tiebout had obtained for him, keeping only two or three of them, for these and the others he had brought up with him could, he fancied, be relied upon. They were thick-lipped, woolly-haired heathen, stupid in all matters beyond their acquaintance, but after the first few weeks they had, at least, done his bidding unquestioningly.

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This quiet white man with the lined face had never used the stick on one of them, and did not, so far as they were aware, even carry a pistol. When they slept at a bush village or obtained provisions there he made the headman a due return before he went away, which was not the invariable custom of other white men they had traveled with. In fact, they looked upon him as somewhat of an anachronism in that country, but since the one attempt a few of them had made to disregard his authority had signally failed they obeyed him, and little by little became sensible of a curious confidence in him. What he said he did, and, what was rather more to the purpose, when he told them that a certain course was expected from them they usually adopted it, even when it was far from coinciding with their wishes.

There are a few men of Ormsgill's kind and one or two women who have made adventurous journeys in the shadowy land unarmed, and carried away with them the dusky tribesmen's good will, while others have found it necessary to march with a band of hired swashbucklers and mark their trail with burnt villages and cartridge shells. As usual, a good deal depended upon how they set about it.

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CHAPTER X

ORMSGILL ASKS A FAVOR

A silver lamp burned on the little table where two diminutive cups of bitter coffee were set out, but its indifferent light was scarcely needed in the open-fronted upper room of Dom Clemente's house. A full moon hung above the Atlantic, and the clear radiance that rested on the glittering harbor streamed in between the fretted arches and slender pillars. Throughout tropical Africa all there is of grace and beauty in man's handiwork bears the stamp of the unchanging East, and one finds something faintly suggestive of the art of olden days where the eye rests with pleasure on any of its sweltering towns, which is, however, not often the case. It is incontrovertible that most of the towns are characterized by native squalor and that some of them are unpleasantly filthy, but, after all, filth and squalor are usual in the East, and serve by contrast to enhance the elusive beauty of its cities.

It was almost cool that evening, and Ormsgill, looking down between the slim pillars across the white walls and flat roofs, though some were ridged and tiled, towards the blaze of moonlight on the harbor, was well content to be where he was after his journey through the steamy bush and across the sun-scorched littoral. He had arrived that afternoon, and had spent the last hour with Benicia Figuera, who had shown herself gracious to him. She lay not far away from him in a big Madeira chair, loosely draped in diaphanous white attire which enhanced the violet depths of her eyes and the duskieness of her hair, and her face showed in the moonlight the clear pallor of ivory. Ormsgill fancied that her attendant the Señora Castro sat in the room behind them from which a soft light streamed out through quaintly patterned wooden lattices, though he had seen nothing of the latter lady since the comida had been cleared away.

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He had said very little about his journey, though he intended to tell Dom Clemente rather more, but he presently became conscious that Benicia was regarding him with a little smile. He also noticed, and was somewhat annoyed with himself for thinking of it, that she had lips like the

crimson pulp of the pomegranate, the grandadilla which figures in the imagery of the Iberian Peninsula as well as in that of parts of Africa, where it is seldom grown. Ormsgill was quite aware of this, and it had its associations of Eastern mysticism and sensuality, for he was a man of education and the outcasts he had lived with had not all been of low degree. Among them there had been a certain green-turbaned Moslem who had taught him things unknown to his kind at home. He felt that it was advisable to put a restraint upon himself.

"You are not sorry you have come back to us?" said Benicia.

Ormsgill was by no means sorry, and permitted himself to admit as much. He had accomplished part, at least, of his purpose successfully, and that in itself had a tranquilizing effect on him, while after the weary marches through tall grass and tangled bush under scorching heat it was distinctly pleasant to sit there cleanly clad, in the cool air with such a companion. Benicia, it almost seemed, guessed his thoughts, for she laughed softly.

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"It is comforting to feel that one has done what he has undertaken," she said. "Still, you were, at least, not alone by those campfires in the bush."

Ormsgill flushed a little, though he contrived not to start. He had naturally not considered it necessary to tell Miss Figuera anything about Anita.

"No," he said simply. "I don't know how you could have heard about it, but I was not alone."

It was characteristic of him that he offered no explanation, and was content to leave what he had done open to misconception. In fact, he had a vague but unpleasant feeling that the latter course might be the wiser one. Benicia turned her dark eyes full upon him, and there was a faint sparkle in the depths of them.

"My friend, I hear of almost everything," she said. "As it happens, I know what you went up into the bush for."

"Well," said Ormsgill reflectively, "perhaps, I should not be surprised at that. It was only natural that I should be watched."

He met her gaze without wavering, and, though he was not aware of this, his eyes had a question in them. It was one he could not have asked directly even if he had wished, but remembering that Anita was to live in that city he took a bold course.

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"I wonder if one could venture to mention that your interest in the woman I brought down from the bush would go a long way?" he said. "It is, I think, deserved, and in case of any difficulty would ensure her being left in quietness here, though, perhaps, the favor is too much to expect."

"No," said the girl, "not when you make the request. Frankly, in the case of others I should have found what I have heard incredible. It suggests the Knight of La Mancha. Are there many in your country who would do such things?"

Ormsgill felt his face grow a trifle hot. After all, Benicia Figuera was, in that land, at least, a great lady, and he remembered that his own people had doubted him. He laughed somewhat bitterly.

"If I remember correctly, the famous cavalier was more or less crazy," he said.

The girl turned a trifle in her chair, and he saw a little gleam kindle in her dark eyes.

"Ah," she said, "perhaps it is a pity there are so many who are wholly sensible."

She sat very close to him, dressed in filmy white which flowed in sweeping lines about a form of the statuesque modeling that is one of the characteristics of the women of The Peninsula, but it was something in her eyes which held Ormsgill's attention. They were Irish eyes, with the inconsequent daring of the Celt in them, though she had also the lips of the Iberian, full and red and passionate. The hot blood of the South was in her, and, though she never forgot wholly who and what she was, and there was a certain elusive stateliness in her pose, it was clear to the man that she was one who could on occasion fling petty prudence to the winds and ride as reckless a tilt at conventionalities and cramping customs as he had done. Such a woman he felt would not expect to be safeguarded by a man, but would bear the stress of the conflict with him, if she loved him, not because his quarrel might be an honorable one but because it was his. Then she made him a little grave inclination.

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"I venture to make you my compliments, Señor Ormsgill," she said.

The man set his lips for a moment, and she saw it with a little thrill of triumph. It was borne in upon her that she desired the love of this quiet Englishman who for a whimsical idea had undertaken such a task. She also felt that she could take it, for she had seen the woman he was pledged to, and knew, if he did not, that he would never be satisfied with her. Then she suddenly remembered her pride, and quietly straightened herself again. Ormsgill sat still looking at her, and though the signs of restraint were plain on his lined face, she saw a curious little glint creep into his eyes. Still, she felt that he did not know it was there.

"What shall I say?" he asked. "I don't think there are many people who would see anything commendable in what I have done. In fact, those who heard about it would probably consider it a piece of futile rashness, and it is very likely that they would be right. After all, the restraints of the city may become intolerable to the girl."

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"Then why did you undertake it?"

Ormsgill laughed, though there was a faint ring in his voice, for he saw that she had not asked out of idle curiosity. "I don't exactly know. For one thing, I had made a promise, but to be candid I think there were other reasons. You see, I have borne the burden myself. I have been plundered of my earnings, driven to exhaustion, and have fought against long odds for my life. It left me with a bitterness against any custom which makes the grinding of the helpless possible. One can't help a natural longing to strike back now and then."

Benicia nodded. It was not surprising that there was a certain vein of vindictiveness in her, which rendered it easy for her to sympathize with him, and once more the man noticed that where Ada Ratcliffe would in all probability have listened with half-disdainful impatience she showed comprehension.

"Still," she said, "in a struggle of this kind you have so much against you. After all, you are only one man."

"I almost think there are a few more of us even in Africa and, as Father Tiebout says, it is, perhaps, possible that one man may be permitted to do—something—here and there."

He spoke with a grave simplicity which curiously stirred the girl. It is possible that the sorrows of the oppressed did not in themselves greatly interest her, for she had certainly never borne the burden, but the attitude of this quiet man who, it seemed, had taken up their cause, and was ready to ride a tilt against the powers that be, appealed to her. She had, at least, courage and imagination, and there was Irish blood in her.

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"Ah," she said, "the fight is an unequal one, but though there will be so many against you I think you have also a few good friends—as well as the Señor Desmond."

Ormsgill started. Her knowledge of his affairs was disconcerting, but he forgot his annoyance at it when she leaned forward a trifle looking at him. Her mere physical beauty had its effect on him, and the soft moonlight and her clinging white draperies enhanced and etherealized it, but it was not that which set his heart beating a trifle faster and sent a faint thrill through him. It was once more her eyes he looked at, and what he saw there made it clear that the reckless, all-daring something that was in her nature was wholly in sympathy with him. He also understood that she had asked him to count her as one of his friends. His manner was, however, a little quieter than usual.

"It is a matter of gratification to me to feel that I have," he said. "Still, what do you know about Desmond?"

Benicia laughed. "Not a great deal, but I can guess rather more. Still, I do not think you need fear that I will betray you. In the meantime I venture to believe that this is another of your friends."

She rose and turned towards the door as her father came in. He shook hands with Ormsgill, and then taking off his kepi drew forward a chair. Benicia said nothing further, but went out and left them together. Dom Clemente lighted a cigarette before he turned to his guest with a little dry smile.

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"Trade," he said, "is not brisk up yonder?"

"I do not know if it is or not," said Ormsgill simply.

"Then, perhaps, you have accomplished the purpose that took you there?"

"A part of it. Because I have ventured to ask your daughter's interest in a native woman I brought down I will tell you what it was."

He did so, and the olive-faced soldier nodded. "I think you have done wisely in making me your confidant," he said. "At least, the woman will be safe here. It is also possible that I shall have a few words to speak to our friend Herrero some day." Then his tone grew a trifle sharper. "I have heard that there are rifles in the hands of some of the bushmen up yonder."

Ormsgill took a cartridge from his pocket and pointed to the dint in the rim. "One might consider this as a proof of it. You will notice the caliber, and I fancy I should recognize the rifle it was fired out of. In that case the man who carries it will have an account to render me."

"Ah," said the little soldier quietly, "it is a confirmation of several things I have heard of lately. I think I mentioned that the bush was not a desirable place for you to wander in. Still, you are probably going back there again?"

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"I believe I am."

His companion looked at him with a little smile. "It is what one would expect from you. One may, perhaps, venture to recall the circumstances under which I first met you. Two soldiers brought you before me—and, as it happened, I had, fortunately, finished breakfast. You made certain damaging admissions with a candor which, though it might have had a different effect a little earlier, saved you a good deal of unpleasantness. I said here is an unwise man whose word can be depended on. You know what the people of this city say of me?"

"That you are a great soldier."

Dom Clemente's eyes twinkled. "Also that like the rest I am willing to abuse my office if it will line my pockets. The latter, it seems, is the purpose which influences me in the unpopular things I do. I make no protestations, but after all it is possible that I may have another one. In any case, I have received you into my house, and admitted a certain indebtedness to you. In return, I ask for your usual frankness. You have heard of a native rising up yonder?"

The question was sharp and incisive, and Ormsgill nodded.

"To be precise," he said, "I heard of two."

"Then we will have your views about the first one. It is not what one could call spontaneous?"

"At least, it is scarcely likely to take place without a little judicious encouragement. The results, it is expected, would be repression and reprisal. It seems that a lenient native policy does not please everybody." [Pg 127]

This time Dom Clemente nodded with the twinkle a trifle plainer in his eyes. "There are, one may admit, certain trading gentlemen in this city who do not like it, but I will tell you a secret," he said. "There are also a few well meaning people of some influence in my country who can not be brought to believe that commercial interests should count for everything. They seem to consider one has a certain responsibility towards the negro. I do not say how far my views coincide with theirs. That may become apparent some day. But the second rising?"

"Will, at least, be genuine, and, I almost fancy, formidable. It is a little curious that the people who are most interested in the other do not seem to foresee it. It may break upon them before they are quite ready with the bogus one."

Dom Clemente smoked out his cigarette before he answered, and then he waved one of his hands.

"Now and then," he said, "things happen that way. Perhaps, the Powers who direct our little comedy can smile on occasion. At least, we frequently afford them the opportunity. It is certain that there is no fool like the over-cunning man. But we will talk of something else. In the meantime, and while you stay here, you will consider this house of mine your home, and those in it your friends and servants."

"Thanks," said Ormsgill. "And when I go away?"

His host made a little gesture. "Then it will depend upon where you go and what you do. We may be friends still, or our ideas of what is expected from us may render that impossible. Perhaps, it is unfortunate when one has any ideas upon that point at all. Still, that is a subject one must leave to the priests and those who reckon our work up afterwards. Being simply a soldier, I do not know." [Pg 128]

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CHAPTER XI

DESMOND VENTURES A HINT

It was blowing hard, and the deluge which had blotted out the dingy daylight and beaten flat the white spouting along the hammered beach had just ceased suddenly when Desmond lay upon a settee at the head of the *Palestrina's* companion stairway. Though the long, sandy point to the north of her afforded a partial shelter, she was rolling savagely with a half-steam ready and two anchors down. Desmond had wedged himself fast with his feet against the balustrade, but he found it somewhat difficult to remain where he was, and the little room was uncomfortably hot, though one door and the lee ports were open. The two that looked forward were swept by spray that beat on them like a shot, and overhead funnel-guy and wire rigging screamed in wild arpeggios under the impact of the muggy gale.

The *Palestrina's* owner was, however, used to that. It rains and blows somewhat hard on that coast at certain seasons, and he had lain there several weeks growling at the heat and the weather, for he was also one of the men who can keep a promise. Just then he had an unlighted pipe and a letter which he had received from Las Palmas a month earlier in one hand. It was from an Englishman he had brought out to Grand Canary, and though its contents did not directly concern him he had given it a good deal of thought once or twice already. His forehead grew a trifle furrowed as he opened it again. [Pg 130]

"We have been wondering what Lister came back for, and the general notion is that you had had enough of him," said his friend. "In any case, he seems quite content with Las Palmas, and the British colony are watching his proceedings with quiet interest. After cleaning out several Spaniards at the casino he has apparently devoted himself to Miss Ratcliffe's service. It is not evident that he receives a great deal of encouragement from the lady herself, but her mother is ostentatiously gracious to him. She may have a purpose in this."

Desmond crumpled the letter in one hand. "Crosbie always was a—tattler, but it's more than

possible that he's right," he said. Then he sighed. "And I put Lister on board the mail-boat and sent him there! If I'd only known what the result would be I'd have drowned him."

He lay still for another few moments filling his pipe, and then flung the tobacco pouch across the room, for a sojourn off those beaches would probably try the temper of most white men, and the Hibernian nature now and then came uppermost in him.

"Damp," he said. "Reeking, dripping, putrid, like everything else on this forlorn coast! It would be a boon to humanity if somebody bought the besotted continent and scuttled it."

He rose to his feet as a man in bedraggled white uniform appeared in the doorway.

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"You were speaking, sir?" he said.

"I was," said Desmond. "I suggested that it was a pity somebody couldn't torpedo this benighted continent. Any word from the men you sent ashore?"

"They've signaled from the rise," said the *Palestrina's* mate. "No sign of him yet. I don't expect them off until to-morrow. The surf's running steep." Desmond made a gesture of concurrence as he glanced at the filmy spray-cloud that drove like smoke up the wet and glistening beach. It was flung aloft by a wild white welter of crumbling seas, and he realized that the boat's crew who had gone ashore could not rejoin the *Palestrina* before the morning, at least. They went every day to watch for a lumbering ox team or a band of carriers plodding seaward across the littoral, and it seemed they had once more signaled that there was no sign of either. Then he moved towards the door bareheaded, with only an unbuttoned duck jacket over his thin singlet, and the mate ventured a deprecatory protest.

"She's throwing it over her in sheets forward," he said.

Desmond disregarded him, and staggering clear of the deck-house stood with feet spread well apart gazing at the stretch of leaden sea while, as the *Palestrina's* bows went up, the spray that whirled in over her weather rail wet him to the skin. He saw the livid tops of the combers that rolled by the point and heard the jarring cables ring, and then turned his eyes shorewards and gazed across the waste of misty littoral.

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"It's a cheerful place, but now and then you feel you might get to like it," he said. "Perhaps it's the uncertainty as to when the fever will get you that gives living here a zest. When you come to think of it, some of us have curious notions."

He appeared to be considering the point as they edged back under the lee of the deck-house, and the mate grinned.

"The men don't take kindly to it, sir," he said. "They've been worrying me lately as to how long we're stopping here."

"A week," said Desmond. "Ormsgill's time is running out, and he'll be here or send us word by then. He said he would, and what that man says you can count on being done."

Something in his tone suggested that the question might be considered as closed, and they discussed other matters while the deck heaved and slanted under them until a man forward flung up an arm and turned towards them with a cry which the wind swept away. In another moment Desmond scrambled half-way up the bridge ladder, and clung there with the mate close beneath him gazing at the white welter where the seas swept by the point. There was a sail just outshore of it, a little strip of gray canvas that appeared and vanished amidst the serried ranks of tumbling combers. It drew out of them and drove furiously towards the *Palestrina*, and when a strip of white hull grew into visibility beneath it Desmond looked down at his mate.

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"A big surf-boat. It's Ormsgill," he said.

There was certainty in his tone, as well as a little ring of satisfaction which was, perhaps, warranted, for it is, after all, something to be the friend of a man who does just what he has promised and never arrives too late. In the meanwhile the object they were watching had grown into a bellying lug-sail that reeled to lee and to weather with the sea streaming from the foot of it, and a patch of foam-swept hull. The boat came on furiously, and when the mate sprang from the ladder roaring orders Desmond could see three or four black figures through the spray that whirled over her. There was also another man in white garments standing upright in her stern, and Desmond was wholly sure of his identity. Then she was lost for awhile, and only swept into sight again abreast of the *Palestrina's* dipping bows, hove high with half her length lifted out of the crest of a breaking sea.

She drove forward with it, the foam standing half a man's height above her stern and the foot of the slanted lug-sail washing in the brine, while a bent white figure struggled with the great steering oar. She swooped like a toboggan plunging down an icy slide when she was level with the *Palestrina's* bridge, and some of the men who watched her from the latter's rail held their breath as the smoking sea passed on and another gathered itself together astern of her. The helmsman, they knew, must bring the dripping, half-swamped boat on the wind to reach the strip of lee beneath the steamer's stern, and when he did it there was every prospect of her rolling over.

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In another moment several black objects rose and grappled with the lug-sail sheet, and the big boat tilted until all one side of her was in the air. Then she went up in the midst of a white

spouting as the slope of water behind fell upon her. Still, the slanted lug-sail rose out of it, and then came down thrashing furiously while naked black figures half-seen in the spray bent from her gunwale with swinging paddles as she drove towards the *Palestrina's* quarter. After that there was a hoarse shouting, and the lines flew from the reeling taffrail as she slid under the steamer's stern.

In another minute or two Ormsgill swung himself on board through the gangway. He had no hat, and the water ran from him, but he shook hands with Desmond unconcernedly.

"Ask them to hand that fellow up," he said pointing to a man who sat huddled in the water that swirled up and down inside the plunging boat. "We took rather a heavy one over two or three hours ago, and he brought up on the after thwart when the big oar jumped its crutch. As he's the only Kroo among them, I took the helm myself after that. I don't fancy he has broken anything."

Desmond hustled him into the deck-house when the negro had been brought on deck and the dripping boat rode astern, and an hour later he sat at dinner with his comrade in the little white saloon. Darkness had closed down in the meanwhile, and the lamp that swung above their heads flung a soft light across the table, where dainty glassware and silver glittered on the snowy cloth. Ormsgill smiled as he glanced at it and the glowing blotch of color in his wine glass. [Pg 135]

"After all, this kind of thing has its advantages, especially when one has been accustomed to squatting in the wood smoke over a calabash of palm oil or some other unhallowed nigger compound," he said. "It's a trifle pleasant to wear clothes that fit you, too. Father Tiebout's and those Dom Clemente lent me didn't. I had to cut the wrists off the latter's jacket."

Desmond looked at him reflectively over his cigar, for he had something to say, and was a trifle uncertain as to how he should set about it.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it is nice for a while, especially, as you say, when it's a change. The point is, would it satisfy you long?"

"A dinner like this one is generally acceptable."

"We'll admit it. The trouble is that these civilized comforts are apt to cost you something. I mean one has usually to give up something else for the sake of them. You begin to understand?"

"I'm not sure that I do," said Ormsgill. "I'll ask you to go on."

Desmond laughed, though he did not feel quite at ease. He remembered the letter in his pocket, and felt that there was a responsibility on him, and that was a thing which, inconsequent as he was, he seldom shrank from. This was not a man who talked about his duty; in fact, any reference to the subject usually roused in him a sense of opposition. He contented himself with doing it when he recognized it, and since singleness of purpose is not invariably an efficient substitute for mental ability, it was not altogether his fault when at times he did it clumsily. There was also a subtle bond between him and the man who sat opposite him. Affection was not the right term, and it was more than *camaraderie*, an elusive something that could not be defined and was yet in their case a compelling force. [Pg 136]

"Well," he said, "those quagmires and forests up yonder appeal to you. It's a little difficult for any reasonable person to see why they should, but they certainly do. So does the sea. The love of it's in both of us."

He stopped with a lifted hand, and, for the ports were open, Ormsgill heard the deep rumble of the eternal surf on the hammered beach. He also heard the onward march of the white hosts of tumbling seas, and the shrill scream of the wire rigging singing to the gale. It was the turmoil of the elemental conflict that must rage in one form or another by sea and in the wilderness while the world endures, and there is a theme in its clashing harmonies that stirs the hearts of men. Ormsgill felt the thrill of it, and Desmond's eyes glistened.

"Lord," he said, "we're curiously made. What in the name of wonder is it that appeals to us in driving a swamping surf-boat over those combers, or standing on the bridge ramming her full speed into it with the green seas going over her forward and everything battened down? Still, there is something. While we can do that kind of thing we can't stay at home."

Ormsgill smiled curiously. He was acquainted with some of the characteristics of the wild Celtic strain, and knew that his comrade now and then let himself go. "I think," he said, "considering where you come from, you should understand it more readily than I can do." [Pg 137]

"You're not exempt," said Desmond, "you cold-blooded Saxons. What did you run that boat down the coast under the whole lug-sail for when she'd have gone nearly dry with two reefs tied down?"

"I don't know. Still, she lost the wind in the hollows. One had to keep her ahead of the seas."

Desmond laughed scornfully. "Is that it? When the boy went down with the breath knocked out of him as she took in a green sea, something came over you as you grabbed the steering oar. You went suddenly crazy, fighting crazy. You'd have rolled her over or run her under before you tied a reef in."

He stopped a moment, and made a little gesture as of one throwing something away. "Still, you'll have to give all that up when you marry and settle down, though it's a little difficult to imagine

you going round in a frock coat and tight patent boots, growing fat, and overfeeding yourself like a—Strasburg goose. I suppose it is your intention to be married some day?"

"I believe it is," said Ormsgill quietly.

Desmond laid down his cigar and looked at him. "Well, I may be on dangerous ground, but when I get steam up I seldom allow a thing like that to influence me. Anyway, I've been worrying over you lately. The question is—are you going to marry the right girl, one who would take you as you are and encourage you to be more so? It isn't every woman who could put up with a man of your kind, but there are a few."

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His comrade's expression might have warned another man, but Desmond went on.

"I don't know if my views are worth anything, and some of my friends doubt it, but you shall have them. After all, the matter's rather an important one. The wife for you is one who would sympathize with your notions even if she knew they were crazy ones, because they were yours, and when they led you into lumber, as such notions generally do, stand beside you smiling to face the world and the devil. There are such women. I've met one or two."

There was silence for a moment or two when he stopped, and Ormsgill, gazing straight before him with vacant eyes, saw a dark-eyed girl with dusky hair and a face of the pale ivory tint sitting where the moonlight streamed in between a colonnade of slender pillars. As it happened, Desmond saw her, too, and sighed. Then Ormsgill seemed to rouse himself.

"I am," he said, "going to marry Miss Ratcliffe, as I think you must be quite aware."

Desmond could have laughed. He fancied that it would have been almost warranted, but he laid a restraint upon himself. "Then," he said, "if you have both made up your minds and the thing is settled what in the name of wonder are you wandering about Africa for? The fact that you like it doesn't count. Why don't you go back—now—to her? It would be considerably wiser."

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Ormsgill looked at him with half-closed eyes. "I'll have to ask you to speak plainly."

"I'll try," and Desmond made a little deprecatory gesture. "There are women it isn't wise to leave too long alone. They were not made to live that way, and if they find it insupportable you can't blame them. How many years is it since Miss Ratcliffe has had more than a few weeks of your company, and is it natural that a young woman should be quietly content while the man she is to marry wanders through these forests endeavoring to throw his life away? Besides that, the thing might very possibly not commend itself to her mother."

The lines grew a trifle deeper on Ormsgill's forehead, and his eyes were grave. "I have," he said, "been a little afraid of what her mother might do myself."

"Then why don't you go across to Grand Canary and make sure she doesn't try to influence the girl? Isn't it only reasonable that she should expect you to be there and save her all unpleasantness in case of anything of that kind happening?"

Ormsgill said nothing for several minutes, but it was borne in upon his comrade that his efforts had been thrown away. He had, however, after all, not expected them to be successful. At length Ormsgill spoke quietly.

"I can't go," he said. "Domingo has carried those boys away into the interior and I pledged myself that they should go home when their time was up. As it is, unless I can take them from him they will be driven to death in a few years. For that, I think, I should be held responsible."

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He rose with a little sigh. "Dick," he said, "I have this thing to do, and even if it costs me a good deal it must be done. I am going back inland, and may be three or four months away. You can't stay here. After all, I don't know that I shall have much difficulty in getting the boys out of the country when I come down again."

Desmond smiled. "I may go to Las Palmas or Madeira, but I'll be here when you want me. We can fix that later. It seems to me I've said quite enough to-night."

Then they went up the companion, and Ormsgill talked of other matters as they sat under the lee of the deck-house, and watched the white seas sweep out of the darkness and vanish into it again.

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CHAPTER XII

LISTER OFFERS SATISFACTION

Desmond's informant had, as it happened, been quite warranted in mentioning that Lister's proceedings had aroused the interest of the English colony in Las Palmas. He provided those who belonged to it with something to talk about as they lounged on the hotel verandas, which was a cause for gratification, since a good many of them had no more profitable occupation. That dusty

city has, like others in the south, distractions to offer the idler with liberal views, though a certain proportion of them are of distinctly doubtful character. There are also in it gentlemen of easy morality who are willing to act as cicerone to the stranger with means, that is, provided he possesses a generous disposition. Spaniards of the old régime call them the *Sin Verguenza*, "men without shame," and there are one or two coarsely forceful Anglo-Saxon terms that might be aptly applied to them. It is, unfortunately, a fact that there are Englishmen among them.

Lister, who was young, and had never imposed much restraint upon himself, profited by the opportunities they provided him. He had the command of more money than was, perhaps, desirable, and for several weeks the pace he made was hot. He was naturally preyed upon and victimized, though, after all, the latter happened less frequently than those who watched his proceedings supposed. The lad was carelessness and generous, but there was a certain shrewdness in him as well as a vein of cold British stubbornness which made him a trifle difficult to handle when once his dislike was aroused. Indeed, one or two of his acquaintances fancied he had not gone so very deep in the mire, after all. How much Mrs. Ratcliffe knew about his doings did not appear. One desires to be charitable, and since Major Chillingham had gone back to England, it is possible, though far from likely, that she had not heard of them at all. In any case, she took him up, and was gracious to him in a motherly fashion, and there was suddenly a change in him.

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Lister henceforward spent his evenings at the hotel, generally near the piano when Ada Ratcliffe sang. He also planned excursions for her and her mother to little palm-shrouded villages among the volcanic hills, and, since there was nobody who understood exactly how Miss Ratcliffe stood with regard to the man who had gone to Africa, the onlookers chuckled, and said that the girl's mother was a clever woman. She said that Lister was a very likable young man, who had no mother of his own, which was always a misfortune, and that it was almost a duty to look after him.

It was, in any case, one she discharged efficiently, and for a time his former companions had very little of Lister's company. Several of them were also sorry he had, apparently, as the result of their persistent efforts to undermine her authority, flung off the restraints Mrs. Ratcliffe had gradually imposed on him when at last he spent a night with them again.

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They had reasonable cause for dissatisfaction when they sat in a certain *caffee* which stood near the cathedral. The latter fact has a significance for those acquainted with Spanish cities, but, after all, the Church is needed most where sinners abound. The *caffee* had wide unglazed windows, and clear moonlight streamed down into the hot, unsavory street, which under that pure radiance looked for once curiously clean and white. Tall limewashed walls rose above it, and, for the flat roofs lay beneath their crests, cut against the strip of velvety indigo, while a little cool breeze swept between them with a welcome freshness. There was no gleam of light behind any of the green lattices that broke their flat monotony and, save for the deep rumble of the surf, the city was very still. Once a measured tramp of feet rang across the flat roofs and indicated that two of the armed *civiles* were patrolling a neighboring *calle* where the principal shops stand, but their business would not take them near the *caffee*. It is, in fact, not often that authority obtrudes itself unadvisedly into certain parts of most Spanish towns.

The moonlight also streamed into the *caffee* where a big lamp in which the oil was running low burned dimly. The table beneath it was stained with cheap red wine, and a good many bottles stood upon it among a litter of Spanish cards. Four men sat about it, and two more lounged upon the settee which ran along the discolored wall. The place was filled with tobacco smoke and the sickly odor of anisado, which was, however, no great disadvantage, since the natural reek of a Spanish Alsatia is more unpleasant still. The men had been there four or five hours when Lister flung down a card and noisily pushed back his chair. His face was a trifle flushed, and his hands were not quite steady, but his half-closed eyes were, as one or two of the others noticed, almost unpleasantly calm. There was a pile of silver at his side on the table, for he had, as the red-faced English skipper opposite him had once or twice observed, been favored with an astonishing run of luck. It is, however, possible that the skipper did not go quite far enough. Lister had certainly been fortunate, but he had also a nice judgment in such matters, and his nerve was unusually good. He looked round at his companions with a little dry smile.

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"You should have left me alone," he said. "I didn't want to come here, but when you insisted I did it to oblige you. As you pointed out, considering what I took out of some of you on another occasion, it seemed the fair thing. Now I hope you're satisfied."

He indicated the pile of silver with a little wave of his hand, and the others, among whom there were two Englishmen beside the skipper, waited in some astonishment, with very little sign of content in their faces, until he went on again.

"Well," he said, "I'm still willing to do the fair thing, though, while I don't wish to be unduly personal, that is a point which has evidently not caused one or two of you any undue anxiety. You can explain that, Walters, to the Spanish gentlemen, though I don't altogether confine my remarks to them."

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An Englishman straightened himself suddenly, and one of the Spaniard's eyes flashed when the man Lister turned to did his bidding. Lister, however, grinned at them.

"The question," he said, "is simply do you feel I owe you any further satisfaction, or have you had enough? I want you to understand that I'm never coming here again, and if you care to double the stakes I'll play you another round."

There was no doubt that they had had enough, and while three of them might have taken another hand with a view to getting back the pile of silver by certain means they were acquainted with they refrained, perhaps because they felt that the man called Walters and the burly steamboat skipper would in case of necessity stand by Lister. The silence that lasted a moment or two grew uncomfortable, but it did not seem to trouble Lister, who sat still looking at them with a little sardonic smile.

"Well," he said, "it's evident that you don't expect anything more from me. Will you and Captain Wilson come with me, Walters?"

He rose when the men addressed reached out for their hats, and then clapped his hands until a girl came in. She was very young, and looked jaded, which was not particularly astonishing considering that she had been keeping the party supplied with refreshment for more than half the night. The smudgy patches of powder on it emphasized the weariness of her olive-tinted face, but there was for all that a certain suggestion of daintiness and freshness about her which was not what one would have expected in such surroundings.

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Lister stood looking at her with half-closed eyes, while the others watched them both until he made a little abrupt gesture.

"It is not you, but your father, the patron, the man who owns this place, I want, but you can stop here and call him," he said in a half-intelligible muddle of Castilian and Portuguese.

Walters made it a little plainer, and the girl spread out her hands. "The patron does not live here," she said. "My father, he is only in charge."

"Call him!" said Lister.

The man came in, and his dark eyes as well as those of all the others were fixed expectantly on Lister when he once more turned to the girl.

"You like waiting on and singing for these pigs?" he asked.

Walters rendered the word *puerco*, which is not a complimentary term in Spain, but the men it was applied to forgot to resent it in their expectancy. A flicker of color swept into the girl's face, and it was evident that her task was not a congenial one. She was, however, about to retreat when Lister raised his hand in protest, and turned to the man.

"What do you mean," he said, "by keeping a girl of that kind in a place like this?"

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Again Walters translated, and the little flicker of color grew a trifle plainer in the girl's olive-tinted cheek. One could have fancied that she had suddenly realized how others might regard her occupation and surroundings. The man, however, spread his hands out.

"It is certainly not what one would wish for her, and she would be a modista," he said. "But what would you—when one is very poor?"

Lister caught up a double handful of the silver which still lay upon the table and signed to the girl.

"That should make it a little easier. It's for you," he said. "If it is not enough you can let me know. You will go and learn to make hats and dresses to-morrow. If your father makes any more objections I'll send the little fat priest after him. You know the one I mean. He has a cross eye and likes a good dinner as well as any man. He is a friend of mine."

The others gazed at Lister in blank astonishment when Walters made this clear, until the Spaniard became suddenly profuse. Lister, however, disregarded him, and picking up the rest of the silver turned towards the door. He went out, and Walters looked at him curiously when he stopped and stood still a moment, apparently reflecting, with the moonlight on his face. The combativeness with which he had regarded his gaming companions had faded out of it, and left it, as it usually was, heavy and inanimate. Lister was skillful at games of chance, where his impassiveness served him well, but Walters fancied he was by no means likely to shine at anything else. He was a young man of no mental capacity, and his tastes were not refined, but there was hidden in his dull nature a germ of the rudimentary chivalry which now and then rouses such men as he was to deeds which astonish their friends. It had lain inert until the dew of a beneficent influence had rested on it, and then there was a sudden growth that was to result in the production of unlooked for fruit. Because of the love he bore one woman he had become compassionate, and, perhaps, it did not matter greatly that she was unworthy, since the gracious impulse was merely brought him by, and not born of, the reverence he had for her. After all, its source was higher than that. It was, however, not to be expected that he should realize such a fact, and he stood wrinkling his brows as though ruminating over his proceedings, until he became conscious that his companion was looking at him inquiringly.

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"I don't know what made me do that," he said. "It's quite certain I wouldn't have thought of it a month or two ago."

"No," said Walters, a trifle drily, "one would not have expected it from you. Still, you have made a few changes lately. What has come over you?"

Lister did not answer him. "If that blamed ass of a skipper means to stop I'm not going to wait for him. He'll get a knife slipped into him some night and it will serve him right," he said. "We'll get

out of this place. Once we strike the big calle it will be fresher."

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They strode on down the hot, stale smelling street, and Lister appeared to draw in a deep breath of relief when they turned into the broad road that runs close by the surf-swept beach to the harbor. Though there were tall white stores and houses on its seaward side the night breeze swept down it exhilaratingly fresh and cool, and Lister bared his hot forehead to it.

"Well," he said, "I've been down among the swine in a number of places, and, though I suppose it sometimes falls out differently, I've scratched some of the bristles off a few of them. Now I want to forget the tricks they've taught me. You see, I'm never going back to any of the—stys again. It's a thing I owe myself and somebody else."

He had certainly consumed a good deal of wine, but it was clear that he was fully in command of his senses, and Walters endeavored to check his laugh as comprehension suddenly dawned upon him. Still, he was not quite successful, and his companion turned on him.

"I meant it," he said. "There'll probably be trouble between us if you attempt to work off any of your assinine witticisms."

Walters said nothing. He had seen his companion calmly insult four men whose dollars he had pocketed, and he did not consider it advisable to explain what he thought about Mrs. Ratcliffe and the interest she had taken in his friend. Still, like most of the English residents who had made her acquaintance, he had his views upon the subject. Lister was, at least, rich enough to make a desirable son-in-law, and if he fancied it was essential that he should reform before he offered himself as a candidate there was nothing to be gained by undeceiving him.

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They walked on until they left the tall white houses and little rows of flat-topped dwellings that replaced them behind, and the dim, dusty road stretched away before them with a filmy spray-cloud and glistening Atlantic heave on one side of it. Lister glanced at the fringe of crumbling combers with slow appreciation.

"In one way that's inspiriting," he said. "I might have sat and watched them half the evening from the veranda of the hotel. In that case I'd have had a clearer head and been considerably fresher to-morrow. Still, those hogs would have me out. It's a consolation to realize that it has cost them something."

Walters stopped when they reached the hotel and glanced at his companion. "Aren't you going in?" he said. "You could still get a little sleep before it's breakfast time."

"No," said Lister simply, "I'm going for a swim. It's no doubt an assinine notion, but the smell of the sty seems to cling to me."

Walters laughed. "Is that a custom you mean to adopt invariably after a night of this kind?"

"No," said Lister. "It won't be necessary. You see there will never be another one."

They went on, and Walters sat down on the little mole not far away while his comrade stripped off his thin attire. Then Lister stood a moment, gleaming white in the moonlight, a big, loose-limbed figure, on the head of the mole before he went down with flung-out hands and stiffened body into the cool Atlantic swell. It closed about him glittering, and he was well out in the harbor when he came up again and slid away down the blaze of radiance with left arm swinging. The chill of the deep sea water, at least, cooled his slightly fevered skin, and, perhaps, there was something in his half pagan fancy that it also washed a stain off him. In any case, the desire to escape from the most unusual sense of contamination was a wholesome one.

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CHAPTER XIII

HIS BENEFICENT INFLUENCE

There is a certain aldea, a little straggling village of flat-topped houses, among the black volcanic hills of Grand Canary which has like one or two others of its kind a good deal to offer the discerning traveler who will take the trouble to visit it. It is certainly a trifle difficult to reach, which is, perhaps, in one sense not altogether a misfortune, since the Englishmen and Englishwomen who visit that island in the winter seldom leave such places exactly as they find them. One goes up by slippery bridle paths on horse or mule back over hot sand and wastes of dust and ashes into a rift between the hills, and when once the tremendous gateway of fire-rent rock has been passed discovers that it costs one an effort to go away again.

In the bottom of the barranco lie maize-fields and vines. Tall green palms fling streaks of shadow over them, and close beneath the black crags stands a little ancient church and odd cubes of lava houses tinted with delicate pink or ochre or whitewashed dazzlingly. They nestle among their fig trees shut in by tall aloes, and oleanders, and a drowsy quietness which is intensified by the murmur of running water pervades the rock-walled hollow. It is the stillness of a land where nothing matters greatly, and there is in it the essence of the resignation which regards haste and

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effort and protest as futile, that is characteristic of old world Spain, for Spain was never until lately bounded by the confines of the Peninsula.

Las Palmas down beside the smoking beach is no longer Spanish. It is filled with bustle and a rampant commercialism, and English is spoken there; but the quietness of the ages lingers among the hills where the grapes of Moscatel are still trodden in the winepress by barelegged men in unstarched linen who live very much as one fancies the patriarchs did, plowing with oxen and wooden plows, and beating out their corn on wind-swept threshing floors. They also comport themselves, even towards the wandering Briton, who does not always deserve it, with an almost stately courtesy, and seldom trouble themselves about the morrow. All that is essentially Spanish is Eastern, too. The life in the hill puebllos is that portrayed in the Jewish scriptures, and the olive-skinned men whose forefathers once ruled half the world have also like the Hebrew the remembrance of their departed glory to sadden them.

It is, however, scarcely probable that any fancies of this kind occurred to Mrs. Ratcliffe as she lay in a somewhat rickety chair under a vine-draped pergola outside a pink-washed house in that aldea one afternoon. She was essentially modern, and usually practical, in which respects Ada, who sat not far away, was not unlike her. A man, at least, seldom expects to find the commercial instinct and a shrewd capacity for estimating and balancing worldly advantages in a young woman of prepossessing appearance with innocent eyes, which is, perhaps, a pity, since it now and then happens that the fact that she possesses a reasonable share of both of them is made clear to him in due time. Then it is apt to cause him pain, for man being vain prefers to believe that it is personal merit that counts for most where he is concerned.

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Ada Ratcliffe was listening to the drowsy splash of falling water, and looking down through the rocky gateway over tall palms and creeping vines, blackened hillslopes, and gleaming sands, on the vast plain of the Atlantic which lay, a sheet of turquoise, very far below. Above her, tremendous fire-rent pinnacles ran up into the upper sweep of ethereal blue, but all this scarcely roused her interest. She had seen it already, and had said it was very pretty. Besides, she was thinking of other things which appealed to her considerably more, a London house, an acknowledged station in smart society, and the command of money. These were things she greatly desired to have, and it was evident that Thomas Ormsgill could only offer her them in a certain measure. It was, in some respects, only natural that her mother should set a high value on them too, and desire them for her daughter. She had made a long and gallant fight against adverse circumstances since her husband died, and there was in her face the hardness of one who has more than once been almost beaten. There were, she knew, women who would freely give themselves with all that had been given them to the man they loved, but Mrs. Ratcliffe had never had much sympathy with them. It was, she felt, a much more sensible thing to make a bargain, and secure something in return.

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Still, nobody would have fancied that Ada Ratcliffe had any such ideas just then. Her face was quietly tranquil, and the pose she had fallen into in the big basket chair was, if not quite unstudied, a singularly graceful one. In her hands lay a Spanish fan, a beautiful, costly thing of silk and feathers and fretted ebony which Lister had given her a few days earlier. He sat on a block of lava watching her with a little significant gleam that she was perfectly conscious of in his usually apathetic eyes. Still, though he had a heavy face of the kind one seldom associates with self-restraint, there was nothing in his expression which could have jarred upon a woman of the most sensitive temperament. There were not many things which Albert Lister had much reverence for, but during the last few weeks a change had been going on in him, and it was a blind, unreasoning devotion which none of his friends would have believed him capable of that he offered this girl.

His pleasures had been coarse ones, and there was much in him that she might have shrunk from, but he had, at least, of late fought with the desires of his lower nature, and, for the time being, trampled on one or two of them. Slow of thought, and of very moderate intelligence, as he was, he had yet endeavored to purge himself of grossness before he ventured into her presence. He had not spoken for awhile when Mrs. Ratcliffe turned to him.

"You were not in the drawing-room last night," she said, and her manner subtly conveyed the impression that she had expected him. "No doubt you had something more interesting on hand?"

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"No," said Lister slowly, "I don't think I had. In fact, I was playing cards!"

Mrs. Ratcliffe was a trifle perplexed, for she had now and then ventured to express her disapproval of one or two of his favorite distractions in a motherly fashion, and she could not quite understand his candor. It was, perhaps, natural that she should not credit him with a simple desire for honesty, since this was a motive which would not have had much weight with her.

"Ah," she said, with an air of playful reproach, "everybody plays cards nowadays, and I suppose one must not be too hard on you. Still, I think you know what my views are upon that subject."

They were scarcely likely to be very charitable ones, since she owed her own long struggle to the fact that there were few forms of gaming her husband had not unsuccessfully experimented with, and she continued feelingly, "If one had no graver objections, it is apt to prove expensive."

Lister laughed a little. "It proved so—to the other people—last night, but I think you are right. In fact, it's scarcely likely I'll touch a card again. In one way,"—and he appeared to reflect laboriously, "it's a waste of life."

His companions were both a trifle astonished. They had scarcely expected a sentiment of this kind from him, and though the elder lady would probably not have admitted it, gaming did not appear to her so objectionable a thing provided that one won and had the sense to leave off when that was the case. Ada Ratcliffe, however, smiled.

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"To be candid, one would hardly have fancied you would look at it in that light," she said. "Still, you seem to have been changing your views lately."

"I have," said the man slowly, with a faint flush in his heavy face. "After all, one comes to look at these things differently, and I dare say those fellows are right who lay it down that one ought to do something for his country or his living. Once I had the opportunity, but I let it go, or rather I flung it away. I often wish I hadn't, but I'm not quite sure it's altogether too late now."

He spoke with an awkward diffidence, for though he was very young, ideas of this kind were quite new to him. The love of the girl he looked at appealingly had stirred his slow coarse nature, and something that had sprung up in its depths was growing towards the light. It might have grown to grace and beauty had the light been a benignant one, for, after all, it is not upon the soil alone that growth of any kind depends. Ada Ratcliffe, however, did not recognize in the least that this laid upon her a heavy responsibility.

"No," she said with an encouraging smile, "there is no reason why you shouldn't make a career yet. I almost think you could if you wanted to."

It was a bold assertion, but she made it unblushingly, and Lister appeared to consider.

"There are not many things I'm good at—that is, useful ones," he said. "You have to be able to talk sensibly, anyway, before you can make your mark at politics, and some of them don't do it under twenty years."

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He stopped for a moment with a little sigh. "Still, I suppose there must be something worth while for one to do, even if it's not exactly what one would like."

"One's duty is usually made clear to one," said Mrs. Ratcliffe encouragingly.

"Well," said Lister, "I'm not sure it is, though it's probably his own fault if he doesn't want to recognize it. As I mentioned, you can look at the same thing differently. There was Desmond's friend Ormsgill. A little while ago I thought he was a trifle crazy. Now I begin to see it's a big thing he's doing, something to look back on afterwards even if he never does anything worth while again."

He saw the faint flush of color in Ada Ratcliffe's face, though he did not in the least understand it. There was a good deal this man could give her, and she knew that he would in due time press it upon her, but she was naturally aware that his mental capacity was painfully small. This made the fact that he should look upon Ormsgill's errand as one a man could take pride in a reproach to her. Mrs. Ratcliffe's face was, however, if anything, expressive of anxiety, for she had asked herself frequently if Lister could by any chance have heard that the girl's pledge to Ormsgill had never been retracted. She did not think he had, but this was a point it was well to be sure upon.

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"I didn't think you had met him," she said.

"I haven't. You see, I stayed behind in Madeira while the *Palestrina* came on, and when I got here Ormsgill had gone. Desmond told me about him. I understood he was to marry somebody when he had done his errand, though, if he knew, Desmond never mentioned who she was."

He stopped, and Mrs. Ratcliffe sighed with sheer relief when he turned and looked eastwards towards Africa across the vast stretch of sea with a vague longing in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "when he comes back again he will have done something that should make the girl look up to him."

Again the flicker of color crept into Ada Ratcliffe's cheek, for she was conscious just then of a curious resentment against the man who had gone to Africa for an idea. It was singularly galling that a man of Lister's caliber should make her ashamed. Still, she smiled at him.

"I believe we have all more than one opportunity, and another one will no doubt present itself," she said.

Lister sat still looking at her in a fashion she found almost embarrassing, and for a moment or two none of them spoke. Then there were footsteps on the lava blocks outside the pergola, and a man appeared in an opening between the vines. He was dressed in white duck, and his face was bronzed by wind and spray, while Mrs. Ratcliffe found it difficult to refrain from starting at the sight of him. He stood where he was for a moment looking at the group with grave inquiry, and Ada Ratcliffe felt that she hated him for the little smile of comprehension that crept into his eyes. Then he moved quietly forward, and Lister rose with a faint flush in his face.

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"I'm glad to see you, Desmond. I mean it, in spite of what passed the night you packed me off," he said.

It was an awkward meeting, though Lister was the only one whose embarrassment was noticeable. His companions were watching Desmond quietly, though Mrs. Ratcliffe was sensible that this was the last man she would have desired to see. He had come back from Africa and might spoil everything, for at the back of her mind she was not quite sure of her daughter. Still,

though it cost her an effort, she asked him a few questions.

"Ormsgill didn't want me for some time and I ran across for coal and other things. That coast isn't one it's judicious to stay on," he said, and looked at Ada steadily. "You will be pleased to hear that he was in excellent health—though he was still bent on carrying out his purpose—when he left me."

The girl's gesture was apparently expressive of relief, and Desmond who sat down on the lava parapet proceeded to relate what he knew of Ormsgill's projects and adventures. He felt the constraint that was upon all of them except Lister, whose embarrassment was rapidly disappearing, and though it afforded him certain grim satisfaction he talked to dissipate it.

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"We ran in this morning, and as the folks at the hotel told me you were here I came on," he said at length.

They asked him a few more questions, and it said a good deal for Mrs. Ratcliffe's courage that she invited him to stay there for comida and then to ride back to their hotel with them. Still it would, as she recognized, be useless to separate the men, since they would come across each other continually in Las Palmas, and she was one who knew that the boldest course is now and then the wisest. Desmond stayed, and it was some little time later when he sat alone with Lister among the tumbled lava by the watercourse. Feathery palm tufts drooped above them, and looking out between the fringed and fretted greenery they could see the blue expanse of sea. Beyond its sharp-cut eastern rim, as both of them were conscious, lay the shadowy land. Desmond turned from its contemplation and regarded his companion with a little smile.

"I heard a good deal about you in the hotel smoking room," he said. "I suppose I ought to compliment you on the possession of a certain amount of sense. Presumably you have now a motive for going steady?"

Lister flushed, but he met his companion's gaze without wavering. "As a matter of fact you are quite correct," he said. "Anyway, the motive is a sufficient one."

"Ah," said Desmond dryly, "it is in that case a lady, Miss Ratcliffe most probably? You no doubt recognize that she is several years older than you, and that it is more than possible her affections have been engaged before?"

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His companion resolutely straightened himself. "It isn't as a rule advisable to go too far, but I don't mind informing you that they are not engaged now."

"You seem sure," said Desmond with more than a trace of his former dryness. "She has presumably told you so?"

"She has not," said Lister. "That is, however, quite sufficient in itself, because if there had been anyone else with the slightest claim on her she and her mother would certainly have found means of making it clear to me."

Desmond saw the glint in the lad's eyes, and could not quite repress a little sardonic smile. What he had heard in the hotel had at first been almost incomprehensible to him, but, as he listened to what the men he met there had to tell, it became clear that Lister had in reality turned from his former courses. Then came his own admission that it was Ada Ratcliffe who had inspired him. Desmond could have found it a relief to laugh. The woman who, it seemed, was willing to throw over his comrade and break her pledge to him that she might be free to marry a richer man was the one who had stirred the lad to what was probably a stern and valiant encounter with his baser nature. It seemed that she could not even be honest with him.

"Am I to understand that you have made up your mind to marry Miss Ratcliffe?" he asked.

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"Yes," said Lister slowly, "I have; that is, if she will have me, which is doubtful. It is, however, in no sense your business, and you needn't trouble to remind me that it would be a very indifferent match for her."

Desmond sat still for several minutes, and thought as hard as he had in all probability ever done in his life. He had given Ormsgill a hint which had not been taken, and now he found it had been fully warranted, he had ventured on giving Lister another which had also been disregarded. The lad's faith in the woman who was deceiving both of them was evidently sincere and generous, as well as in one respect pitiable, and under the circumstances Desmond could not tell what course he ought to take. He was aware that the man who rashly meddles in his friends' affairs seldom either confers any real benefit upon them or earns their thanks, and he doubted if Lister would listen to any advice or information he might offer him. To say nothing meant that he must leave Mrs. Ratcliffe a free hand, but he had sufficient knowledge of that lady's capabilities to feel reasonably sure that she would succeed in marrying the girl to one of the men in spite of him. That being so, it seemed to him preferable that the one in question should not be his friend. Then he looked at Lister gravely.

"Well," he said, "I almost think she'll have you, and I'm not sure that you need worry yourself too much about not being good enough for her. That's a point you could be content with her mother's opinion on."

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He left the lad, and five minutes later came upon Ada Ratcliffe in the patio of the adjacent house. "You will make my excuses to your mother," he said. "After all, I think I had better ride back to

Las Palmas alone."

The girl met his eyes, but for a moment her face flushed crimson. She said nothing, and he quietly turned away, while in another few minutes she heard his horse stumbling down the slippery path beside the watercourse. When they reached the hotel that evening they were also told that he did not intend to live ashore while the yacht was in the harbor, which was a piece of information that afforded Mrs. Ratcliffe considerable relief.

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CHAPTER XIV

HERRERO'S IMPRUDENCE

Though it was, at least, as hot as it usually is at San Roque and the heavy, stagnant atmosphere made exertion of any kind impossible to a white man, Dom Erminio had not gone to sleep that afternoon, as he generally did. He had, after all, some shadowy notions of duty, and would now and then rouse himself to carry them out; that is, at least, when he stood to obtain some advantage by doing so. In this he was, perhaps, not altogether singular, since it is possible that there are other men who recognize a duty most clearly under similar circumstances. He lay in a low hung hammock where the veranda roof flung a grateful shadow over him, with a cigar in his hand, meditatively watching a row of half-naked negroes toiling in the burning sun, and the fashion in which he did so suggested that it afforded him a certain quiet satisfaction. He had grave objections to physical exertion personally, and as a rule succeeded in avoiding it, for there are, as he recognized, advantages in being a white man, in that country, at least. Dom Erminio invariably made the most of them.

It must be admitted that the negro is by no means addicted to toiling assiduously under scorching heat, especially when, as sometimes happens, he works for a white man who requisitions his services without any intention of rewarding him for them, but though the baked and trampled soil of the compound flung back an intolerable heat and glare, the half-naked men were diligent that afternoon. Dom Erminio had his shifty black eyes on them, and certain dusky men with sticks stood ready to spur the laggards to fresh endeavor. So while the sweat of strenuous effort dripped from them some trotted to and fro with baskets of soil upon their woolly heads and the rest plied saw and hammer persistently. They were strengthening the fort stockade and digging a ditch, and incidentally riveting the shackles of the white man's bondage more firmly on their limbs. The Commandant, or Chefe as he was usually called, appeared to recognize that fact, for he smiled a little as he watched them.

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By and by he turned and blinked at the forest which hemmed in the stockaded compound as with an impenetrable wall. It was dim and shadowy, even under that burning glare suggestively so, and he was aware that just then whispers of a coming rising were flying through its unlifting gloom, though the fact caused him no great concern. A few white friends of his were playing a game that has been played before in other regions, and he was quite willing to gain fresh renown as an administrator by the suppression of a futile rebellion. It is also possible that his friends looked for more tangible advantages, and would have been willing to offer him a certain share of them. That, however, is not quite a matter of certainty, and there were, at least, men in that country who said they regarded Dom Erminio as all an administrator ought to be. Perhaps he was, from their point of view.

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The Lieutenant Luiz, who had just come back from a native village with a handful of dusky soldiers and a band of carriers loaded with fresh provisions, sat in a basket chair close by, also regarding the stockade builders with a little smile. The natural reluctance of certain negroes to part with their possessions had occasioned him a good deal of trouble during the last few days. A negro who served as messenger stood waiting a few paces behind him.

"It is an advantage when one can teach the trek-ox to harness himself," he said reflectively. "I do not think those men like what they are doing. Every pile that they are driving makes our rule a little surer. It is not astonishing that some of them should be a trifle mutinous now and then."

"You had a difficulty about those provisions?" said Dom Erminio.

His companion laughed. "One would scarcely call it that. It was merely advisable to use the stick, and a hut or two was burnt. In times like the present one profits by a little judicious firmness."

"I think one could even go a trifle further than that."

Lieutenant Luiz made a little gesture. He had a certain shrewdness, and the Chefe was only cunning, which is, after all, a different thing from being clever. It seemed that Dom Erminio failed to recognize that it is always somewhat dangerous to play with fire. One can as a rule start a conflagration without much difficulty, but it is now and then quite another matter to put it out.

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"I am not sure," he said. "There are men in this country who seem to enjoy scattering sparks, and they are rather busy just now. It is, perhaps, not very hazardous when it is done judiciously and one knows there is only a little tinder here and there, but when one flings them broadcast it is

possible that two or three may fall on powder." He turned and stretched out a dainty, olive-tinted hand towards the forest. "After all, we do not know much about what goes on there."

"Bah!" said Dom Erminio, who had courage, at least, "if the blaze is a little larger than one expected what does it matter? The stockade will be a strong one."

His companion glanced at the gap in the row of well stiffened piles. "It would certainly be difficult to storm that gate, but these bushmen who are building the stockade will have the sense to realize it and tell their friends. If there is an attack it will not be made that way."

"Exactly!" and the Chefe's eyes twinkled as he waved a yellow hand. "It is a little idea that occurred to me while you were away. The bushmen would come by the rear of the stockade which we leave lower, and when they do I think we shall also be ready for them there. There are certain defenses which will be substituted when their friends have gone away again."

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They both laughed at this and neither of them said anything further for awhile until a negro swathed in white cotton strode out of the forest with a little stick in his hand. He was challenged by a sentry who sent him on, and presently stood on the veranda holding out the stick. Dom Erminio glanced at it languidly.

"Our injudicious friend Herrero has some word for us," he said. "He is a man who lets his dislikes run away with him, and he is not always wise in his messages." He stopped a moment with a little reflective smile. "Still, a message is always a difficulty in this part of Africa. If one teaches the messenger what he is to say he may tell it to somebody else, and it happens now and then that to write is not advisable. One must choose, however, and I wonder which our friend has done."

The man decided the question by holding out a strip of paper, and the Chefe who took it from him nodded as he read.

"It appears that Herrero is not pleased with the doings of the Englishman who is now in the bush country," he said. "Herrero seems to consider that he and a few others are capable of rousing all the ill will against us among the natives that is desirable, and I am almost tempted to believe that he is right in this. He is, however, imprudent enough to supply me with a few particulars which might with advantage have been made less explicit. He fancies we shall have a rebellion, and if we do not I almost think it will be no fault of his."

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"There is no doubt a little more," observed Lieutenant Luiz. "When that man writes a letter he has something to ask for."

The Commandant nodded. "It is in this case a thing we can oblige him in," he said. "It seems the crazy Englishman Ormsgill is causing trouble up yonder and inciting the natives to mutiny. Further, it is evidently his intention to deprive Domingo of some of the boys who have engaged themselves under him. The man is one who could, I think, be called dangerous. It is not a favor to Herrero, but a duty to place some check on him."

They looked at one another, and Dom Luiz grinned. "Ah," he said, "our imprudent friend no doubt mentions how it could most readily be done."

The Commandant raised one hand. "The thing is simple. You will start, we will say the day after to-morrow, with several men, and you will come upon Ormsgill in a village in Cavalho's country. Domingo, it seems, is there now, and it is expected that Ormsgill will attempt to take the boys from him, but this will cause no difficulty. The Headman, who is a friend of Domingo's will, if it appears advisable, disarm Ormsgill. The latter will no doubt not permit this to be done quietly, and it is possible that there will be a disturbance in the village, as the result of which you will arrest him for raiding natives under our protection. We shall know what to do when you bring him here."

They had, after sending Herrero's messenger away, spoken in Portuguese of which the negro who remained on the veranda understood no more than a word or two. He stood still, statuesque, with his white draperies flowing about his dusky limbs, and as disregarded by the white men as the native girl with the big bedizened fan who crouched in the shadowy doorway just behind them. Yet both had intelligence, and noticed that the Chefe instead of destroying the letter laid it carelessly on the edge of his hammock, from which it dropped when he raised himself a little. The girl's eyes glistened, but she said nothing, and the man moved slightly as though his pose had grown irksome. It was unfortunate that Dom Erminio had considered it advisable to keep him there waiting his pleasure, for when he stood still again he was a foot or two nearer the strip of paper than he had been a few moments earlier.

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Then the girl in the doorway rose, and the Chefe turned sharply in his hammock as a little haggard man in plain white duck walked quietly out of the house. He saw the question in the glance Dom Erminio flashed at his Lieutenant, and smiled as he seated himself in the nearest chair. Father Tiebout was always unobtrusive, and what he did was as a rule done very quietly, but he was quite aware that neither of the two white men were exactly pleased to see him.

"I came in from the east by the rear of the stockade where they are mending it," he said. "It was a little nearer. One would suppose that you did not see me."

The residency veranda, as is usual in that country, ran round the building, which had several doors and two stairways, and it was therefore perfectly natural that the priest should have arrived unnoticed, but the fact that he had done so was disconcerting just then, and it left the

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question how long he might have been in the house. Still, there were reasons why the Chefe could not ask it or treat his guest with any discourtesy.

"In any case you are welcome," he said. "There is presumably something I can do for you?"

Father Tiebout nodded. "A little matter," he said. "I was going to San Thome, and as my road led near the fort I thought I would mention it. My people have a complaint against the soldiers you lately sent into our neighborhood under the Sergeant Orticho. Some of them have been beaten."

"Dom Luiz will go over and look into it," said the Chefe. "That is, presently."

"Ah," said Father Tiebout, "then Dom Luiz is busy now? He will, no doubt, be at liberty in a day or two?"

It was not a question Dom Erminio wished to answer, and he waved his hand. "At the moment one cannot say. In the meanwhile you will make your complaint a little more definite."

He had apparently forgotten the messenger, but Father Tiebout had been quietly watching him, and now saw him stretch out a dusky foot towards the strip of paper which lay not far away. He touched it with a prehensile toe, and in another moment it had vanished altogether, though the man did not stand exactly where he had stood before. Lieutenant Luiz, as it happened, sat with his back to him, and Dom Erminio lay in his hammock where he could not see, but two people had noticed every motion, and though neither of them made any sign the dusky man was quite aware that the girl who had retired to one of the windows was watching him. About Father Tiebout he was far from certain, but he was a bold man, and turning a little away from him he stooped and apparently touched a scratch a thorn or broken grass stalk had made on his foot. When he straightened himself again there was, however, something in his hand. Then the Chefe appeared to remember him.

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"You will go back to the Lieutenant Castro," he said. "You can tell him there is no answer. Start to-morrow."

"It is a long journey," said the man. "I go back now."

Dom Erminio made a little gesture which seemed to indicate that it was a matter of indifference to him, and Father Tiebout put a check on his impatience. He had, as it happened, been in the house at least a minute before any one had noticed him, and was anxious for reasons of his own to discover what was in the letter. He did not know what the messenger meant to do with it, but he was aware that those entrusted with authority in that country were frequently at variance and spied on one another. It was possible that the man who could not read the note might expect to sell it.

Still, the missionary was one who seldom spoiled anything by undue haste, and he reflected that while he had traveled in a hammock leisurely the man was probably worn by a long journey, since San Roque lay at some distance from the camp where the officer the Chefe had mentioned was stationed then. So he supplied his hosts with particulars concerning his complaint, and then talked of other matters for an hour or more, and it was not until the comida was laid out that he set out on his journey. This was a somewhat unusual course in the case of a guest who had a long march still in front of him, but although the messenger, who might also have been expected to spend the night there, had evinced the same desire to get on his way, it never occurred to Dom Erminio to put the two facts together. There are, however, other cunning men who now and then fail to see a very obvious thing.

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Still, Father Tiebout did not go by the nearest way to San Thome, though he urged his hammock boys through the bush all night at their utmost speed. The path was smoothly trodden, and they had no great difficulty in following it through the drifting steam, while when the red sun leapt up and here and there a ray of brightness streamed down, they came upon a weary man who turned and stood still when he saw them. He made a little gesture of comprehension when the priest dropped from his hammock and looked at him.

Father Tiebout touched his shoulder and led him back a few paces into the bush. The man was big and muscular, as well as a pagan, but the priest had the letter when they came out again. He did not tell any one how he induced the messenger to part with it, but, as he now and then admitted, he was one who did not hesitate to use the means available. It was, in fact, a favorite expression of his, and, though he usually left the latter point an open question, in his case, at least, the results generally justified the means. He spoke a word or two sharply to the hammock boys, and they left the man sitting wearily beside the trail when they went on again.

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It was three weeks later when the priest in charge of the San Thome Mission, who was a privileged person, sent on the letter to Dom Clemente Figuera by the hands of a Government messenger, but Father Tiebout, who requested him to do so, had made one or two other arrangements in connection with it in the meanwhile. Ormsgill, as he had once said, had a few good friends in Africa.

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CHAPTER XV

NARES COUNTS THE COST

It was getting late and the night was very hot, but Nares was still busy in his palm-thatched hut. The creed he taught was not regarded with any great favor by the authorities, and, perhaps, was also by virtue of its very simplicity a little beyond the comprehension of the negro, who not unnaturally finds it a good deal easier to believe in a pantheon of mostly malevolent deities, but if his precepts produced no very visible result, there were, at least, many sick who flocked to him. It was significant that the door of his hut stood wide open, as it always did, though there were men in that forest who had little love for him. The priests of the heathen also practice the art of healing, and it is not in human nature to be very tolerant towards a rival who works without a fee.

He sat with the perspiration trickling down his worn face beside a little silver reading lamp, a gift from somebody in the land he came from. Now and then there was a faint stirring of the muggy air, and the light flickered a little, while the blue flame of a spirit lamp that burned beneath a test tube was deflected a trifle, but the weary man scarcely noticed it as he pored over a medical treatise. Nor did he notice the crackling that unseen creatures made in the thatch above his head, the steamy dampness that soaked his thin duck jacket, or the sickly smell of lilies that now and then flowed into the room. He was too intent upon the symbols of certain equations, letters and figures, and crosses of materialistic significance, with the aid of which he could, at least, mitigate bodily suffering and fight disease. They were always present, and it was a valiant fight he made in a land where the white man's courage melts and his faith grows dim.

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At last there were voices and footsteps in the compound, which he heard but scarcely heeded, and he only looked up when a man stood in the doorway smiling at him.

"Ah," he said, "I scarcely expected to see you, Father. What has become of your hammock boys, and where have you sprung from?"

Father Tiebout waved his hand, and dropped into the nearest chair. "The boys are already in the guest hut," he said. "I have come from San Roque, but not directly. In fact, I found it advisable to make a little detour."

"In your case that is not a very unusual thing," and Nares laughed. "Still, you appear to get there, arrive, as you express it, at least as frequently as I do."

The priest made a little gesture. "When one finds a wall he can not get over across his path it is generally wiser to go round. Why should one waste his strength and bruise his hands endeavoring to tear it down? It may be a misfortune, but I think we were not all intended to be battering rams. The metaphor, however, is not a very excellent one, since it is in this case a lion that stands in the path of our friend Ormsgill. For a minute or two you will give me your attention."

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Nares listened with wrinkled forehead, leaning forward with both arms on the table, and then there was a faint twinkle in his eyes as he looked at his companion. It was, after all, not very astonishing that he should smile, for he was accustomed to disconcerting news.

"I wonder if one could ask how you learned so much?" he said. "It is scarcely likely that the Chefe or his Lieutenant would tell it you."

"For one thing, I heard a few words that were not exactly meant for me; for another, I laid unauthorized hands upon a certain letter. One, as I have pointed out, must use the means available."

"The results justify it—when he is successful, which is, no doubt, why you so seldom fail? Under the circumstances you can not afford to. There may be something to say for that point of view, but our fathers were not so liberal in Geneva."

Father Tiebout smiled good-humoredly. "We will not discuss the point just now. The question is what must be done? We have a friend who will walk straight into the jaws of the lion unless—some one—warns him."

"It is not impossible that he will do so then."

The priest spread his hands out. "Ah," he said, "how can one teach the men who delight in stone walls and lions a little sense? Still, perhaps, it would be a pity if one could. It is possible that folly was the greatest thing bestowed on them when they were sent into this world. That, however, is not quite the question."

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"It is—who shall go?" and Nares, who closed one hand, thrust his chair back noisily. "There are you and I alone available, padre, and we know that the one of us who ventures to do this thing will be laid under the ban of Authority, openly proscribed or, at least, quietly thwarted here and there until he is driven from his work and out of the country. There are many ways in which those who hold power in these forests can trouble us."

Father Tiebout said nothing, but he made a gesture of concurrence, with his eyes fixed steadily on his companion, and Nares, who could not help it, smiled a trifle bitterly.

"Well," he said, "you have your adherents—a band of them—and what you teach them must be a higher thing than their own idolatry. If they lost their shepherd they would fall away again. I, as you know, have none. My call, it seems, is never listened to—and it is plain that circumstances point to me. Well, I am ready."

His companion nodded gravely. "It is a hard thing I have to say, but you are right in this," he said. "I have a flock, and some of them would perish if I left them. For their sake I can not go. It is not for me to take my part in a splendid folly, but"—and he spread his thin hands out—"because it is so I am sorry."

It was clear that Nares believed him, though he said nothing. He knew what the thing he was about to do would in all probability cost him, but he also realized that had circumstances permitted it the little fever-wasted priest would have gladly undertaken it in place of him. Father Tiebout was one who recognized his duty, but there was also the Latin fire in him, and Nares did not think it was merely because he liked it he submitted to Authority and walked circumspectly, contenting himself with quietly accomplishing a little here and there. [Pg 180]

Then Father Tiebout made a gesture which seemed to imply that there was nothing further to be said on that subject, as he pointed through the open door to the steamy bush.

"You and I have, perhaps, another duty," he said. "We know what is going on up yonder, and, as usual, those in authority seem a trifle blind. If nothing is done there will be bloodshed when the men with the spears come down."

Nares was by no means perfect, and his face grew suddenly hard. "That," he said, "is the business of those who rule. They would not believe my warning, and I should not offer it if they would. There are wrongs which can only be set right by the shedding of blood, and I would not raise a hand if those who have suffered long enough swept the whole land clean."

Father Tiebout smiled curiously. "There is, I think, one man who would have justice done. It is possible there are also others behind him, but that I do not know. He is not a man who takes many into his confidence or explains his intentions beforehand. I will venture to send him Herrero's letter—and a warning." [Pg 181]

He rose with a soft chuckle. "I almost think he will do—something by and by, but in the meanwhile it is late, and you start to-morrow."

"No," said Nares simply. "I am starting as soon as the hammock boys are ready."

He extinguished the spirit lamp, and lighting a lantern went out into the darkness which shrouded the compound. He spent a few minutes in a big whitened hut where two or three sick men lay and a half-naked negro sat half-asleep. There was, as he realized, not much that he could do for any of them, and after all, his most strenuous efforts were of very slight avail against the pestilence that swept those forests. He had not spared himself, and had done what he could, but that night he recognized the uselessness of the struggle, as other men have done in the land of unlifting shadow. Still, he gave the negro a few simple instructions, and then went out and stood still a few moments in the compound before he roused the hammock boys.

There was black darkness about him, and the thicker obscurity of the steamy forest that shut him in seemed to emphasize the desolation of the little station. He had borne many sorrows there, and had fought for weeks together, with the black, pessimistic dejection the fever breeds, but now it hurt him to leave it, for he knew that in all probability he would never come back again. He sighed a little as he moved towards one of the huts, and standing in the entrance called until a drowsy voice answered him. [Pg 182]

"Get the hammock ready with all the provisions the boys can carry. We start on a long journey in half an hour," he said.

Then he went back to his hut, and set out food for himself and his guest. They had scarcely finished eating when there was a patter of feet in the compound and a shadowy figure appeared in the dim light that streamed out from the door.

"The boys wait," it said. "The hammock is ready."

Nares rose and shook hands with his companion. "If I do not come back," he said, "you know what I would wish done."

The priest was stirred, but he merely nodded. "In that case I will see to it," he said.

Then Nares climbed into the hammock, and once more turned to his companion.

"I have," he said, "failed here as a teacher. At first it hurt a little to admit it, but the thing is plain. I may have wasted time in wondering where my duty lay, but I think I was waiting for a sign. Now, when the life of the man you and I brought back here is in peril I think it has been given me."

"Ah," said the little priest quietly, "when one has faith enough the sign is sometimes given. There are, I think, other men waiting on the coast yonder, and one of them is a man who moves surely when the time is ripe."

Nares called to the hammock boys, who slipped away into the darkness with a soft patter of naked feet, while Father Tiebout stood still in the doorway with a curious look in his eyes. He [Pg 183]

remembered how Nares had first walked out of that forest and unobtrusively set about the building of his station several years ago. Now he had as quietly gone away again, and in a few more months the encroaching forest would spread across the compound and enfold the crumbling huts, but for all that, the man he had left behind could not believe that what he had done there would be wholly thrown away.

It was a long and hasty march the woolly-haired bearers made, and they did not spare themselves. It is believed in some quarters that the African will only exert himself when he is driven with the stick, and there are certainly white men in whose case the belief is more or less warranted, but Nares, like Ormsgill, used none, and the boys plodded onwards uncomplainingly under burning heat and through sour white steam. They hewed a way through tangled creepers, and plunged knee and sometimes waist deep in foul morasses. The sweat of tense effort dripped from them, and thorns rent their skin, but they would have done more had he asked it for the man who lay in the hammock that lurched above them.

Nares on his part knew that Ormsgill was well in front of him, and Ormsgill as a rule traveled fast, but it was evident that he must have made a long journey already, and the Mission boys were fresh. That, at least, was clear by the pace they made, but it did not greatly slacken when weariness laid hold on them. They pushed on without flagging through the unlifting shade, and the ashes of their cooking fires marked their track across leagues of forest, until late one night they stopped suddenly in a more open glade, and Nares, flung forward in his hammock, seized the pole and swung himself down.

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He alighted in black shadow, but he could dimly see one of the boys in front of him leaning forward as though listening. A blaze of moonlight fell upon the trail some forty yards away, and two great trunks rose athwart it in towering columns, but there was nothing else visible. Still, the boy, who now crouched a trifle, was clearly intent and apprehensive. He stood rigid and motionless, gazing at the bush, until he slowly turned his head.

Nares, who could hear no sound, felt his heart beat, for the man's attitude was unpleasantly suggestive. It seemed that he was following something that moved behind the festooned creepers with eyes which could see more than those of a white man, and Nares felt the tension becoming unendurable as he watched him until the negro flung out a pointing hand. Then a voice rose sharply.

"Move forward a few paces out of the shadow," it said in a native tongue.

Nares laughed from sheer relief, for the voice was familiar.

"We'll move as far as you wish, but we're quite harmless," he said.

There was a crackle of undergrowth, and a white-clad figure stepped out of the bush with something that caught the moonlight and glinted in its hand. Nares moved forward, and in another moment or two stopped by Ormsgill's side.

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"I might have expected something of the kind, but I scarcely fancied you were so near," he said. "Anyway, I should not have supposed a white man could have crept up on us as you have done."

Ormsgill's smile was a trifle grim. "Most white men have not been hunted for their life," he said. "As a rule it's prudent to take precautions in the bush. It was not you I expected to see."

"Still, I have come a long way after you."

"Then we'll go back to camp," said Ormsgill. "Bring your boys along."

He sent a hoarse call ringing through the shadows of the bush, and then turned to his companion as if in explanation.

"One or two of the boys have Sniders, and their nerves might be a trifle unsteady," he said, "I can't get them to keep their finger off the trigger."

"Sniders?" said Nares.

Ormsgill laughed. "There are, it seems, a few of them in the country. I have now and then come across American rifles, too. I don't know how they got here, and it's not my business, but it is generally believed that officials now and then acquire a competence by keeping a hand open and their eyes shut."

Nares, who asked no more questions, followed him through the creepers and undergrowth until he turned and pointed to a stalwart negro standing close against a mighty trunk, who lowered his heavy rifle with a grin. Then the faint glow of a smoldering fire became visible, and Ormsgill stopped where the moonlight streamed down upon the ground sheet spread outside a little tent.

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"Your boys can camp among my carriers," he said. "You will probably have fed them, but I can offer you a few biscuits and some coffee. It's Liberian."

The coffee was made and brought them by a splendid grinning negro with blue-striped forehead, who hailed from the land where it was grown, and while they drank it Nares made his errand clear. When he had done this Ormsgill laid down his cup and looked at him.

"There is one thing you have to do, and that is to go back to the Mission as fast as you can," he said. "Our friends in authority will make things singularly uncomfortable for you if they hear that

you have taken the trouble to spoil their plan by warning me."

Nares smiled and shook his head. "You ought to be acquainted with the customs of this country by now," he said. "I couldn't keep clear of all the villages on my way up, and, if I had, news of what I have done would have reached San Roque already."

"Ah," said Ormsgill quietly, "that is probably correct. It is unfortunate. I won't attempt to thank you—under the circumstances it would be a trifle difficult to do it efficiently. Well, since you can't go back to the Mission, you must come on with me."

Nares looked at him in some astonishment. "After what I told you, you are going on?"

"Of course!" and Ormsgill laughed softly. "I have been trailing Domingo for a long while, and he is, as you know, in the village a few days' march in front of us with most of the boys. It is scarcely likely that I shall have a more favorable opportunity."

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"Haven't I made it clear to you that the Headman is a friend of his, and they are supposed to have arms there? Can't you understand yet that Domingo will embroil you with him, and arrange that you will have to fight your way out? Even if you manage it Dom Luiz is close behind with several files of infantry, and will certainly lay hands on you. You will have fired upon natives under official protection, and taken a labor purveyor's boys away from him. It would not be difficult to make out that you were inciting the natives to rebellion. Do you expect a fair hearing at San Roque?"

"I don't," and Ormsgill smiled. "In fact, I don't purpose to go there at all. I expect to be clear again with the boys before Dom Luiz arrives. From what I know of his habits on the march I should be able to manage it."

"But it is likely that Domingo, who knows he is expected to keep you here until Dom Luiz turns up, will sell the boys?"

Ormsgill smiled again. "I don't purpose to afford him the opportunity. He stole the boys, and I am merely going to make him give them up again. With a little resolution I believe it can be done. Still, I am sorry to drag you into the thing."

Nares said nothing for a moment or two. He felt that it would be useless, and his companion's quiet cold-blooded daring had its effect on him. After all, check it as he would, there was in him a vague pride and belief in the white man's destiny, and in the land he came from the term white man does not include the Latins. This world, it seems, was made for Americans and Englishmen to rule. A little gleam crept into his eyes.

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"Well," he said, "I don't think I'm going to blame you now I am in."

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CHAPTER XVI

NEGRO DIPLOMACY

The glare was almost intolerable when Ormsgill and his carriers walked into the space of trampled dust round which straggled the heavily thatched huts of the native village. The afternoon sun flooded it with a pitiless heat and dazzling brilliancy, and there was not a movement in the stagnant atmosphere. Beyond the clustering huts the forest rose impressively still, and there was a deep silence for a few moments after the line of weary men appeared. Then as they came on with a soft patter of naked feet a murmur rose from the groups of half-naked negroes squatting in the dust under the shadow flung by a great tree. It was not articulate, but there was a hint of anger in it, for white men were not regarded with any great favor in that village, which was not astonishing.

They moved quietly forward across the glaring dust, with a guard of dusky men in white cotton marching rifle on shoulder behind them. Indeed, the carriers only stopped when they reached the shadow of the tree under which the Headman and the elders of the village had assembled. Then as Ormsgill raised his hand the men with rifles swung out to left and right, and stood fast, an inconsequent handful of motionless figures with the unarmed carriers clustering behind them. Their white cotton draperies, which they had put on half an hour ago, gleamed in the sun glare dazzlingly.

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Ormsgill was quite aware that a good deal depended on his composure and steadiness of bearing, but he had just come out of the shadow of the forest and he blinked as he looked about him. Close in front of him the fat village Headman sat on a carved stool, but there was another older man of somewhat lighter color and dignified presence who was seated a little higher, and this promised to complicate the affair, since Ormsgill recognized him as a man of some importance in those forests, and one who claimed a certain domination over the villages in them. It was known that he bore the white men little good will, but his presence there suggested that he had some complaint against the villagers, or was disposed as their suzerain to listen to their grievances,

and Ormsgill realized that he had arrived at a somewhat unfortunate time. Then his eyes rested on another man he had expected to see. He stood among the elders, big and brown-skinned, with loose robes of white and blue flowing about him, smiling maliciously, though Ormsgill fancied that for some not very evident reason he was not quite at ease. Nares, who now stood beside his comrade, recognized him as Domingo, the labor purveyor.

"I'm 'most afraid you are going to find it difficult to get those boys," he said. "One could fancy these people had affairs of their own to discuss, and it's by no means certain that they'll even listen to us in the meanwhile."

Ormsgill, who did not answer him, glanced round at his boys. He fancied that none of them felt exactly comfortable, but they, at least, kept still, and he sent forward two of them with the presents he had brought before he turned to the Headman. [Pg 191]

"I have come here to justice," he said in a bush tongue, and Nares who had a closer acquaintance with it amplified his observations. "That man," and he pointed to Domingo, "has with him boys who belonged to my friend the trader Lamartine. He stole them, and I have made a long journey to get them back again."

"If they belonged to Lamartine, who is dead, they can not be yours," said the Headman shrewdly. "You do not say you bought them from him."

"In one sense it's almost a pity you hadn't. He has made a point," Nares said quietly.

It was evident that the rest of the assembly recognized the fact, for there was laughter and a murmur of concurrence. Ormsgill, who did not expect to be believed, flung a hand up.

"If you will listen you shall hear why I claim them," he said, and he spoke for some minutes tersely while Nares now and then flung in a word or two.

Another laugh rang along the rows of squatting men, and there was blank incredulity in the dusky faces. This was, however, by no means astonishing, since the motives he professed to have been actuated by were distinctly unusual in that part of Africa. It was inconceivable to those who heard him that a man should trouble himself greatly about a promise he need not have kept, as this one said he had done. They were too well acquainted with the white men's habits to believe a thing of that kind could be possible. The fat Headman looked round and grinned. [Pg 192]

"I think," he observed, "we should now hear what Domingo has to say."

Domingo had a good deal to say, and framed it cunningly, playing upon the dislike of the white men that was in those who heard him, but as Ormsgill noticed, it was the old man of lighter color he chiefly watched. The latter sat silent and motionless, regarding him with expressionless eyes, until he ceased, and Ormsgill realized that if it depended upon the opinion of the assembly Domingo had won his case. Still, though he was by no means sure what he would do, he was, at least, determined it should not depend on that, and there was a trace of grimness in his smile when Nares turned to him.

"I'm afraid it has gone against us," he said.

"Against me, you mean," said Ormsgill dryly.

"No," and Nares's gesture was expressive, "what I said stands without the correction."

Before Ormsgill could answer, the old man made a sign, and there was no mistaking his tone of authority.

"Bring the boys," he said.

They were led in some minutes later, eight of them, and three or four ran towards Ormsgill with eager cries. He waved them back, and there was silence for a moment or two until the old man rose up slowly with a curious smile in his eyes.

"It seems that this man has not beaten them too often," he said. "You have seen that they would sooner be his men than Domingo's. Let one of them speak." [Pg 193]

One of them did so, and what he said bore out some, at least, of Ormsgill's assertions. Then the grave figure in the plain white robe raised a hand, and there was a sudden silence of attention.

"After all," he said, "this is my village, and it is by my permission your Headman rules here. Now, this stranger has told us a thing which appears impossible. We have not heard anything like it from a white man before, but when a man would deceive you he is careful to tell you what you can believe."

There was a little murmur which suggested that the listeners grasped the point of this, and the old man went on.

"I know that Lamartine was an honest man, for I have bought trade goods from him. They were what I bought them for, and I got the weight and count in full. Lamartine was honest, and it is likely that this man is honest, too, or he would not have been his friend."

He stopped a moment, and smiled a trifle dryly. "Now, we know that Domingo is a thief, for he has often cheated you, and it is certain that he is a friend of the white men. I have told you at other times that you are fools to trade with him. If a man is in debt or has done some wrong you

part with him for this trader's goods. The rum is drunk, the cloth wears out, but the man lives on, and every day's work he does on the white men's plantations makes them richer and stronger. As they grow richer they grow greedier, and by and by they will not be satisfied with a man or two from among you. You will have made them strong enough to take you all. That, however, is not the question in the meanwhile. I think it may have happened, as this stranger says, that Domingo stole these boys from Lamartine, but even in that case there is a difficulty. The boys are with him, and in this country what a man holds in his hand is his. Perhaps the white man will offer him goods for them. I do not think he would ask too much, at least, if he is wise."

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He looked at Ormsgill, who shook his head.

"Not a piece of cloth or a bottle of gin," he said.

There was a little murmur of resentment from the assembly, but Ormsgill saw that his boldness had the effect he had expected upon the man whose suggestion he had disregarded, and he had not acted inadvisedly when he dismissed all idea of compromise. Domingo had influential friends in that village, while, save for the handful of carriers, he and his companion stood alone. He also knew that if misfortune befell them no troublesome questions would be asked by the authorities. The whole enterprise was in one sense a folly, and that being so it was only by a continuance of the rashness he could expect to carry it through. Half measures were, as he realized, generally useless, and often perilous, in an affair of the kind, for there are occasions when one must face disastrous failure or bid boldly for success. Nares also seemed to recognize that fact, for he smiled as he turned to his companion.

"I think you were right," he said.

Then the Headman said something to his Suzerain who made a sign that the audience was over.

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"It is a thing that must be talked over," he announced. "We shall, perhaps, know what must be done to-morrow."

Ormsgill acknowledged his gesture, swinging off his shapeless hat, and then led his boys away to the hut one of the Headman's servants pointed out to him. It was old, and had apparently been built for a person of importance for, though this was more usual further east among the dusky Moslem, there was a tall mud wall about it, and a smaller building probably intended for the occupation of the women inside the latter. It was dusty and empty save for the rats and certain great spiders, and during the rest of the hot afternoon Ormsgill sat with Nares in the little enclosed space under the lengthening shadow of the wall. The boys had curled themselves up amidst the dust and quietly gone to sleep.

There was nothing they could see but the ridge of forest beyond the huts, and though now and then a clamor of voices reached them from outside, it supplied them with no clue to what was going on. Ormsgill smoked his pipe out several times before he said anything, and then he glanced at the wall meditatively.

"It seems thick, and there's only one entrance," he observed. "I almost fancy we could hold the place, though I don't anticipate the necessity. Still, Domingo, who does a good trade here, has a certain following, and it might be an advantage if I knew a little more about our friends' affair. Their Suzerain seems to have some notion of fair play. I wonder what he is doing here."

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"I have been asking myself the same question," said Nares. "It seems to me these folks have been a little slack in recognizing his authority, and he has been making them a visitation. In one respect they're somewhat unfortunately fixed. The Portuguese consider they belong to them though they have made no attempt to occupy the country, and it's a little rough on the Headman who has to keep the peace with both."

Ormsgill made a little gesture of concurrence. "No doubt you're correct. The question is who the Headman would sooner not offend, and it's rather an important one because we are somewhat awkwardly circumstanced if it's the Portuguese. Our friend from the Interior naturally doesn't like them, but it's uncertain how far we could count on him, and Dom Luiz will probably turn up to-morrow night or the next day, and then there would be fresh complications."

"In that case we should never get the boys."

The lines grew a trifle deeper in Ormsgill's forehead, but he smiled. "I wouldn't go quite so far, though if Domingo still had the boys it might delay things. As it is, I don't think he will have them. How I'm going to take them from him I don't quite know, but I expect to make an attempt of some kind to-morrow. You see, these folks have no particular fondness for the Portuguese, and that will probably count for a little."

Nares said nothing further on that subject, and Ormsgill talked about other matters while the shadows crept across the little dusty enclosure and the forest cut more darkly against the dazzling glare. Then it stood out for a brief few minutes fretted hard and sharp in ebony against a blaze of transcendent splendor, and vanished with an almost bewildering suddenness as darkness swept down. The smell of wood smoke crept into the stagnant air, and a cheerful hum of voices rose from the huts beyond the wall, through which odd bursts of laughter broke. It would not have been astonishing if it had jarred upon the susceptibilities of the two men who heard it, but, as it happened, they listened tranquilly. They had both faced too many perils in the shadowy land to concern themselves greatly as to what might befall them. In one was the sure belief that all he was to bear was appointed for him, and the other thought of little but the task in hand. They were

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simple men, impatient often, and now and then driven into folly by human bitterness, but there is, perhaps, nothing taught in all the creeds and philosophies greater than their desire to do a little good. The formulas change, and lose their authority, but the down-trodden and those who groan beneath a heavy burden always remain.

By and by one of the Headman's retainers brought in food and a native lamp. He had nothing to tell the white men, and they, recognizing it, judiciously refrained from useless questions. When they had eaten they sat awhile talking of matters that did not greatly interest them until Ormsgill, who had already stationed his sentries, extinguished the light.

"Whether the boys can be depended on to watch I don't know, and it's probably very doubtful," he said. "Anyway, I think we shall be safe until to-morrow, and I'm going to sleep. After all, I fancy we could leave the thing to the Headman. He's a cunning rascal, and it's to some extent his business to find a way out of the difficulty. As you suggest, he stands between his Suzerain and the Portuguese, and can't afford to offend either of them." [Pg 198]

He stretched himself out on his hard native couch, and apparently sank into tranquil slumber, but it was some time before Nares' eyes closed. He was of different temperament, and, though he was not unduly anxious, the surroundings had their effect on him. There was, as usual, no door to the hut, and he could see the soft blue darkness beyond the entrance. The figure of a big, half-naked man who carried a heavy rifle cut against it shadowily now and then. The village was silent, and he could hear a little hot breeze sweep through it and stir the invisible trees. At last, however, he sank into sleep, and was awakened suddenly some time later. He did not know what had roused him, but as he raised himself he dimly saw Ormsgill slip across the room. Then there was a footfall outside, and he made out the sentry half-crouching in the entrance.

He rose, and stood still, quivering a little, while, perhaps, a quarter of a minute slipped by. The stillness was very impressive, and seemed emphasized by the footsteps outside. They were soft and cautious, and it was evident that the man who made them was desirous of slipping into the hut unseen. Then there was a thud in the entrance, and a scuffle during which Ormsgill hurled himself upon the pair of struggling men. [Pg 199]

"Let him go," he said in a bush tone. "Take your hand off his neck. Now get up."

A man who gasped heavily staggered to his feet, and Ormsgill laughed as he turned to Nares.

"I believe he's a messenger, but he can hardly blame us for welcoming him as we did," he said. "Now if you have anything to say go on with it."

Nares could only just see the negro, who was probably attempting to recover his senses, for he said nothing.

"Who sent you?" asked Ormsgill, who gripped his arm tightly, in the native tongue.

"It is a thing I am not to tell," said the man. "I have a message. Domingo left our village with the boys an hour ago. He heads for the west."

Nares turned to Ormsgill. "Well," he said, "I am not altogether astonished, and the Headman's hint is plain enough. Of course, the thing may be a trap, but it is quite possible he is not unnaturally anxious to get rid of us and Domingo."

Ormsgill looked at the negro. "If he has gone an hour ago how are we to come up with him?"

"The road twists across the high land," said the man. "There is a shorter path through a swamp."

"Then if you will lead us across the swamp so we can reach firm ground in front of Domingo you shall have as much cloth as you can carry."

It was a tempting offer, and though the negro appeared to have misgivings he profited by it, and in another few minutes Ormsgill had roused the boys in the compound. [Pg 200]

"If we have no trouble in getting out I think we can feel reasonably sure that the Headman doesn't care whether we worry Domingo or not," he said.

"Well," said Nares reflectively, "I almost think you're right. Still, he may, after all, have something different in his mind. As you said, we could probably hold the hut, and we are not out of the village yet."

Ormsgill seemed to smile. "In that case," he said, "he may have reason to be sorry he ever entertained a notion of that kind."

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CHAPTER XVII THE AMBUSCADE

A thin crescent moon hung low in the western sky when they slipped out into the sleeping village,

and shadowy huts and encircling forest were dimly distinguishable. The place was very silent, and though the negro as a rule sleeps lightly no one appeared in a doorway, and no voice was raised to challenge them. In fact, Nares, who walked beside his comrade with his heart beating a good deal faster than usual, felt the silence almost oppressive, for he was conscious that it might at any moment be rudely broken. He had very little confidence in the dusky Headman, and knew that if treachery was intended they were affording him the opportunity he probably desired.

Now and then there was a faint clatter and jingle of arms, and at times the soft patter of naked feet in the trampled dust was flung back with what appeared to be a startling distinctness by the huts they passed, but there was no other sound, and the boys flitted steadily on, a line of vague, shadowy figures, in front of him. Then he drew a deep breath of relief as they left the village behind them and plunged into the gloom of the forest. He looked back a moment towards the clustering huts which rose faintly black against the dim bush, and wondered how the Headman would explain matters to his Suzerain on the morrow. That, however, was the Headman's affair, and Nares fancied he would be equal to the occasion, since the negro is usually a very shrewd diplomatist.

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By and by the darkness beneath the trees grew a little less intense, and they came out on the brink of a morass. It stretched away before them smeared with drifting wisps of sour white steam, and it was not astonishing that they halted and looked at it apprehensively. An African swamp is not, as a rule, considered impassable so long as one does not sink beyond the hips in it, and there are places where British forest officers flounder through them more or less cheerfully for days together, but it is, for all that, a thing the average white man has a natural shrinking from. Ormsgill significantly tapped the rifle he now carried before he exchanged a few words with their guide.

"He says we can get through, but I'll take the precaution of walking close beside him," he said to Nares. "It's an excellent rule in this country not to let your guide get too far in front of you."

They went in, and the tall grass near the verge crackled about them as they sank in the plastic mire out of which they could scarcely drag their feet. It was a little easier where there was only foul slime and water, and in places there were signs of a path, that is, they could see where somebody else had floundered through the quaggy waste of corruption. The smell was a thing to shudder at, but they were all of them more or less used to that, and the emanations of such places do not invariably prostrate the white man who is accustomed to the country. In some cases, at least, the results of inhaling them only appear some time afterwards, but there are very few white men who escape them altogether.

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In due time they came out, bemired from head to foot, with scum and slimy water draining from them, and they diffused sour odors as they once more plunged into the forest which just there was permeated with the sickly scent of lilies. Still, it was a consolation to Ormsgill that they had, at least, left nobody behind, and he acquired a certain confidence in their guide. They pushed on for most of the night, smashing and hacking a way through creepers, and stumbling in loose white sand, and at last came out upon a well beaten trail. The negro who crawled up and down it said that Domingo had not reached that spot yet, but Ormsgill did not content himself with his assurance. With difficulty, he made a little fire and while it flickered feebly stooped over the loose sand. Then he stamped it out before he turned to Nares.

"I almost think he is right, and as the Headman doesn't expect us to compromise him we'll let him go," he said.

The man, it was evident, had no desire to stay, and when he went away content with his load of cotton cloth Ormsgill made the most of his forces. Two men with Sniders whom he fancied he could to some extent depend upon were sent back to crouch beside the trail; a few more took up their stations a little distance ahead; and the white men lay down with the carriers between the two parties, and a few yards back from the path. It was now a trifle cooler, for the night was wearing through, and the mysterious voices of the forest had died away and left a deep silence intensified by the splash of moisture on the leaves. Nares shivered a little as the all pervading damp crept through his thin garments, though the lower half of them was still foul with the mire of the swamp.

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"I suppose we shall meet Domingo if we wait long enough?" he said. "After all, we have only the Headman's word to warrant us believing it."

Ormsgill laughed. "It depends a good deal upon the kind of bargains Domingo has made with him lately. The thing will probably work out just as we would like it if he hasn't been quite satisfied with them. It's an arrangement that would commend itself to the average African. Still, as I said already, I'm a trifle sorry that you are mixed up in it."

Nares sat silent a moment or two. He had borne a good deal, perhaps rather more than could have been expected of him, from those whom he considered with some reason as workers of iniquity, and, after all, excessive meekness has seldom been a characteristic of the Puritan.

"Well," he said slowly, "I'm not sure that I am. It is very probable that I have been proscribed already, and, perhaps, it was not patience but cowardice that made me submit so long. After all, patience accomplishes very little in Africa."

"I'm afraid it was never one of my strong points," and Ormsgill smiled. "In fact, if Domingo made any kind of fight it would be a certain relief to me, although because one can't always afford to be

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guided by his personal likes I've taken every precaution against it. Now, suppose we get the boys back, what do you propose to do?"

"Go back to my station," said Nares quietly.

"And if you hear that Dom Luiz is there with several files of infantry to arrest you?"

"In that case I will go down to the coast with you."

Ormsgill dropped a hand on his comrade's shoulder. "I shall be glad to have you wherever I go, though I'm not sure that you wouldn't be safer if you pushed on alone. You don't mention what it has cost you to warn me, but I think I can understand."

Nares slowly shook his head. "I don't think I have much to regret," he said without a trace of bitterness. "I was sent here to save men's souls, and it seems that I have failed. Still, I think I should have stayed and healed their bodies—had it been permitted—but there is, perhaps, work I can do elsewhere since that is not the case." He stopped a moment with the faintest sigh. "We will not mention this again."

Ormsgill said nothing, probably because he was more than a trifle stirred. He knew that it requires self-restraint and courage to face the fact that one's efforts have been thrown away, but there are men like him who now and then shrink from expressing their sympathy. Leaning forward a little with the rifle across his knees he set himself to listen.

It was almost an hour before he heard anything at all, and in the meanwhile the faint coolness increased, and the tops of the trees above him became dimly visible. They cut with a growing sharpness against the eastern sky, and here and there a massy trunk grew out of the obscurity. Then there was a faint pearly flush beyond them, and in the cold of the sudden dawn he heard the men he was waiting for. A soft patter of footsteps and a murmur of voices came up the winding trail. He knew the boys had also heard, for the undergrowth behind him crackled and then was still again.

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In another few minutes there was dim light in the forest, and he could see indistinct figures moving towards him through the narrow gap in the leaves. They became more visible, and he could make out the uncovered ebony skin of some and the fluttering cotton that flowed about the others' limbs. There were burdens upon most of their heads, but a few carried what seemed to be long flintlock guns. Then, for dawn comes with startling swiftness in that land, the shadowy trunks became sharp and clear, and the men who plodded among them seemed to emerge from a blurring obscurity. Black limbs, impassive faces, raw white draperies, and gray gun barrels were forced up in the sudden light, but Ormsgill raising himself a trifle fixed his eyes upon the man of lighter color who walked a little apart from the others. His voice rang harshly as he flung menaces in a native tongue at one or two of those who lagged under their burdens, and perhaps he was, in one respect, warranted in this, since, for economic reasons, the negro whose labor somebody else has sold for him is seldom loaded beyond his strength on his march to the coast, at least, so long as provisions are plentiful.

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They had almost reached the spot where the white men lay when Ormsgill quietly walked out into the trail, and stood there with left foot forward and the rifle at his hip. He had left his shapeless hat behind, and his thin, thorn-rent garments clung about him damp with dew and foul with mire. Still, he looked curiously resolute, and the men with the burdens stopped and recoiled at the sight of him, until one group of them flung down what they carried and ran towards him clamoring. Then there was a harsh cry from the rear of the line, and swinging round they scattered into the underbrush as the tall man of lighter color sprang forward with something that glinted in his hand.

Ormsgill's rifle went up and came in to the shoulder. With the same motion his cheek dropped upon the stock. He said nothing, but the labor purveyor stopped. Ormsgill swung down the rifle.

"Look behind you," he said in Portuguese.

Domingo turned, and saw two half-naked men with Sniders standing in the trail. Then looking round again he saw several more ahead, while other dusky figures had risen here and there among the undergrowth. They appeared resolute, and it was evident that he could get no further without their permission. He was credited with being a daring as well as an unscrupulous man, but he knew when the odds were too heavy against him, and he made a sign to Ormsgill.

"You want something from me?" he said.

"I do," said Ormsgill. "The boys you stole from Lamartine. It will save you trouble if you give them up."

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Domingo glanced once more at the men with the rifles, who stood still, one or two of them regarding him with a sardonic grin. Then he glanced at his startled carriers, who had thrown down their burdens and huddled together. There was, of course, nothing to be expected from them, and his few armed retainers were evidently not to be relied upon. In fact, they were gazing longingly at the bush, and it was clear that they were ready to make a dash for its shelter. They had done his bidding truculently when it was a question of overawing down-trodden bushmen and keeping defenseless carriers on the march, but to face resolute men with rifles was a different matter, and their courage was not equal to the task. Domingo seemed to recognize it, for he made a little scornful gesture.

"If I had a few men who could be depended on I would fight you for the boys," he said. "As it is they are yours."

"I see eight," said Ormsgill. "Where are the others?"

Domingo smiled maliciously. "In the hands of the Ugalla Headman. I am afraid it will be a little difficult to induce him to part with them: Lamartine, it seems, had taught them enough to make them useful to a Headman who is copying the white men's habits."

"In that case he no doubt gave you something worth while for them, and since you stole them it does not belong to you. Are you willing to tell me what he offered you?"

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"No," said Domingo resolutely.

"It wouldn't be difficult to estimate it at the usual figure, and you will understand that the Headman will ask me, at least, as much as he gave for them, but I will be reasonable. If you will let me have the arms your boys carry I shall be satisfied."

"How can I drive these men to the coast if we have no arms?"

"I don't know," said Ormsgill with a little laugh. "It is your affair, but, perhaps, I can simplify the thing for you. I will take the arms in exchange for the boys in the Headman's possession, and hand you over what trade goods I have and paper bills for the rest of the men, except the eight boys, for whom you will get nothing. I think I can calculate what they cost you, and the fact that the transaction is probably illegal does not trouble me."

There was still silence for a moment or two, and a dazzling ray of sunlight beat down into the bush. It made a sudden brightness, and showed the malice in Domingo's dusky face. Then it touched the huddled carriers' naked skin, and Nares glanced from them to the group of Lamartine's boys who had appeared again. It seemed they understood a little of what was going on, and were watching Ormsgill expectantly. He stood quietly in the middle of the trail, with a rifle at his hip and a little grim smile in his eyes. All round rose the forest, impressive in its stillness, dim and shadowy, and the scene had a curious effect on Nares. He felt it had its symbolism, and its motive was that of all the old world legends and dramas, the triumph of the right over evil which man has from forgotten times vaguely believed in. It is, perhaps, especially difficult to be an optimist in Africa, but Nares who had borne a good deal in its steamy shadow held fast to his faith, and it did not matter greatly to him that the latter day champion of the oppressed was a most unknighly figure in burst shoes and tattered garments and carried an American rifle. At last, however, Domingo made a little gesture.

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"I am in your hands," he said. "You shall have them."

They were not long in making the bargain, and when the arms and all the boys except the few who had carried the long guns had been handed over Ormsgill turned once more to Domingo.

"Now," he said, "you can go where you please, but I scarcely think it will be back towards the interior. Your friends up yonder would probably profit by the opportunity if you appeared among them with a few unarmed men."

Domingo called to his few remaining followers, who took up some of the loads the men released had carried for them. Then there was a soft patter of feet and one by one the dusky figures flitted by and vanished into the gloom. Ormsgill armed Lamartine's boys, and afterwards drew Nares aside.

"In the first case I have to make sure of these men, and it is a question if I can reach the coast before Domingo's friends head me off," he said. "Considering everything it seems to me that haste is distinctly advisable."

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They started in another half-hour, and pushed on through the forest for a week or two. Then Ormsgill made a traverse which cost him several days to reach the vicinity of Nares' station. He stopped at a bush village, and was told there that the station was occupied by black soldiers from San Roque. When they heard it Ormsgill quietly looked at Nares.

"You can't go back," he said. "The Chefe holds summary authority, and no doubt has his views concerning you. It's scarcely worth while pointing out what they would probably be, but if you succeed in getting out of his hands you would be a discredited man who had only met with his deserts."

Nares made a little gesture, for that was a very bitter moment, but his face was tranquil.

"It's a thing I was prepared for. We'll push on," he said.

They stayed an hour or two in the village, and then started once more on their long journey to the coast. It was clear that they could afford no delay in reaching it, but there was no road to the Bahia Santiago, and day by day they floundered through swamp and forest under an intolerable heat, with garments rent to tatters, worn out, gasping now and then, but always pushing on. They drank putrid water, and when provisions commenced to run out lived on a few daily handfuls of equally divided food. Nature was also against them, and barred their path with fallen trees and thorny creepers, and the march they made was a test of what man could bear. Still, there was no discord, and no negro raised his voice in protest. The boys recognized that haste was advisable, and they had confidence in the white man with the quiet lined face who marched at the head of

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CHAPTER XVIII

DOM CLEMENTE LOOKS ON

A little breeze blew in between the slender pillars delightfully fresh and cool, and Dom Clemente Figuera, who had taken off his heavy kepi, lay in a cane chair with a smile in his half-closed eyes. The ten o'clock breakfast had just been cleared away, but two cups of bitter black coffee still stood upon the table beside a bundle of cigars and a flask of light red wine. He was, as he now and then laughingly admitted, usually in an excellent humor after breakfast, and one could have fancied just then that he had not a care in the world. There were, however, men who said that in the case of Dom Clemente tranquillity was not always a favorable sign.

Opposite him sat the trader Herrero, who was not quite so much at ease as he desired to be. His manners were usually characterized by a certain truculence, which as a rule served him well in the bush, but he had sense enough to realize that it was not likely to have much effect upon his companion. There was something about the little smiling gentleman in the immaculate white uniform on the other side of the table which would have made it difficult for one to adopt an aggressive attitude towards him, even if he had not been one who held authority. Herrero had therefore laid a somewhat unusual restraint upon himself while he expressed his views, and now sat watching his companion anxiously. Dom Clemente lighted a cigar before he answered him.

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"This Englishman," he said, "is apparently a turbulent person. I have just received a letter concerning him from the Chefe at San Roque, as you are, no doubt, aware."

There was a question in his glance which Herrero could not ignore, though he would have liked to do so. He felt it was unfortunate that he did not know exactly what was in the letter.

"I addressed my complaint to the Chefe in the first case," he said. "Since Ormsgill is believed to have traveled towards the coast it was to be expected that Dom Erminio should communicate with you."

"Exactly!" and Dom Clemente smiled. "The complaint, it seems, is a double one. The Englishman Ormsgill has, I am informed, abducted a native girl who was in your company, but one can not quite understand how he has offended in this, since it appears that she was content to go with him. In one case only you have a remedy. If you have any record of a marriage with this woman the affair shall be looked into."

"I have none," and Herrero made a little gesture. "There are, you understand, certain customs in the bush."

Dom Clemente reproachfully shook his head. "They are," he said, "not recognized by the law, and that being so your grievance against the Englishman is a purely personal one. It is no doubt exasperating that the woman should prefer him, and she is probably unwise in this, but it is not a matter that concerns any one else."

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"It is not alleged that she preferred him," and the trader's face flushed a trifle.

"Still," said his companion, "she went with him. Now you do not wish to tell me that you had laid any restraint upon her to keep her with you, or that there was anything to warrant you doing so. For instance, you do not wish me to believe that you had bought her?"

Herrero did not, at least, consider it prudent. The law, as he was aware, did not countenance such transactions, and while he sat silent his companion smiled at him.

"Then," he said, "I am afraid I can only offer you my sympathy, and we will proceed to the next complaint. This Englishman, it is alleged, has also stolen certain boys from Domingo. Now the law allows a native to bind himself to labor for a specified time, and while the engagement lasts he is in a sense the property of the man he makes it with. The engagement, of course, can only be made in due form on the coast, but the man who brings the boys down and feeds them on the strength of their promise may be considered to have some claim on them. It seems to me that person was Domingo. Why did he not make the complaint himself?"

"He is busy, and it would necessitate a long journey. Besides, I have a share in his business ventures."

"That," said Dom Clemente reflectively, "is a sufficient reason. This Domingo seems to be an enterprising man. One wonders if he has many business associates up yonder."

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Again Herrero did not answer. He did not like the little shrewd smile in his companion's eyes, for, as he was aware, the only white men in the forests Domingo frequented were missionaries and administrators, who were, at least, not supposed to participate in purely commercial ventures. He could not understand Dom Clemente at all, for it was very natural that it should not occur to

him that he was an honest man, as well as an astute one who had been entrusted with a difficult task. He would, in fact, have been startled had he known what was in his companion's mind. Seeing he did not speak, Dom Clemente waved his hand.

"It seems," he said, "that Ormsgill will make for the coast with the boys in question, and you have come to warn me, partly because it is to your interest, and partly from the sense of duty. Well, with this knowledge in my possession it should be difficult for him to get them away."

He stopped a moment, but Herrero saw nothing significant in the fact that he glanced languidly towards the *Palestrina*. She lay gleaming white like ivory on the glittering stretch of water he could see across the roofs of the city, and, as it happened, he was going off that evening to a function which Desmond, who had brought her in the day before, had arranged.

"Steps will be taken to intercept him when we have news of his whereabouts, and in the meanwhile I have another question," he said. "There is discontent up yonder among the bushmen?"

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His manner was indifferent, but Herrero was on his guard. "A little," he said. "If it becomes more serious it will be due to this Ormsgill, and, perhaps, to the missionaries. He and the American are teaching the bushmen to be mutinous."

Dom Clemente took up a letter which had, as it happened, been sent him by Father Tiebout, from the table, and read it meditatively. Then he rose with a little smile.

"The affair shall be looked into," he said.

Herrero withdrew, not altogether satisfied. Dom Clemente had been uniformly courteous, but now and then a just perceptible hardness had crept into his eyes. The latter, however, smiled as he poured himself out another glass of wine, and then turned quietly, as his daughter appeared in the doorway. She came nearer, and stood looking down at him.

"That man has gone away?" she said. "He is an infamous person."

Dom Clemente glanced at the little green lattice on the white wall behind her with a faint twinkle in his eyes. It was not very far away, and he remembered that Herrero had spoken distinctly.

"One would admit that he is not a particularly estimable man, but he has, like most of us, his little rôle to play," he said. "He does not, however, play it brilliantly."

Benicia made a gesture of impatience. "The Englishman is on his way to the coast. You are going to arrest him?"

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"When we know where he is. What would you have me do? A man in authority has his duty."

"Is it a duty to bring trouble on a man who has done no wrong?"

Dom Clemente leaned forward with his arms on the table, and looked at her with a curious little smile.

"I almost think," he said reflectively, "if I was a great friend of this Englishman's I would prefer him to fall into the hands of—such a man as I am. In that case, he would, at least, be prevented from going back to the bush, which is just now unsafe for him."

Benicia felt her face grow hot under his steady gaze. "The difficulty is that there are men without scruples who would blame him for whatever trouble may be going on up yonder in the forest," she said. "You would have to listen to them. If their complaints were serious what would you do?"

"Ah," said Dom Clemente, "that is rather more than I can tell. When one is young one feels that he is always expected to do something. Afterwards, however, one becomes content to leave it to the others now and then. It is sometimes wiser to—look on. That may be my attitude in this case, but I am not sure that the affair is one that concerns you."

He made a little deprecatory gesture as he turned to the papers in front of him, and Benicia went out quietly. It was an affair that concerned her very much indeed, but she knew that Dom Clemente could be reticent, and she fancied that he had something in his mind. As it happened, this was the case with her. In the meanwhile he sat still, gazing thoughtfully at the sun-scorched town while he smoked another cigar. Then he rose with a little jerk of his shoulders, and buckling on his big sword went down the stairway.

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When evening came he went off to the *Palestrina* with his daughter, her attendant Señora Castro, and one or two officials and their wives, and enjoyed an excellent dinner on board the yacht. He fancied Benicia was rather silent during part of it, and glanced at her once or twice, which she naturally noticed, and as the result of it roused herself to join in the conversation. Still, she was a trifle relieved when the dinner was over and Desmond led them up on deck. Clear moonlight streamed in between the awnings, and, as it happened, Desmond seated himself beside the rail at some distance from her Madeira chair. Twice she ventured to make him a little sign, which he apparently disregarded, but at last he rose and walked forward, and she turned to the black-robed Señora Castro, who had clung persistently to her side.

"The dew is rather heavy. I brought a wrap or two, but I think I left them in the saloon," she said.

The little portly lady waddled away, and a minute or two later Benicia rose languidly, and moved

towards the companion door through which she had disappeared. Instead of descending the stairway, the girl slipped out by the other door, and flitted forward in the shadow of the deckhouse until she came upon Desmond standing beneath the bridge.

"You do not seem to notice things to-night. I signed to you twice," she said.

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Desmond smiled. "I saw you," he said. "Still, I wasn't quite sure that another of my guests did not do so, too. You have something to say to me."

Benicia turned and glanced down the long deck. There was nobody visible on that part of it.

"Yes," she said a trifle breathlessly. "But nobody must know that I have talked to you alone."

Desmond opened the door of the little room beneath the bridge. A lamp burned in it, and he flung a shade across the port before he drew the girl in, and then closing the door, leaned with his back against it.

"I do not think we shall be disturbed," he said.

Benicia stood still a moment looking at him. It was in the case of a young woman from The Peninsula a very unusual thing she had done, but there was inconsequent courage in her, and a certain quiet imperiousness in her manner.

"You have coal and water on board?" she said.

"I have," said Desmond. "I have also clearance papers for British Nigeria, but we haven't steam up. You see, I expected to stay here at least a day or two."

"Then you must raise it. You must sail for the Bahia Santiago before to-morrow."

"You have word of Ormsgill?" and Desmond became suddenly intent. "He is a man who is never late, but on this occasion he is a week or two before his time. Well, I dare say we can sail to-morrow. You will tell me what you know?"

He leaned against the door with a quiet thoughtful face while she did so, and then the Celtic temperament revealed itself in the flash in his eyes.

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"It will evidently be a tight fit, but we'll get him if I have to arm every man on board and bring him off," he said. "That there may be complications afterwards doesn't in the least matter."

"Ah," said Benicia, "you are one who would do a good deal for a friend."

Desmond looked at her with a little wry smile. "Miss Figuera," he said slowly, "I think I would gladly do a very great deal for you."

A just perceptible flicker of color crept into the girl's face. "But what you are about to do now is for your friend Ormsgill."

"Yes," said Desmond, still with the curious little smile. "In one way, at least, I suppose it is."

Benicia turned and faced him, with the color growing plainer in her cheeks, and for a moment there was hot anger in her, for she knew what he meant. Then the fierce resentment vanished suddenly, as she once more met his eyes. There was something that suggested a deep regret in them, and his manner was wholly deferential.

"I only wish you to understand that if I fail it will not be because I have not done all I can," he said. "You see, I would, at least, like to keep your good opinion, and in spite of every effort one can't always be successful. Still, if it is possible, I will bring Ormsgill safely off. As you say, he is my friend."

There was silence for, perhaps, half a minute, and during it each knew what the other was thinking. Then Benicia made this clear.

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"Ah," she said, "you are a very generous man." She stopped a moment, and there was a faint tremble in her voice when she turned to him again. "You have come from Las Palmas?"

"I have," said Desmond. "I saw Miss Ratcliffe there. I think I may venture to tell you that Ormsgill will never marry her."

Benicia's face flamed, but the color died out of it again, and she looked at him quietly. "To no one else could I have forgiven that. Still, one can forgive everything to one who has your courage—and devotion."

Desmond made a little gesture. "Well," he said simply, "we sail before to-morrow, and I will do what I can. There is this in my favor—your friends probably don't know where Ormsgill is heading for."

Then the girl started suddenly with consternation in her eyes, for there was a tapping at the door, but Desmond's hand fell on her shoulder and she felt that he would do what was most advisable. Next moment he leaned forward and turned the lamp out before he threw the door open.

"Well," he said, "what do you want? I am, as you see, just coming out."

There was moonlight outside, though the awnings dimmed it, and just there the bridge flung a shadow on the deck, and he recognized with the first glance that it was one of his guests who had

tapped upon the door which he flung carelessly to behind him.

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"One wondered where you had gone to," said the man.

Desmond laughed, and slipping his hand beneath the inquirer's arm strolled aft with him, but he sighed with relief when, as they joined the others on the opposite side of the deck-house, he saw Benicia already sitting there. He did not know how she had contrived it, until he remembered that to slip through the companion would shorten the distance. It was, however, half an hour later when she found an opportunity of standing beside him for a moment or two.

"It seems that one is watched," she said. "You must be careful."

Desmond was on the whole not sorry when his guests took themselves away, and he laughed as he stood at the gangway shaking hands with them.

"I am afraid I shall not be ashore to-morrow," he said. "It is very likely that we shall be out at sea by then."

One or two of them expressed their regret, and the boat slid away, while some little time afterwards Dom Clemente glanced at his daughter as they stood on the outer stairway of his house. Beneath them they could see the *Palestrina* dotted here and there with blinking lights, and a dingy smear of smoke was steaming from her funnel.

"So he is going away again to-morrow," he said reflectively. "Well, I suppose one is always permitted to change his mind."

Benicia made no answer, and Dom Clemente stood still, glancing towards the steamer with a somewhat curious expression when she went into the house. Then he made a little abrupt gesture, as of one who resigns himself, before he turned away and went in after her.

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"In the meanwhile I look on," he said.

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CHAPTER XIX THE DELAYED MESSAGE

It was a few days after the *Palestrina* had sailed when Dom Clemente once more sat behind the pillars in a basket chair looking thoughtfully at his unlighted cigar. He could when it appeared advisable move energetically and to some effect, but he was not fond of action, or conversation, for its own sake, and he seldom told anybody else what was in his mind. There are men who apparently find a pleasure in doing so, and in their case the task is as a rule a particularly easy one, but Dom Clemente had no sympathy with them. When the time was ripe he acted on his opinions, but otherwise he was placid, tolerantly courteous, and inscrutable. Still, there were men concerned in the government of his country who had confidence in him.

It happened that a little cargo steamer on her way north had crept in that morning with engines broken down, and her British skipper, who had certain favors to ask, had been sent to Dom Clemente. He had gone away contented a few minutes earlier, but he had incidentally supplied Dom Clemente with a piece of information which, although he was not altogether astonished at it, had made him thoughtful. At last he rose, and laying down his cigar strolled forward leisurely to where, looking down between the pillars, he could see his daughter in the patio below. She did not see him, for she was sitting with a book turned back upwards upon her knee and apparently gazing straight before her at a trellis draped with flowers. He would have greatly liked to know what she was thinking, but since he recognized that this was one of the wishes that must remain ungratified he turned away again with a little gesture which was chiefly expressive of resignation. He could deal with men, but he had already found that the charge of a motherless daughter was something of a responsibility. Then he called a negro whom he dispatched with a message, and leaned against one of the pillars until a man in uniform with a big sword belted to him came in.

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"Sit down," he said, pointing to the table. "Write what I tell you."

The man did as he was bidden, and Dom Clemente nodded when he was shown the letter. "You will take it across to the Lieutenant Frequillo and tell him to send a few men direct to the Bahia if he considers it advisable," he said. "Then you will see the messenger Pacheco dispatched with it. The matter, as you will understand, is urgent. As you go down say that I should like a word with the Señorita Benicia if she is at liberty."

His companion went out with the letter of instructions which was directed to the officer in command of the handful of dusky soldiers who had been sent up to inquire for news of Ormsgill, and Dom Clemente who sat down again waited until his daughter came in. She stood looking at him expectantly until he turned and pointed to the little British steamer.

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"The captain of that vessel has just been in," he said. "He told me with some resentment that a

white steam yacht went by him two days ago, and took no notice of his signals. The captain, it seems, was very anxious to be towed in here."

"I do not think that concerns me," said Benicia.

"The yacht," said Dom Clemente, "had a single funnel, a long deck-house, and two masts, which, of course, is not unusual, but it is most unlikely that there are two yachts of that description anywhere near this coast. The point is that she was steaming very fast, and heading south, which is certainly not the way to Nigeria."

Benicia appeared to straighten herself a trifle, but save for the little movement she was very quiet, and she looked at her father with eyes that were almost as inscrutable as his own. Still, she recognized that she was at a disadvantage, since it was evident that the course he meant to take was clear to him, and she was in a state of anxious uncertainty.

"It is," he continued tranquilly, "a little astonishing how these Englishmen recognize the natural facilities of a country. There is down the coast a little bay which I have long had my eyes upon. Some day, perhaps, we will build a deep water pier there and make a railway across the littoral. No other place has so many advantages. It offers, among others, a natural road to the interior."

The girl could have faced a direct question better than this preamble, which Dom Clemente no doubt guessed.

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"The Señor Desmond is not a commercialist," she said. "Why should this interest him?"

"Well," said Dom Clemente, "one could fancy that it does, for he is certainly going there." He stopped for a moment, and then his tone was sharp and incisive. "The question is, who sent him?"

Benicia saw the little glint in his dark eyes, but she met his gaze. She was clever enough to realize that there was only one course open to her.

"Ah," she said, "I almost think you know."

The man made a little gesture. "At least, I do not know how the affair concerns you."

Benicia sat down in the nearest chair, and a faint warmth crept into her face, for this was the last point she desired to make clear, and Dom Clemente's eyes were still fixed upon her. It was evident that he expected an answer, and it said a good deal for her courage that her voice was steady.

"You are aware that I have spoiled your plans?" she said.

"That," said Dom Clemente dryly, "is another matter. I am not sure that you have spoiled them. I would, however, like to hear your reasons for meddling with them."

It was the same question in a different guise, and she nerved herself to face it.

"The Señor Ormsgill is doing a very chivalrous thing," she said. "It is one in which he has my sympathy—one could almost fancy that he has yours, too."

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This was a bold venture, but she saw the man's faint smile. "I have a duty here, and that counts for most," he said. "Then it was sympathy with this man Ormsgill that influenced you?"

"Not altogether. I hate the Chefe at San Roque. You know why that is natural, and, after all, it was you who had him sent there. Apart from that, is it not clear that he and the trader Herrero and Domingo play into each other's hands up yonder? The traffic they are engaged in is authorized, but the way in which it is carried out is an iniquity."

There were, as it happened, men in that country who held similar views, but the other reason the girl had proffered seemed to Dom Clemente the most obvious one, though he fancied it did not go quite far enough. It was conceivable that she should hate Dom Erminio, who had been sent up into the bush after bringing discredit upon himself as well as certain friends of hers. Still, he realized that this was a matter on which she would never fully enlighten him, and he recognized his disabilities. It was, perhaps, one of his strong points that he usually did recognize them, and seldom attempted the impossible. As the result of this he generally carried out what he took in hand. Dom Clemente was first of all a soldier, and not one who shone in civilized society or cared to scheme for preferment by social influence, which was probably why he had been sent out to a secondary command in Africa. He had friends who said he might have gone further had he been less faithful to his dead wife's memory.

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"Well," he said, "it was certainly my intention to arrest this man Ormsgill. I admit that I have a certain sympathy with him, and that is partly why I am a little anxious to keep him from involving himself in useless difficulties."

"Do you think a man of his kind would be grateful for that?"

Dom Clemente made a little gesture of indifference. "I do not know. It is, after all, not a point that very much concerns me, though he is doing a perilous thing by meddling with our affairs, especially in the bush yonder."

"Ah," said Benicia, "then is nobody to meddle, and is this iniquity to go on?"

Dom Clemente smiled dryly. "I almost think," he said, "that when the time is ripe there will, as

usual, be a man ready to take the affair in hand. In the meanwhile it would be a very undesirable thing that any one should point to you as a friend of this rash Englishman."

He rose, and buckling on his sword went down the outer stairway, while Benicia sat still with her cheeks burning. She fancied Dom Clemente had meant a good deal more than he had said, but, after all, that did not greatly trouble her. She was not one who counted the cost, and it was not quite clear that she had failed, though she knew troops had been dispatched to head off Ormsgill from the coast. It was possible that he had slipped past them, and the *Palestrina* would be waiting at the Bahia Santiago, and then it flashed upon her that it would not be difficult for her father to send the man in command of the troops instructions to proceed direct to the Bahia by a fast messenger. While she considered the point it happened that the officer he had handed the instructions to came up the stairway.

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"I wonder if you know where the messenger Pacheco is, Señorita?" he said. "I have an urgent errand for him."

Benicia saw that he had a packet in his hand, and a swift glance at the table showed her that the writing materials were not exactly as they had been laid out an hour or two earlier. Somebody, it seemed, had written a letter, and she could make a shrewd guess at its purport. For a moment she stood looking at the officer, and thinking hard. It was evident that her father had a certain liking for Ormsgill, but she felt that he would probably not allow it to influence him to any great extent. He was apparently working out some cleverly laid plan of his own, and it was evident that she would incur a heavy responsibility by meddling with it, but after all Ormsgill's safety stood first with her.

"I am not sure, but I think he is in the house," she said.

She left the officer waiting, and entering her own room hastily wrote a note. Then she went down the inner stairway with it in her hand, and crossing the patio glanced up for a moment at the balustrade above. Fortunately, the officer was not leaning over it, and did not see her slip into a store room where a big dusky man was talking to the negress cook, with whom, as it happened, he was a favorite. Western Africa is indifferently supplied with telegraphic and postal facilities and messages are still usually carried by native runners. There were none of them anywhere about that city as fast or trusty as Pacheco, and Benicia smiled as she looked at him. He was lean and hard and muscular, a man who had made famous journeys in the service of the Government, which was exactly why she did not wish him to be available for another one.

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"I have a message for the Señora Blanco," she said. "I should like her to get it before she goes to sleep in the afternoon, and you will start now, but if it is very hot you need make no great haste in bringing me back the answer."

Pacheco rose with a grin. "It is only two leagues to the plantation," he said. "Though the road is rough, that is nothing to me."

Then the plump negro woman caught Benicia's eyes, and, though she said nothing, there was comprehension in her dusky face. The girl went out in the patio satisfied, and stood waiting behind a creeper-covered trellis. She felt she could leave the matter in the hands of the negress with confidence. The latter turned to the messenger with a compassionate smile.

"You have the sense of a trek-ox. It is in your legs," she said. "The Señorita does not wish you to distress yourself if the day is hot."

"But," said Pacheco, "it is always hot, and no journey of that kind could weary me."

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The woman made a little grimace. "The trek-ox is slow to understand and one teaches it with the stick. Sometimes the same thing is done with a man. It seems the Señorita does not wish to see how fast you could go."

At last Pacheco seemed to understand. "Ah," he said, "there are thorns in this country. Now and then one gets one in his foot."

"The Señorita would be sorry if you came home limping. Once or twice I have cut my hand with the chopper, and she was kind to me."

The man chuckled softly and went out, and Benicia standing in the shadow felt her heart beat as she watched him slip across the patio. There would probably be complications if the officer saw him from above. Nobody, however, appeared among the pillars, and the shadowy arch that led through the building was not far away. The negro's feet fell softly on the hot stones, and though the slight patter sounded horribly distinct to her nobody called out to stop him. He had almost reached the arch when a uniformed figure appeared between two of the pillars, and for a moment the girl held her breath. If the man moved another foot it was evident that he must see the messenger, but, as it happened, he stood where he was, and next moment Pacheco, who turned and looked back at her with a grin, slipped into the shadow of the arch. Then Benicia went back into the house a little quiver of relief running through her. It would, she knew, be possible to obtain other messengers, but none of them were so well acquainted with the native paths which traverse the littoral or so speedy as Pacheco, and she did not think he would be available until the evening.

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In the meantime the officer waited above, until growing impatient, he summoned the major domo, who sent for the negress.

"Pacheco was certainly in the house because he talked to me, but he went out with a message, and I do not know when he will be back again," she said.

The officer asked her several questions without, however, eliciting much further information, and went away somewhat perplexed. He could not help a fancy that Benicia was somehow connected with the messenger's disappearance, but there was nothing to suggest what her object could have been. She was also a lady of influence, and he wisely decided to keep his thoughts to himself. As it happened, Pacheco did not arrive until late that night, and another messenger was dispatched in the meanwhile. He, however, became involved amidst a waste of tall grass which Pacheco would have skirted, and afterwards wasted a day or two endeavoring to carry out the directions certain villagers who bore the Government no great good-will had given him. As the result of this the handful of black soldiers had wandered a good deal further inland before he came up with them.

In the meantime it happened the morning after he set out that Dom Clemente sent for Pacheco who was just then sitting in the cook's store nursing an injured foot. They exchanged glances when the major-domo informed him that his presence would be required in a few minutes, and after the latter had gone out the negress handed Pacheco a sharp-pointed knife.

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"It is wise to make certain when one has to answer a man like Dom Clemente, and the scratch the thorn made was not a very large one," she said.

Pacheco took the knife, and looked at it hesitatingly.

"The thing would be easier if it was some other person's foot. It will, no doubt, hurt," he said.

"It will hurt less than what Dom Clemente may order you," and the negress grinned. "A man is always afraid of bearing a little pain."

Pacheco decided that she was probably right, and set his thick lips as he laid the knife point against the ball of his big toe. Still, for it is probable that there are respects in which the negro's susceptibilities are less than those of the civilized white man, he steadily pressed the blade in. After that he wrapped up his foot again, and rose with a wry face.

"I was given a bottle of anisado and a small piece of silver yesterday," he said. "I almost think I deserve a little more for this."

Then he limped up the stairway leaving red marks behind him, and made a little deprecatory gesture when he appeared before Dom Clemente. The latter looked at him in a fashion which sent a thrill of dismay through him.

"I hear you have hurt your foot," he said. "Take that bandage off."

Pacheco, who dare not hesitate, sat down and unrolled the rag. Then with considerable misgivings he did as he was bidden and held up his foot.

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"Ah," said Dom Clemente dryly, "a thorn did that. The wound a thorn makes seems to keep curiously fresh. Well, you can put on the rag again."

Pacheco did it as hastily as he could while he wondered with a growing uneasiness what the man who regarded him with a little sardonic smile would ask him next. Dom Clemente, however, made him a sign to get up.

"One would recommend you to be more careful," he said. "You will have reason to regret it if the next time I have an errand for you you have a—thorn—in your foot."

Pacheco limped away with sincere relief, and Dom Clemente who sat still contemplatively smoked a cigar. While he did it he once more decided that it is now and then advisable to content oneself with simply looking on, and it was characteristic of him that when he next met Benicia he asked her no questions.

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CHAPTER XX

DESMOND GOES ASHORE

It was a thick black night when Desmond brought the *Palestrina* into the Bahia, steaming at half-speed with the big smooth swell heaving in vast undulations behind her. The blinding deluge which had delayed him for half an hour had just ceased, and at every roll boat and deckhouse shook off streams of lukewarm water. A dripping man stood strapped outside the bridge swinging the heavy lead, and his sing-song cry which rose at regular intervals broke through the throb of slowly turning engines. A yard or two away from him Desmond leaned upon the rails peering into the darkness athwart which there ran a dim black line of bluff. A filmy haze that glimmered faintly white leapt up between him and it, and the stagnant air was filled with a great, deep-toned rumbling. It rolled along the half-seen bluff like the muttering of distant thunder, for, though the

Bahia was partly sheltered, the vast heave of the Southern Ocean was crumbling upon the hammered beach that night. It does so now and then when there is not a breath of wind.

"It isn't exactly encouraging," he said to his mate. "The surf seems running unpleasantly steep. There's a weight in it. I'm rather glad the boat's a big one since we have to face it. Well, you had better get forward, and stand by your anchors. I'll bring her up in another few minutes."

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The mate went forward with a handful of dripping men behind him, and left Desmond quietly intent upon the bridge. The latter was quite aware that it would have been prudent to wait for daylight, and recognized that he was doing a reckless thing, but that rather appealed to him. It is also possible to do a reckless thing carefully, and he was, at least, proceeding with a certain circumspection. When the bluff grew a trifle plainer he seized his telegraph, and raised a warning hand to the helmsman.

"Starboard!" he said. "Let her swing when she goes astern."

A gong tinkled beneath him, there was a sharper clank of engines, and the *Palestrina* swinging round rolled from rail to rail. Then a strident roar of running cable jarred through the rumbling of the surf, and was succeeded by a trumpeting blast of blown off steam when he rang the telegraph again. When this slackened a little he raised his voice.

"If you're ready there, Mr. Winthrop, will you bring your men along," he said.

There was a tramp of feet forward, and when half-seen figures clustered beneath the bridge Desmond leaned over the rails and addressed them.

"Boys," he said, "what we are going to do is in some respects a crazy thing, and while I don't know that we'll have trouble it's very probable. Now there'll be a bonus for the men who come with me, but I don't want any one to go against his will. If any of you would sooner stay here all he has to do is to walk forward, and I'll admit that he's sensible."

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There was a little laughter, but nobody moved. Among those who heard him were shrewd, cold-blooded Scots from the Clyde, and level-headed Solent Englishmen, as well as boys from Kingston and Belfast Lough. Of these latter Desmond had no doubt. A hint that the thing was rash and might lead to trouble was naturally enough for them, but he recognized that there might be occasions when the colder temperament of the others was likely to prove, at least, as serviceable. It was not astonishing that these, too, evidently meant to go with him, for there are men who can apparently with no great effort bend others to their will, and, after all, one can not invariably be sensible. Perhaps, it would be a misfortune if this were possible.

"Sure," said one of them, and he was a Kingston man, "all ye have to do, sir, is to go straight ahead. We're coming with ye, if we have to swim, an' if we have to it's more than I can."

One or two of his comrades laughed, and Desmond raised a hand. "It's very probable that you'll have to try. We'll get the surfboat over, Mr. Winthrop."

It would have been a difficult task in the daylight, for the *Palestrina* rolled wickedly and the long slopes of water lapped to her rail, but they accomplished it in the dark, and when the big boat hove up beneath them dropped into her one by one. They had a few Accra and Liberia boys for the paddles, but not enough and white seamen perched among them on the froth-licked gunwale as they reeled away on the back of a swell. It swept them out from the steamer, and let them drop into a black hollow while the negro at the steering oar yelled as another dark ridge hove itself aloft behind them. They drove on with this one and several others that succeeded it, careering amidst a turmoil of spouting froth that boiled round the high, pointed stern, and there was spray all about them, stinging their eyes and in their nostrils, when at last the beach was close at hand. They could not, however, see it. There was nothing visible now but a dim filmy cloud, out of which came a thunderous rumbling that has its effect upon the stoutest nerves, for there are probably few men who can listen to the crashing charge of the great combers on an African beach quite unmoved, especially if it is their business to face them in the dark.

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Desmond glanced astern a moment when the sable helmsman shouted, and then resolutely turned his eyes ahead. He had seen all he wished to, and it was with vague relief he felt the boat rush upwards under him, for that waiting in the hollow was not a thing one could bear easily. She went forward reeling, half-buried in tumbling foam, twisting in spite of the gasping helmsman in peril of rolling over, and out of the spray and darkness the dim line of bluff came rushing back to them. Then there was a crash that flung half of them from the gunwale, and the boat went up the beach with a seething white turmoil washing over her, until they swung themselves over and clung to her waist-deep in the wild welter when the sea sucked back. Straining every muscle they held her somehow, and a voice rose strained and harsh through the din.

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"Where are those—rollers, boys?" it said.

Somebody produced them, and gasping and floundering they ran her up with another comber thundering out of the darkness behind them, and then flung themselves down breathless and dripping on the hot sand. Desmond let them lie awhile, and then leaving the negroes behind, the white men clambered up the face of the bluff. After that they stumbled amidst loose sand and tufts of harsh grass that now and then cut through their thin duck garments and twined about their legs, but they plodded on steadily, and when morning broke had made about a league which was, all things considered, excellent traveling. With the daylight, however, came the rain that beat the soil into a pulp and filled the steamy air. The grass they found in places bent beneath it,

and the water flowed about their feet. Still, they held on, drenched, and bleeding from odd scars and scratches, until there broke out dazzling, blistering sunshine which in a few minutes sucked the moisture from their clothing.

Then Desmond, who had heard that littoral described as dry and parched, bade them lie down in the scanty strip of shadow behind a clump of thorns, and a twinkle crept into his eyes as he glanced at them. They were already freely plastered with mire. A few of them had sporting rifles—he carried one himself—and bandoliers, while some of the rest had the gig's ash stretchers, and one a big pointed iron bar, but he fancied they would scarcely pass for a big game expedition. For one thing, they had no carriers. Desmond desired only men who could be relied upon to say as well as do what he bade them, for he could without any great effort foresee that he might have to grapple with more than physical difficulties. He let them lie for half an hour, and then the rain came and drove them on again.

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"He fancied they would scarcely pass for a big game expedition."—[Page 242.](#)

They floundered through it all that afternoon, lay down in wet sand when the sudden darkness blotted out the misty littoral, and rose with the swift dawn, cramped and wet and aching, to plunge into a thick white steam. There was a muggy warmth in it which relaxed their muscles and insidiously slackened the domination of their will. They wanted to lie down, and wondered vaguely why they did not do so, for there are times when man's resolution melts out of him in that land, and nothing seems worth the trouble of accomplishing. Still, they went on, and evening found them wearied in body and limp of will, as well as very wet and miry, on the edge of a belt of thorny vegetation amidst which there wound a native path. They slept beside it as best they could, and went on again for two more days under scorching sunshine until at last they reached a ridge of higher ground. There were a few palms on the crest of it, and they lay down between them amidst a maze of thorny vines.

Darkness was creeping up from the eastwards when Desmond sat poring over a section of a large-scale chart which had proved to be a reasonably accurate guide to the physical features of that littoral. The elevation of which the ridge formed a portion was duly marked, as was the creek they had cautiously waded through, and not far away there stood another rise which might be made out from a steamer's bridge. The dots that ran through them both indicated Ormsgill's path. He was a man who, at least, endeavored to provide for contingencies, and he had for Desmond's benefit plotted out the last stages of his march to the coast. The latter, however, remained in unpleasant uncertainty as to when he would arrive, which, in view of the fact that a handful of dusky troops were in all probability not very far away, was a question of some consequence.

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When darkness swept down he posted two sentries and then lay down near the smoldering cooking fire. The strip of rubber sheeting he spread beneath him did not make a very efficient mattress, but worn-out as he was he fell asleep in spite of the mosquitoes, and so far as he could afterwards ascertain the men he had left on watch in due time did the same. When he awakened there was a half-moon in the sky, and a faint silvery light shone down upon the ridge. He could see the palm shafts cut against it darkly in delicately proportioned columns, and the ebony

tracery of their great curved leaves. Now and then a big drop that fell from them splashed heavily upon the straggling undergrowth, but save for that everything was very still. The fire was red and low, but the smell of wood smoke and hot wet soil was in his nostrils. He was wondering drowsily why he had awakened when he fancied that a shadowy figure flitted behind a palm, and turning cautiously he reached out for the rifle that lay by his side. As his hand closed upon it another figure moved towards him quietly. The moonlight fell upon it and his grasp relaxed on the rifle as he saw that it was dressed in tattered duck. He scrambled to his feet, and Ormsgill stopped a pace or two away.

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"You are a little ahead of time, but considering everything it's fortunate," he said.

Desmond blinked at him for a moment or two. The man's face was lean and worn, and his thin, dew-drenched garments were torn by thorns. One of his boots had also burst, his wide hat was shapeless, and sunbaked mire clung about him to the knees.

"There were reasons why it seemed advisable to divide my party and push on," he proceeded. "My few personal belongings are now reposing in a swamp."

Desmond shook hands with him. "Well," he said, "it's like you. Where are your niggers, and what's the matter with my—sentries? Still that's not exactly what I meant to say."

Ormsgill laughed, and sent a shrill call ringing across the belt of mist below. There was an answer from it, and while the men from the *Palestrina* rose clamoring to their feet a row of weary, half-naked negroes plodded into camp. Some of them had red scars upon their dusky skin, some of them limped, and when they stopped at a sign from Ormsgill the seaman clustered round and gazed at them. They were woolly-haired and thick-lipped, and their weariness had worn all sign of intelligence out of their dusky faces. They looked at the clustering seamen vacantly and without curiosity.

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"Lord," said Desmond, "and these are the fellows you have done so much for! Well, it's evidently my turn. I suppose they can eat?"

Ormsgill laughed. "A good deal just now. We started soon after sunrise, and have scarcely stopped all day. In fact, we have been marching rather hard the last week or two."

Desmond turned to one of the men he had brought with him. "Stir that fire," he said. "Make these images something, then take them away and stuff them."

He touched Ormsgill, and pointed to the strip of sheeting. "Get off your feet. We have a good deal to talk about."

They sat down, and by and by one of the *Palestrina's* stewards served them with coffee and canned stuff while his comrades sat in a ring about the negroes patting them on their naked shoulders and encouraging them to eat. The black men's stolidity vanished, and they grinned widely, while by degrees odd snatches of different languages and bursts of hoarse laughter rose from them. In the midst of it one big man chanted a monotonous song. Ormsgill laid down his cup and listened with a little smile.

"He's improvising rather cleverly," he said. "It's almost a pity you don't know enough of the language to hear your praises sung. You see, he has so far only come across two white men who have even spoken to him decently."

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Desmond grinned, and raised his voice. "If they understand what tobacco is let them have what you have with you, boys," he said. "You can come to me for more when we get back on board."

"That's all right, sir," said one man. "It's our dinner party. We've got most of a hatful for them ready."

"Sailors," said Desmond reflectively, "have some curious notions on the subject of making pets. So have you, for that matter, but, after all, that's not quite the question. Did you see anything that would lead you to believe Herrero's friends were after you?"

"I did," said Ormsgill. "Smoke, for one thing, and that was why I pushed on for the coast. Nares who was a little feverish and found it difficult to march fast insisted on turning back inland with half the carriers. I left two men I could rely on behind to investigate, and I expect some news before the morning. In the meanwhile what are you doing here? It's at least a week before I was due."

Desmond looked at him steadily, and, as it happened, the firelight fell upon them both. "Miss Figuera sent me."

"Ah," said Ormsgill, and a curious little glint crept into his eyes and faded out of them again. "Well, you have, no doubt, a little more to tell."

His companion told it tersely, and afterwards Ormsgill sat silent for awhile with a half-filled pipe in his hand. Many a time during his wanderings he had seen in fancy Benicia Figuera sitting in the shady patio, and on each occasion the longing to hear her voice and once more stand face to face had grown stronger. He had fought against it on weary march and when the boys were sleeping in the silent camp, but it had conquered him.

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"It was very kind of her," he said at last. "Still, considering her father's status, one could wonder why she did it."

Desmond smiled curiously as he leaned forward and stirred the fire. "That," he said with an air of reflection, "is naturally one of the things I don't know. Still, there is a certain chivalrous rashness in the adventure you have undertaken which, although sensible folks would probably consider it misguided, might appeal to a young woman of Miss Figuera's description. You see, she is by no means a conventional person herself. Perhaps, it's fortunate there are young women like her with courage and intelligence enough to form their own opinions."

"Miss Figuera has certainly courage," said Ormsgill slowly.

Desmond laughed. "She has. She has also a wholesome pride, and sense as well as imagination, though the two don't always go together. With her at his side a man crazy enough to be pleased with that kind of thing might set himself to straighten up half the wrongs perpetrated by our civilization, and she'd see he was never wholly beaten. Somehow, she would, at least, bring him off with honor, and that is, after all, the most any one with such notions could reasonably look for."

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He stopped for a moment, and when he went on again the firelight showed the little flush in his cheeks and the gleam in his eyes.

"Lord," he said, "how little some of us are content with when we marry—a woman to sit at the head of our table, and talk prettily, one who asks for everything that isn't worth while, and sees you never do anything her friends don't consider quite fitting. Still, there is another kind, the ones who give instead of asking, and who would, for the man they loved, face the malice of the world with a smile in their eyes. I think," and he made a little vague gesture, "I have said something of the kind before, but I have to let myself go now and then. I can't help it."

"One would almost fancy you were in love with the girl yourself," said Ormsgill quietly.

Desmond leaned forward a trifle, and looked hard at him. "No. I might have been had things been different. At least, she is certainly not in love with me."

Ormsgill said nothing, but he was sensible of a curious stirring of his blood. He would not ask himself exactly what his comrade meant, or if, indeed, he meant anything in particular, for it was a consolation to remember that Desmond now and then talked inconsequently. He sat still, vacantly watching the blue smoke wreaths curl up between the palms. The boys had lain down now, and only an occasional faint rustle as one moved broke the heavy silence. Then, and, perhaps he was a trifle overwrought and fanciful, as he watched the drifting smoke wreaths a figure seemed to materialize out of them. It was filmy and unsubstantial, etherealized by the moonlight, but it grew plainer, and once more he saw Benicia Figuera as he had talked with her in the shady patio. She seemed to be looking at him with reposeful eyes that had nevertheless a little glint in the depths of them, and now the desire to see her in the flesh took him by the throat and shook the resolution out of him. At last he knew. There could no longer be any brushing of disconcerting facts aside. There was one woman in the world whom he desired, and he had pledged himself to marry another one. Still, his duty remained, and he sat silent with one lean hand closed tightly and the lines on his worn face deepening until at last he became conscious that Desmond was watching him, and he roused himself with an effort.

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"Well," he said quietly, "she has laid me under a heavy obligation, but we have other things to talk of."

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CHAPTER XXI ON THE BEACH

Desmond was asleep when the men his comrade had left behind came in, but the negroes' sense of hearing was quicker than his, and when he rose drowsily to his feet there was already a bustle in the camp. Ormsgill, who was giving terse directions, turned to him.

"These boys have brought me word that there is a handful of troops in a village a few hours' march away," he said, pointing towards two half-seen men who were talking excitedly to the dusky carriers. "As they know where we are heading for they will probably be upon our trail as soon as the sun is up." He did not seem very much concerned, and when he once more turned to the negroes, Desmond, reassured by his quietness, glanced about him. The fire had died out, and there was no longer any moonlight, but the palms cut with a sharp black distinctness against the eastern sky. It was also a little cooler. Indeed, Desmond shivered, for he was stiff and clammy with the dew. The negroes were hurrying to and fro, apparently getting their loads together, and the seamen were asking each other disjointed questions as they scrambled to their feet. Desmond could see their faces faintly white which he had not been able to do when he went to sleep.

"Well," he said, "I suppose we'll have to make a move of some kind?"

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"It would be advisable," said Ormsgill. "Fortunately, it will be daylight in a few minutes. You will start for the coast as soon as you are ready, and take most of the boys I brought down along. It

would be wiser to push on as fast as possible, though it's scarcely likely that the troops will come up with you. If they do, you will give the boys up to them, but in that case one of the carriers will slip away and bring me word. Any resistance you could make would be useless and very apt to involve you in serious difficulties."

Desmond smiled dryly, and did not pledge himself. He was not a man who invariably did the most prudent thing.

"You are not coming with us?" he said.

"No," said Ormsgill. "There are six boys not accounted for yet. I am going back inland for them. The troops will, of course, pick up your trail, and they will probably be content with that. It's scarcely likely to occur to them that there might be another."

Desmond exerted all his powers of persuasion during the next minute or two, and it was not his fault if his comrade did not realize that it was a folly he was undertaking. Desmond, at least made a strenuous attempt to impress that point on him, in spite of the fact that it was a folly he would in all probability have been guilty of himself. Ormsgill, however, only smiled.

"As you have pointed out, anything I can do to straighten out things in this country is scarcely worth while," he said. "I'm also willing to admit that it's not exactly my business, and I'm far from sure that the rôle of professional philanthropist is one that fits me. Still, you see, I have undertaken the thing, and I can't very well leave it half done." He stopped a moment, and laughed, a trifle harshly. "Especially as it's scarcely probable that I shall have an opportunity of doing anything of the kind again."

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Then he turned to the negroes, and spoke to them for several minutes in scraps of Portuguese and a native tongue. Their villages on the inland plateau had been burned, he said, and there was, so far as he knew, no one he could trust them to in the country. If they stayed in it some white man would in all probability claim them, and they would be sent to toil for a term of years upon the plantations. They knew what that meant.

They certainly appeared to do so by the murmurs that rose from them, and Ormsgill pointed to Desmond. He had pledged himself to set them at liberty, he said, and his friend would take them to a country where negroes were reasonably paid for their services, and, unless they deserved it, very seldom beaten. What was more to the purpose, if they did not like the factory they worked at they could leave it and go to another, which was a thing that appeared incomprehensible to them, until a man with a blue stripe down his forehead stood up and told them it certainly was as Ormsgill had said. He had himself earned as much by twelve months' labor at a white man's factory as would have kept him several years in luxury. Then one of the boys, a thick-lipped, woolly-haired pagan with nothing about him that suggested intelligence or sensibility asked Ormsgill a question in the native tongue, and the latter looked at Desmond.

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"He asks if I can give my word that they will not be ill-used in Nigeria, and it's a good deal to assure them of," he said. "Still, I think it could be done. There are outcasts in those factories, men outside the pale, and it's possible that some of them occasionally belabor a nigger with a wooden kernel-shovel, but considering what the negro is accustomed to in this country that is a little thing, and they usually stop at it. After all, it is not men of their kind who practice systematic oppression or grind the toiler down. When I was a ragged outcast it was the men outside the pale who held out their hands to me."

He turned to the negro saying a few words quietly, and there was a low murmuring until one of the boys pointed to Desmond.

"Then," he said, "we are ready to go with him."

Even Desmond could understand all that this implied, and it stirred the hot Celtic blood in him. It was a crucial test of faith, for it seemed that these half-naked bushmen had a confidence in his comrade which no one acquainted with the customs of the country could reasonably have expected of them. They knew how their fellows were driven by men of his color, but in face of that his word that it should not be so with them was, it seemed, sufficient.

"You already understand my wishes, and here are the letters for the two traders in Nigeria," said Ormsgill quietly. "There is nothing more to say."

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"There's just this," said Desmond turning towards the *Palestrina's* men, who had naturally been listening. "If it costs me the yacht to do it I'll see these boys safe into the right hands."

The men from Belfast Lough and Kingston grinned approvingly. They and their leader were, after all, of the same temperament, and one of them carried a sharp-pointed iron bar and others stout ash stretchers which they had, somewhat to their regret, not been called upon to do anything with yet. Desmond, however, walked a little apart with Ormsgill.

"When will you be back?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Ormsgill. "There is a good deal against me just now. In any case, I expect nothing further from you. You have done more than I would have asked of anybody else already."

"Will two months see you through?"

"It may be four, very probably longer."

"Exactly," said Desmond with a little smile. "In the meantime the *Palestrina* is going to Nigeria. I don't quite know where she'll go after that."

They said very little more until Ormsgill shook hands with him and calling to his carriers marched out of camp. The sun had just lifted itself above a rise to the east, and for awhile Desmond watched the line of dusky men with eyes dazzled by the fierce light, and then turned to give instructions to his seamen. They had already been busy, and in another few minutes they and the boys that had been Lamartine's had started for the coast. [Pg 255]

It proved an arduous march, for before the sun had risen its highest it was blotted out by leaden cloud and the wide littoral was wrapped in dimness until the lightning blazed. It ceased in a few minutes, but the men crouched bewildered for another half hour ankle-deep in water while a pitiless blinding deluge thrashed them. Then they went on again dripping, and every league or so were lashed by tremendous rain while mad gusts of wind rioted across the waste in between. The next day there was scorching sunshine, and the men were worn-out, parched, and savage, when at last one of the boys who had served Lamartine, climbing a low elevation, assured his comrades that there were soldiers behind them. He said they would be, at least, an hour in reaching that spot, but there was haste and bustle when the information was conveyed to Desmond. The latter fancied it would be several hours before he made the beach.

He and the white men had occasion to remember the rest of that journey. They strained every aching muscle as they plodded on with the perspiration dripping from them and the baked mire crumbling and slipping beneath their feet while a dingy haze once more crept across the sky and the heat became intolerable. It was dark when they reached the beach, and Desmond gasped with relief when the roar of the *Palestrina's* whistle rang through the thunder of the surf in answer to a rifle shot. It was evident that she had steam up. He sent two men back to keep watch on the crest of the bluff, and then set about getting the boat down with the rest. [Pg 256]

She was big and heavy. The sand was soft, and the rollers instead of running over it bedded themselves in it. The boys from the interior were also of little use at that task, and though the seamen toiled desperately it was almost beyond their accomplishing. The tide was at low ebb, and the sand grew softer as they ran her down a yard at a time, until at last they stopped gasping. Then one of the men came running from the bluff.

"The soldiers are not far away," he said.

Desmond asked him no questions, but turned to the seamen. "We have got to do it, boys," he said. "Shift that after roller under her nose."

They drew breath, and toiled on again. Their progress was not reassuring in view of the fact that the troops were close at hand, but they made a little, and in front of them the spray beyond which lay the *Palestrina* whirled in a filmy cloud. Every now and then there was a thunderous roar in the midst of it, and part of the beach was hidden in a tumultuous swirl of foam. Gasping, straining, slipping, but grimly silent, they toiled on, moving her a foot with every desperate effort, until at last a yeasty flood surged past them knee-deep, and hove her away from them grinding one bilge in the sand. Then Desmond raised a hoarse voice.

"Hang on to her," he said. "Oh, hang on. Down on her bilge, and let her go when the sea sucks out again." [Pg 257]

They went out with her and it amidst a sliding mass of sand, and somehow contrived to hold her when the next sea came in. It broke across her, and some of them went down, but when the seething flood swept on up the beach she was there still, and they went out again waist-deep in the downward swirl of it. Then they were up to the shoulders with a great hissing wall of water close in front of them, and black man and white scrambled in over the gunwale and floundered furiously in the water inside her, groping for oar and paddle. Still, they were perched on the gunwale, and the man with the blue-striped forehead had the big steering oar before the sea fell upon them, and straining every muscle they drove her through the breaking crest of it.

She lurched out, half-full and loaded heavily, to face the next, and Desmond was never certain how she got over it, but at least, he was not washed out of her as he had half expected. He fancied there was a faint shouting on the bluff, but nobody could have been sure of that through the din of the surf, and all his attention was occupied by his paddle. Very slowly, fighting for every fathom, they drove her outshore, until the combers grew less steep and their crests ceased to break, and Desmond gazing seawards could see the *Palestrina* when she lifted. She swung with the swell, a dim, blurred shape, without a light on board her, but a sharp jarring rattle told him that his instructions were being carried out. Winthrop the mate was already heaving his anchor. That was satisfactory, for Desmond knew that nobody could see the yacht through the spray that floated over bluff and beach. [Pg 258]

They were alongside in some twenty minutes with another troublesome task before them. The yacht was rolling heavily, and the big half-swamped boat swung up to her rail one moment and sank down beneath a fathom of streaming side the next. It was a difficult matter to reach her deck, and Lamartine's boys were bushmen who knew nothing of the sea. They crouched in the boat's bottom stupidly until their white companions who found thumps and pushes of no avail seized them by their woolly hair and dragged them to their feet. They were sent up one by one, and when at last the boat was hove in by the banging winch Desmond scrambled with the brine running from him to his bridge. The windlass rattled furiously for another minute or two, and then with a quickening throb of engines the *Palestrina* swept out into the night. A little while

later Winthrop the mate climbed to the bridge, and Desmond laughed when he asked him a few questions.

"I don't think those folks ashore got a sight of the yacht or boat," he said. "It will be morning before they find out where we've gone, and we should be a good many miles to the north by then. I don't suppose they know Ormsgill isn't with us either, and that will probably put them off his trail for a time, at least. In the meanwhile you'll head her out a point or two more to the westwards for another hour, and have me called at daylight. I'm going down to change my clothes."

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He had just dressed himself in dry garments when a steward tapped at the door of his room.

"I don't know what's to be done with those niggers, sir," he said. "The men won't have them in the forecastle."

"Ah," said Desmond a trifle sharply, "that's a thing I hadn't thought of, though, of course, it might have struck me. They're on deck still? Bring me a lantern."

The man got one, and Desmond who went out with him held it up when they stood beside the little group of dusky men who sat huddled together upon the sloppy deck. A seaman stood not far away from them, and he turned to Desmond.

"We can't have them down forward with us, sir," he said.

There was a certain deference in his tone, but it was very resolute, and Desmond made a little gesture of comprehension as he glanced at the huddled negroes. Most of them were naked save for a strip of tattered waistcloth, and their thick lips, wooly hair, and heavy faces were revealed in the lantern light. He realized that there was something to be said for the seaman's attitude. They had done what they could for these Africans, and had done it gallantly, but now they were afloat again they would not eat with them or sleep in their vicinity. Color is only skin-deep, a question of climate and surroundings, but Desmond, who admitted that, felt that, after all, there was a wide distinction between himself and the seamen and these aliens. It was one that could not be ignored. The theory of the brotherhood of humanity went so far, and then broke down.

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"We have a few strips of pine scantling among the stores," he said, after a moment's thought. "You can screw one or two of them down on deck—but I can't have more than a couple of screws in each. Then if you ranged a bass warp in between it would keep them off the wet. There's an old staysail they can have to sleep in. We could toss it overboard when they have done with it."

He turned away, and, soon after a meal was brought him, went to sleep while the *Palestrina* sped on as fast as her engines could drive her towards the north. In due time she also crept into one of the many miry waterways which wind through the mangrove forests of Lower Nigeria, and Desmond sent a boat up it with a letter Ormsgill had given him to a certain white trader. An hour or two later a big gaunt man in white duck came back with the boat and drank a good deal of Desmond's wine. Then after asking the latter a few questions he looked at him with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "Ormsgill is rather a friend of mine, and what you have been telling me is certainly the kind of thing one would expect from him. It is by no means what I would do myself, but he always had—curious notions. Most of us have, for that matter, though, perhaps, it's fortunate they're not all the same. Well, I'll be glad to have the boys, especially as it's difficult to get Kroos enough from Liberia just now."

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"I think there were certain conditions laid down in Ormsgill's letter," said Desmond reflectively.

The trader laughed. "There were," he said. "Well, I'm willing to admit that I have once or twice pitched a nigger who was a trifle impudent over the veranda rails. It's one of the things you have to do, and if you do it in one way they don't seem to mind. No doubt they understand it's only natural the climate and the fever should make you a trifle hasty. Still, I don't think a Kroo was ever done out of his earnings, or had things thrown at him when he didn't deserve it, in my factory."

Desmond fancied that this was probable, for he liked the man's face. There was rough good-humor in it, and the twinkle in his eyes was reassuring. As a matter of fact, he was, like most of those who followed his occupation in those swamps, one who lived a trifle hard and grimly held his own with a good deal against him. His code of ethics was, perhaps, slightly vague, but there were things he would not stoop to, and though now and then he might in a fit of exasperation hurl anything that was convenient as well as hard words at his boys, they knew that such action was not infrequently followed by a fit of inconsequent generosity. There are men of his kind in those factories whose boys will not leave them even when a rival offers them more gin cases and pieces of cloth for their services. In a moment or two Desmond made up his mind.

"Shall I send the boys ashore with you?" he asked.

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"No," said the trader reflectively. "After what you've told me it might be wiser if I ran them up river in the launch to our factory higher up after dark. You see, nobody would worry about where they came from there. In the meantime you had better go up and ask the Consul down to dinner. You needn't mention the boys to him, and it's fortunate that a yacht owner escapes most of the usual formalities. I'll be back with the launch by sunset."

He kept his word, but while he was getting the boys on board his launch just after darkness closed down a little white steamer swept suddenly round a bend, and before the launch was clear two white officers stepped on board the *Palestrina*. A thick white mist rose from the river, but Desmond was a trifle anxious when one of the officers leaned over the yacht's rail looking down on the launch.

"You seem to have a crowd of boys with you, Brinsley," he said.

The trader stepped back on to the *Palestrina's* ladder. "I could do with more. Those folks up river are loading me up with oil. Anyway, I'd like a talk with you about that gin duty your clerk has overcharged me."

Then he turned to a man in the launch below. "Go ahead," he said. "You can tell Nevin he must send me that oil down if he works all to-morrow night."

A negro shouted something back to him, and with engines clanking the launch swept away up the misty river, while it was with relief Desmond led Brinsley and his guests into the saloon where dinner was set out.

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CHAPTER XXII

UNDER STRESS

When Desmond left him Ormsgill did not march directly east towards the interior, but headed northwards for several days. There were reasons which rendered the detour advisable, especially as he desired to avoid the few scattered villages as much as possible, but he had occasion to regret that he had made it. He pushed on as fast as possible until one hot afternoon when the boys wearied with the march since early morning lay down in the grass, and he wandered listlessly out of camp. Their presence was irksome, and he wanted to be alone just then.

There are times when an unpleasant dejection fastens upon the white man in that climate, and when he is in that state a very little is usually sufficient to exasperate him. The boys were muttering drowsily to one another, and Ormsgill felt he could not lie still and listen to them. He had also a tangible reason for the bitterness he was troubled with. Desmond had brought him no message from Ada Ratcliffe, and though she had as he knew no sympathy with what he was doing and had never shown him very much tenderness, it seemed to him that she might, at least, have sent him a cheering word. It was, in view of what it would cost him to keep faith with her, and that was a thing he resolutely meant to do, a little disconcerting to feel that she did not think of him at all.

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In the meanwhile it was oppressively hot, and the air was very still. His muscles seemed slack and powerless, his head ached, and the perspiration dripped from him, but he wandered on until he reached a spot where a little patch of jungle rose amidst a strip of tall grass in the mouth of a shallow ravine. Ormsgill stood still in its shadow and looked about him. Not a leaf shook, and there was not a movement in the stagnant air. In front of him the patch of jungle cut harshly green against the glaring blue of the sky, and beyond it there was sun-baked soil and sand on the slopes of the ravine.

Then there was a flash in the shadow and one of his legs gave away. He staggered and reeled crashing into a thicket, and when a minute later he strove to raise himself out of it one leg felt numb beneath the knee except for the spot where there was a stinging pain. Ormsgill also felt more than a little faint and dizzy, and for a few moments lay still again blinking about him. A wisp of blue smoke still hung about the leaves, and he could hear a low crackling that grew fainter as he listened. It was evident that the man who had shot him was bent on getting away, and he made shift to roll up his thin duck trousers, and looked down at his leg. There was a bluish mark in the middle of the big muscle with a little dark blood about it, and he took out his knife. He set his lips as he felt the point of it grate on something hard, and then closed the knife and sat still again with a little gasp of pain.

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There was, he knew, a piece of the broken cooking pot the West African usually loads his flintlock gun with embedded in his leg. That, at least, was evident, but he did not know who had shot him, and, indeed, was never any wiser on that point. It was, perhaps, a negro who had supposed him to be a trader or official against whom he had some grievance, but, after all, that seemed scarcely likely, and Ormsgill fancied it was some dusky sportsman who had fired at a venture when he heard a movement, and had then gone away as fast as possible when he saw that he had hit a white man. This appeared the more probable because they were not very far from the coast, where men do not often attempt each other's life, and Ormsgill had only been struck by one piece of iron.

In any case, the faintness was leaving him by the time the startled boys came up and found him sitting in the shadow. It was evident that the wound was not very serious in itself, but he realized that a man could not expect to travel far in that climate with a piece of iron rankling in his leg.

Somebody must cut it out for him, and he did not care to entrust any of his thick-headed carriers with the operation. Without being much of a physiologist he knew that there are arteries in one's leg which it is highly undesirable to sever. He also recognized that while the thing was, perhaps, possible to one with nerve enough, he could not get it out himself, which was, however, rather more than one could reasonably have expected of a man born and brought up in a state of civilization, for there are a few points on which the primitive peoples excel us. Still, the life he had led had made him hard, and when he had quieted the boys he bound up the wound, and filling his pipe with hands that were tolerably steady, lay still awhile to consider.

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He could not push on towards the interior as he was, and there were, he believed, one or two doctors in the city, which was not very far away. He was aware that he was liable to be arrested there, but it seemed possible that he might enter it unobserved at night and purchase secrecy from any one who took him in. In such a case he would be the safer because it was about the last spot in which those interested in his capture would expect to come across him, and in a few more minutes he had made up his mind. Though the hammock is not so frequently used as a means of conveyance in that country where the trek-ox is generally available as it is in most other parts of Western Africa, he had provided himself with one.

"Get the hammock slung," he said. "We will go on towards the west when you are ready."

Half an hour later the bearers hove the pole to their woolly crowns, and plodded on again. They were not men of any great intelligence, and were usually content to do what they were told without asking questions, which was a custom that had its advantages. They had also an unreasoning and half-instinctive confidence in the man who led them, and in due time they plodded into sight of the town one night when the muggy land breeze was blowing. Like other West African towns, the place straggles up and back from the seaboard bluff, with wide spaces between the houses, and nobody seemed stirring when Ormsgill's boys marched into the outskirts of it. Remembering what the priest of San Thome had told him of the man whose wife he had sent the girl Anita to, he presently bade them stop outside the building which stood well apart from the rest. Some of them were roofed with corrugated iron, and some with picturesque tiles, but the top of this one was flat, which Ormsgill was pleased to see. He recognized that it was built in the older Iberian style which is not uncommon in Western Africa and ensures the inmates privacy. There are no outbuildings where this plan is adopted. The house stands four-square and self-contained, presenting an almost unbroken wall to the outer world, though there is usually an open patio in the midst of it. One of the boys rapped upon a door, and when it was opened by a negro his comrades unceremoniously marched down an arched passage under the building until they reached the enclosed patio. Ormsgill had impressed them with the fact that the most important thing was to get in.

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Then lights appeared at one or two windows, and when a little, olive-faced gentleman in white linen with a broad sash about his waist came down the stairway from a veranda Ormsgill raised himself in the lowered hammock.

"You will forgive this intrusion, Señor," he said.

The other man made him a little formal salutation. "I," he said dryly, "await an explanation."

Ormsgill offered him one, and the little gentleman looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two.

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"I have heard of you—from the fathers up yonder who are friends of mine," he said. "Perhaps it is my duty to inform the Authorities that you are here, but in the meanwhile that is a point on which I am not quite certain. You can, at least, consider this house as yours until we talk the matter over. The boys may sleep in the patio to-night, but they will first carry you in."

They did it at Ormsgill's bidding, and left him sitting in a basket chair in a big, cool room, after which his host brought in a few cigars and a flask of wine.

"They are at your service, señor," he said. "I would suggest that you give me a little more information. I am one who can, at least, now and then respect a confidence."

Ormsgill looked at him steadily, and made up his mind. It was clear that if his host meant to hand him over to the Authorities there was nothing to prevent him doing so, and reticence did not appear likely to serve any purpose, since he was wholly in his hands. He spoke for a few minutes, and the other nodded.

"I think it was wise of you to tell me this," he said. "There are, I may mention, others besides myself who desire to see certain changes made in our administration, and they would, I think, sympathize with you. Some of them are gentlemen of influence, but we have confidence in Dom Clemente and another man of greater importance—and we are waiting. To proceed, I think it would not be difficult to keep you here awhile without anyone we would not wish to know becoming aware of it. The thing is made easier by the fact that my wife and the girl Anita are away, and my sister, who is very deaf and does not like society, rules the household. Now if it is permissible I will examine your leg."

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He did so, and looked a trifle grave after it. "I know a little of these matters, and it is advisable that this should be seen to," he said. "Now the Portuguese doctor is not exactly a friend of mine, and might ask questions as to how you got hurt and where you came from, but there is a half-breed who I think is clever, and he would probably refrain from mentioning anything that

appeared unusual if he is remunerated sufficiently. It is"—and he made a little expressive gesture, "a thing he is accustomed to doing."

Ormsgill suggested that the man should be sent for early next morning, and went to sleep an hour later in greater comfort than he had enjoyed for a considerable time. He did not, however, sleep soundly, and was awake when the half-breed doctor came into his room next morning. The latter set to work and managed to extract the piece of iron, but before nightfall the fever which had left him alone of late had Ormsgill in its grip. It shook him severely during several days, and then, as sometimes happens, left him suddenly, limp and nerveless in mind and body. He was content to lie still and wait almost unconcernedly. Nothing seemed to matter, and he felt that effort of any kind was futile.

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He lay one morning in this frame of mind when there were footsteps on the veranda outside his door, and he heard a voice that sounded curiously familiar. Then the door opened, and Benicia Figuera who came into the room started when she saw him. Ormsgill, however, betrayed no astonishment. He was too languid, and he lay still gravely watching her. The sunlight that streamed in through the open door fell full upon her, gleaming on her trailing white draperies and forcing up bronze lights in her dusky hair. He did not see the faint tinge of color that crept into the ivory of her cheek, but he vaguely noticed the pity shining in her eyes. She seemed to him refreshingly cool and reposeful.

He did not remember exactly what she said, though he fancied she mentioned that she had some business with his host's sister, and he had no recollection of his own observations, but he sank into tranquil sleep when she went away and awoke refreshed, to wonder when she would come back again. As it happened, she came next day, bringing him choice fruits and wine, and it was by her instructions he was carried out on the veranda above the patio where she sat and talked to him. Her voice was low and tranquil, her mere presence soothing, and she did not seem to mind when he grew drowsy. Once or twice again, when she was not aware that he was watching her, he saw compassion in her eyes. Afterwards, though this was not quite in accordance with Iberian customs, she came for an hour or two frequently, and Ormsgill grew curiously restless when she stayed away. Sometimes his host sat with them and discoursed on politics, but more often he left his deaf sister, who would wander away to superintend the dusky servants' lax activities.

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The house, like others of the same type, might have been built for a fortress, and afforded those within it all the seclusion any one could desire. One arched entrance pierced the tall white walls, which had a few little windows with heavy green lattices set high in them. Within, the building rose, tinted a faint pink and terraced with verandas supported by tottering wooden pillars, about a quadrangular patio, and it was characteristic that it was more or less ruinous. When the outer windows were open the sea breeze blew through it, and sitting in cool shadow one could hear the drowsy murmur of the surf. Ormsgill found the latter inexpressibly soothing when Benicia sat near him, and he would lie still contentedly listening to her and watching the shadow creep across the patio. Weak as he was in body, with his mind relaxed, he allowed no misgivings to trouble him. He was vaguely grateful for her presence as a boon that had been sent him without his request, and whether Benicia understood his attitude, or what she thought of it, did not appear.

That was at first, however, and by degrees he took himself to task as his strength came back, until in the hot darkness of one sleepless night he realized towards what all this was leading him. As it happened, Benicia did not appear the next day, and he had nerved himself for an effort by the one that followed. He had an interview with his host and the half-breed doctor, who both protested, and then lay waiting for the girl in a state of tense expectancy. He recognized now what it was most fitting that he should do, but that, after all, is a good deal less than half the battle. It was late in the afternoon when she came, and the first glance showed her that there was a change in Ormsgill.

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He lay in a canvas lounge smiling gravely, but he had dressed himself more precisely than usual, and there was a suggestion of resolution in his haggard face which had not been there before. There was also something in his eyes which conveyed the impression that the resolution had cost him an effort, and Benicia laid a certain restraint upon herself, for she knew what had happened. The days in which he had leaned upon her and permitted her unquestioningly to minister to his comfort had, undoubtedly been pleasant, but, after all, she had not expected them to continue.

"You are stronger to-day," she said, with a composure that was a little difficult to assume, as she took a chair beside him.

"I am," said Ormsgill quietly. "In fact I have been getting stronger rapidly of late, and I am glad of it. You see, I have been blissfully idle for a while and I have a good deal to do."

Benicia knew what was coming, but she smiled. "You are sure of that?" she said. "I mean, you still think it is your business?"

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"Perhaps it's a little absurd of me, but I do. Anyway, I don't know of anybody else who is willing to undertake it."

"Ah," said Benicia, "would it matter greatly if it was not done, after all? There are so many things one would have altered in Africa—and they still go on. It is possible that nobody will ever succeed in changing them."

It was, though she was, perhaps, not aware of this, a very strong argument she used, one whose

force is now and then instinctively realized by every thinking white man in the western half of Africa, and in other parts as well. It is a land that has absorbed many civilizations and continued in its barbarism. Nature unsubdued is against the white man there, and against her tremendous forces his most strenuous efforts are of little avail. Where the air reeks with germs of pestilence and there are countless leagues of swamps breeding corruption, one can expect very little from a few scattered hospitals and an odd mile of drains. Besides, there is in the lassitude born of its steamy heat something that insidiously saps away the white man's will until he feels that effort of any kind is futile, and that in the land of the shadow it is wiser to leave things as they are.

Ormsgill nodded gravely. "Yes," he said, "one recognizes that, but, you see, I don't expect to do very much—merely to keep a promise, and set a few thick-headed heathen at liberty. I think I could accomplish that."

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"Why should you wish to set them at liberty?"

"It's a trifle difficult to answer," and Ormsgill laughed. "After all, the motive is probably to some extent a personal one. Anyway, it's not a thing I have any occasion to inflict on you. There was a time when you didn't adopt this attitude, but sympathized with me."

The girl made a little gesture. "I would like to understand. You and Desmond have all that most men wish for. Why are you risking your life and health in Africa?"

A curious little smile crept into Ormsgill's eyes. "Well," he said reflectively, "there are respects in which one's possessions are apt to become burdensome. They seem to carry so many obligations along with them that one falls into bondage under them, and I think some of us are rebels born. We feel we must make our little protest, if it's only by doing the thing everybody else considers reprehensible."

He stopped a moment, and his face grew a trifle grim when he went on again. "In my case it must be made now since I shall probably never have an opportunity of doing anything of the kind again."

Benicia understood him, for she had watched Miss Ratcliffe carefully at Las Palmas. In fact, she had understood him all along. That he should shrink from any claim to philanthropy was only what she had expected from him, and it was also characteristic that he should have made as little as possible of his motives. Admitting that he had to some extent been swayed by the rebellious impulse he had mentioned, she knew there was beneath it a chivalrous purpose that was likely to prove the more effective from its practical simplicity. The Latins can appreciate chivalry, though they do not invariably practice it now, and she realized vaguely that there is nothing in man more knightly than the desire to strike a blow for the oppressed or at his peril to redress a wrong. Ormsgill's sentiments and methods were, perhaps, a trifle crude, and, from one point of view, somewhat old fashioned. He did not preach a crusade, but couched the lance himself. After all, he belonged to a nation which had once, using crude effective means, swept the slavers off that coast, and still stamps its coinage with the George and Dragon.

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It was, however, after all, not so much as a redresser of grievances and a friend of the oppressed, but as a man that Benicia regarded her companion, for she knew that she loved him. She said nothing, and in a minute or two he spoke again.

"There is a thing that has been on my mind the last few days," he said. "The fever must have left me too shaky to think of it before. I am afraid, though it was very pleasant to see you, I haven't quite kept faith with your father in allowing you to come and talk with me. You, of course, don't understand exactly how the Authorities regard me."

Benicia smiled a little, for she understood very well. "I don't think that counts," she said, "and what is, perhaps, more to the purpose, my father is not here; he has gone, I believe, on business of the State, into the bush country. If you had remembered earlier you would have been anxious to send me away?"

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She leaned forward looking at him, and saw the tension in his face. It told her a good deal, and she felt that for all his resolution she could, if she wished, bend him to her will.

"No," he said, "I'm not sure I could have done it if I had wished. In fact, the week—is it a week?—I have lain here has been such a one as I have never spent before. Now I am horribly sorry that it is over."

There was something in his voice which fully bore out what he had said, but Benicia was aware that it was she who had forced the admission from him without his quite realizing its significance. She knew that he would speak more plainly still if she kept her eyes on him.

"It is over? You can countenance no more of my visits, then?" she asked.

"I am," said Ormsgill gravely, "going away again before to-morrow."

Benicia sat very quiet, and contrived that he did not see her face for a moment or two. She had, at least, not expected this, and it sent a thrill of dismay through her. Steady as his voice was, she was aware that the simple announcement had cost the man a good deal.

"You are not strong enough for the journey yet," she said at length. "It would not be safe."

Ormsgill smiled in a curious wry fashion. "It does not require much strength to lie still in a

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hammock, and I shall no doubt get a little more every day. Besides, I almost think there is a certain danger here. In fact, it would be safer for me up yonder in the bush."

Benicia was quite aware that he was not thinking chiefly of the danger of arrest, and again a little thrill that was no longer altogether one of dismay ran through her. He was, it seemed, afraid of sinking wholly under her influence. Again she leaned a little forward, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"You must go? Would nothing keep you here—at least until you are fit to travel?" she asked.

She saw his lips set for a moment, and the tinge of grayness creep into his face. Then, with a visible effort, he laid a restraint upon himself.

"If I do not go," he said simply, "I should be ashamed the rest of my life. Perhaps, that would not matter so much, but, as it happens, one can't always bear his shame himself."

Benicia turned a little in her chair, and let her hand fall back again. She knew that if she chose to exert her power he would not go at all, but it was probably fortunate that she did not choose. After all, she was a lady of importance in that land, and had the pride of her station in her. Though he loved her, she would not stoop to claim him against his will, and, what was more, she had a vague perception of the fact that he was right. A wrong done could not be wiped out by the mere wish to obliterate it, and she felt that if he broke faith with the Englishwoman in Las Palmas and slackly turned back from the task which he, at least, fancied was an obligation upon him, there might come a time when the fact would stand between them and she would remember the stain upon his shield. She hated the Englishwoman with Latin sincerity, but in this case her pride saved her from a fall. There are other people who owe their pride a good deal.

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"Then," she said slowly, "one can only tell you to go. Some time, perhaps, you will come back again?"

She rose, and Ormsgill with an effort stood up awkwardly, and taking the hand she held out held it a moment. "I do not know," he said with a faint trace of hoarseness. "It is not often possible for one to do what one would wish, and there are—duties—laid on me. Still, if it should be possible—" He broke off for a moment, and then went on again in a different tone very quietly, "In the meanwhile I must thank you. I owe you a good deal."

He watched her go down the stairway, and then leaned on the balustrade for awhile wondering vaguely what would have happened if he had flung off all restraint and let himself go. He did not know that while he was nearest to doing so Benicia Figuera had laid a restraint on him, and that had she permitted it he would have rushed headlong to a fall. There are times when the strength of a usually resolute man is apt to prove a snare to him. Then he sat down wearily in the canvas chair again, and when the land breeze swept through the city that night he and his handful of carriers slipped quietly out of it.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE SLACKENING OF RESTRAINT

A half moon had just sailed up above the shoulder of a hill, and its pale light streamed into the veranda of the little mission house which stood in a rift of the great scarp where the high inland plateau breaks down to the levels of the sun-scorched littoral. The barren hillslopes round about it were streaked with belts of gleaming sand, and above them scrubby forests, destitute of anything that man or beast could eat, rolled back to the vast marshes of the western watershed, but the bottom of the deep valley was green and fertile as a garden. It had, however, only been made so by patient labor, for even in the tropics there is no escape from the primeval ban. It is by somebody's tense effort that man is provided with his daily bread, and where he labors least he lives most like the animals, for nature unsubdued is very rarely bountiful. She sends thorns and creepers to choke the young plantations, and the forest invades the clearing when the planter stays his hand. But in Western Africa the white man sees that the negro fights the ceaseless battle for him. It is, in his opinion, what the black man was made for, and those who know by what methods he obtains and controls his dusky laborers in certain tracts of the dark land wonder now and then why such things are permitted and if there will never be a reckoning. That is, however, only one aspect of a very old question, and it is admittedly difficult to be an optimist in Africa.

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Still, there was, for the time being, at least, quietness and good will in that lonely rift among the hills, and Nares, sitting on the mission house veranda in the moonlight, felt its beneficent influence, though he was suffering from that most exasperating thing the prickly heat, which had, as it frequently does, followed a slight attack of fever. Two patient men from his own country sat with him, and it was clear that their toil had not been in vain. He could see the sprinkling of white blossom on the trees beneath him that bore green limes, and beyond these were rows of mangoes, coffee plants, and sweet potato vines, but the huts of the dusky converts were silent

and hidden among the leaves. There was no sound but the soft murmur of running water. A deep serenity brooded over it all.

"A garden!" he said. "In this country one could call it a garden of the Lord."

The elder of his two companions smiled, for he had shrewdness as well as faith.

"Thanks in part, at least, to our mountain wall," he said. "We lie several leagues from the only road, and that is not a much frequented one. There is, most fortunately, little commerce in this strip of country, and the great roads lie as you know far to the south of us. Still, I sometimes wonder how we have been left alone so long, and we have had our warnings."

"Herrero now and then comes up this way?"

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The missionary nodded. "He is the thorn in our side," he said. "Domingo, his associate, as of course you know, rambles through the back country. There is no one else to cause us anxiety, but Herrero has an old grudge against us. There were villages in these valleys when he first came here, and he swept them almost clean. We gathered up the remnant of the people, and now they will not buy his rum from him."

"If the news we got with our last supplies is correct he can not be more than a few days' march away," the younger man broke in. "I have been wondering how often he will pass us by. Some day he will come down on us. It's a sure thing."

Nares straightened himself a trifle. He had for several years borne almost all a man could bear and live through in that land, and after he left Ormsgill had fled inland, proscribed, finding no safety anywhere until his countrymen at their peril had offered him shelter at the mission. Besides, he had fever and prickly heat, which tries the meekest white man's patience, and it was New England stock he sprang from. He was a Puritan by birth as well as training, of the old grim Calvinistic strain, and his forbears had believed that the sword of the Lord is now and then entrusted to human hands. In that faith they had faced their king at Naseby, and in later days and another land held their own at Bunker Hill, and again crushed the Southern slave-owners' riflemen. It awoke once more deep down in the heart of their descendant as he sat on the mission veranda that night.

"What will you do then?" he said. "It sometimes seems to me that we have borne enough. One could almost wonder if there is anything more than prudence in our non-resistance. That alone seldom carries one very far."

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A faint sparkle crept into the eyes of the younger man, for there was also a capacity for righteous wrath in him, but his elder companion raised a restraining hand.

"What can we do that will not bring down trouble on our followers' heads?" he asked.

Nares had not slept for several nights, and that coming on top of his other troubles had its effect on him, for he was, after all, very human, and the white man's self-restraint is apt to grow feeble in that land where his passions usually grow strong. Now and then, indeed, it breaks down altogether suddenly.

"Somebody must suffer for every reform," he said. "It seems that a sacrifice is demanded, and the ban is upon us still. Here, at least, the cost of man's progress is the shedding of blood." Then he made a little forceful gesture. "They are arming in the bush. In another month or two there will be very grim doings at San Roque."

The older man changed the subject abruptly. "You have your own course to consider. Have you come to a decision yet? I almost think if you surrendered to a responsible officer the Society has influence enough to secure your acquittal. After all, there are a few honest men upon the coast."

Nares looked at him with a curious little smile. "It is possible that I might escape with my liberty, but not until those who hate us had blackened my character and flung discredit upon the aims and methods of the men who sent me here. Is my acquittal worth what it would cost your Society? Would the folks down yonder miss such an opportunity as my trial would afford them of making us out political intriguers and destroyers of authority?"

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He broke off for a moment, and laughed softly. "Still, they can't very well have a trial without a prisoner, and I shall wait in the bush until Ormsgill overtakes me. I have left word for him here and there with men who I think will not betray me."

"Why shouldn't you stay here?" asked the younger man.

"And bring the authorities down upon you? You know the cost of harboring me. Still, I will wait a day or two. Ormsgill must go inland by the road through the next valley, and if he has escaped the troops, there should be news of him any hour now."

The others said nothing further. They knew those in authority had, perhaps, naturally little love for them, and would make the most of the opportunity if it became evident that they had sheltered a proscribed man. After all, they had a duty to their flock and the men who had sent them out. Nares, who guessed their thoughts, smiled at them.

"It is all decided," he said. "When Ormsgill comes up I, believing as I do in the strictest teaching of the Geneva fathers, am going into the interior with him to accomplish the work he has undertaken for the repose of the soul of the rum trader Lamartine."

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Again his companions made no answer. After all, the creeds now and then grow vague in Africa, or, perhaps, in the anguish of life in the dark land they are purged of their narrowness and amplified. Besides this, it was evident that Nares was a trifle off his balance. There was silence for the next half hour. One of the men had toiled with the hoe among his flock that day, and the other had come back from a long march to a native village. The night was clear and cool and wonderfully still, and the peace of the garden valley crept in on them. One could almost have fancied the mission had been translated far from Africa, where tranquillity that is not tempered with apprehension seldom lasts very long. Then a sharp cry, harsh with human pain and terror, rang out of the soft darkness, and the man in charge of the station rose quietly from his chair.

"Herrero's men are here. Our time has come at last," he said.

The others rose with him, and stood very still for a moment or two listening until the cry arose again more shrilly, and there was a clamor among the unseen huts. The crash of a long flintlock gun broke through it, and in the midst of the uproar they heard a patter of naked feet. Half-seen shadowy figures swept past among the leaves, and a red glare that grew momentarily brighter leapt up behind the mango trees.

"Herrero's men," said the older man again, as though in the bitterness of the moment that was all that occurred to him.

They followed him down the stairway, though none of them knew what they meant to do, and, while now and then a half-naked figure dashed past them, down a narrow path between the trees, until the thatched roofs of the village rose close in front of them. One of them was blazing fiercely, and in another few minutes they saw a little group of dusky figures scurrying to and fro with burdens in the glare. A man among the latter also saw the newcomers, for apparently in drunken bravado he flung up a long gun, and there was a flash and a detonation as he fired at random. Nares saw him clearly, a big, brawny man swaying half-naked on his feet with short cotton draperies hanging from his waist, and his truculence was a guide to his profession. He was one of the hired ruffians who escort the labor recruits to the coast, and the African has no more grievous oppressor than the negro who acts as the white man's deputy.

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Still, the missionaries saw very little more just then, for at the flash of the gun a swarm of terror-stricken boys who had been lurking there broke out from the shadow of the outlying huts, and swept madly up the path. Nares ran forward to meet them, calling to them in a native tongue, but it was not evident that they understood him, for they ran on. He felt one of his comrade's hands upon his shoulder, but he shook it off, and clutched at one of the flying men nearest him. He was overwrought that night, and his patience had gone. An unreasoning fury of indignation came upon him, and in the midst of it he remembered that it was most unlikely Herrero's boys would do more than attempt to overawe any one who might venture to resist them with their guns. Yet here was a flock of sturdy men flying in wild panic from a handful of ruffians. Perhaps this was natural. The men had seen what came of resistance, and had been taught drastically that it was wisest to submit to the white man and those whom he permitted to persecute them.

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In any case, Nares's efforts availed him nothing, for the crowd of fugitives surged about him and his companions and bore them along. They could neither make head against it nor struggle clear, and were jostled against each other and driven forward until the crowd grew thinner abreast of the mission house where several paths that led to the hillslopes and the bush branched off. Then at last they reeled out from among the negroes, and while they stood gasping, Nares looked at the man in charge of the station with a question in his eyes. The latter made a little gesture of resignation.

"That is certainly Herrero's work, and I think he has given them rum, but there is nothing we can do," he said. "They may burn a hut or two, but they can be built again, and the boys—I am thankful—have taken to the bush. We will go back to the house."

This was not exactly to Nares' mind, but he recognized that there was wisdom in it, and they went up the little stairway and sat down once more upon the veranda. Now and then a hoarse shouting reached them, and the glare of burning thatch grew brighter, but nobody came near to trouble them. After all, a missionary's color counted for something, and it was a perilous thing for a negro who had not direct authority to meddle with him. Still, the older man's face was troubled.

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"They will go away by and by, and there is, fortunately, very little in the huts," he said. "There is only one thing I am anxious about. Our store shed stands in a thicket among the trees yonder close beneath us. We built it there not to be conspicuous, and they may not notice it, but it is only a few weeks since our supplies came in—drugs and cloth, besides tools, and goods that we could not replace."

Nares made a little gesture of comprehension. He knew that the finances of the stations in that country are usually somewhat strained, and that when supplies went missing on the journey from the coast, as they sometimes did, the efforts of those they were intended for were apt to be crippled for many months.

"The place is locked?" he said.

"It is," said the younger man with a little smile. "After all, the boys are human. The door and building are strong enough, and the roof is iron. They can not burn it."

Nares glanced at his older companion and saw that there was still concern in his face. Half an

hour dragged by, and they sat still struggling with the uneasiness that grew upon them. There was less shouting in the village, and the fire was evidently dying down, but now and then a hoarse clamor reached them. Nares felt that to sit there and do nothing was a very hard thing. At last the younger man pushed his chair back sharply. [Pg 289]

"I think they have found where the store shed is. They are coming here," he said.

"I wonder who has told them," said his companion.

A patter of feet grew nearer, and Nares felt his mouth grow dry as he forced himself to sit still and listen, until several shadowy figures flitted out from among the trees. Then the older man's question was answered, for one of them dragged a Mission boy along with him. He carried a hide whip in one hand, and turned towards the veranda with a truculent laugh as he brought it down on his captive's quivering limbs.

"Ah," said the younger man with sharp incisiveness, "I do not think one could blame that boy."

More figures appeared behind the others, and they flitted across the strip of open space towards the store shed, after which there were hoarse shouts and a sound of hammering which ceased again. Then Herrero's boys came back by twos and threes, big, muscular negroes with short draperies fluttering from their hips, some of them lurching drunkenly. Three or four also carried long flintlock guns, and the one who had the whip still dragged the Mission boy along. They stopped in the clear space beneath the house, and Nares, who felt his heart beat, set his lips tight as one of them strode forward to the foot of the short veranda stairway. He was almost naked, and for a moment or two the white men sat still, and looked at him. It was, they felt, just possible that at the last moment his assurance would fail him. Perhaps, he understood what they were thinking, for he made a little contemptuous gesture. [Pg 290]

"We want the key to the store," he said in halting Portuguese.

Then Nares turned to the head of the station. "You mean to give it him?"

"No," said the older man simply. "If they are able to break into the shed I can not help it, but, at least, I will do nothing to make it easier for them. I am the Society's steward and these goods are entrusted to me."

Nares looked at his younger companion, and saw a little smile in his eyes. It was clear that force would be useless, even if they had been willing to resort to it, but passive resistance was not forbidden them, and while apt to prove perilous it might avail, since it was scarcely probable that Herrero's boys could find the key. Then the younger man turned to the negro.

"We will never give you the key," he said.

"Then we will come and take it," said the man below.

He signed to his companions, and when three or four of them gathered about him clamoring excitedly Nares felt his blood tingle and his face grow hot. Perhaps it was the fever working in him, and he was certainly overwrought, and, perhaps, it was a subconscious awakening of the white man's pride. After all, the men of his color held dominion, and it was an intolerable thing that one of them should submit to personal indignity at a negro's hand. A little quiver ran through him, but his restraint did not break down until the big truculent negro came up the stairway and laid a greasy black hand upon the shoulder of the worn and haggard man who ruled the station. He shook him roughly, grinning as he did it, and then Nares' self-control suddenly left him. Swinging forward on his left foot he struck at the middle of the heavy, animal face, and the negro staggering went backwards down the stairway. Then with the sting of his knuckles a change came over Nares, for the passions he had long held in stern subjection were suddenly unloosed. At last he had broken down under a tension that had been steadily growing intolerable, and he turned on his persecutors as other men of his faith have done. When men of that kind strike they strike shrewdly. [Pg 291]

There was also a change in the negroes' attitude. They had maltreated their own countrymen at their will, but they had as yet never laid hands upon a white man. Perhaps, it was the rum Herrero had given them which had stirred their courage, and, perhaps, they regarded a missionary as a good-humored fool who had for some inconceivable reason flung the white man's prerogative away. In any case, they were coming up the stairway, three or four of them, and now the first man carried a matchet, an instrument which resembles an old-fashioned cutlass. Nares, who asked for no directions, sprang into the room behind him where one of the trestle cots not unusual in that country stood. It had a stout wooden frame, and he rent one bar from the canvas laced to it. In another moment he was back at the head of the stairway where the man in charge of the station stood, frail, and haggard, but very quiet, with his thin jacket rent open where the negro had seized him. A foot or two below him the man with the matchet was coming up, naked to the waist, and half-crazed with rum. Nares could see his eyes in the moonlight, and that was enough. [Pg 292]

He swung the bar high with both hands, and it descended on the negro's crown. The man went backwards, but another who carried a long gun sprang over him, and the heavy bar came crashing down on his naked arm. Then it whirled again, and there was a curious thud as it left its mark upon a dusky face. There was a clamor from the men below, a gasp behind Nares, and a folded canvas chair struck the next negro on the breast. He, too, lost his balance, and in another moment the stairway was empty except for one of the dusky men who lay still upon the lower

steps of it. Nares stood on the veranda, with a suffused face, and the perspiration dripping from him, and smiled curiously when the man in charge of the station glanced at him with wonder and a vague reproof in his eyes.

"I am not sure that I have anything to regret," he said. "They are coming back again."

Herrero's boys were once more at the foot of the stairway, trampling on their comrade as they scrambled over him, but there were now two men with extemporized weapons at the head of it who stood above them and had them at a disadvantage. Nares was, however, never quite clear as to what happened during the next few minutes, for an unreasoning fury came upon him, and he saw only the woolly heads and dusky faces as he gasped and smote, though he was vaguely conscious that now and then a shattered chair somebody whirled by the legs swung above his head. Then a long gun flashed, and the detonation was answered by a sharper, ringing crash. One of Herrero's boys screamed shrilly, and the half-naked figures went scrambling down the stairway. They had scarcely floundered clear of it when a man in white duck appeared in the space below, and flung up a rifle, and another of the boys who went down headlong lay writhing horribly in the sand. After that there was a shouting and a patter of flying feet, and further dusky men with matchets and Snider rifles poured out of the path that wound down the hillside. Nares quietly laid the bar he held against the wall, and turned to the others with a gasp.

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"It's Ormsgill," he said.

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CHAPTER XXIV

BENICIA MAKES A BARGAIN

Except for the two unsightly objects that lay in the soft moonlight, there was no sign of Herrero's boys when Ormsgill walked up the stairway with a rifle in his hand. A little smoke curled from the breech which he opened before he shook hands with Nares.

"It's fortunate I knew where you were, and came round to pick you up," he said, and turned to the head of the station, who leaned upon the balustrade apparently shaken and bewildered by what had happened.

"I came up behind Herrero most of the way, and when there were signs that we were getting closer I sent one of my boys on to creep in upon his camp two or three days ago. From what he told me when he came back I fancied there was mischief on foot, and I pushed on as fast as possible. Considering everything, it seems just as well I did."

The other man appeared unwilling to let his gaze wander beyond the veranda, which was in one way comprehensible. There was shrinking in his face, and his voice was strained and hoarse.

"It was so sudden—it has left me a trifle dazed," he said. "I am almost afraid the trouble is not over yet."

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Ormsgill smiled reassuringly. "I scarcely think—you—have any cause to worry. There is no doubt that Herrero inspired his boys, and attempts of this kind, as no doubt you are aware, have been made on mission stations before, but it's certain he would disclaim all knowledge of what they meant to do, and will be quite content to let the matter go no further. That is, at least, so far as anybody connected with the Mission is concerned."

"I am afraid he may find some means of laying the blame on you."

"It is quite likely," and Ormsgill laughed. "After all, it's a thing I'm used to, and, you see, I'm proscribed already. As it happens, so is Nares. He should never have left me. I have no doubt Herrero, who has friends in authority, will endeavor to make him regret his share in to-night's proceedings."

Nares glanced at one of the rigid figures that lay beneath him in the moonlight. He saw the naked black shoulders, and the soiled white draperies that had fallen apart from the ebony limbs, and a little shiver ran through him. The heat of the conflict had vanished now, and the pale light showed that his face was drawn and gray.

"I struck that man," he said. "I don't know what possessed me, but I think I meant to kill him. In one way, the thing is horrible."

"Well," said Ormsgill dryly, "it is also very natural. The impulse you seem to shrink from is lurking somewhere in most of us. In any case, the man is certainly dead. I looked at him as I came up."

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He stopped a moment, and leaned somewhat heavily upon the balustrade with his eyes fixed on the dusky form of the negro. "The meanest thing upon this earth is the man who sides with the oppressor and tramples on his own kind. Still, though I think what I did was warranted, that was not why I shot those men. One doesn't always reason about these matters, as I fancy you understand."

He turned, and looked at Nares who, after a momentary shrinking, steadily met his gaze. The man was wholly honest, and the thing was clear to him. He had struck at last, shrewdly, in a righteous cause, and nobody could have blamed him, but, as had happened in his comrade's case, human bitterness had also nerved the blow.

"Well," he said slowly, "you and I, at least, will probably have to face the results of it."

Again Ormsgill laughed, but a little glint crept into his eyes. "As I pointed out, we are both of us outlawed, with the hand of every white man in this country against us, but we have still a thing to do, and somehow I almost think it will be done."

Then he turned to the man in charge of the Mission. "Nares is coming away with me. There are several reasons that make it advisable. It is very unlikely that anybody will trouble you further about this affair, and if the blame is laid on us it can't greatly matter. The score against one of us is a tolerably long one already—and if my luck holds out it may be longer. There is just another point. Shall I take those two boys below away for you?"

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"No," said the other man quietly. "There is, at least, one duty we owe them."

Ormsgill made a little gesture. "The bones of their victims lie thick along each trail to the interior, but, after all, that is probably a thing for which they will not be held responsible. In the meanwhile, there are one or two reasons why I should outmarch Herrero if it can be done. When Nares is ready we will go on again."

Nares was ready in a few minutes, and shaking hands with the two men who went down the veranda stairway with them, they struck into the path that led up the steep hillside. Ormsgill's boys plodded after them, but when they reached the crest of the ridge that overhung the valley Nares sat down, gasping, in the loose white sand, and looked down on the shadowy mission. He could see its pale lights blinking among the leaves.

"It stands for a good deal that I have done with," he said. "It is a strange and almost bewildering thing to feel oneself adrift."

"Still," said Ormsgill, "now and then the bonds of service gall."

Nares made a little gesture. "Often," he said. "Perhaps I was not worthy to wear the uniform and march under orders with the rank and file, but I think the Church Militant has, after all, a task for the free companies which now and then push on ahead of her regular fighting line."

"They march light," said Ormsgill. "That counts for a good deal. It has once or twice occurred to me that the authorized divisions are a little cumbered by their commissariat and baggage wagons."

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Nares sighed. "Well," he said softly, "every one must, at least now and then, leave a good deal that he values or has grown attached to behind him." He stopped a moment, and then asked abruptly, "You have heard from the girl at Las Palmas. Desmond would bring you letters?"

"No," said Ormsgill, "not a word. She had no sympathy with my project—that she should have was hardly to be expected. One must endeavor to be reasonable."

"There must have been a time when you expected—everything."

Ormsgill sat silent a minute or two, and while he did so a moving light blinked among the trees below. It stopped at length, and negro voices came up faintly with the thud of hastily plied shovels. It seemed that the terrified converts were coming back and the missionaries had already set them a task. Ormsgill knew what it was, but he looked down at the rifle that glinted in the moonlight across his knee with eyes that were curiously steady. The thing he had done had been forced upon him. Then he turned to his companion, and though he was usually a reticent man he spoke what was in his mind that night.

"There certainly was such a time," he said. "No doubt it has come to others. For five long years I held fast by the memory of the girl I had left in England, and I think there were things it saved me from. Somehow there was always a vague hope that one day I might go back to her—and for that reason I kept above the foulest mire. One goes under easily here in Africa. Then at last the thing became possible."

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He broke off, and laughed, a curious little laugh, before he went on again.

"I went back. Whether she was ever what I thought her I do not know—perhaps, I had expected impossibilities—or those five years had made a change. We had not an idea that was the same, and the world she lives in is one that has grown strange to me. They think me slightly crazy—and it is perfectly possible that they are right. Men do lose their mental grip in Africa."

Nares made a little gesture which vaguely suggested comprehension and sympathy before he looked at his comrade with a question in his eyes.

"Yes," said Ormsgill quietly, "I am going on. After all, I owe the girl I thought she was a good deal—and to plain folks there is safety in doing the obvious thing." His voice softened a little. "It may be hard for her—in fact when I went back she probably had a good deal to bear with too. One grows hard and bitter when he has lived with the outcasts as I have done."

Nares understood that he meant what other men called duty by the obvious thing, but the

definition, which he felt was characteristic of the man, pleased him. He was one who could, at least, recognize the task that was set before him, and, as it happened, he once more made this clear when he rose and called to the boys who had flung themselves down on the warm white sand.

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"Well," he said, "we have now to outmarch Herrero, and there is a good deal to be done."

They went on, Ormsgill limping a little, for his wound still pained him, and vanished into the shadows of the bush, two weary, climate-worn men who had malignant nature and, so far as they knew, the malice of every white man holding authority in that country against them. Still, at least, their course was clear, and in the meanwhile they asked for nothing further.

It also happened one afternoon while they pushed on through shadowy forest and steaming morass that a little and very ancient gunboat crept along the sun-scorched coast. Her white paint, although very far from fresh, gleamed like ivory on the long dazzling swell that changed to a shimmering sliding green in her slowly moving shadow, for she was steaming eight knots, and rolling viciously. Benicia Figuera, who swung in a hammock hung low beneath her awnings, did not, however, seem to mind the erratic motion. She was watching the snowy fringe of crumbling surf creep by, though now and then her eyes sought the far, blue hills that cut the skyline. Her thoughts were with the man who was wandering in the dim forests that crept through the marshes beyond them.

By and by she aroused herself, and looked up with a smile at the man who strolled towards her along the deck. She had met him before at brilliant functions in Portugal where he was a man of importance, and he had come on board in state a few hours earlier from a little sweltering town above a surf-swept beach whose citizens had seriously strained its finances to do him honor. He was dressed simply in plain white duck, a little, courtly gentleman, with the look of one who rules in his olive-tinted face. He sat down in a deck chair near the girl.

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"After all, it is a relief to be at sea," he said. "One has quietness there."

Benicia laughed. "Quietness," she said, "is a thing you can hardly be accustomed to Señor. Besides, you are in one way scarcely complimentary to the citizens yonder."

"Ah," said her companion, "it seems they expect something from me and it is to be hoped that when they get it some of them will not be disappointed. I almost think," and he waved a capable hand, "that before I am recalled they will not find insults bad enough for me."

Benicia felt that this was quite possible. Her companion was she knew a strong man as well as an upright one, who had been sent out not long ago with ample powers to grapple with one or two of the questions which then troubled that country. It was also significant that while he was known as a judicious and firm administrator his personal views on the points at issue had not been proclaimed. Benicia had, however, guessed them correctly, and she took it as a compliment that he had given her a vague hint of them. Perhaps, he realized it, for he watched her for a moment with a shrewd twinkle in his dark eyes.

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"Señorita," he said, "I almost think you know what I was sent out here to do. One could, however, depend upon Benicia Figuera considering it a confidence."

The girl glanced out beneath the awnings across the sun-scorched littoral towards the blue ridge of the inland plateau before she answered him.

"Yes," she said, "it was to cleanse this stable. I almost think you will find it a strong man's task."

Her companion made a gesture of assent. "It is, at least, one for which I need a reliable broom—and I am fortunate in having one ready."

"Ah," said Benicia, "you of course mean my father. Well, I do not think he will fail you, and though he has not actually told me so, I fancy he has, at least, been making preparations for the sweeping."

The man looked at her and smiled, but when a moving shaft of sunlight struck him as the steamer rolled she saw the deep lines on his face and the gray in his hair. He, as it happened, saw the little gleam of pride in her eyes, and then the light swung back again and they were once more left in the shadow. Yet in that moment a subtle elusive something that was both comprehension and confidence had been established between them.

"Dom Clemente," he said, "is a man I have a great regard for. There is a good deal I owe him, as he may have told you."

"He has told me nothing."

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The man spread his hands out. "After all, it was to be expected. He and I were comrades, Señorita, before you were born, and there was a time when I made a blunder which it seemed must spoil my career. There was only one man who could save me and that at the hazard of his own future, but one would not expect such a fact to count with your father. Dom Clemente smiled at the peril and the affair was arranged satisfactorily."

Again he made a little grave gesture. "It happened long ago, and now it seems I am to bring trouble on him again. Still, the years have not changed him. He does not hesitate, but I feel I must ask your forbearance, Señorita. You have, perhaps, seen what sometimes happens when

one does one's duty."

Benicia smiled, a little bitterly. "Yes," she said, "I know that the man who is so rash as to attempt it in this country is usually recalled in disgrace. Still, it is not a thing that happens very frequently. Dom Clemente is to be made the scapegoat."

"I think," said the man gravely, "I may be strong enough to save him that. It is possible, as I have told him, that he will be recalled—but what he has done will stand."

He spoke at last as a ruler, with authority, and a trace of sternness in his eyes, but his face changed again.

"Señorita," he said, "if it happens, I think you will not grudge it, or blame me."

The girl saw the opportunity she had been waiting for. "As you have admitted, you owe my father something, and now you have asked something more. Is it not conceivable that you owe me a little, too. I am an influence here—and it would be different in Lisbon if Dom Clemente was sent home again. Besides, sometimes he will listen to me. Now and then a woman has made a change in a man's policy, and, though it is a little more difficult when the man is one's father, it might be done again."

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"Ah," said her companion, "you wish to make a bargain."

"It would be too great a condescension, Señor," and Benicia laughed. "I want a promise that is to be unconditional. Some day, perhaps, I shall ask you to do something for me. Then you will do it whatever it is."

The man looked up at her with a little dry smile, but, as he admitted, he owed her father a good deal, and he was not too old for gallantry. Besides that, he had the gift of insight, and a curious confidence in this girl. He felt she would not ask him anything that was not fitting.

"The request," he said, "is a little vague, and perhaps, I am a trifle rash, but I almost think I can promise that what you ask shall be done."

Benicia, reaching out from the hammock, touched him with her fan. "Now," she said, "I know what you think of me. How shall I make my poor acknowledgments? Still, there is another thing. You will discover presently that the brooms of the State are slow. There are two men not among its servants who have commenced the sweeping already. I think Dom Clemente knows this, but you will not mention it to him."

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Her companion glanced at her sharply with a sudden keenness in his eyes, but he said nothing, and the girl smiled again.

"When you hear of them I would like you to remember that they are friends of mine," she said. "You will, of course, recognize that nobody I said that of could do anything that was really reprehensible."

"I might admit that it was unlikely," said her companion.

"Then," said Benicia, "when the time comes I would like you to remember it. That is another thing you will promise."

She flashed one swift glance at her companion, who smiled, and then looked round as Dom Clemente and two of the gunboat's officers came towards them along the deck. She roused herself to talk to them, and succeeded brilliantly, now and then to the momentary embarrassment of the officers, who were young, while the man with the gray hair lay in a deck chair a little apart watching her over his cigar. She was clever, and quick-witted, but he knew also that she was like her father, one who at any cost stood by her friends. At the same time he was a little puzzled, for, in the case of a young woman, friend is a term of somewhat vague and comprehensive significance, and she had mentioned that there were two of them. That appeared to complicate the affair, but he had, at least, made a promise, and it was said of him that when he did so he usually kept it, though it was now and then in a somewhat grim fashion. There were also men in the sweltering towns beside the surf-swept beach the gunboat crawled along who would have felt uneasy had they known exactly why he had been sent out to them.

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CHAPTER XXV

DOMINGO APPEARS

The carriers had stopped in a deserted village one morning after a long and arduous march from the mission station, when Ormsgill, lying in the hot white sand, looked quietly at Nares, who sat with his back against one of the empty huts.

"If I knew what the dusky image was thinking I should feel considerably more at ease," he said. "Still, I don't, and there's very little use in guessing. After all, we are a long way from grasping

the negro's point of view on most subjects yet. They very seldom look at things as we do."

Nares nodded. "Anyway, I almost fancy we could consider what he has told us as correct," he said. "It's something to go upon."

The man he referred to squatted close by them, naked to the waist, though a few yards of cotton cloth hung from his hips. An old Snider rifle lay at his side, and he was big and muscular with a heavy, expressionless face. As Ormsgill had suggested, it certainly afforded very little indication of what he was thinking, and left it a question whether he was capable of intelligent thought at all. They had come upon him in the deserted village on the edge of a great swamp an hour earlier, and he had skillfully evaded their questions as to what he was doing there.

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It was an oppressively hot morning, and a heavy, dingy sky hung over the vast morass which they could see through the openings between the scattered huts. It stretched back bare and level, a vast desolation, towards the interior, with a little thin haze floating over it in silvery belts here and there, and streaking the forest that crept up to its edge. The carriers lay half-asleep in the warm sand, blotches of white and blue and ebony, and the man with the rifle appeared vacantly unconcerned. Time is of no value to the negro, and one could have fancied that he was prepared to wait there all day for the white men's next question.

"It's not very much," said Ormsgill reflectively, referring to his comrade's last observation. "Domingo, it seems, is up yonder—but there are one or two other facts, which I think have their significance, in our possession. Herrero is coming up behind us, and, though there are no other Portuguese in the neighborhood, we find this village empty. I should very much like to know why the folks who lived in it have gone away, and I fancy our friend yonder could tell us. Still, it's quite certain that he won't."

"Herrero evidently means to join hands with Domingo," suggested Nares. "It's quite possible, too, that he will do what he can to prevent us buying the six boys from the Headman, who, it's generally believed, does a good deal of business with him. It's a little unfortunate. In another week the thing might have been done."

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Ormsgill nodded as one who makes his mind up. "When in doubt go straight on—and, as a matter of fact, we can't afford to stop," he said. "Provisions are going to be a consideration. We'll push on and try what can be done with Domingo and the Headman before Herrero comes up."

He turned to the negro, and Nares amplified his question.

"Yes," said the man, with the faintest suggestion of a grin, "I know where Domingo is, and if you come to our village it is very likely that you will see him. I will take you to the Headman for the pieces of cloth you promise."

He got up leisurely, and Ormsgill, who called to the boys, looked at Nares as they plodded into the forest that skirted the swamp.

"It's quite certain the man was waiting for somebody, and it wasn't Herrero, or he wouldn't have gone away," he said. "That naturally seems to suggest he might have been on the lookout for us. In that case I should very much like to know what was amusing him."

It was not to be made clear until some time later, and in the meanwhile they pushed on for a week through straggling forest with all the haste the boys were capable of, though Ormsgill's face grew thoughtful when they twice passed an empty village. The fact had its significance, for little labor recruiting had been done in that strip of country. Still, its dusky inhabitants had apparently forsaken it, and it became more evident that something unusual was going on. Once only they met a native, or rather he blundered upon their camp when they lay silent in the thin shadow of more open bush on a burning afternoon, and their guide roused himself sharply to attention when a patter of footsteps came out of the stillness. Somebody was evidently approaching in haste, and Ormsgill glanced at Nares in warning when the negro who lay close beside them rose to a crouching posture and drew back the hammer of his old Snider rifle. It was clear that strangers were regarded with suspicion in that country. Then the man drew one foot under him, and sat upon it with the arm that supported the rifle on his knee, and an unpleasantly suggestive look in his heavy face. One could have fancied that he meant to kill, and Ormsgill stretching out a hand laid it on his comrade's shoulder restrainingly.

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"Wait," he whispered. "In the meanwhile it's not our business."

Nares waited, but he felt it become more difficult to do so as the footsteps grew plainer. He could hear the little restless movements of the boys, but he had eyes for little beyond the ominous half-naked figure clutching the heavy rifle. It dominated the picture. Tall trunks, trailing creepers, and clustering carriers grew indistinct, but he was vaguely conscious that there was an opening between the leaves some sixty yards in front of him, and his heart throbbed painfully with the effort the restraint he laid upon himself cost him. Then a dusky figure appeared in the opening, and stopped a moment, apparently in astonishment or terror, while Ormsgill was sensible of a sudden straining after recollection. The man was leanly muscular and dressed as scantily as any native of the bush, but there was something in his appearance that was vaguely familiar. In the meanwhile he was also conscious that their guide's arms were stiffening rigidly, and when the man's cheek sank a little lower on the rifle stock he let his hand drop from Nares's shoulder. As it happened, he was close behind the negro, and in another moment would have clutched him.

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Just then, however, the stranger sprang forward and a little acrid smoke blew into Ormsgill's

eyes. There was a detonation and he contrived to fall with a hand on the ground instead of upon the crouching negro with the rifle. When he looked up again the man who had narrowly escaped from the peril by his quickness was running like a deer, and vanished amidst a crash of displaced undergrowth, while their guide flung back his rifle breech with clumsy haste. When he turned round there was no sign of the stranger and Ormsgill was quietly standing on his feet. Only a few seconds had elapsed since the man had first appeared.

The guide made a little grimace which was expressive of resignation as he turned the rifle over and shook out the cartridge, and in another minute or two they were going on again. When he moved a little away from them Ormsgill looked at Nares.

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"It's probably just as well our friend does not know I meant to spoil his aim," he said. "I haven't the least notion why he wished to shoot that man, and very much wish I had, but I can't help fancying that I've seen him before—at one of the Missions most likely. I should be glad if anybody could tell me what he is doing here."

There was nobody who could do it except, perhaps, their guide, but Ormsgill surmised that he was not likely to supply him with any information. He was not to know until some time later that the man in question had once served Herrero, who had beaten him too frequently and severely, and that as a result of this he met Pacheco the Government messenger in a deserted village after another week's arduous journey. In the meanwhile he pushed on, limping a little, through marsh and forest until their guide led them into a large native village where he expected to find the last of Lamartine's boys. This one, at least, was not deserted. In fact, it appeared unusually crowded and, as Ormsgill was quick to notice, most of its inhabitants were armed. He had, however, little opportunity of noticing anything else, for he was led straight into the presence of its ruler, who sat on a low stool under a thatched roof raised on a few rickety pillars in the middle of the village. He was dressed in a white man's duck jacket, worn open, and a shirt; and every person of consequence in the place had gathered about him. The guide presented the newcomers tersely, and it seemed to Ormsgill that the manner in which he did it was significant.

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"They are here," he said. "I have done as I was bidden."

The Headman spent some time examining the collection of the sundries they offered him and made a few indifferent attempts to restrain the rapacity of his retainers, who desired something, too. Then he asked Ormsgill his business, and nodded when the latter explained it briefly.

"The six boys are certainly here," he said. "Still, I do not know just now if I can sell you them. That will depend—" Nares understood from the next few words that he desired to be a little ambiguous on this point. "You have, it seems, some business with Domingo, too?"

Nares said it concerned the boys in question, but as the labor purveyor had no claim upon them the matter could be arranged with the Headman, who grinned very much as the guide had done, while a curious little smile crept into the faces of some of the rest.

"Then," he said, "I think he will be here in a day or two. Some of my people have gone for him, but I am not sure that he will have much to tell us when he comes. In the meanwhile you will stay with us a few days, and when I am ready to talk about the boys again I will send for you."

He made a sign that the interview was over, and several of his followers who were armed escorted the white men and their boys to the hut set apart for them. They left them there with a plainly worded hint that it would be wise of them not to come out of it, and when they went away Ormsgill looked at Nares.

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"I suppose you're not sure what that Headman really meant," he said. "A man naturally has you at a disadvantage when he doesn't wish to make himself very clear and talks in a tongue you don't quite understand. I wish I knew exactly why he chuckled."

Nares looked thoughtful. "He seemed to know we meant to visit him."

"It's evident. How I don't quite understand. We traveled fast. Still, he did know. In the meanwhile we can only wait."

They waited, somewhat anxiously, for several days, knowing that Herrero, whose presence promised to complicate affairs, was drawing nearer all the while. There was, however, no other course open to them, for when they attempted to leave the hut a big man armed with a matchet who kept watch outside informed them it was the Headman's pleasure that they should stay there until he was at liberty to talk to them.

At last one morning word was brought them, and Ormsgill looked about him in astonishment when they walked into the wide space in the midst of the straggling village. All round it stood long rows of dusky men, most of whom were armed, but only a small and apparently select company sat under the thatched roof in the shadow of which the Headman had previously received them.

"There is something very unusual going on. Half these men seem to be strangers, and they have Sniders," he said. "I expect Domingo could tell how they got them, but I don't seem to see him." Then he touched his comrade's shoulder. "I fancy we can expect something dramatic. There's a man yonder we have met before."

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Nares felt that the scene was already sufficiently impressive. The strip of empty sand in front of

him flung up a dazzling glare. The sky the palm tufts cut against was of a harsh blue that one could scarcely look upon, and the village was flooded with an almost intolerable brilliancy which flashed upon glittering matchets and Snider barrels. It also smote the massed white draperies and flickered with an oily gleam on ebony limbs and the sea of dusky faces turned expectantly towards the group beneath the thatch. Most of the men there sat on the ground, but there were two seated figures, the village Headman, and the Suzerain lord of his country, the old man they had met already, on a slightly higher stool. He, at least, was dressed in dignified fashion in a long robe of spotless cotton, and a few men with tall spears stood in state behind him. His face was impassively grim, and Nares's heart beat a trifle faster as his eyes rested on him, but at the same time he was sensible of an expectancy so tense that it drove out personal anxiety. He almost felt that he was watching for the opening of the drama from a place of safety.

In the meanwhile he moved towards the thatch with his comrade until they stopped a few yards' distance from the Suzerain, who leaned forward a little and looked at Ormsgill steadily. He was of commanding presence, but there was something in his attitude which suggested that he regarded this stranger as an equal, though he was lord of that country, and the other stood before him, a spare, lonely figure in white duck, with nothing in his hands.

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"The Headman has told me your business, and it seems it is very much the same as when I last talked to you," he said. "You are, I believe, not a friend of those other white men who have persecuted me?"

Ormsgill turned to Nares. "You can tell him that we are both proscribed," he said. "Make it quite clear. I don't think there's any reason to be anxious about his handing us over to the folks at San Roque."

Nares explained, and the old man made a little gesture. "Then," he said, "you shall have the six boys, and it is not my will that you offer the Headman anything for them. Domingo stole them—and we have satisfied our claim on him. Still, I do not know yet whether you will be permitted to go away with them. In the meanwhile there is another matter."

Nares made out the gist of it, and as he hastily explained the old man raised his hand. "You have business with Domingo, and there are two other white men who have come here to meet him. Let them come forward."

Somebody passed on the order, and there was a murmur of voices and a stirring of the crowd as a little group of men strode out of it. In front walked the Boer Gavin, a tall, lean figure in travel-stained duck with a heavy rifle cradled in his arm, and his manner was unconcerned. Behind him came Herrero, little, and yellow-faced, looking about him furtively, while a line of dusky men half of whom were armed plodded after them, obviously uneasy. The Suzerain sat impassively still, and looked at them in a curious fashion when they stopped not far from him.

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"You have come here to meet Domingo. You are friends of his?" he said.

Herrero hesitated, but his companion laughed when an interpreter repeated the question.

"You can say we came to meet him, in any case," he replied.

"Was that wise?" asked the old man, and his voice had a jarring ring. "Still, as you have come you shall see him."

Then he smiled grimly, and made a sign to some of those behind. Again there was a stirring of the crowd, and Nares felt his nerves thrill with expectancy. He looked at Ormsgill, who was standing very still with empty hands at his side, and afterwards saw Gavin, the Boer, glance sharply round and change his grip on the heavy rifle. In another moment there was a very suggestive half-articulate murmur from the assembly, and then an impressive stillness as two men came forward bearing between them a heavy fiber package slung as a hammock usually is beneath a pole. They laid it down, and while Ormsgill and Gavin moved forward at the Headman's sign one of them took something out of it. He held it up, and Nares gasped and struggled with a sense of nausea, for it was a drawn and distorted human face that met his shrinking gaze.

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"They've killed him!" he said hoarsely.

Ormsgill stood rigidly still. "Yes," he said, "it's Domingo. Considering everything one could hardly blame them."

Then the stillness was sharply broken. A cry rose from the assembly as Herrero's boys turned and fled. Their leader shrank back pace by pace from the old man's gaze, and then wheeling round sped after them. As he did so somebody shouted, and a couple of Sniders flashed. Their crash was lost in a clamor, and odd groups of men sprang out into the open space. Then Nares saw Gavin running hard come up with his comrade and grasp his shoulder. He drove him before him towards one of the larger huts while the Snider bullets struck up little spurts of sand behind them.

Nares set his lips, and held his breath as he watched them. The shadowy entrance of the hut was not far away, but it seemed impossible that they could reach it before one, at least, of them was struck. Herrero, blind with fear, seemed to flag already, but Gavin drove him on, and Nares could see that his face was set and grim. They went by a cluster of negroes running to intercept them, and the tall man in the white duck seemed to fling his comrade forward into the hut. Then he spun round pitching up the heavy rifle. There was a flash and a detonation, and Ormsgill heard a

curious droning sound as if a bee had passed above his head. In another second a man who stood close at his Suzerain's side lurched forward with a strangled cry. Then Gavin sprang into the hut, and when the old man made a sign four of his retainers laid hands on Ormsgill and his companion. They were big muscular men, and Nares looked at Ormsgill, who submitted quietly.

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"It's horrible," he said.

Ormsgill made a little gesture. "They brought it upon themselves. I'm a little sorry for Gavin, but I can't get away."

It was perfectly evident. Their captors held them fast, pinioning their arms with greasy black hands, and there were two to each of them, while there are very few white men who have the negro's physical strength, at least if they have been any time in that climate. Nares gasped and felt his heart throb furiously, as he waited with his eyes fixed on the hut.

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CHAPTER XXVI

THE DAY OF RECKONING

There was silence in the village for almost a minute after Gavin vanished into the hut, and the men who had pursued him stood still, apparently irresolute. The entrance was dark and narrow, and they could not see inside, but it was evident that they recognized it was a very determined man who awaited them in its shelter. He was also white, which had no doubt its effect upon the negro mind, since it usually happens that when a race or caste asserts its superiority loudly enough its claims are admitted, especially when they are backed by visible force.

So while the seconds slipped away the negroes stood hesitating, and glancing at one another as well as at the hut which lay in the shadow. Their ebony limbs and scanty draperies were forced up against the glaring dust and sand in a flood of searching brilliancy. Nares, who felt his nerves tingle, could see the tension in their dusky faces and the oily gleam of their bodies as the perspiration broke from them. There was something curiously suggestive of pent up fury in the poses they had fallen into. In the meanwhile he could not move. Indeed, the big negro who held him fast had savagely drawn his arms behind his back, and the strain in the muscles was becoming almost intolerably painful.

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Then several men broke away from the others and ran towards the hut, and once more Nares held his breath. He could have shouted as he saw the first dark form bound on, clutching a long Snider rifle in both hands, but he restrained himself. In another moment or two a thin flash blazed from the doorway of the hut, and the man went down with a shrill scream and lay clawing at the sand. Nares heard no detonation. He was only conscious of the little curl of blue smoke in the entrance of the hut, and the black object that writhed in the pitiless glare in front of it. Then the fallen man's comrades stopped, and a little shiver ran through him as he turned to Ormsgill, who nodded as if he understood him.

"You can only face it," said the latter. "They would scarcely listen to their Headman, and I can't move a limb. It's a single-shot rifle. They're bound to kill him." Then he broke off with a little gasp. "Ah," he said a moment later, "two of them are trying it now."

Nares did not wish to look, but he could not help it. The scene held his gaze, and he saw the two figures move cautiously towards the hut, keeping one wall of it between them and the doorway as far as they could. This, however, did not serve them. The deadly fire flashed again, and one negro who collapsed suddenly fell on his hands and knees. Then there was another streak of sparks and smoke, and the second man staggering forward went down headlong with a thud. Several Sniders flashed, and there was silence again.

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"It's too much," said Ormsgill. "I can't stand this."

He struggled furiously, and he and the men who held him swayed to and fro, a cluster of scuffling, staggering figures for a moment or two. The effort, however, was futile, and he stood still again with his arms pinioned fast behind his back and the perspiration dripping from him while the Suzerain looked at him from his stool with a little grim smile.

"It is not your affair," he said.

Ormsgill said nothing, though the veins were swollen on his forehead and his face was suffused with blood, and at a sign from the Headman the negroes who held him relaxed their grasp a trifle. Nares also stood still, with every nerve in him thrilling. The man inside the hut no doubt deserved his fate, but that did not seem to count then, and the missionary felt only a sympathy with him that was almost overwhelming in its intensity. It was one man against a multitude, for there was no sign that Herrero was making any effort, and, after all, that man sprang from the same stock as he did. Then deep down in him he felt a thrill of pride, for Gavin was making a very gallant fight of it. It was in many ways a shameful work that he and his comrade had done, selling proscribed arms to the people who had turned against him now, fomenting discord between them

and their neighbors, and debauching them with villainous rum, but, at least, he made it clear that the courage of his kind was in him. This was all at variance with Nares' beneficent creed, but the man was dying, indomitable, a white man.

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Those who meant to kill him drew back a little farther from the hut, and standing and squatting flung up the long rifles. They were by no means marksmen, but the hut was large and built of cane and branch work. The heavy Snider bullets smashed through it, and for a few minutes the stagnant air was filled with the jarring detonations. There was no answering flash from the hut and Nares could see that its shadowy entrance was empty. Then as the ringing of the Sniders died away and a man here and there stole forward cautiously it seemed to him that a dimly seen white object dragged itself towards the doorway and crouched in it. He did not think it would be visible to the assailants, for they were keeping a little behind the hut, but it was clear to him that the one man against a multitude was bent on fighting still.

The straggling figures crept on, moving obliquely towards the perilous entrance, that the hut might shelter them, until they massed together for a dash at it. Then the flash blazed out again, and one of them dropped. Another went down screaming a few seconds later, and then the foremost broke and fled, and there was a sudden scattering of those behind. There were a host of negroes, but they shrank from that unerring rifle. They were evidently willing to face a hazard, but this was certain death. Then the Suzerain of the village signed to the negroes who held Ormsgill, and they led him forward.

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"It seems it may cost us a good deal to kill that man," he said. "Go and see what terms he will make with me. An offer of a few good rifles would have some weight just now."

Ormsgill went, and crossing the hot space of dust and sand walked into the hut. Dazzled as he was by the change from the glare outside, he could see almost nothing for a moment or two. The place was also filled with an acrid haze, but by degrees he became accustomed to the dimness and made out Gavin lying against the wall. He looked up with a little wry smile, but Ormsgill moving nearer saw that his face was gray and drawn. There was dust on his thin duck clothing, and in two spots a small dark-colored stain.

"You are hit?" he said.

"Yes," said Gavin, "I'm done." He gasped before he spoke again with evident difficulty. "They plugged me twice before they made the last attempt. I could just hold the rifle. If they'd kept it up they'd have got in."

"Where's Herrero?"

Gavin appeared to glance across the hut, and Ormsgill saw a huddled figure lying in the shadow. It did not move at all.

"Yes," said Gavin, "I think the first bullet that came in quieted him, and I wasn't sorry. He was worrying me. Lost his nerve, though he never had very much. Well, I suppose you have come to make a bargain with me?"

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"Something like that. Our friend yonder hinted that he would probably do a good deal for a few rifles."

Gavin smiled dryly. "It isn't worth while now. As you have no doubt noticed, I can hardly talk to you."

He stopped for a moment with a heavy gasp. "This was my last kick, you see."

"Ah," said Ormsgill, "is there any other little way in which I could be of service? Any message you would like sent on?"

The man made a painful effort, but Ormsgill had now some little difficulty in hearing him. "None," he said. "They have forgotten me yonder, and, perhaps, it's just as well. Our folks—my mother was Cape Dutch, you know—believe in everything as it used to be, but I'm like my father; there was always a kick in me. One of your Colonial vacillations cost him his farm, for, though he said he was ashamed of his country, he wouldn't recognize the Boers as his rulers. I, however, got on with them until I vexed the authorities by something I did in resentment of the—arrogance of certain mine-grabbing Englishmen. I believe I might have made terms if I'd truckled to them a little, but that was a thing I wouldn't do, and so I came out here. There are probably more of us with the same nonsensical notions."

Ormsgill said nothing for a moment or two. He had also lived among the outcasts, and knew what comes of disdain to regard things from the conventional point of view. Something in him stirred in sympathy with the dying man, and he sat down in the dust and laid a hand on his shoulder. Gavin made no further observation that was intelligible, until at last he feebly raised his head.

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"If you wouldn't mind I'd like a drink," he said.

Ormsgill rose and walked out of the hut calling in the native tongue. The men who squatted about it in the hot sand still clenching their Sniders apparently failed to understand him, or were unwilling to do what he asked, and some time had slipped by when at last one of them brought a dripping calabash. Ormsgill went into the hut with it, and then took off his shapeless hat as he poured out the water on the hot soil. Gavin lay face downwards now, clutching his deadly rifle,

but there was no breath in him. Then Ormsgill went back quietly to where the Headman and his Suzerain were sitting.

"I am afraid you can not have those rifles. The man is dead," he said.

After that he and Nares were led back to their hut, and when it was made clear to them that they were expected to stay there Ormsgill sat down in the shadow and pulled out his pipe.

"We wondered what was going on, and now the thing's quite plain," he said. "It's rebellion."

"How was it they didn't creep round the hut from behind?" asked Nares, who felt a trifle averse from facing the point that concerned them most.

"Lost their heads, most probably," said Ormsgill. "Didn't think of it. Any way, they'd have had to make a dash for the door eventually. Still, it would have saved them a man or two, and our friend the Suzerain noticed it."

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"Why didn't he point it out to them?"

"I fancy he wanted to see how they'd stand fire, and break them in. Felt he could afford to throw a few of them away, as he certainly could, and he only stepped in when the thing was commencing to discourage them."

"It's quite likely you're right," and Nares looked at his comrade with a little wry smile. "Still, after all, I'm not sure it's very material."

The lines grew a trifle deeper on Ormsgill's worn face. "No," he said, "the real question is what our dusky acquaintance means to do with us, and we have to face it. Personally, I don't think he means us any harm, but it's certain he won't let us go until he and his friends have cleaned out San Roque. You see, in an affair of this kind the first blow must be successful, and he has probably a lurking suspicion that we might warn Dom Erminio. The trouble is that once the rebellion breaks out it will be almost impossible for us to reach the coast."

He spoke quietly, but there was a strain in his voice, and Nares guessed what he felt.

"I suppose he wouldn't be content with our assurance that we'd say nothing?" he suggested.

"Would you make it?"

Nares sat very still for a few moments, with a curious look in his eyes, and one hand closed, and his comrade once more recognized that there had been a change in him of late. He had the fever on him slightly, and while that is nothing unusual in those forests, he had grown perceptibly harder and grimmer during the last few weeks. Now and then he also gave way to outbreaks of indignation, which, so far as Ormsgill knew, was not a thing he had hitherto been addicted to doing. Still, the latter was aware that the white man's mental balance is apt to become a trifle unsettled in that land.

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"I can't tell. It's a question I've grappled with in one shape or other before," he said. "The land is full of iniquities and horrors, and I think that some of them can only be washed out in blood. That law stands as it has always done. The great trade road to the south of us is paved with the bones of the victims, and they still come down to die, worked out in a few years on the plantations. It is a thing that can't go on."

He opened and closed a thin hand savagely while his voice rose to a harsher note. "For one man killed by the bullet if war breaks out a hundred perish yearly under the driver's lash on the great roads and, I think, among the coffee plants. They are dumb cattle, here and in the Congo. They can not tell their troubles, and they have no friends. How could they when the white man grows rich by their toil and anguish? Still, this earth is the Lord's, and there are men in it who will listen when once what is being done in this land of darkness is clearly told them. One must believe it or throw away all faith in humanity. I think if it rested with me I would let these bushmen come down and crush their oppressors, since it seems there is no other way of making their sorrows known."

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He broke off abruptly, and seemed to shrink back within himself, for it was, after all, but seldom he spoke in that fashion. Ormsgill nodded.

"It's a very old way of claiming attention, and one that's sometimes effective," he said. "They might have tried it before, but, you see, those beneath the yoke have their hands tied, and those who aren't somewhat naturally don't care. That's one of the things which have hampered most attempts at emancipation. Only our friend the Suzerain has sense enough to realize that if they sit still much longer the yoke will be tolerably securely fastened on all of them. I think he has the gifts of a leader, but there is another man of the same kind on the coast. I mean Dom Clemente, and I'm not sure he'd be willing to have the land swept out in that unceremonious fashion. In fact, one could almost fancy that in due time he means to do the cleaning up, tactfully, himself."

He stopped a moment, and smiled somewhat grimly before he went on again. "After all, this doesn't directly concern either of us. It's a little hard that now when the thing we have in hand is in one sense accomplished and neither Domingo nor Herrero can worry us, we should be kept here indefinitely at the pleasure of this back-country nigger."

He glanced at the dusky men who squatted not far away in the shadow watching the hut. They had Snider rifles, and it was evident they were there to see that nobody came out. Then he sat

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moodily silent awhile, with a curious hardness in his lined face. He was lame and worn-out. The climate had sapped the physical strength out of him, and the wound in his leg still caused him pain. Also, struggle against it as he would, the black dejection which preys on the white man in that land was fastening itself on him. The thing was hard, almost intolerably so. He was a captive with the opportunity of accomplishing his task receding every moment further away from him, for it was clear that once the rebellion broke out it would be almost impossible for him to convey his boys across the track of it to the wished-for coast. Some time had slipped by when Nares roused himself to ask another question.

"Are these people likely to meet with any opposition from the natives when they march?" he said.

"That," said Ormsgill reflectively, "is a thing I'm not quite sure about. There is one Headman of some importance between them and the littoral. You know whom I mean, and it would make things difficult for our jailers if he remained on good terms with the authorities. In fact, in that case it seems to me these folks would have a good deal of trouble in getting any further. What he will do I naturally don't know, but if I was in command of San Roque I would make every effort to keep him quiet and content just now."

After that he once more sat silent, apparently brooding heavily, until the sudden darkness fell and the pungent smoke of the cooking fires drifted about the village. Then, soon after food was brought them, he sank into restless sleep.

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CHAPTER XXVII

AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

Fort San Roque stood, as Father Tiebout sometimes said, on the verge of extinction in the shadow of the debatable land, but its Commandant or Chefe, as he was usually termed, had become accustomed to the fact, and, if he did not forget it altogether, seldom took it into serious consideration. After all, the European only exists on sufferance in the hotter parts of Africa, and as a rule, once he realizes it, ceases to trouble himself about the matter and concentrates his attention on the acquiring of riches by any means available. Dom Erminio was not an exception, and being by no means particular, endeavored to make the most of his opportunities, especially as his term of office was not a long one. It was, perhaps, not astonishing that in his eagerness to do so he became to some extent oblivious of everything else, since those entrusted with authority over a discontented subject people have at other times and in other places acted as though they were a trifle blind to what was going on about them. Dom Erminio was cunning, but, as occasionally happens in the case of cunning men, he was also short-sighted.

The evening meal had been cleared away when he lay in a canvas lounge, yellow in face, as white men often become in that part of Africa, with a cigar in his bony fingers. Darkness had just closed down on the lonely station, but the little rickety residency had lain for twelve hours under a burning sun, and now the big oil lamps raised the already almost insupportable temperature. The Chefe, however, did not seem to feel it. He lay in his chair apparently languidly content, a spare figure in loose and somewhat soiled white uniform, looking at his Lieutenant, who was fingering a glass of red Canary wine. Neither of them troubled themselves about the fact that there were men in that country who regarded them with a vindictive hatred.

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"I almost think we may as well call that man in," he said.

The Lieutenant Luiz glanced towards the veranda, where a negro was patiently squatting, as he had, in fact, been doing for most of the day. He brought a message from a Headman of some importance in the vicinity, and there was no reason why he should not have been listened to several hours earlier, except that Dom Erminio preferred to keep him waiting. It was in his opinion advisable that a negro should be taught humbly to await the white man's pleasure, which is a policy that has now and then brought trouble upon the white man. Dom Luiz, who understood his companion's views on that subject, smiled.

"He has, no doubt, complaints to make. They always have," he said. "Considering everything, that is not astonishing. I wonder if the Headman expects us to give them much consideration."

Dom Erminio spread his yellow hands out. "One would have thought we had taught him to expect nothing. He is, it seems, a little slow to understand. Perhaps, we have not put the screw on quite hard enough. I fancy another turn would make him restive."

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He looked at his Lieutenant, and both of them laughed. Then the Chefe made a little sign.

"Bring him in," he said.

The negro came in, a big, heavily-built man, with an expressionless face. When Dom Erminio made him a sign not to come too near he squatted down, a huddled object with apathetic patience in its pose, until the Lieutenant signified that he might deliver his message.

"The Headman sends you greeting. He has a complaint to make," he said, and another dusky man who had slipped in softly made his observations plain. "The soldiers have been beating the people in one of his villages, and carrying off things that did not belong to them again. The Headman asks for justice in this matter."

"He shall have it," said the Chefe. "His people have been insolent, and they are certainly getting lazy. We will send him a requisition for more provisions."

Nobody could have told whether the messenger felt any resentment, but, after all, very few white men ever quite understand what the African is thinking. He crouched impassively still, with the lamplight on his heavy face and his oily skin gleaming softly over the great knotted muscles of his splendid arms and shoulders. There was something in his attitude which vaguely suggested dormant force that might spread destruction when it was unloosed, but that naturally did not occur to the Chefe, who indicated by a little gesture that he might continue. [Pg 335]

"There is another matter," said the negro. "The Headman can not send in the rubber demanded. Already we have cleared the forest of half the trees. One has to go a long way to find any more. He will do what he can, but he asks that you will be content with a little less than usual."

Dom Erminio shook his head reproachfully. "I have made this man concessions, and this is the result," he said. "There are many duties I have released him from, and I only ask a little rubber and a few other things for the favor."

Then he straightened himself in his chair. "Tell your Headman that not a load of rubber will be excused him, and he must restrain his people from provoking the soldiers. Also, the next time he has a complaint to make let him come himself and lay it before me."

The man stood up, splendid in his animal muscularity, but there was for just a moment a little gleam in his eyes which suggested that hot human passions were at work within him. The white men, however, as usual, did not notice it, and the black interpreter, whose opinion was seldom invited, said nothing.

"I will tell him," said the messenger, and Dom Erminio looked at the Lieutenant Luiz when he went out with the interpreter. [Pg 336]

"I think," he said reflectively, "we will give the screw that other turn. It is supposed that our new rulers down yonder"—and he apparently indicated the coast with a stretched out hand—"are in favor of a more conciliatory policy, which is not what we would wish for just now."

"It is clearly out of the question," and Dom Luiz grinned. "I think it would be advisable if I went out with a few files and made some further trifling requisition to-morrow."

"You will go, and do what appears desirable," said the Chefe, who lighted another cigar.

Dom Luiz set out on the morrow with a handful of dusky ruffians in uniform, and left rage and shame behind him in the villages he visited, which, as it happened, had results neither he nor Dom Erminio had anticipated. The Headman did not come to San Roque to make his humble complaint, but he sent an urgent message to the Suzerain of the village Ormsgill was confined in, and at last one morning the old man sent for the latter.

"We march in a few hours, and as we can not leave you here you and the boys you asked me for will come with us," he said. "What our business is does not concern you, and you will go with us as prisoners. Just now I do not know what we will do with you afterwards. It will depend"—and he looked at Ormsgill with a little grim smile—"a good deal upon your own behavior." [Pg 337]

Ormsgill, who grasped the gist of what he said, could take a hint, and went back to Nares. The latter listened quietly when he told him what he had heard.

"I believe there is no other way. Their oppressors have brought it upon their own heads," he said.

His comrade noticed the curious hardness of his face, and the glint in his eyes. It was very evident to him that Nares, who had been down again with fever while they lay in the sweltering heat, had changed. He had borne many troubles uncomplainingly for several weary years, and, perhaps because of it, the events of the last few weeks had left their mark on him. After all, there is a subtle concord between mind and body, and in that land, at least, the fever-shaken white man who persists in staggering on under a burden greater than he can reasonably bear is apt to be suddenly crushed by it. Then his bodily strength or mental faculties give way once for all beneath the strain. Ormsgill could not define the change in his companion, but he recognized it. It was a thing which he had seen happen to other men.

They started in the heat of that afternoon, and Ormsgill, marching with his boys, watched the long dusky column wind into the forest in front of him. There were men with Snider rifles, which they were indifferently accustomed to, men with glinting matchets, and men with flintlock guns and spears, besides rows of plodding carriers. They were half-naked most of them, men of primitive passions and no great intelligence, but they had risen at last in their desperation to strike for freedom. Behind them rose a tumultuous uproar of barbaric music, insistent and deafening, that floated far over the forest. Ormsgill smiled a little as it grew fainter. [Pg 338]

"I'm not sure there will be any music when they come back again," he said. "Still, I almost think they will accomplish—something."

Nares looked straight in front of him as he plodded on, but there was a curious gleam in his eyes.

"There is no other way," was all he said.

The long dusky column pushed on steadily through dim forest, wide morass, and tracts of hot white sand, and it happened one evening when the advance guard were a considerable distance ahead that Dom Erminio sat alone on the veranda at San Roque. It was then about eight o'clock, and the night was very dark and hot. Now and then a little fitful breeze crept up the misty river, and filled the forest that rose above it with mysterious noises. Then it dropped away again, and left a silence the Chefe commenced to find oppressive behind it. He could hear the oily gurgle of sliding water, and at times a sharp crackle in the crazy building behind him, out of which there drifted a damp mildewy smell, but that merely emphasized the almost disconcerting absence of any other sound. Indeed, it was so still that the soft rustle his duck garments made as he moved jarred on him, and he was glad when the little muggy breeze flowed into the veranda again.

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There was nothing in all this to trouble a man who was accustomed to it, but the Chefe was not quite at his ease. Dom Luiz, whom he had sent out a few days earlier, should have been back that afternoon, but there was no sign of him yet, nor had the three or four dusky soldiers who had gone out on some business of their own with his consent as yet made an appearance. There were very few men in the fort, and when nine o'clock came Dom Erminio, who was quite aware that the natives had no great cause to love him, admitted that he was a trifle anxious. Still, he had, with what he considered a more sufficient reason, been anxious rather frequently. It was a thing one became accustomed to in the debatable land, and sitting still he lighted another cigar. He could see the mists that rolled up from the river, and the forest cutting faintly black against the sky, and wondered vaguely what was going on in it. That there was something going on in it he now felt tolerably certain, though he did not exactly know why.

At last the hoarse cry of a sentry rose out of the night, and when it was answered he went down to the gate of the stockade. It was not a gate that opened in the usual fashion, but one that dropped, a stout affair of logs copied from the form adopted by the inhabitants of the plateaux to the south. When he reached it two or three black soldiers were heaving it up, and there was a patter of feet outside. Then a line of shadowy figures grew out of the darkness, and though there did not seem to be as many as he had expected it was with a sense of relief he saw Dom Luiz come in through the gap. The logs clashed down behind the last of his men, and Dom Erminio straightened himself suddenly when a sergeant came up with a lantern.

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Two of the row of barefooted men appeared scarcely fit to stand. Their garments were rent to pieces, and there was blood and mire on them, while neither of them carried rifles. Dom Luiz saw the question in the Chefe's eyes, and nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I should have been here earlier. It was these two who detained me. I sent them on to the village in the thicker bush two days ago, and they came back dragging themselves with difficulty—as you see them. It seems the villagers had beaten them, and they did not know what had become of their rifles."

Dom Erminio's face became suddenly intent. "Ah," he said, "they shall be beaten again tomorrow. You will hand them to the guard. I suppose you saw nothing of the Sergeant Orticho?"

"No," said Lieutenant Luiz, who was a trifle puzzled by the sudden change in the Chefe's manner, "I saw no sign of him."

He called to his men, and as they filed by him loaded heavily with miscellaneous sundries, Dom Erminio smiled significantly.

"They have, it seems, been successful, which is fortunate," he said. "I almost think it will be some little time before they make any more requisitions of the kind again."

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He turned back towards the house, and was once more sitting on the veranda when the Lieutenant Luiz rejoined him.

"It would no doubt be advisable that I should set out again in the morning with a stronger party and chastise those villagers who have beaten our men?" said the latter.

"No," said the Chefe dryly, "you will probably be busy here. When the natives venture to beat our men it is, I think, wiser to keep every man we have inside the fort."

"Ah," said his companion, "you believe they have courage enough to go further?"

Dom Erminio smiled. "I believe we both admitted that the natives might resent our attitude. We were, I think, for several reasons not unwilling that they should do something to make their resentment evident."

He stopped a moment, and the manner in which he spread out his yellow hands was very expressive. "Now I fancy we have got what we wished for—and, perhaps, a little more than could reasonably have been expected. It is rather a pity that we have lost several men with sickness lately."

Dom Luiz straightened himself in his chair. "There are very few of us, and I am not quite sure that one or two of the fresh draft could be depended on. Still, Orticho has most of them well in hand."

Dom Erminio made a little gesture. "I think we can not count upon Orticho in this affair. It is scarcely likely that he and the men who went out with him will come back again. What he has heard in the bush I do not know, but it is evident that he regards this thing very much as I do. In fact, I fancy he is heading as fast as possible for the coast by now."

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"Ah," said Dom Luiz, and looked at his companion inquiringly.

"The business we have in hand is perfectly simple," said Dom Erminio. "We were sent here to hold San Roque, and it must be done. When these bushmen call upon us we shall be ready. With that in view you will set about moving the quick-firing gun from where it is now, and when that is done you will open a loophole for it at the rear of the stockade. It is not quite so strong at that point, and our friends, who know where the gun stood, will probably attack us there. It would be advisable to have it done before the dawn comes."

Dom Luiz rose and set about it. There was no uneasiness in his companion's manner, but there was a look which had not been there for some little time in his eyes. He was, perhaps, in several respects a rogue, but, like other men of that kind, he had his strong points, too, and nobody had ever accused him of being deficient in manhood, which, unfortunately, is not always quite the same thing as humanity. He was also Chefe, Commandant and Administrator, which he never forgot, and he sat on the veranda smoking cigarette after cigarette while Dom Luiz toiled for once very strenuously half the night. It was very dark and hot, the logs he handled were heavy, and the dusky soldiers seemed unusually slow at understanding. Still, when the dawn broke the little quick-firing gun stood at the rear of the stockade, which had been strengthened wherever it was possible.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CHEFE STANDS FAST

It was an hour after midnight when the Headman sent for Ormsgill, who found him sitting with his overlord beside a little fire that burned redly in the thin mist. The night was almost chilly, and the Suzerain crouched close beside the blaze, huddled in his loose garments, with the uncertain light on his impassive face. It seemed to Ormsgill that he looked worn and old, and he became conscious for the first time of a vague pity for him. The task he had undertaken was, the white man felt, one he could not succeed in. It was merely another futile protest, for the yoke that was being fastened on his people's necks could not be flung off that way. Ormsgill stood silent a moment or two until the old man turned to him.

"You have no cause to love those white men in San Roque," he said. "Well, I will give you forty boys with rifles. We want leaders who know how the white men fight."

Ormsgill shook his head. "No," he said, "I can not lead them. This affair is no concern of mine."

The negro appeared to ponder over his answer, for it was with difficulty they understood each other, though another man crouching in the wood smoke flung in a word or two.

"Are you all against us because we are black?" he said. "Those men at San Roque would shoot you if they could."

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"It is very likely," and Ormsgill smiled a little. "Still, I think we are not all against you—though I can not lead your men. There are white men among the Portuguese who know that you have wrongs. Some day they will have justice done."

The negro spread out a dusky hand. "That is what the missionaries tell us, but we have waited a long time, and there is no sign of it yet. We can not wait for ever, and very soon all my people will be at work upon the white men's plantations. They get greedier and greedier. Now at last we strike."

Once more Ormsgill, standing still in the shadow watching him, was stirred by a vague compassion. He knew that revolt was useless, and wondered whether the old belief that there was a ban upon the negro and that he was made to serve the white man was not, after all, founded on more than superstition and self-interested sophistry. Other primitive peoples had, he knew, died off before the white man, but the Africans had thriven in their bondage, filling Brazil and the West Indies and the cotton-growing States. They were prolific, cheerful, adaptable to all conditions, and yet even where liberty had been offered them they remained a subject people, and made no effort to shake off the white man's yoke.

"You may sack San Roque," he said. "Still, I think you will never reach the coast."

The Headman started at this boldness, and there was a vindictive gleam in his eyes, but his overlord sat silent a space, apparently brooding heavily, and gazing at the mist. Then he turned to Ormsgill with a somewhat impressive deliberateness.

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"At least," he said, "I go on. You will not lead our men, but you can not warn the white men at San

Roque. When we have sacked the fort I will send for you again."

Ormsgill made him a little formal inclination before he turned away, for the attitude of this negro was one he could understand. He had himself attempted things that could not be done, expecting to be defeated, but undertaking them because he felt that, at least, was an obligation laid on him. Nares, and Father Tiebout, and no doubt countless host of others, had also done the same, and Nares the optimist had said that though they failed signally the protest of their futile efforts would be listened to some day. It seemed that the dusky man crouching beside the fire realized how much there was against him, but, as he had said, he was going on. Perhaps it is because men of all creeds and colors have pressed on downwards through the ages to face ax and stake and firing platoon that there are not even more of the overburdened in the world to-day. The cost of progress is heavy, and the upward struggle is very grim and slow.

In the meanwhile Ormsgill went back past the long rows of weary men lying in the sand to where his comrade was sitting in the clammy mist. Nares was a little feverish that night.

"Well?" he said.

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"I have been offered a command," said Ormsgill. "Naturally, I refused it. I also ventured to tell our friend that he would fail. It says a good deal for him that I escaped the usual fate of the prophets. He did not even ask me for my reasons."

"You have them?"

"Yes," said Ormsgill. "The thing's quite evident in a general way and to be precise he has to reckon with Dom Clemente. You remember the man our guide fired at? I can't help thinking he has passed on any information he may have picked up to the coast by now, and Dom Clemente is a man who can move to some purpose when it's advisable. Still, I have no doubt we shall sack San Roque before to-morrow. Our friend hinted that measures would be taken to prevent us warning the Chefe."

Nares turned and pointed to several men with rifles who sat half-seen not very far away. Then he seemed to shiver.

"There was a time when I could have warned them in San Roque, though I scarcely think they would have listened to me. Now I do not know that I would do it if I had the opportunity." His voice grew sterner. "They have brought it upon themselves. There are iniquities which can not be borne."

His companion said nothing further, but sat down gnawing at an empty pipe until they started again. The Headman or his Suzerain had drilled his followers into some kind of order, and Ormsgill found something impressive in the silent flitting by of half-seen men. They came up out of the soft darkness with a faint patter of naked feet in sand, and were lost in it again ahead of him. Now and then there was a crackle of undergrowth or a clash of arms, but for the most part the long column went by like a crawling shadow, for these were men accustomed to flit through dim forests thick with perils noiselessly, and they did not proclaim their presence as white troops would have done. When they struck it would be in silence, and Ormsgill fancied that San Roque was not much more than a league away.

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Still, it was rough traveling through loose sand and tangled scrub, and several hours had passed when the long sinuous column stopped suddenly. The men in charge of Ormsgill handed him and Nares over to a few others, who had only flintlock guns, and these led them forward to a more open space, where they sat down. The night had grown a trifle clearer, and Ormsgill could see a wide break in the bush in front of him. A broad belt of mist hung about one side of it, and the gurgle of sliding water came out of the vapor, against which there rose a shadowy ridge.

"The stockade," he said. "We have arrived. Dom Erminio has either no vedettes out, or our vanguard has stalked them and cut their throats."

He broke off, but in another moment or two he spoke again with a little tension in his voice. "It's curious, and no doubt in one way unreasonable, but I feel the desire to warn him getting almost too much for me. I don't know how one could do it, and it certainly wouldn't be any use, since I believe our friends are ringing the fort in. Dom Erminio must fight for his life to-night."

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The clang of a rifle, a Portuguese rifle, cut him short, and a cry rose out of the vapor. After that there was silence until a crackling commenced in the bush, and the two sat still and waited while the tension grew almost intolerable. Ormsgill, who felt his mouth grow parched and dry, fancied he could see the stockade a trifle more plainly, and the forest seemed to be growing blacker, though the mist was a little thicker than it had been. It was also perceptibly colder.

"It will be daylight in half an hour," he said, and his voice struck on his companion's ears curiously strained and hoarse.

Then another rifle flashed, there was a sudden shouting, and a tumultuous patter of naked feet, and a shadowy mass of running figures hurled themselves at the stockade. A good many of them never reached it, for the dusky barrier blazed with twinkling points of light, and a withering volley met them in the face. Then the drifting smoke was rent by brighter snapping flashes in quick succession, and the jarring thud of heavier reports broke through the crash of the rifles. This lasted for perhaps two minutes, and then there was by contrast a silence that was almost bewildering. It seemed emphasized when once or twice the ringing of a rifle came out of the

streaks of drifting vapor that hung about the stockade.

"They're going back," said Ormsgill hoarsely. "The Chefe's men will stand." Then he laughed, a harsh, strained laugh. "They know they have to. Our friends are not likely to have much consideration for any of them who fall into their hands."

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Nares, who shivered a little, said nothing, and a minute or two later a crackle of riflery broke out in the bush. It came from the Suzerain's men, for there was no mistaking the crash of the heavy Sniders. Once or twice the jarring thud of the machine gun broke in, and here and there a twinkling flash leapt from the stockade, but with that exception there was no answer from the fort.

"It seems," said Ormsgill, "Dom Erminio has his men in hand. It's a little more than I expected from him. Presumably our friend wishes to keep him occupied while he seizes the canoes. Anyway, his boys will be considerably more dangerous when they've wasted their ammunition."

The fusillade continued, in all probability, harmlessly, for awhile, and then Ormsgill rose to his feet. "I think they'll get in this time. They're trying it again."

Once more vague, shadowy objects flitted out of the bush, and swept towards the stockade. They ran without order, furiously, while more of their comrades emerged from the shadows behind them, until the narrow strip of cleared space was filled with running figures. There appeared to be swarms of them, and Ormsgill held his breath as he watched. He saw them plunge into a crawling trail of low lying mist, that seemed torn apart suddenly when once more the face of the stockade was streaked with little spurts of flame. It closed on them again until all was hidden but the intermittent flashing, and the jarring thud of the machine gun rent the din. One could not tell what was going on, and it was by a tense effort Ormsgill held himself still with every nerve in him quivering. How long the tension lasted he did not know, but at length the ringing of the rifles died away again, and as a little puff of chilly breeze rolled the haze aside it became evident that the space before the stockade was once more empty. He could see the stockade clearly, and the edge of the forest now cut sharply against the sky.

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"The Headman can't afford to fail again," he said. "It is breaking day."

Then there was silence for a space, while the light grew clearer until the residency beyond the stockade grew into shape. A smear of pale color widened in the eastern sky, and as Ormsgill turned his eyes towards the house a limp bundle of fabric rose slowly up the lofty staff above it. It blew out once on the faint breeze, and then hung still again, but as he watched it, Ormsgill felt a little thrill run through him.

"Rather earlier than usual. Dom Erminio means to fight," he said.

Just then, however, a negro who came up gasping with haste signed to Nares. "The Headman sends for you," he said. "You are to take a message to those people yonder."

Ormsgill looked at his comrade, who smiled curiously. "Yes," he said, "I shall certainly go. Whether I am in any way responsible for all this I do not know, but I may, perhaps, save a few of them."

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He raised himself somewhat stiffly, and turned away, but two negroes held Ormsgill fast when he would have gone with him. He sat down again when they relaxed their grasp, and at last saw Nares appear again on the edge of the bush some distance away. He was alone, and walked quietly towards the stockade with his wide hat in his hand, and a figure in white uniform appeared in the notch where the palisades had been cut down for the quick-firing gun. Just then a ray of brightness struck along the trampled sand, and Ormsgill saw his comrade stop and stand still, spare and gaunt and ragged, with the widening sunlight full upon him. What was said he did not know, but he did not blame Dom Erminio afterwards for what followed. Perhaps, some black soldier's over-taxed nerve gave way, or the man had flung off all restraint and gone back to his primitive savagery, for a rifle flashed behind the stockade, and Nares staggered, recovered his balance, and collapsed into a blurred huddle of white garments on the trampled sand.

Then as Ormsgill sprang to his feet the bush rang with a yell, and a swarm of half-naked negroes poured tumultuously out of it. There was no firing among them. They ran forward with glinting matchets and spears and brandished flintlock guns, and Ormsgill knew that now, at least, they would certainly get in. In another moment he was running furiously towards them, and so far as he could remember afterwards none of the men in whose charge he had been troubled themselves about him. It was some way to the front of the stockade, and when he got there he was hemmed in by a surging crowd. There was smoke in his eyes, and a bewildering din through which he heard the thudding of the quick-firing gun, but where Nares was he did not know. He could only go forward with the press, and he ran on in a fit of hot vindictive fury.

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Here and there a man about him screamed, and now and then a half-seen figure collapsed in front of him, but this time no one stopped or turned. They were all crazed with primitive passion, and were going in. Ormsgill, pressing onwards with them, saw that he had now a matchet in his hand, though he had no recollection of how it came there. Then the thudding of the gun ceased suddenly and the air was rent by a breathless gasping yell. The stockade rose right over him, and he went headlong at the gap in it from which there protruded the muzzle of the gun. Somebody behind him hurled him through the opening, and he dropped inside. As he scrambled to his feet he saw a swarm of men running towards the residency, and he went with them, partly because he

wished to get there and also because those who poured through the gap behind him drove him along. He had afterwards a fancy that he saw a white man lying not far from the gun, but he could not be certain, for the negroes were thick about him, and he was not in a mood to interest himself in anything of that kind just then. He was possessed by an unreasoning fury, and an overwhelming desire to reach the men who had treacherously shot his comrade.

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They came gasping to the foot of the outer stairway, and by this time Ormsgill had almost come up with the foremost of his companions. A glance showed him the barricade of bags and boxes apparently filled with soil on the veranda, and the black faces and rifle barrels above them. There seemed to be a good deal of smoke in the air, but he saw Dom Erminio standing amidst it in white uniform. He had a naked sword in his hand, and apparently saw Ormsgill, for his drawn face contorted into a very curious smile. So far as the latter could make out, he had still a handful of men under his command. Escape was out of the question. The score he had run up was a long one, and now the reckoning had come.

Then several rifles flashed among the bags, and the negroes went up the stairway with a yell. Ormsgill fancied that two or three men went down about him, and had a vague remembrance of trampling on yielding bodies, but he went up uninjured, and leapt up upon the barricade. The veranda was thick with smoke now, but he saw Dom Erminio suddenly lean forward with the long blade gleaming in his hand, and a black soldier who crouched close beside his feet tearing at his rifle breech. That, however, was all he saw, for in another moment he leapt down, and a swarm of half-naked men with spears and matchets swept into the veranda. What he did next he knew no more than those about him probably did, but when at length he reeled out of the smoke-filled building and down the stairway the matchet was no longer in his hand, and he wondered vaguely that there was so far as he could discover not a scratch on him. Still he felt a trifle dazed, and as his head ached intolerably he sat down gasping.

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There was no firing in the residency now, and half-naked men were pouring out of it, but Ormsgill felt no desire to go back and see what had become of Dom Erminio and his soldiery. He sat still for several minutes, and then rising with an effort walked stiffly across the compound. He had some trouble in climbing the stockade, and when that was done came upon Nares lying face downwards in the trampled sand. He raised him a trifle with some difficulty, and saw a little hole in the breast of his thin jacket. Then laying him gently down again he took off his shapeless hat. He was still standing beside him vacantly when one of the Headman's messengers laid a hand on his shoulder. Ormsgill looked down once more on his comrade, and then turned away and went with the man.

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CHAPTER XXIX

DOM CLEMENTE STRIKES

There was a chill in the air and the white mist crept in and out among the shadowy trunks when the foremost of the rebels went slipping and floundering down the side of a river gorge just before the dawn. Ormsgill marching, well guarded, with his carriers and the six boys he had liberated in the rear could just discern the dim figures flitting on in front of him, and wondered if the next hour would see them safely across the river. He had been subjected to no ill usage though he had been carefully watched, and he fancied that the rebel leader expected to find him useful when the time to make terms with the authorities came, but that was a point he was never quite clear about. In the meanwhile he was worn-out and badly jaded, for his leg still pained him, and the rebels had pushed on as fast as possible after the sacking of San Roque.

Ormsgill fancied he understood the reasons for this. The body was not a very strong one, and though there were petty Headmen on the inland plateau who had long cherished grievances against the white men, they were no doubt prudently waiting to see what their friends were likely to accomplish before they joined them. In an affair of that kind a prompt success counts for everything, since it brings the waverers flocking in, and while the seizing of San Roque was scarcely sufficient to do this in itself, the first of the white men's plantations was now not so very far away. There was another fact that made delay inadvisable. The river flowed rapidly between steep banks just there, and Ormsgill felt it was just the place he would have chosen had it been his business to dispute the rebels' passage. He fancied their leader was anxious to get across before the news of the fall of San Roque brought troops up from the coast.

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In the meanwhile he plodded onwards wearily, aching all over and wet with the dew, while the sound of sliding water grew steadily louder. Now and then the long straggling column stopped for a minute or two, and there was a hoarse clamor which he fancied indicated that a scout had come in, but the men promptly went on again, and his guards, who carried flintlock guns, saw that he did not linger. The path grew steadily steeper, and he stumbled in loose sand while the half-seen trees went by until at last a sharp crackling mingled with the patter of naked feet as the head of the column smashed through the thick undergrowth and tall reeds in the river hollow. Then his guards made it evident that he was to stay where he was, and he sat down among his boys in the loose sand where he could look down on the men in front of him. There was now a

faint light, though the mist lay in thick white belts in the hollow, and the air was very still. He could dimly see dusky figures moving amidst the grass and reeds, and here and there a faint gleam of water in front of them, while now and then a confused clamor rose out of the haze. The rebels, he fancied, were disputing about their orders, or urging some course upon their leaders, and he wondered vaguely whether they were likely to do more than involve themselves in disaster, and where Dom Clemente was.

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This was, however, as he recognized, no concern of his. He was a prisoner, and he could see only difficulties in front of him. Had he been free at that moment and the boys he had liberated safely sent away, the outlook would not have been much brighter, for he would still have to face a duty he shrank from. That Ada Ratcliffe had no great love for him he now felt reasonably sure, but it was clear that she and her mother expected him to marry her, and, since she had kept faith with him, he could not break the pledge he had given her. After all, he reflected grimly, she would probably not expect too much from him, and be content with the material advantages he could offer her. Then he thought of Benicia Figuera, and set his lips tight as he once more strove to fix his attention on the men below.

At last there was a soft splashing and he could dimly see them wade into the river. Their disputes were over, and they were going across in haste. Then the foremost of them plunged into a belt of mist, and for several minutes he watched their comrades press onwards from the tall grass and reeds. The water was gleaming faintly now, and they looked like a long black snake crawling through the midst of it until the filmy haze shut them in. At times a shouting came up through the splashing and crackle of undergrowth. In the meanwhile the tail of the straggling column still winding down the side of the gorge was steadily growing plainer, and the haze commenced to slide and curl upwards in long filmy wisps, until at last Ormsgill scrambled to his feet with every nerve in him thrilling. The ringing of a bugle rose from beyond the river and was answered by another blast apparently from the rise behind him.

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Then the splashing ceased suddenly, and there was for a few moments a tense and almost intolerable silence, during which he stood still with one hand clenched until a clamor rose from the midst of the river, and he heard the dull thud of a flintlock gun. It was answered by a clear ringing crash of riflery, and then while the flintlocks and Sniders joined in, thin pale flashes blazed amidst the reeds and in the sliding mist. This lasted for, perhaps, a minute or two, until it became evident that the rebels were splashing back again. Ormsgill could see them streaming out of the mist, and as he watched them another patter of riflery broke out upon the higher ground behind him. A bugle rang shrilly, and he fancied he heard a white man's voice calling in the bush. Then looking round as one of the boys touched him, he saw that his guards were no longer there. They had evidently fled and left him to shift for himself. He stood a minute considering, with the boys clamoring about him, and then made up his mind. The rebels were streaming back up the gorge, and it seemed to him just possible that if he separated himself from them he might slip away unobserved in the press of the pursuit. Once across the river he might still reach the coast.

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Calling to the boys he set out at a stumbling run, and for awhile skirted the ridge of bluff. The rebels were too intent on their own affairs to trouble about him, even if any of them noticed him, which appeared very doubtful. He struck the river half a mile below the spot where the negroes had attempted the crossing, and plunged in with the boys still about him. He could see them clearly now, and the bush showed sharp and black against the sky. There was a desultory patter of riflery behind him, but except for that he could hear very little, and he pushed on with the water rising rapidly to his waist. It was as much as he could do to keep his feet, for the stream ran strong. Then one of the boys clutched him and held him up, and for the next few minutes they struggled desperately in a swifter swirl of current until the water sank again suddenly, and he stood, gasping, knee-deep in the yellow stream, looking about him.

It was broad daylight now, and he could see a steep bank clothed with thick bush and brushwood close by. There was a little hollow in it up which the mist that still drifted about the river was flowing, and calling to his boys he headed for it. Nothing seemed to indicate that there were any troops in the vicinity. They floundered dripping through a belt of tall grass, and were clambering up the slope when one of the boys laid a wet hand upon his arm and the rest stood still suddenly. Ormsgill felt his heart beating a good deal faster than usual, though he could see nothing but trees in front of him. He was on the point of pushing on again when a voice came out of the sliding haze.

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"Stand still," it said sharply in Portuguese. "We will shoot the first who stirs."

Ormsgill made a sign to the boys, and in another moment several black soldiers appeared among the trees. A white sergeant in very soiled uniform moved out from among them and stood surveying him with a little sardonic grin.

"There are half a dozen rifles here," he said. "You surrender yourselves?"

Ormsgill made a little gesture. "Señor," he said, "it is evident that we are in your hands."

The man beckoned him to come forward with the boys, and a few more black soldiers who rose out of the undergrowth closed in on them. Ormsgill turned quietly to the sergeant.

"You have been too much for the bushmen," he said. "Who is commanding you?"

"Dom Clemente," said the sergeant. "He has trapped those pigs of the forest. That is a wonderful

man. You will wait here until I can send you to him. Whether he will have you shot I do not know."

In spite of this observation he appeared a good-humored person, and presently offered Ormsgill a cigarette. The latter, who sat down near the sergeant and smoked it, waited until a patrol came along, when the black soldier in command marched him and the boys through the undergrowth, and at length led him into the presence of Dom Clemente. He sat in state at a little table, immaculate in trim white uniform, with two black men with rifles standing behind him. Another white officer and a dusky interpreter who stood close by had apparently been interrogating a couple of rebel prisoners. They squatted upon the ground gazing at the white men with apprehension in their eyes. Dom Clemente made Ormsgill a little formal salutation, and then leaned back in his chair.

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"This meeting reminds me of another occasion when you were brought before me, Señor and you were then frank with me," he said. "I might suggest that candor would be equally advisable just now. I hear that San Roque has fallen, and it appears that you were there. I must ask you to tell me in what capacity."

"As a prisoner in the hands of the rebels," said Ormsgill.

Dom Clemente nodded. "It is on the whole fortunate that I think one could take your word for it," he said. "You are desired to tell us what happened at San Roque."

Ormsgill did so quietly, though he said as little as possible about his own share in the proceedings, and afterwards answered the questions the other officer asked him until Dom Clemente turned to him again.

"It seems that Dom Erminio has, at least, acquitted himself creditably in this affair," he observed. "All things considered, I do not know that one has much occasion to be sorry for him. Dom Luiz, too, went down beside his gun. Well, that is, after all, what one would have expected from him."

Then he made a little gesture. "You will understand that there are matters which demand my attention, and I may have something more to say later. In the meanwhile you will give me your parole. The boys will be looked after."

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Ormsgill pledged himself to make no attempt at escape, and was led away to a little tent where food was brought him and he was told he was to stay. He realized that Dom Clemente had struck the rebels a crushing blow, one from which there was little probability of their recovering, but what was being done about the pursuit he did not know, though he fancied that a body of troops had crossed the river. Still, that did not greatly concern him, and worn-out and dejected as he was he was glad to fall asleep. It was evening when he awakened as a black soldier looked into the tent, and a few minutes later Dom Clemente came in and sat down in the camp chair the soldier had brought. Ormsgill sat on the ground sheet, heavy-eyed, tattered, and haggard, and waited for him to speak.

"I shall go on to-morrow when more troops come up, and you will come with us. There are matters that require attention yonder," he said. "In the meanwhile I have had the boys you brought down interrogated, and the story they tell me is in some respects a fantastic one. It is, I fancy, fortunate for your sake that I am acquainted with several facts which seem to bear it out."

Ormsgill was a trifle astonished, but Dom Clemente smiled. "It is," he said, "advisable that one in authority should hear of everything, but it is not always wise that he should make that fact apparent. One waits until the time comes—and then, as was the case this morning, one acts."

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He spread out one slender, faintly olive-tinted hand and then brought it down upon the table closed with an unexpected sharpness that was very expressive.

"Señor," he said, "though I have heard a little from the boys, you have not told me yet exactly how you came to fall into those bushmen's hands."

Ormsgill, who did not think that reticence was likely to be of much service, briefly related what had befallen him, and his companion nodded.

"I have the honor of your acquaintance, and it is perhaps, permissible to point out that you have a troublesome fondness for meddling with other people's business," he said. "Further, you are a trifle impulsive and precipitate."

"There was nobody else who seemed anxious to undertake the affair in question," said Ormsgill dryly.

Dom Clemente made a little gesture. "It is generally wiser to wait until one is certain. Well, I think I may venture to take you into my confidence to some extent. The doings of the trader Herrero—who has lodged complaints against you—and his friend Domingo have long been known to me. They were merely being permitted to involve themselves in difficulties while we waited until the time was ripe. It is now very probable that I shall suppress both of them."

"One can sometimes wait longer than is advisable," said Ormsgill with a little dry laugh. "Herrero and his friend are dead."

Then for the first time he narrated all that had been done in the inland village, and Dom Clemente, who listened carefully, smiled.

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"It only proves my point," he said. "One waits and the affair regulates itself. Well, they are dead, and I do not think there is anybody who will greatly regret them. It will clear the ground for what we mean to do up yonder. There is, you understand, to be a change in our native policy, and I"—he straightened himself a trifle—"have been entrusted with its inauguration. From now we shall, at least, endeavor to modify some of the difficulties which are, perhaps, not inseparably connected with this question of the labor supply."

"The whole system should be done away with."

Dom Clemente spread his hands out. "In this country one is content with accomplishing a little now and then. But there is another matter. Certain complaints have been made against your friend the American, and we have decided that there is nothing against him. I bring him permission to go back to his station."

"Nares," said Ormsgill quietly, "will not profit by it. He has been promoted. He was killed endeavoring to make peace at San Roque."

"Ah," said Dom Clemente, "that is a matter of regret to me. Perhaps, he was a little imprudent. Some of these missionaries are sadly deficient in diplomacy, and that may have been the case with him. I do not know. Still, when all is said, he was a brave man, and I think"—he made a little grave gesture—"what he has done for these black men will be remembered where he is now."

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It was not a great deal, but Ormsgill who noticed the quick change in the little soldier's voice was satisfied with it. After all, one can not say much more of any man than that he has done what he could for his fellow men. Then Dom Clemente turned to him again.

"I have not asked you yet what you did during the attack on San Roque," he said.

"If you fancy I have done anything for which I could be held accountable it is for you to establish it. It seems to me that would be a little difficult since I believe every man in the fort is dead."

"Still—if the thing appeared advisable—it might be possible."

Ormsgill made no attempt to dispute this, but changed the subject. "There is a thing I don't quite understand," he said. "I almost fancy the man who led the rebels must have known you held the bank when he pushed his men across."

"Yes," said Dom Clemente, "I believe he did. Still, there are men who can recognize when they must fight or fail ignominiously. One has a certain respect for them. I do not think it was that negro's fault that he was driven back. Flintlocks and matchets are not much use against our rifles."

Then he rose. "In the meanwhile you will be detained. My instructions were to arrest you, and, as you know, I only hold subordinate authority. Still, so far as my duty permits it, I think you can regard me as a friend."

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He went out of the tent, and an hour or two later Ormsgill contrived to go to sleep again. He was roused by the bugles at daylight, and went back with the rear guard into the forests he had lately left, and in due time marched with them into sight of the ruins of San Roque. It was early morning when they reached the fort, but before the sun was high the three white men who had fallen there were laid to rest in state. The black troops who had with reversed rifles swung into hollow square stood listening vacantly round the bank of raw steaming soil where Father Tiebout recited words of ponderous import in the sonorous Latin tongue. Then there was a crashing volley, and as the patter of marching feet commenced again Ormsgill and the priest and Dom Clemente stood looking on while a few black soldiers raised the three rude crosses. On one of them a dusky armorer had under Ormsgill's supervision cut the words, "*In hoc signo*."

Father Tiebout glanced at them and nodded gravely. "It is fitting," he said. "He did what he could—and we others do not know how much it was. After all, it is only a grain of understanding that is now vouchsafed us, but"—and he once more broke into the sonorous Latin, "I look for the resurrection of the dead."

Dom Clemente smiled. "There are men of your profession, Father, who would not have ventured to do what you have done," he said. "Still, I think when that day comes some of us may, perhaps, have cause to envy this heretic."

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Then they turned away, and in another hour once more pushed on into the forest.

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CHAPTER XXX

ORMSGILL BEARS THE TEST

The black troops were coming home again when they halted at a coffee-planter's fazienda within easy march of the coast to allow the rear guard to come up. They had met with no resistance

since they crossed the river. The rebels had melted away before them and vanished into the forests and marshes of the interior, and the troops had pushed on into a waste and empty country finding only a few deserted villages here and there. This was, however, very much what their leader had expected, for he knew that in an affair of this kind everything usually turns upon the first success, and he had made his plans with that fact in view. Dom Clemente Figuera was, at least, a capable soldier.

The hacienda was old and somewhat ruinous. Its prosperity had departed, though plantations of coffee and cocoa still stretched about the rambling white house and dusky laborers' sheds, and a little coarse sugar was made chiefly for the sake of the resultant rum. Cocoa could no longer be grown there by antiquated methods at a profit, and there had of late been trouble about the labor supply. Standing where it did within easy reach of the coast, the hacienda was open to inspection, and the rulers of that colony had of late been making inquiries as to the way in which the legislation that permitted the planters to engage the negroes brought down from the bush was carried out. Indeed, its owners realized with concern that there was likely to be a change in their ruler's views. Dom Clemente had, in fact, issued one or two proclamations which filled them with alarm, for they knew that what he said was usually done.

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Still, during the few days the troops halted there the white planters had many guests, men who had, for the most part, axes to grind. They wished to discover how the changes Dom Clemente appeared to be contemplating might affect their trade, which like everything else in that country depended upon the labor supply. Some of them wanted concessions, and to be the first to benefit by any reprisals that might be made upon the rebels, and others had grievances against the inland officials whom they supposed Dom Clemente was not altogether satisfied with. It was also, they felt, desirable to gain his ear, or, at least, those of his subordinates, before affairs were debated officially when he reached the coast, but perhaps, Dom Clemente was aware of this, for he had most vexatiously remained behind, and those under him had, it seemed, instructions to observe a judicious reticence. In this case, at least, they also considered it advisable to carry their instructions out.

Ormsgill, however, knew very little about what was going on, and late on the second afternoon after he reached the hacienda he sat listlessly in a half-ruinous shed which was partly filled with bags of coarse sugar. The door was shut, and he fancied there was a sentry on guard outside it, but from where he sat he could look out through an unglazed window across the tall green cane towards the wooded ridge that shut the plantation in. It is also possible that he could have got out that way and slipped into the cane without anybody noticing him, for black sentries are not invariably watchful, but he had given Dom Clemente his parole, and he would have had to leave behind the boys he had brought down. Besides, he was utterly listless. He had for several months overtaxed his physical strength, and the fever of the country had rudely shaken him, and left behind it an apathetic lassitude, as it frequently does.

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It was very hot in the shed which had lain since morning under a scorching sun, and the glare that still streamed in through the window hurt his heavy eyes. He sat on an empty case, ragged and travel-stained, brooding heavily while the perspiration trickled from his worn face. Nothing seemed to matter, and it would have afforded him little pleasure had he been offered his liberty. He would, he knew, leave all he valued behind him when he left that country, and worn out in body as he was, and enervated in will, he shrank from the duty that awaited him, for if he ever reached Las Palmas, which seemed somewhat doubtful, Mrs. Ratcliffe would certainly expect him to carry out his promise. He was in one way sorry for Ada Ratcliffe, but he fancied that she would, after all, probably be satisfied with the things he could offer her. Since that was the case, and she had kept faith with him, it was evident that he could not draw back now. Perhaps he was foolish, but he was one who kept his word, and at least endeavored to live up to his severely simple code.

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At last the glare outside the window commenced to die away, and he could see an odd palm tuft cut with a restful greenness against the paling sky. It was very hot still, but evening was at hand and by and by one of the younger lieutenants who had shown him some kindness on the march would probably come in and talk to him. He fancied he heard the man's footsteps when another half hour had slipped away, and then his voice rose sharply as he said something to the black sentry, but he did not come in, and Ormsgill rose with every nerve quivering when he heard another voice he recognized. Still, he contrived to lay a restraint upon himself when the door opened and Benicia Figuera stood in the entrance.

She was clad in thin draperies that gleamed immaculately white, and the fine lines of the figure they flowed about were silhouetted sharply against the light. Her face was in shadow, but Ormsgill saw the sudden compassion in her eyes, and the blood crept to his forehead. Then she turned for a moment towards the portly, black-robed lady who appeared behind her, and apparently addressed the invisible lieutenant.

"It is very hot here, and I think the Señora Castro would find it more comfortable if you brought her a chair outside," she said. "You can leave the door open. It is scarcely likely that I shall run away with your prisoner."

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The man outside apparently made no demur and when the portly lady disappeared Benicia turned towards Ormsgill.

"Now we can talk," she said. "You are looking very ill."

Ormsgill drew forward the empty case, and laid some matting on it. "A prisoner's quarters are not usually very sumptuous, and that is the only seat I can offer you," he said. "I was a little astonished when I saw you."

Benicia sat down, and smiled when he found a place among the sugar bags.

"Astonished—that was all?" she said.

The man felt his forehead grow warm, but he laughed. "Well," he said, "I'm not sure that quite expresses everything. Still, I certainly was astonished. I wonder if one could ask what brought you here?"

"I came to meet my father—for one thing," and the little pause might have had its significance, though Benicia who unrolled her fan was handicapped by the fact that she was speaking English and had to choose her words carefully. "I am told that he is expected here some time to-night—but you are ill. It is needless to say—is it not?—that I am sorry."

She looked sorry. In fact, her manner was exquisitely expressive of sympathy, but Ormsgill contrived to answer lightly.

"The thing is not altogether unnatural," he said. "A good many of your father's troops are sick, too. After all, there are worse troubles than a slight attack of African fever, and I shall no doubt get well again presently."

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"And you are still—a very little—lame."

It did not strike Ormsgill as significant that she should have noticed this, though he had only moved a pace or two when she came in. Indeed, nothing of that kind would have occurred to him then, for while his blood stirred within him he was struggling fiercely to retain his self-control.

"It is possible that I shall always be a little lame," he said, and laughed somewhat bitterly. "Still, I'm not sure that it matters. You see, I don't even know what will be done with me when we reach the coast."

"You have certainly enemies there—as well as friends. There are gentlemen of some influence who had an interest in Herrero's business, and it seems they have made rather serious complaints against you. It is even suggested that you brought about his death. We, of course, know that such complaints are absurd."

"I wonder why?"

Benicia leaned forward a little with her eyes fixed on him. "It is only strangers one wastes compliments upon," she said. "I think you and I are friends."

She had, it seemed to Ormsgill, not gone far enough, and there was an elusive something in her manner which conveyed the impression that she realized it. He felt his heart beat unpleasantly fast, but he controlled himself, and while he sat silent Benicia's fan closed with a curious little snap. One could have fancied that she had expected him to speak.

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"Still," she said, "there are others who might believe those complaints, and—though you have friends—justice is not always certain in this country. Are you wise in staying here?"

"I'm not sure that I can help it. You see there is a sentry yonder."

Benicia laughed a little. "Pshaw!" she said, "that could be arranged without any great difficulty. One could require, perhaps, two minutes to slip away into the cane, and I think nothing would be discovered until the morning."

"On the contrary, there are several difficulties. For instance, it would probably become evident that the thing had been—arranged. Could I allow you to involve yourself in an affair of that kind?"

"It is by no means certain that I should involve myself. In fact, it is most unlikely," and Benicia laughed again, though she fixed her eyes on him with a curious intentness. "Is it not worth the hazard, Señor, if it set you at liberty to go back to—Las Palmas?"

"No," said Ormsgill with sudden vehemence, while the veins showed swollen on his forehead. "It certainly isn't."

A little gleam of exultation sprang into the girl's eyes, for she recognized the thrill of passion in his voice, and she already knew it was not the woman who awaited him at Las Palmas that he loved. Still, it was, perhaps, fortunate he had answered her in that decisive fashion, for the Latin nature is curiously complex and always a trifle unstable. Though she could not have told exactly why she had led him on, it is just possible that had he shown any eagerness to profit by the suggestion she had made her tenderness would have changed to vindictive anger. That she would be willing to restore him to the other woman at her peril was, after all, rather more than one could reasonably have expected from her. Benicia Figuera was in several respects very human.

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"Ah," she said, with a curious slow incisiveness, "then you are not so very anxious to go back—to her?"

Ormsgill sat still for almost a minute with set lips while the perspiration dewed his lined face. He read what the girl thought in her eyes, and his passion came near shaking the resolution he strove to cling to out of him. Ada Ratcliffe, who did not love him, was far away, and this girl who

he felt would, as Desmond had said, stand by the man she loved through everything, sat within a yard of him. He seemed to realize that if he flung aside every consideration that restrained him and boldly claimed her she would listen. Her mere physical beauty had also an almost overwhelming effect on him, and the tinge of color in her cheeks and the softness in her eyes was very suggestive. Then with a little strenuous effort he straightened himself.

"After all," he said, "that is scarcely the question?"

"Still," the girl insisted, "I have offered you liberty, and you do not seem to want it. Since that is so, one could almost fancy it would not grieve you very much if you never went back."

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Ormsgill stood up. "Señorita, that is a thing I can not very well answer you. Besides, it does not seem to count. You see, I have pledged myself to go."

"Ah," said the girl, and, though this was no news to her, her fan snapped to again. "Would nothing warrant one breaking such a pledge?"

Then for a few seconds they looked at one another with no disguise between them, and all their thoughts in their eyes. The girl's face was white and intent, the man's drawn and furrowed, and the passion that was fast overmastering all restraint was awake in both alike. It is more than likely that Benicia did not remember that her companion had borne as heavy a stress once before at least. When she came in she had no intention of subjecting him to it again. She had possibly only meant to do him a kindness, perhaps merely wished to see him, though this was a point on which she was never sure; but the fiery Latin nature had been too strong for her. Restraint is, after all, not a characteristic of the people of the South. At length Ormsgill made an effort.

"The thing would be impossible," he said. "I am guarded. There is a sentry at the door."

The girl saw that his control was slackening, for she knew it was not the pledge she had mentioned but the hazard she would run in setting him at liberty he was referring to, and she laughed, almost exultantly.

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"No," she said, "it would be so easy. The sentry is called away for a few minutes. As I said—it could be arranged. Then you slip away into the cane. It is not difficult to reach the city—and you have friends there."

She broke off abruptly, but Ormsgill saw that she had flung her pride away, and, since it was clear that it was not that he might go back to Las Palmas she was willing to connive at his escape, he felt it only remained for him to supply what she had left unsaid. The desire to do so shook him until he closed one hand in an intensity of effort, and for almost half a minute there was a silence that grew almost intolerable.

Then the girl slowly straightened herself, and her eyes gleamed curiously, though her face was very pale.

"The hazard appears too great for you, Señor?" she said.

"Yes," said Ormsgill quietly, noticing the sudden change in her attitude, "in one way it does." Then he made a little abrupt gesture. "As I said, I am pledged to go back to Las Palmas if I am set at liberty—but it is a matter in which I can not permit you to do anything for me."

Benicia stood up very straight, and her eyes had still a curious gleam in them. "Then there is nothing more to be said. It seems you will not listen to any suggestion I can make—and, perhaps, you are right."

She spread out her hands in a vaguely forceful fashion as she turned from him and moved towards the door, but before she reached it she stopped and glanced at him again. Ormsgill who set his lips tight said nothing at all. Then there was a sound of footsteps outside, and Dom Clemente, who appeared in the entrance, stood still looking at them curiously. It was a moment or two before he turned to Benicia.

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"Ah," he said, "I did not know you were here until a few minutes ago and I will not keep you now. I think the Señora is waiting for you."

He stood aside when she swept past him and vanished with a rustle of filmy draperies. Then he turned to Ormsgill.

"Señor," he said, "I am inclined to fancy that you have something to say to me."

The blood rose to Ormsgill's face, and his voice was strained. It was an almost intolerable duty that was laid upon him.

"I am afraid your surmise is not correct," he said. "I have nothing to say."

Dom Clemente let one hand drop on the hilt of his sword. "Señor," he said, "I am informed by my Secretary that the Señorita Benicia Figuera has obtained certain concessions concerning you from a man whose authority we submit to. You are, it seems, to be treated with every consideration, and he will investigate the complaints made against you personally. That," and he made a little impressive gesture, "is evidently the result of the Señorita Benicia's efforts on your behalf. I am here to ask you why she has made them?"

Ormsgill looked at him steadily, though it cost him an effort to answer.

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"I have the honor of the Señorita's acquaintance," he said. "It seems she is one who does what she can for her friends. I can offer no other explanation."

"Ah," said Dom Clemente with incisive quietness, "I once informed you that it seemed to me you were doing a perilous thing in going back to Africa. It is possible you will shortly realize that what I said was warranted."

Then he turned and went out, and Ormsgill sat down again with a little gasp, for the tension of the last few minutes had been almost insupportable.

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CHAPTER XXXI ON HIS TRIAL

Several hours had passed since Dom Clemente left Ormsgill's quarters when he sat with one of his staff under a lamp in a room of the fazienda. He had laid his kepi on the table, and leaned back in his chair looking at a strip of paper with a little grim smile in his eyes. A negro swathed in white cotton squatted against the wall watching him uneasily, and a black soldier who had led the man in stood with ordered rifle at the door. At length Dom Clemente tossed the paper across to the officer sitting opposite him.

"I should be glad of your opinion," he said.

"It is discreet," said his companion, who examined the paper carefully. "The writer evidently foresaw the possibility of his message falling into the wrong hands. It is also indifferent Portuguese, but I think it is the writing of an educated man."

"Exactly! The question is why should an educated man express himself in that fashion?"

The officer shook his head. "That," he said reflectively, "is a thing I do not understand."

Dom Clemente smiled a little, and took up another strip of paper. "This," he said, "is a message of the same kind which has also fallen into my hands. Does anything else occur to you when you put the two together?"

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"They are from the same man," and then a light seemed to break in upon the officer. "He does not write like a native of the Peninsula."

"No," said Dom Clemente. "I do not think he has ever been there. Still, he had, no doubt, reasons for attempting to write in Portuguese." Then he turned sternly to the crouching negro. "Who gave you this message. Where were you to take the answer?"

"A man of a tribe I do not know," said the messenger who was evidently in a state of terror. "I was to meet him before the morning at a spot about a league away."

"Then," said Dom Clemente, "there is a little service I want from you. You will take some of my soldiers with you when you meet this man. If you attempt to warn him you will probably be shot."

He turned to his companion. "I think it would be advisable for you to go yourself. You will take a reliable sergeant and several files, and arrest the man who wrote this letter. I think you will find that he is the leader of a big game expedition."

The officer raised his eyebrows. "There is no big game in this part of the country."

"That," said Dom Clemente, "is a point the man in question has probably forgotten. In any case, you will arrest him and bring him here. It is, however, advisable that the thing should be done quietly."

The officer signed to the black soldier who moved forward and touched the messenger's shoulder, and Dom Clemente smiled grimly as he once more busied himself with the papers in front of him when they went out.

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In the meanwhile Ormsgill lay half-asleep upon a few empty sugar bags in the ruinous shed. His head ached, for the fever still troubled him now and then and the place was almost insufferably hot, but the strain he had borne that afternoon had left him a trifle dazed and insensible to physical discomforts, and at length he sank into fitful slumber. Several times he wakened with a start and closed a hot hand as his troubles returned to him, but he was too limp in mind to grapple with them. It was rather late in the morning when a patter of naked feet and the shouting of orders roused him. It suggested that the troops were being paraded, and looking out through the window he saw Dom Clemente and several officers descend from the planter's house. After that there was a stir and bustle, and by and by he saw a man whom he did not recognize being led towards the house by a group of deferential officers. This, however, did not appear to concern Ormsgill, and leaving the window when his breakfast was brought him he sat down on the sugar bags for another hour or two. Then the door of the shed was flung open and he saw a black sergeant who stood outside beckoning to him.

"Your presence is required," he said in Portuguese.

Ormsgill stood still a moment blinking in the brightness when he left the shed, for the glare of sunlight on trampled sand and white walls set his heavy eyes aching, but when the sergeant made a sign he followed him to the planter's house. He was led into a big scantily furnished room which had green lattices drawn across two of the open windows, but a dazzling shaft of sunlight streamed in through one that was not covered, and he saw a grave-faced gentleman sitting in state at a table. He was, though Ormsgill did not know this, the man who had talked to Benicia on board the gunboat, and had arrived at the fazienda that morning. Two black soldiers with ordered rifles stood motionless behind him, and Dom Clemente sat on the opposite side of the table. Beside him there were also two other officers, one of whom seemed to be acting as secretary, for there was a handful of papers in front of him, and several of Ormsgill's boys squatted, half-naked, impassive figures, against the wall.

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Ormsgill stood still, looking at the men at the table with heavy eyes. His thin duck garments were more than a trifle ragged and stained with travel, and his face was haggard. He was, it seemed, to be tried, but he felt no great concern. The result was almost a matter of indifference to him since it only remained for him to go back to Las Palmas if he was set at liberty. There was a momentary silence when he was led in, and then Dom Clemente handed one or two more papers to the secretary.

"There are, as you are aware, several somewhat serious complaints against you," he said in Portuguese. "It is now desirable that they should be investigated. I will have them read to you."

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Ormsgill listened gravely while the officer read aloud. He was, it appeared, charged with abducting a native woman from the trader Herrero, and taking away by force labor recruits who had engaged themselves to the latter's associate Domingo. There were also charges of supplying the natives with arms and inciting them to mutiny.

"You have heard?" said the man at the head of the table. "If you do not admit the correctness of all this we will hear what you have to say. You will, however, be required to substantiate it."

Ormsgill roused himself for an effort. After all, liberty was worth something, and it was a duty to attempt to secure it, and for the next quarter of an hour he concisely related all that he had done since he came back to the country after the death of Lamartine. None of those who heard him made any comment, but he could see the little smile of incredulity which now and then flickered into the eyes of the younger officers. The man who sat in state at the head of the table, however, listened gravely, and Dom Clemente's face was expressionless.

"That is all," said Ormsgill at last. "It is very possible that what I have told you may appear improbable, and I can not substantiate it. Most of those concerned are dead. Still, you have some of my boys here, and you can question them."

There was a little silence until the man at the head of the table leaned back in his chair.

"It is a very astonishing story," he said. "There are one or two points I should like made clearer, but in the meanwhile we will hear the boys."

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An interpreter was brought in, and with his assistance two of the boys told what they knew. Then he went out again, and Dom Clemente turned to his companion.

"I must admit that I have information which partly bears out what has been said about the native woman Anita," he said. "If this assurance is not sufficient she could be examined later. I have,"—and he looked hard at Ormsgill—"at least no cause to be prejudiced in the prisoner's favor. In the meanwhile one might ask if he can think of nobody else who would support what he has said?"

"No," said Ormsgill dryly, "as I mentioned, most of those concerned are dead."

He saw Dom Clemente glance at the man opposite him who smiled.

"There is one point on which we have not touched," said the latter, who turned to Ormsgill. "How did you get the first eight boys you say you set free out of the country?"

"That," said Ormsgill, "is a thing I can not tell you. It was, at least, not with the connivance of anybody in the city."

Dom Clemente made a little sign to his secretary, who went out, and there was silence for a while. The room was very hot, and Ormsgill felt himself aching in every limb. He had been standing for half an hour now, and his leg was becoming painful. Then there were footsteps outside, and he gasped with astonishment as a black soldier led Desmond in. The latter, however, turned to the officers.

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"You have had me brought here against my will, gentlemen, and it is very possible that you will have grounds for regretting it," he said in English. "It would be a favor if you will tell me what you want?"

The gentleman at the head of the table leaned forward in his chair. "A little information—in the meanwhile," he said quietly. "You recognize the prisoner yonder?"

Dom Clemente translated, and Desmond carefully looked Ormsgill over.

"Well," he said, "I have certainly met him before—in Las Palmas—and other places. He doesn't

seem to have thrived since then."

"We would like to know what you were doing at the spot where the soldiers arrested you?"

"That," said Desmond sturdily, "is my own business; and a thing I have not the least intention of telling you."

Two of the officers frowned, but the man at the table waved his hand.

"Well," he said, "we will try another question. It is desirable that we should know how a certain eight boys whom the prisoner brought down to the coast were smuggled out of the country."

Desmond looked at Ormsgill, who nodded. "I think you may as well tell him," he said. "There is reason for believing that our friend yonder who speaks excellent English"—and he indicated Dom Clemente—"is acquainted with it already. I don't think they can hold—you—responsible." [Pg 388]

Then Desmond spoke boldly, answering their questions until almost everything was explained. Dom Clemente's eyes twinkled, and his companion leaned back in his chair with a curious little smile.

"What I have heard is so extraordinary as to be almost incomprehensible," he said. "It seems that you and your friend must have spent a very large amount of money to set these fourteen boys at liberty."

He waved his hand towards the squatting negroes. "Señores," he said turning to the officers, "I would ask you to look at them, and tell me if the thing appears reasonable."

The manner in which the officers smiled was very expressive. It was, they were assured, for these thick-lipped, woolly-haired bushmen crouching half-naked against the wall, without a spark of intelligence in their heavy animal-like faces, that the two English gentlemen had spent money broadcast, faced fatigue and peril, and hazarded the anger of the Government. The thing certainly appeared incomprehensible to them. Desmond guessed their thoughts, and a red flush crept into his sea-bronzed face and a little portentous glint into his eyes.

"I admit that it sounds nonsensical," he said. "Still, Señores, I have the honor of offering you my word."

Then somewhat to the astonishment of all except Dom Clemente, who smiled, the man at the head of the table made Desmond a little punctilious inclination. [Pg 389]

"Señor," he said, "I think your word would go a long way. In the meanwhile we will hear what the priest has to tell us."

Ormsgill started a little when Father Tiebout was brought in a minute or two later. He sat down and nodded when Dom Clemente had spoken to him.

"Most of what I know is at your service," he said. He commenced with the death of the trader Lamartine, and told his tale quietly but with a certain dramatic force. When he came to the point where he and Nares had written to Ormsgill after Domingo's raid he stopped a moment, and the pause was impressive.

"You will understand, Señores, that we had faith when we wrote to this man," he said.

"You believed he would come back and undertake the task at his peril?"

"The thing," said Father Tiebout quietly, "was, to us at least, absolutely certain."

There was blank astonishment in two of the officers' faces, but the man at the head of the table made a sign of concurrence, and once more a little gleam crept into Dom Clemente's eyes. Then the priest went on, and when at last he stopped there was a full minute's silence. After that the man at the head of the table spoke to Ormsgill, and his voice had a curious note in it.

"How was it you did not ask us to send for this priest and hear him in your defense?" he said.

Ormsgill smiled dryly. "It is not as a rule advisable for a missionary to meddle with affairs of State." [Pg 390]

"Ah," said the other man, "it would, I think, make our work easier if none of them did. Well, you have given us a reason, and it is one I could consider satisfactory—in your case."

Then he turned to Desmond. "Señor, I had the honor of asking you a question a little while ago. Perhaps, it may not appear desirable to withhold the information I desired any longer."

Desmond laughed, and looked at him steadily.

"Well," he said, "since you have no doubt guessed my purpose, I will tell you. I came up here to take my friend out of your hands, and if it hadn't been for the thick-headed boy who let the soldiers creep in on us while we were asleep I think I would in all probability have managed it."

"Ah," said the other man spreading out his hands, "I almost believe it is possible."

Then he turned to his companions. "One naturally expects something quite out of the usual course from men like these."

After that he sat silent for at least a minute, until he leaned forward and spoke awhile in a low

voice with Dom Clemente who once or twice made a sign of concurrence.

Then he turned to Ormsgill.

"I shall probably have something to say to you again," he said. "This is an affair that demands careful consideration, and in the meantime there are other matters which can not be delayed."

Dom Clemente spoke sharply, and a black sergeant at the door who beckoned Ormsgill and Desmond to follow him went with them to their quarters in the ruinous shed.

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"There are, I think, very few men in this country who would have spoken to that man or Dom Clemente as you have done," he said. Then he grinned in a very suggestive fashion. "It is probably fortunate that he seemed to believe you, though if he had been any other man I would have called him very foolish."

Ormsgill said nothing, but sat down among the empty sugar bags, and he and Desmond looked at one another when the patter of the sergeant's feet grew indistinct. Both were glad they were alone, but for a minute or two neither of them broke the silence.

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CHAPTER XXXII

BENICIA UNDERTAKES AN OBLIGATION

Ormsgill, who reclined among the sugar bags, lighted a cigarette one of the officers had given him before he turned to Desmond.

"I don't know if you are comfortable on that case, but, as you see, I haven't another seat to offer you, and these bags are a trifle sticky," he said. "I understand that my jailers were instructed to show me every consideration."

Desmond laughed as he glanced around the half-ruinous shed. "It's hardly worth while making excuses of that kind," he said. "I'm quite willing to admit that the one thing that's worrying me is the question what your friends mean to do with us."

"It's possible they may set us at liberty, but in the meanwhile you know as much as I do. How did you fall into their hands?"

"I was at Las Palmas when I heard that they were having trouble in the interior. The news wasn't very definite, but it seemed to me I might be wanted and I brought the yacht across as hard as we could drive her."

"Ah," said Ormsgill quietly, "that is, of course, very much the kind of thing one would expect you to do. You were at Las Palmas—but go on. I may ask you something later."

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Desmond understood him, and though he had driven the *Palestrina* mercilessly day after day under the uttermost pressure her boilers would stand he was satisfied. He had not thought it worth while to mention how they had shaken every rag of canvas out while the yacht rolling viciously and shivering in every plate swept along with the spray-clouds flying over her before the big trade breeze combers, or the more arduous days when, while the firemen gasped beneath an almost intolerable heat, they still drove her south at topmost speed over an oily blazing sea across the line. He also fancied he knew what Ormsgill wished to ask him, and a trace of uneasiness crept into his face as he proceeded somewhat hastily.

"Well," he said, "when we got the anchor down I heard that the fighting was over and the troops were coming back again. Somebody told me they had a white prisoner who had evidently been encouraging the rebels, and it seemed to me advisable to set out up country on a shooting trip. There was a rather capable boy among those I hired, and he hadn't much difficulty in making friends with one of the camp followers or carriers when we came up with the troops. After that we followed their track, keeping about a league away from them for almost a week, and I sent you two messages. I suppose you never got them?"

"No," said Ormsgill. "I almost think it's evident that somebody else did."

Desmond made a little sign of concurrence. "The boy probably sold us, or your friend Dom Clemente was too clever for him. One could fancy that is a very capable man. Anyway, while I was considering how we could arrange to get you off we went to sleep last night in a belt of grass. I took the precaution of sending two sentries out, and I don't know yet why they didn't warn me, but when I awakened early this morning there was a white officer standing over me. As he had several black soldiers with him and we were evidently at his mercy I came along with him. I don't think there was any other course open to me."

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"You have done what you could. You brought me no message from Las Palmas?"

Desmond, who once more appeared uneasy, sat silent for a moment or two. Then he leaned forward a trifle with a flush in his face.

"I don't know how you'll take it, but, as a matter of fact, I did," he said. "I brought a letter which Mrs. Ratcliffe gave me, and I believe there was another from Miss Ratcliffe inside it. Unfortunately, one of your friends here confiscated it not long ago as well as every other scrap of paper in my possession."

"They sent me no word when you left Las Palmas before," said Ormsgill with a portentous quietness, though there were signs of tension in his face. Then he straightened himself suddenly. "You are keeping something back. It concerns Ada?"

"It does, and I'm particularly sorry your friends seized that letter. This is an affair I should greatly have preferred to leave in Mrs. Ratcliffe's hands. She"—and Desmond made a little vague gesture—"is a lady of considerable ability and has no doubt explained the thing much more satisfactorily than I could do."

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"Go on," said Ormsgill with sharp incisiveness.

Desmond, who still hesitated, looked at him in a curious deprecatory fashion.

"Well," he said, "the fact is Miss Ratcliffe was married the day before I left Las Palmas."

In another moment Ormsgill was on his feet, and his laugh jarred on Desmond's ears.

"Married!" he said hoarsely, clenching one hand tight. "And I've thrown away everything to keep faith with her."

Desmond made a little restraining gesture. "Well," he said, "it's not my business, but I think I understand what you are referring to—and, perhaps, it's scarcely wise to be too sure. With all deference to Mrs. Ratcliffe I can't help fancying you are well out of the other matter. After all, to mention no other reason, it would require a certain amount of courage to recognize that lady as one's mother-in-law."

Ormsgill, who made no answer, turned towards the door, and spoke a few words to the sentry. The latter called to one of his comrades, and Ormsgill, after giving the man a message came back again and sat down quietly.

"I have asked if I may have the letter," he said.

It was brought him ten minutes later unopened, and he sat very still for awhile after he had read it. Then there was bitterness in his laugh.

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"It is in one sense a masterly production," he said. "In fact, both of them are. I am assured that Mrs. Ratcliffe recognized all along that we were never made for one another." He turned, and grasped his companion's shoulder. "Can you tell me anything about this paragon who, it seems, has married Ada?"

A little twinkle crept into Desmond's eyes. "I never heard him called anything of that kind before. Lister, you see, is an unlicked colt, and nobody could have said very much to his credit until lately. Still, he seems to be making an effort to rub out certain defects in his character, and if Miss Ratcliffe can only keep it up they may get along tolerably well together."

"Keep it up?"

Desmond smiled again. "It's probably somewhat delicate ground, but the thing has its whimsical aspect. You see he, perhaps, naturally, regards Miss Ratcliffe as the incarnation of honor and every other estimable equality, which is apt to make her rôle rather a difficult one. I have no doubt her mother has asked you very tactfully not to say anything that might render it harder still if you ever come across Lister, which, if she has any hand in his arrangements, is most unlikely."

"There is a suggestion of that kind here," and Ormsgill gazed at him very grim in face. "You mean that they have not mentioned me to Lister."

"I should consider it very improbable," said Desmond dryly. "As I ventured to suggest, you have, perhaps, after all, no very great cause for regret."

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Ormsgill, who said nothing, rose and walked several times up and down the shed, and then moved suddenly towards the door. He spoke a few words to the sentry, after which he sat down and waited for some little time, while Desmond smiled once or twice as he watched him. Then the door was opened, and a black sergeant who appeared in the entrance signed to Ormsgill.

"Dom Clemente can spare you a few minutes," he said.

Ormsgill rose and followed him across the compound and up the veranda stairway into a room where Dom Clemente was sitting alone. He looked up when Ormsgill came in.

"You have some complaint—of the accommodation we have provided you with?" he said.

"No," said Ormsgill, "my business is of a very different nature. You asked me last night, Señor, if I had anything to say to you. I wonder if you will now listen to me for a little while?"

His companion's gesture signified compliance, and Ormsgill proceeded, speaking with a terse directness which, as it happened, served him well. When at last he stopped Dom Clemente looked at him with a little dry smile.

"Señor," he said, "in one sense the explanation is sufficient, though there are, you can understand, respects in which it leaves a little to be desired."

"I make no excuse," and a faint flush crept into Ormsgill's face. "Only, in this case my mind will always be the same."

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The little officer sat still, looking at him steadily, while half a minute slipped away, and Ormsgill felt the silence becoming oppressive. Then he spread one hand out.

"After all," he said, "there are, probably, very few among us who are quite exempt from some folly of this kind, and I think it is to your credit that when you recognized that it was a folly you were willing to carry it out. I may mention that I had the honor of meeting the lady."

Then he made a little expressive gesture. "Señor, you are, at least, one whose word can be relied upon, and that counts for a good deal. It is, however, to be remembered that you are not yet at liberty."

"I think my liberty largely depends upon you. One could fancy that you know how far the complaints against me are credible. In fact, I do not understand why you ever gave them any consideration."

Dom Clemente smiled. "One has usually a motive, Señor, and it is generally wiser not to make it too apparent until the time is ripe. In this case I think the results have warranted everything I have done. Herrero and Domingo, not to mention one or two others, have accomplished their own destruction, though that is, after all, not quite the question. The matter you have laid before me is, it seems to me, one that Benicia must decide."

He rose with the little twinkle still in his eyes. "I will leave you to make it as clear as you can to her."

He went out, and Ormsgill waited, with his heart beating a good deal faster than usual, until Benicia came in. He stood looking at her a moment, with a faint flush in his haggard face.

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"Señorita," he said, "I would like you to listen to a story—though it is a little difficult to tell."

For a moment Benicia met his gaze, and saw the little glint in his eyes. She also saw how worn his face was, and the gauntness of his frame, and her compassion was stronger than her pride.

"Ah," she said, "I know it already. I have known it all along."

"Still," said Ormsgill, "there is a little more to be said. I am not going back to Las Palmas if I am set at liberty."

He saw the crimson creep into her forehead. "Benicia," he said, "the woman I was pledged to has cast me off. I am going back to England, and—after all you know—I wonder if I dare venture to ask you if you will come with me."

"Ah," said the girl with a simplicity that had a certain stateliness in it, "I think I would go anywhere with you."

Then Ormsgill strode forward masterfully, and it was a minute later when she smiled up at him. "This," she said, "is not what I meant to do—at least, just now—but when I saw you looking so worn and anxious and remembered that you were still a prisoner I forgot how I hated that Englishwoman. I only remembered how I loved you."

A little later there were footsteps outside, and the black sergeant once more appeared in the doorway, while when he led Ormsgill away Benicia went straight to a room guarded by a dusky soldier, and demanded to see the officer within. He sent his secretary away, and then looked up at her with a little smile.

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"You have a promise to keep," she said. "I have come to ask you to set these two Englishmen at liberty."

"Ah," said the man, "there are, no doubt, one or two reasons for this that you can suggest?"

"You know they have done no wrong."

"It is possible. Still, we have not altogether settled that question yet. Is there nothing else that you can urge in their favor?"

"They are friends of mine."

The officer made a little grave gesture. "That," he said, "goes a long way, but, after all, I am not sure that it goes quite far enough."

Benicia's face grew a trifle warm, but she smiled. "One," she said, "is the man I am going to marry."

Her companion's eyes twinkled. "Well," he said, "in that case we must certainly see what can be done before we march to-morrow."

Benicia asked nothing further, for she was satisfied, and soon after she left the officer Ormsgill sat down opposite Desmond in the half-ruinous shed. He said a few disjointed words, and Desmond laughed cheerfully.

"I knew how it was as soon as I saw you," he said. "Well, I believe we could get hold of an American missionary, and the *Palestrina's* ready."

The rest of that day passed very slowly with them both, but early next morning they were once more led into the presence of Dom Clemente and the gray-haired officer. When they came in the latter signed to his secretary, and Father Tiebout, who quietly went out. A few minutes afterwards the secretary led Benicia in, and the officer turned to Ormsgill.

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"We have," he said, "again carefully considered the complaints against you. As the result of it I think I can venture to set the Señor Desmond at liberty, and to place you at the Señorita Benicia's disposal. She"—and he smiled gravely—"will be held accountable for your behavior while you remain in this country. If it is permissible, I might advise her not to countenance any further undertakings of the kind that brought you back to Africa."

Transcriber's Note:

The following typographical errors present in the original edition have been corrected:

On the title page, "THE CATTLE-BARON S DAUGHTER" was changed to "THE CATTLE-BARON'S DAUGHTER".

In the Table of Contents, the page number for Chapter XVIII, DOM CLEMENTE LOOKS ON, was changed from 231 to 213.

In Chapter I, "Maderia chair on the veranda" was changed to "Madeira chair on the veranda", "since you have no carries" was changed to "since you have no carriers", "took of his hat" was changed to "took off his hat", and commas were added after "a good magazine rifle" and "it was so still that Nares".

In Chapter II, a comma was added after "Herrero has gone South somewhere".

In Chapter III, a period was added after "almost too startled to understand that you had arrived", and "I believe you are smiling" was changed to "I believe you are smiling".

In Chapter IV, a comma was changed to a period after "with a little flush in her face", and a single quotation mark (') was changed to a double quotation mark (") after "your prospective mother-in-law will be pleased with you?".

In Chapter V, a period was changed to a question mark after "become a trifle civilized", and a period was changed to a comma after "you are determined to go".

In Chapter VI, "He could forsee that" was changed to "He could foresee that", and a missing quotation mark was added before "It would be an interesting spectacle."

In Chapter VII, a period was changed to a comma after "and Nares added", and a comma was deleted after "Anybody who wishes to go inland".

In Chapter VIII, "two somewhat ragged white men lay listlessly" was changed to "two somewhat ragged white men lay listlessly", and "Still they can't shoot as I can" was changed to "Still, they can't shoot as I can".

In Chapter IX, a single quotation mark (') was changed to a double quotation mark (") after "I should probably not have been welcome?", and "I am not sure that is quiet sufficient in itself" was changed to "I am not sure that is quite sufficient in itself".

In Chapter X, "statutesque modeling" was changed to "statuesque modeling", and a comma was added after "while you stay here".

In Chapter XI, a period was changed to a question mark after "try to influence the girl".

In Chapter XII, a comma was added after "though far from likely", and "Still you have made a few changes lately" was changed to "Still, you have made a few changes lately".

In Chapter XIII, "Thomas Ormsgills could only offer her them" was changed to "Thomas Ormsgill could only offer her them".

In Chapter XIV, "The Commandant or Chefe as he was usually called" was changed to "The Commandant, or Chefe as he was usually called".

In Chapter XV, a period was changed to a comma after "I have to say", and also after "I will see to it", and "until Dom Luix turns up" was changed to "until Dom

Luiz turns up".

In Chapter XVI, a quotation mark was added after "stands without the correction", "and they recognizing it" was changed to "and they, recognizing it", "Ormsgill who had already stationed his sentries extinguished" was changed to "Ormsgill, who had already stationed his sentries, extinguished" and a comma was changed to a period after "stir the invisible trees".

In Chapter XVIII, a comma was added after "as he now and then laughingly admitted".

In Chapter XIX, "'It is', he continued tranquilly" was changed to "'It is,' he continued tranquilly", and a comma was added after "where the messenger Pacheco is".

In Chapter XXI, a comma was added after "climbing a low elevation".

In Chapter XXIII, a comma was changed to a period after "changed the subject abruptly", "one thing I am anxious about" was changed to "one thing I am anxious about", and "an intrument which resembles" was changed to "an instrument which resembles".

In Chapter XXIV, commas were added around "who swung in a hammock hung low beneath her awnings", "one of two of the questions which then troubled that country" was changed to "one or two of the questions which then troubled that country", and a misformed quotation mark was fixed after "I think".

In Chapter XXV, a comma was added after "whose presence promised to complicate affairs", and a missing quotation mark was added before "It's probably just as well".

In Chapter XXXII, a comma was changed to a period after "twinkle still in his eyes", "the gauntess of his frame" was changed to "the gauntness of his frame", and a quotation mark was deleted before "I have known it all along."

The punctuation in the original edition was erratic and often ungrammatical, and many words were spelled inconsistently. Corrections have been made where the author's intent seemed clear, or where the original text was clearly incorrect or particularly confusing. Oddities that did not affect the correctness or readability of the text have been retained.

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