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KRIS-GIRL

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KRIS-GIRL

BY

BEATRICE GRIMSHAW

AUTHOR OF "WHEN THE RED GODS CALL,"
"GUINEA GOLD," ETC.

MILLS & BOON, LIMITED

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KRIS-GIRL

CHAPTER I

THE RUBBER QUEEN

SOMETHING had frightened the birds in the jungle : the white cockatoos flew shrieking from tree to tree ; the small bright feathered things that swing in the sunlight gathered themselves into the innermost clefts of bamboo clumps, and whistled pitifully.

Something was darkening the glory of the equatorial noon. Hidden as we three were in the forest, we could not see what was happening beyond, but the round white spots of sun sprayed off no longer from the varnished leaves, and the dark of the mysterious gullies and gorges had grown very dark indeed.

"It's going to rain," said the old lady in a thin voice, looking up at the dense roof of palm and teak and cottonwood, hung with thick cordage of liana, that shut out all view of the sky. Cristina (I addressed her as Miss Raye, but thought is free) stopped chasing an opal-blue butterfly as big as a

swallow, and put on the hat she had been using as a net.

"It's going to do more than that, unless those birds are fools," she said. "We had better get back to the steamer, quick march."

"This is outside the hurricane belt," I put in timidly. Cristina seemed to have travelled the whole world over, and I had never been away from Europe before this voyage; moreover, I had only known the girl and her chaperon for two or three days—since the *Juliana* called at Macassar from Singapore and took them on. Still, I put in my word, as I happened to know a few rough facts about tropical conditions in general. It had been my business to know. We are manufacturers and wholesale exporters of—but it wouldn't interest you to hear.

"Oh, yes," she allowed, shortening her dress with rapid fingers. "Still, Celebes can put up a very pretty show at times. . . . Mrs. Ash, dear woman, pull your skirt into your belt and take Mr. Garden's arm; you've got to break your own record in the next three-quarters of an hour."

She was still speaking, when an appalling sound broke upon our ears—the whistle of the *Juliana*, unmistakably in a starting humour.

"Oh, the brute! she can't, she daren't!" exclaimed Cristina; "she wasn't due to go till six." . . . For a moment we stood like figures in a stereoscope photo, struck stiff in the very act of movement. Then the *Juliana* whistled again

—the long loud hoot that means “Going at once.” We started back down the track at a pace that none of us could have kept up for three minutes—but it was not two, before the last long howl sounded up from the beach below. At this, we all stopped again, and then began to run. I dragged Mrs. Ash along as if she had been a sack, Cristina trotted like a little mule. It was all of no avail. When we came out on the top of the great cliff that overhung the shore, the faithless ship was just clearing the passage in the reef, half a mile out at sea.

Cristina, up to this, had been behaving like a silly school-girl, calling the steamer pettish names, stamping her tiny foot in its Cuban shoe whenever we halted for breath, and scolding at everybody in general. Now a sudden change came over her: something that I had not seen looked out from her face. She became calm, and her small blue eyes (they were small, though very blue and pretty) grew curiously bright and seemed to be looking at something a long way off . . . not the *Juliana*.

“There was a reason,” she said. “Weather—yes, probably. Some reefs can’t be passed through unless the wind is in the right quarter. The opening here is to the west, and that nasty cloud is rising from the west. And the water of the bay is black-blue-green—no soundings probably. . . . Yes, if the *Juliana* hadn’t got out, she’d have been blown ashore.”

The old lady, who had more ways of being silent than anyone I had ever known, took her arm out of mine, looked round for a fallen log, and composedly sat down upon it. Without saying a word, she succeeded in making Cristina and myself understand that she held us responsible for the whole thing.

It seemed plain that we were abandoned—marooned, practically—in the wilds of the Celebes jungle, no one knew how far from any white man's habitation. We had not so much as a biscuit or a box of matches by way of stores, and no clothes but those we stood up in—which clothes were as completely wet through with the heat of the jungle as if we had been dropped into a river. The birds kept on crying; a cold wind suddenly blew out of the forest and as suddenly stopped. Up the open sky to seaward a strange black screen was slowly rising; as it rose the sunlight died.

"Cristina!" said the old lady suddenly and sharply. There was something expectant in the tone. Cristina answered never a word. She seemed to be thinking. It was an odd time to think, out there in the jungle, with a storm chasing us from the open sea, and I began to break in with some question or remark, but the old lady shook her umbrella at me, and said:

"Sh! Let her alone."

There was a very short space of silence, the cloud climbing all the while, and then Cristina said briskly:

"There'll be a plantation within a mile or two ; the captain calculated on that, or he wouldn't have done it. It isn't copra, or they'd have been loading it. The only other thing they grow just here is rubber. Take this track, help Mrs. Ash along, and look sharp for rubber trees. Now, *pigi* !"

If I had not known the expressive Malay word for "hurry up," I should have guessed it, from the look of the weather. "*Pigi*," we did. Mrs. Ash made wonderful progress, half carried on my arm, her black thin draperies flying, and her feather-weight little body scarcely touching the ground. In scarcely ten minutes, the expected happened. We came out of the dense jungle of palm and creepers, into an enchanted forest.

It was a rubber plantation, in sober fact. A carpet of fine green grass supported innumerable reddish-coloured columnar trunks, holding up a dark, cool canopy of leaves at a uniform height of some twenty feet. Wherever you looked, you were the centre of a radiating star of avenues, grassy, soundless, solitary, bordered by the red trunks, and the great varnished leaves and long crimson buds of the rubber trees. Over all the avenues, and all the trees together, spread that dark, cool, shining canopy of leafage, like one huge tent. There were doubtless gaps among the tree tops, but from where we stood, they did not show. It was a wonderful and a lovely sight.

We had about twenty seconds to look at it, standing on the borders of the clearing ; and then

the sky fell on our heads. This may seem an extravagant way of saying that it rained, but it is the truth. The thick tent above us made scarcely any difference in the way of shelter: the rain simply flung itself down in huge sheets of water, as if a colossal tank had broken somewhere just above. And the sound of its trampling on the leaves was like the sound of a troop of cavalry going over a railway bridge.

"When the rain's before the wind, you must then your topsails mind," quoted Cristina in a piercing shout. "*Pigi*, it's coming." She fled through the rubber forest, as light on her feet as Botticelli's Flora, her soaked white draperies glimmering among the trees as she led us, I do not know how. In a minute or two, we had crossed the corner of the plantation, and were out in an open clearing; the rain was bucketing down on short grass planted with ornamental trees, and we were flying along a wide tiled walk towards a house with steps leading up to its verandah, and tall white marble pillars in front. At this point, I picked up Mrs. Ash in my arms and sprinted after Cristina, who was running wonderfully. I had heard "it"; it was howling behind us in the forest like a beast let loose, and through its long, terrible cry came the crack of falling trees.

The next thing I remember was the slamming of doors—tall, mahogany doors set in lintels of marble—and the sudden silence of a great dim central hall, furnished with things that looked

rich and costly, and floored with wonderful painted tiles, over which our soaked clothes were dropping mud and water. There were no windows in the hall, and all its doors had been shut. It was lighted by a great cut crystal lamp hung in the centre.

Under the lamp, standing with her jewelled hand on a table of Florentine mosaic, was one of the handsomest women I had ever seen. It is difficult to describe beauty, since the terms are almost the same in every case, though the results of different combinations vary infinitely. Pretty women have almost always straight noses and short upper lips, low-growing hair and plenty of it, good colour, enticing corners to the mouth and eyes, well-developed figures, white necks and arms. The variations you must put in for yourself. Pink cheeks, yellow hair, small mouths, and blue eyes are not much beloved by novelists on the lookout for originality—I have observed that the tendency of the present day heroines is towards green eyes and “mouths too large for perfect beauty,”—but the ideal above described is good enough for the average man. The lady of the marble palace had every advantage I have named, and one or two more—just that one or two that you cannot describe, and must look for among your own recollections.

This is what I saw. Mrs. Ash told me afterwards that she had seen a little more; she had seen that the lady was no longer young—close on forty if a day. Well, Helen was forty when she

ran away with Paris, and I suppose the Trojan women rubbed the damning circumstance into her, during every day of the ten years' siege, with chronological emendations up to date. But apparently Paris did not mind.

After that wild rush into the hall, and the slamming of the doors in the face of the gale outside, it was Cristina who first recovered her presence of mind—if she had ever lost it, which is doubtful. Dripping as she was, she advanced with perfect dignity to the lady of the house, and addressed her in Dutch. The lady replied :

“ There, for gracious sake, talk English, if you can. You don't sound Dutch, and anyhow I hardly know a word of the beastly language.”

I was a trifle startled ; the address of this queen of beauty hardly seemed to match her splendid presence.

“ I'm so glad you're English,” said Cristina prettily, “ we're in a dreadful plight. That wretched steamer went off at two minutes' notice when the storm came on, and left us to perish in the jungle.”

“ Oh, she would, with that sort of a gale getting up. Mind you, there oughtn't to be any gale at this time of year, and I suppose she counted on that when she put in to let the passengers see things, but the one thing you can't count on in this part of Celebes is weather. She would have been on the coral bottom half an hour ago if she hadn't cleared. Listen to that ! ”

Not even the solid marble walls could shut away the crashing of the wind outside, and the waterfall roar of the rain. We could feel the house quiver every time a new gust struck it.

"The captain knew I was here all right," said the beauty consolingly. "Everybody knows me : I'm the only white but one for fifty miles. You'll all have to stay till the steamer comes back ; she'll be here in a week, and I'd love to have you. I could fair bite my nails off sometimes, for loneliness, in this great jail of a place. I'm a widow, you know, Australian ; married a Dutch, more fool I, and settled down in this awful place, because he was rich. He died two years ago, and I'm managing for myself. I have to stay because . . ."

Here, much to everyone's dismay, the lady of the palace suddenly sat down upon a yellow satin chair, put her hands over her face, and began to cry.

"If you knew what a brute he was to me," she sobbed. "If you knew what a will he left . . ."

Mrs. Ash, dripping mud and water from every pore, stood stiffly up and regarded the lady with the air of one to whom no manifestations of grief accompanied by bad grammar, could possibly be interesting or touching. But Cristina's eyes had taken on that odd sparkle that I had seen before, and she looked excited.

A curious thing followed. She dived into her wet pocket, produced a silver card-case, and handed a card to the weeping lady. The latter read it,

rose to her full five feet ten of height, and solemnly embraced Cristina.

“ ‘Miss Cristina Raye,’—why, that’s the Kris-Girl ! ” she said. “ My dear, there’s no one in the whole world whom I’d rather see. All Malaysia is talking about you. ”

“ I suppose, ” said Cristina with a slightly bored expression, “ it was the diamond-mine manager’s wife who started that. ”

“ Not so much her as the Sultana who had the gold parasol. ”

“ She has it now, ” remarked Cristina with an enigmatic smile.

“ So she has, so she has ! ” cried the widow admiringly. “ And the Governor whose daughter’s dowry—— ”

“ Oh, please ! ” said Cristina deprecatingly.

“ If you don’t like it, my dear. But God bless us and keep us, you’re all as wet as drowned rats ; what am I thinking of ? Jonges ! ”

A thin, dark native, in white jacket and red sarong, appeared in a doorway. The lady spoke to him in somewhat halting Malay. Then she led the way into a suite of rooms opening off the hall, and began disposing of us in magnificent style—bedroom, dressing-room and boudoir to each. Clothes of her late husband were exhumed from wardrobes for me ; other wardrobes ransacked for the two women.

“ They’re bringing you all hot schnapps and water, ” she announced as she left us. “ Just you

put it down and none of you'll be a hair the worse."

She stepped with the pace of an empress out into the hall; I am sure Cleopatra never looked so queenly. As she went she turned her head.

"Don't be too long," she said, "lunch is coming in, and I'm sure you're all fair empty in your insides."

The slightest possible sound, resembling the uncorking of a soda-water bottle, came from Cristina's room. As for Mrs. Ash's feelings, a treacherous ventilator made me master of them shortly after.

"Torchon or crochet is neither here nor there, but real Venice point upon them makes you feel like Jezebel . . ."

The storm was already slackening when we came forth, dry and clothed; these baby hurricanes of equatorial Malaysia are brief as they are keen. The lady of the house was waiting in the grand saloon.

"You look splendid," was her comment. "Miss Raye, you must be a witch to make that worked gauze fit you so well. Mr. Garden, you want nothing on earth but a couple of buttons moved in over your stomach; you're almost of a size with Van Cloon, but he would eat right through thirty dishes of rice-table, every 'makan siang' at twelve o'clock. I do hope you find yourself comfortable in my things, Mrs. Ash."

"Thank you extremely," replied Mrs. Ash with polite bitterness. I never saw a human being so expressive of wordless protest, from head to shoe-sole, as Mrs. Ash in the widow's gorgeous, over-flowing gown.

The meal was splendidly served, on heavy solid silver, china, and cut glass; it was liberal enough, and the wines were better than necessary, but there was a suggestion of something got up in a hurry about the whole entertainment, that convinced me Mrs. Van Cloon did not treat herself so handsomely as she treated her guests. Her dress, too, and the dresses she had lent, struck me—though I am not a connoisseur—as being none of the newest, in spite of their gorgeousness. There was, indeed, an air of pinched magnificence, of slightly limping grandeur, about the whole place, that set one wondering as to whether the opulent lady were not a little of a miser. Money must be there: the rubber estate was clearly a big one, and well managed; and the price of rubber, that year, was higher than it had ever been before—or, for the matter of that, has ever been since. And yet the place was—pinched.

We went into the grand saloon after "makan." The storm was quite over now; all the splendid windows were thrown open down to the marble pavement; a delicious scent of wet grass and flowers came in across the verandah. Mrs. Van Cloon, who saw that Mrs. Ash was not feeling at home, took her off into a corner and, with wonder-

ful good luck, started the subject of kitchen stoves. Kitchen stoves and the *Idylls of the King* were the two themes on which Mrs. Ash could be eloquent. To hear her explain the theory of draught and dampers, or give you, in clear-cut tones, her reasons for considering Guinevere, Elaine, Isolt, Ettarre, Enid, and Vivien, lazy-boned hussies who were enough to drive three Round Tables to destruction and despair because they were never known to do anything but loaf about the castle, or go hunting in unsuitable silk gowns—was to understand the views and the philosophy of Mrs. Ash as nothing else could make you understand them.

Cristina found a seat upon a chair that imitated a harp in appearance, and played a tune—happily a brief one—when you sat on it. There was another chair near it, which I took myself. It looked like a huge scarlet crab with gold legs (I am not exaggerating: you can buy the same hideous thing for an appalling price in the Mercatoria of Venice, any day you are fool enough to wish to do so). One lifted the back of the crab up by its china eyes, and found a cushioned seat inside. This, and the awful bunch of green glass grapes, each grape the size of a hen's egg, that contained the electric light, led me to conclude that the late Van Cloon had been possessed of more money than taste. The widow loved her various curios; she called our attention to their beauties, and also to a clock that had a Spanish girl's face above it,

which unrolled its eyes distractingly from side to side at every tick, a mechanical fan, meantime, raising and lowering itself with ghastly mechanical coquetry. I had never thought to see flirting done by machinery.

"Isn't she a dear, and isn't it all delightfully Victorian?" commented Cristina, under cover of a vigorous onslaught of Mrs. Ash's upon German circular stoves. "Our grandmothers would just have loved all this. Amber satin and beads—it's gloriously beady—and cornices and pilasters and *étagères* and mirrors and marble tables—and all these dear hideous chairs, and—did you see the fire?"

"The what?" I asked, surreptitiously wiping my face, under cover of driving away a fly. I think the thermometer must have been standing at about ninety-five in the shade.

Cristina pointed with her chin. I looked, and saw the oddest and most pathetic decoration, surely, that drawing-room ever boasted.

There was a fireplace, marble, and very handsome; an overmantel also of marble; a hearth of costly Dutch tiles. There were fire-irons, a fender, bars. Behind the bars was a mimic fire, with coals of black and scarlet enamel, flames of yellow tinsel, and smoke of bluish-coloured wool.

"Good Lord!" was all that I found to say.

"It shows Van Cloon must have been fond of her," commented Cristina, somewhat elliptically.

"How?"

"The thing is a monument of home-sickness—exile—that almost makes one cry, in spite of its absurdity. Somebody was very homesick; it wasn't the Dutchman, for they use stoves in Holland; so it must have been she. And Van Cloon indulged her with this horror. It's as clear as glass."

"It would not have been to me, but I can see you're right," I said humbly. And in the same moment Mrs. Ash gave us a proof of Cristina's rightness.

She fixed her eyes longingly on the mimic fire, got up from her chair (it was solid gilt, with looking-glass-panelled legs) and drifted over to the marble mantel and hearth. There she sat down, and, with her creased, elderly hands stretched out to an imaginary blaze, seemed to lose herself in thoughts of winter England.

Mrs. Van Cloon followed her.

"My husband put in that for me," she said, nodding at the hideous thing. "Bonzer, isn't it? He was always ready to spend money on me, was Van—I must say that for him; and when I began to fret after the Gippsland winters, he said he'd settle things so that I could fancy I was up in the mountains in June."

I glanced at Cristina. She smiled slightly; I thought she looked a little bored, as if she had gone through this sort of thing very often. . . . What sort of thing? I found no answer to the question—yet.

Next day we were taken out in a couple of sulkies, drawn by fiery small Macassar horses, to see the plantation. Our clothes had turned up by this time; Cristina had sent down to the jetty to see if the captain of the *Juliana* hadn't dumped them ashore before he left, and luckily, he had. So we drove along the shaded avenues, comfortable in body and mind. I think none of us was quarrelling with the accident that had brought us here, by this time; the establishment of the widow Van Cloon promised to be interesting.

Cristina Raye, it seemed, had been making good use of her time. She told me quite a good deal about our hostess, as we bumped lightly along the grass avenues towards the central collection of smoke-houses and sheds. The widow had married Van Cloon when she was thirty; some unhappy love affair had kept her single until then. He was old when she married him, but he had lived for eight years. He had been dead two years now, leaving behind him a will that was, as his widow declared, "a sin and a scandal." According to Cristina, it was quite the most interesting thing she had come across for a long time. Indeed, the very mention of it seemed to brighten her up, but why, I could not imagine.

By this time, I was feeling not a little "intrigued" about Miss Raye. I had met her for the first time on board the *Juliana*, just as we were sailing from Macassar, several days earlier. I do not speak Dutch, and my German is an uncer-

tain quantity ; in consequence, the easily-flowing ship-talk that commonly puts one in possession of all sorts of facts about all kinds of passengers, within a day or two of sailing, was of little more use to me than a piano to a deaf man. I did pick up a stray word or two—it was said that the girl was English (which needed no saying), that she was well off, and travelling for pleasure with her chaperon. There was also some suggestion, dimly comprehended through fogs of unfamiliar languages, of a tragic story, a grief . . . and, indeed, I had caught a look on the delicate girlish face at times that seemed strangely ungirlish and sad. This was all I knew—except that Miss Cristina Raye and her chaperon kept very much to themselves, were conscientious in seeing all the sights, and clung to their own national ways of dressing, living, and eating, as far as possible. When the hour of siesta arrived, and all the ship, male and female, calmly unclad itself and lay down to doze in pyjamas, combing jacket and Malay *sarong*, according to sex, and the decks of the *Juliana* blossomed with bare legs and bath slippers pendent from sleepy toes ; when the fifteen-stone lady of a Commissioner waddled in to lunch wearing nothing but a brief bedgown and a sort of coloured tablecloth wrapped about her legs, and her unmarried daughter, debarred by Dutch-colonial custom from the *kabaja dan sarong* of the matron, promenaded the hurricane deck at four p.m. in the thinnest of silk wrappers, worn over a sole chemise

—Cristina Raye and Mrs. Ash, as if in protest, grew more and more lineny and tailored and tied and collared and bonneted. At least, Cristina wore collars and linen tailor-mades, fitting her as a stocking fits a foot, while Mrs. Ash encountered the ardours of the equatorial noon in gauzes of black and grey, Victorian bonnet, and corsets as uncompromising and unmistakable as a picket-fence.

Yes, they were undoubtedly British, the old lady especially so. What more were they? That was the matter that puzzled me. Cristina was not the ordinary pretty girl; not even the ordinary pretty girl with a "disappointment" to give her character and single her out. There was something . . . something else. . . .

What had Mrs. Van Cloon's greeting meant? Why was Miss Raye called the "Kris-Girl?" *Kris* in Malay, means dagger, the pronunciation being not quite "Kriss" and not quite "Krees," but something between the two. Was it a play on her name? It was a bad play, if that were the case—Cristina is undoubtedly "Criss." Had she any special interest in the national weapon of Malaysia? I did not think so. They had brought krises on board for sale early in the trip—modern German rubbish, got up to sell; plain Sheffield stuff; one or two real old Celebes weapons, made of native hammered iron. I had bought a couple as curios. I did not recollect that Miss Raye had bought any, or even looked at the weapons.

I shot a glance at her as she sat there by my

side, handling the reins of the fiery little Macassar horse with an easy, almost careless touch. She wore a gown that was very soft and dainty, and very white; she had a little silver belt about her little waist; her face was shaded by a broad-leaved, Watteau-shepherdess sort of hat. She looked very young and very simple to be the owner of such a nickname. . . . Before I knew what I was doing I had asked right out—

“Why do they call you Kris-Girl?”

“They don’t,” said Cristina calmly. “*Prem-pooan-Kris* is the word.”

“But that’s what it means?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what does it signify in itself?”

“It might amuse you to guess.” She sparkled a little, and turned her bright small face towards me. We were bouncing very fast along an avenue of great forest trees, with green ostrich-feather-shaped leaves and flowers of geranium scarlet, alternated with trees that carried not a single leaf but massed themselves against the sky in enormous domes of brightest heliotrope bloom. The ground beneath the horses’ hoofs was thick with fallen flowers. A good way off, at the end of the avenue, you could see the bay of Goonong Kuda, like a sheet of blue crystal, surrounded by mountains of blue velvet. The gold and the green and the red and the purple, the smiting diamond brilliance of the sun, the scents and splendour of the whole thing, almost took my breath away. But Cristina

looked at it all very coolly ; she was not new to the colour-show of the equatorial lands, as I was.

"I'll tell you something," she said, as we drew up in a valley of darkly canopied rubber. "You are to take me to call somewhere to-morrow. On a bachelor. An attractive bachelor, just at the age when Balzac says that——"

"Hold on about Balzac," I interrupted gloomily. "I'm not so very much below that age myself, as not to know that Balzac was just whistling to keep his courage up, when he said what he did."

"Very well, then. To call on a bachelor who is attractive, whatever his age. Planter in a small way. Lives near here. A great friend of Mrs. Van Cloon, and has some mystery about him ; she won't say what it is, but I'm to go and see, and then I'll understand everything. And you're to go too, because she thinks dear Ash is unsympathetic."

"All right, Miss Kris-Girl," I said. "I'm beginning to see a little light."

We had to get out of the sulkies at this point, and go over the greater part of the plantation, marshalled by Mrs. Van Cloon. I need hardly tell you of all we saw—the tapping of the trees, the milky sap running into neat tin vessels ; the coagulating in long, tidy sheds, by means of—but you wouldn't care to hear—it interested me very much, and I could give you all the chemical formulæ, still . . . I asked Cristina how she liked it, and she said the smell of the smoke-houses

was lovely, and reminded her of Red Indian stories. Also, she took certain specimen balls of rubber and bounced them in her hands, and did amazing tricks with them ; she seemed to have the eyes and fingers of Cinquevalli. She shied away with determination from all attempts to explain mechanical details, but I thought she enjoyed herself on the whole. As for Mrs. Van Cloon, she stalked like Semiramis through plantation, manufactory, drying-sheds and stores, ordering about the silent, swift Malay workmen, showing processes and results, discussing percentages, investments, expenses, returns, with the tones of a cathedral bell, and the gestures of a *caryatid* come to life. It interested me extremely. Rubber has not been one of our specialities, but one never knows—and it was a pleasure in itself to hear a woman discourse so ably upon business matters. The place was paying splendidly, too ; I could not have picked a hole in the management, except a tendency towards cutting expenses almost over-finely. There was a Malay overseer, but Mrs. Van Cloon managed for herself.

More and more I puzzled over the contradictions of the place. I would have sworn that Mrs. Van Cloon was naturally no screw ; her cheerful hospitality to us would have proved that, had proof been wanting. She was making good money with the plantation ; her needs were small ; she had, as she told us in a burst of confidence, neither chick nor child, and not a relation whom she valued

at twopence halfpenny. Where did all the money go ? It was of course no affair of mine ; but, as a business man, I could not help wondering. Here and there I could see places where money ought to have been laid out, and was not. I ventured to speak of one. The widow listened to me, nodded her head goodnaturedly, thanked me and said she wished to God she could afford it. Then she dismissed the subject and called "Jonges !" in a tone that Clara Butt might have envied, and the boy came running up with the sulkies, and we drove home.

Next afternoon, the sulkies came round again, and we started off for what proved to be a fairly extended drive, along a shaded forest track. The place was full of magnificent butterflies, like floating flowers ; parrots, painted in all the colours of Joseph's coat, flew squawking in and out of the trees ; once and again a furry, mocking little monkey face peered down and disappeared. It was atrociously hot, but Mrs. Ash, whom I was driving, looked as dry and cool as a chip. More in order to make conversation than anything else, I asked her what she had thought of the rubber plantation.

"Didn't look at it," she said woodenly.

"Don't you like that kind of thing ?" I asked.

"My good man," replied the old lady, in a sudden spate of communicativeness, "I like London, Kensington, coal fires, and concerts at the Albert Hall."

"Then why——" I began.

"Because one must earn one's salary honestly. Play the game, as they say now-a-days. It's in the job. Seeing things, I mean. Liking them isn't in the bargain. I hate 'em. Hate mountains, lakes, castles, Swiss railways, gondolas, Buddhist ruins, mines, plantations, savages, hate steamers, hate hotels, hate travelling."

"Good gracious!" was all I found to say.

"But I'm honest," she went on. "I'm paid well, and I earn it. I'm worth any money. You can't get a chaperon like me now-a-days. There aren't any real old ladies left. They wear wavy brown wigs with a spring inside. And a touch of pink, and some white on the top. And corsets down to their knees. And heels—and hats. Look at me—real bonnet with strings, grey hair grown on my own head, elastic boots and stays that are just stays. Cristina knows I'm worth all she can give. It's not in the job that I'm to take an interest, but I have to go and see, with her. Seen the Kremlin, Taj Mahal, Boro Bodoor, Rio Harbour, Pyramids, Sphinx, Niagara, Victoria Falls, wistaria festival in Japan, Chinese New Year in Canton, Brittany Kermesse, Panama Canal, Midnight Sun. Don't remember twopence ha'penny-worth of the lot, don't want to. Been out hunting nasty tigers on the back of a nasty elephant. Been camping in disgusting damp jungles full of dirty lions. Got two more years of it, and then I'll go back to my decent home in Kensington, and buy it—own it—

live there. Never take a ticket as far as Brighton again."

"Why two years?" I asked.

"Cristina wants to travel for five, and we've only done three," was the mystifying answer.

"What's that for?" I asked unashamedly; and Mrs. Ash, biting her words off as we bumped faster and faster in chase of the sulky ahead, replied:

"Wouldn't tell if I knew, but I don't. Some fad. Cristina can be close. I respect her for it. Everyone knows about her *fiancé's* dreadful death three years ago—bitten by a mad dog, and died snapping and howling. She doesn't take it as well as you'd think, even yet. Never has that ring off, night or day, in her bath or out of it."

"That curious old ring, like a long marquise?"

"Yes. Chinese toe-ring really. I've never seen her without it; she had it when we first met. She started travelling just after he died, and nothing can stop her since. Five years I'm engaged for, and I'll go through with it, if it kills me. She pays well. And she's a good girl. And as for cleverness, she's got a great deal more than any girl's got any business to have."

"Why do they call her that odd name?" I was utterly ashamed of myself, but could not stop asking questions.

"The Kris-Girl? Malay name; she's become quite celebrated since we began travelling, for what the natives here call cutting knots. Give

Cristina something to disentangle that nobody else can make head or tail of, and see her cut it clear with a sweep. She's wonderful. Ought to have been a diplomat's wife—or a detective's. Or something in a circus; she can juggle with her hands as well as with her head. But I don't hold with any of it. In my time, girls who had lost their lovers stayed at home, and took an interest in the poor. A great deal more sensible, and more refined, too. But Cristina's parents are dead, and she does as she likes."

Mrs. Ash shut up like a tap that has been turned off. I do not think she made ten consecutive remarks in the whole of the next two days.

When we reached the end of the Van Cloon estate—which was a good way off—the widow descended from her sulky, and beckoned to Mrs. Ash.

"You and I are going to stay here in the tea-house, and wait," she said. "You can trust Miss Raye in Mr. Garden's care, I'm certain sure."

"Got anything you want to show me?" asked Mrs. Ash, her elastic-sided boot hesitating on the step.

"I'm sorry I haven't anything to see here at all—nothing but the little tea-house that I——"

"I'll stop," announced Mrs. Ash, bringing the second boot after the first. Cristina and I drove on. If I had had any capacity for astonishment left in me, which I scarcely had by this time, I might have been astonished to observe that Mrs.

Van Cloon entered the little rustic rest-house with her handkerchief up to her eyes.

We bounced along for a while through sun and shade, and then I asked despairingly,

"Is everybody mad? or what is it all about?"

Cristina bubbled with laughter. Despite the shadow that never quite seemed to leave the depths of her eyes, she was a merry creature.

"I'll tell you every bit I know," she said. "I have Mrs. Van Cloon's leave. She says you are a 'fair treat,' and I gathered she meant to be complimentary. Well—in the first place, the late Van Cloon was not a good husband; he seems to have been quite half mad with jealousy, and I don't honestly believe that Mrs. Van ever gave him cause. He kept her shut up here on the plantation, and wouldn't let her go down to Macassar more than about once a year. He used to have parties of people staying, and then he liked to see her dressed up gorgeously, and wearing jewels, but he kept spying and watching about her all the time. And by-and-by—she cried when she told me, poor dear—someone came whom she did care for very much. There's a mystery about him; she won't tell me, because she says I must see him to understand. He lives on a tumble-down little plantation near here, and she used to meet him by chance in the forest."

"Sounds rather thin."

"Well, she says I'll understand when I see him

—and anyhow there was no harm in it ; I would swear to that.”

“ So would I, somehow—I like the amazing widow.”

“ Van Cloon got to know,” went on Cristina, “ and there was a terrible row. He died soon after and left a very unjust will. She was to have the estate and income ; there are a lot of charges to relations of his that reduce it a good deal, but as you see, she’s well off. If she re-marries, she loses all but five hundred a year. If she marries this man, she loses every guilder. Isn’t it mean, after she’d spent the best years of her life nursing and taking care of the old villain ? ”

“ It all depends. The other man may be an adventurer.”

“ That’s what she thought I’d think, so she asked me to go and see him. She wouldn’t give me a letter of introduction ; it’s funny. She told me just to say to him she was a friend of mine.”

“ What’s his name, and who is he ? ”

“ English ; name Captain Ord.”

“ Army or navy ? ” I asked suddenly.

“ Army,” said Cristina. I whistled. Cristina was too young—yes, she undoubtedly was—to remember about Ord of the Nilghiris, and his noble defence of the British fort. What that defence had cost him, I remembered now. . . . So Ord of the Nilghiris was living on “ a tumble-down plantation ” here at the end of the world, and my Cleopatra of the rubber estate had been forbidden to marry him.

"Do you know anything about him?" asked Cristina.

I was just going to tell her what I knew, when something occurred that made speech unnecessary. We had come to a boundary—a well-made, handsome fence of posts and wire, cutting off the Van Cloon estate from something that looked like a half-redeemed wilderness on the other side. There was a gate in the fence, and through that gate was coming slowly, very slowly, an exceedingly tall man dressed in a khaki shirt and trousers, belted at the waist. The rough and ready costume showed off to full advantage a magnificent figure, held finely erect. The head was thrown somewhat backwards, and the chin a little raised, in a listening attitude. Under the shade of the plantation hat that sat upon the man's thick, grizzled hair, one could see that his eyes were fixed upwards and far ahead . . . yet here the dense high forest shut in the track like a wall.

Cristina pulled up the horse, and the man in the gateway moved forward, and called out "Who is there?" still with his head raised and his bright, sword-grey eyes looking up at the forest roof. No answer came at first, and he stretched out his hands with the pathetic gesture that no one can mistake. . . .

"Oh, poor thing, poor thing! he's blind!" whispered Cristina with a sob in her voice; and I knew—I cannot tell how—that her pity was not for the blind man before us, but for the rich lonely

woman in her empty palace, unable to share her riches with the man who needed them and who loved her.

That last item was a doubt solved—for me—in the next few seconds. Cristina sprang from the sulky, and walked towards the gate. Waves of hope and fear chased each other visibly over the face of the blind soldier as she came, settling down into disappointment as soon as she spoke.

“Captain Ord, I am Miss Cristina Raye, and my friend Mr. Garden is with me. We have come to see your place, if we may.”

Captain Ord's hat was already in his hand.

“I'm afraid there is nothing to see; it is a very poor little place,” he said courteously. “But come in by all means. Are you from the *Juliana*?”

“We got left behind by her, and are staying with Mrs. Van Cloon for a few days; she has very kindly put us up,” replied Cristina.

The dark, lean face brightened suddenly.

“She's always kind,” was all he said. “Ah-met!”

A Malay appeared from nowhere in particular. The captain delivered the sulky to him, and gave some order in Malay. Then, walking with astonishing certainty, he led the way through a wretched unweeded patch of cacao trees to a small brown house in a clearing. It was built of plaited bamboos, and furnished very poorly. I do not think that it had more than two rooms. Here, under the dusk of the deep-thatched roof, with the fierce

white sunlight striking at us through the open door, we sat on native-made chairs, and drank the fresh coconuts brought by the Malay. I don't believe there was a solitary other creature about the place—no wonder it looked unweeded—and I don't imagine there was anything in the Chinese box that served for a cupboard, except the dry biscuits that the Captain produced for our refreshment.

But the place was perfectly clean and tidy, and Ord's own clothes, though old, were mended well. The look that Ahmet cast upon his *Tuan*, when bending down to serve him with a coconut, explained many things. I believe the Malay would have died for his master. Well, many a man did die for him, in that year of the forgotten eighteen-nineties—without saving Ord, after all, from something that was worse than swift and easy death.

When the coconuts were finished, Cristina announced shamelessly that I was dying to look at Captain Ord's cacao, and chased me out into the hot sun, while she remained in the house with her host. For the best part of an hour, I was left to wander disconsolately about the weedy patches of bush, pinching pods that seemed unlikely ever to ripen, poking my head into the mean little drying shed where half a dozen trays of beans lay on a packing-case table, observing here and there and everywhere the naked poverty of the place. The plantation, I heard long after, had come to Captain Ord, as payment of a bad debt, some few

years after his blindness. God alone knows what disappointment, disillusion, faithlessness, had driven him out of Europe into this forest hermitage. Straining my memory, I could recollect something about a Lady Aline Somebody. Whoever and whatever she was, she had evidently failed him. . . . I could understand how the big-hearted woman in Van Cloon's great palace had appealed to him, in spite of her surface roughness—even in spite of the fact that he had never seen her beauty. I could understand how she came upon him during some of his wanderings in the forest—how perhaps she had led or helped him, in her compassionate way—the solitary, afflicted man, hungry for love. . . . Yes, I saw the story, plain man of commerce as I am.

When Cristina came out, she was very silent, but her eyes sparkled and her little mouth was tight. Mrs. Van Cloon and she exchanged some mysterious feminine signal as we joined them, and they had a long talk after we got in. I noticed that the widow was unusually bright that evening.

Tropical houses, even when built of marble, are treacherous regarding secrets, because everyone lives out of doors on the verandah. Drives or walks offer the only possible chance for private conversations. That is why I could not help hearing something that was not meant for me, as we all lay in long chairs upon the marble terrace after dinner, watching the fireflies dance among the orange blooms below. Mrs. Van Cloon was

some way off, but marble carries sound almost like water.

"I've saved and scrimped," I heard. "I've saved on my very back and belly, so I have—not a new dress for two years, and not even a pudding for dinner when I'm alone—but all I can do, with the charges on the estate, I can't save enough out of the income to make a capital we could live on, for another five or six years. And oh, my dear, my dear, time's creeping upon me like the tide—I'm getting old. . . . And he all alone. . . ."

"Beast!" was Cristina's reply. Mrs. Van Cloon seemed to place the epithet where it belonged, without any difficulty, for she went on——"

"Yes, that's what he was—and me slaving and nursing all those years without looking at another man, so much as to see whether he'd got two legs and a head on him or not—except. . . . And as for these quiet-looking Dutch, you know what they really are, my dear, and the amount of keeping off they take——"

It seemed Cristina did know, for I thought I heard her giggle.

"So there's how it is, and sometimes I wish I had the pluck to go and jump into the Goonong Kuda Bay, and a' done with it all. But while he's alive——"

Handkerchiefs came out here, and I woke up—rather late—to the necessity of coughing or of scraping my chair. I did both. Followed a good deal of whispering; at the end, Mrs. Van Cloon

kissed Cristina with some violence, rose and withdrew.

"I'm going to pack twelve clean chemises this very minute," I heard her say.

A coastal steamer called next day, and with it Mrs. Van Cloon went down to Macassar, leaving us three in charge of the plantation. Before she went, she asked me to help her in making out a complete statement of the expenses and profits of the plantation for the previous year. This she took with her, together with a copy of her late husband's will. She also took three feathered hats designed to strike with amazement the Hooge Pad at driving time, and a box that contained, I suppose, the necessities she had mentioned, together with some others. Cristina and I stood on the verandah and cheered her as she went. Mrs. Ash, her elastic-sided boots well in view, and a genuine 1870 cap on her head, sat knitting warm vests for North Sea Fishermen, underneath the biggest of the electric punkahs. She did not feign any interest whatever in the events proceeding. Doubtless she considered such interest "not in the bargain."

"Now," said the Kris-Girl, leading me into the central hall and selecting two chairs, "sit down, and I will tell you my story. . . . Isn't it exactly like an Adelphi play? Even the chairs are the right pattern, with all those gilt legs. Well, I believe I've cut Mrs. Van Cloon's knot about through."

"Good for you," I said.

"Have you noticed," asked Cristina, rather dreamily, "that when people want anything in the world very, very, very much, they——"

"Hold on, Kris-Girl, I have noticed. I didn't either, you see."

"Or," she went on, small hands round small silken knee, clear eyes looking up at the gaudy crystal chandelier—"if there's anything they have that they like very, very, very much, something comes between, and takes it away. . . . And there are knots and nets and tangles. Always; it's a law."

She stopped a minute, and (I knew) ranged back over the past. How do I know? . Because I did too.

"It's another law," she went on, "that you can't help yourself—or hardly ever. But you can help other people, if you are a little less stupid than they are. For most people are stupid, you know; Carlyle was so right in that. Well—there's been a lot of stupidity over this matter. And it can be cleared away—I think."

"I must be stupid myself," I said. "For I can't see where any possible hope comes in. The will is good. Lots of married men make wills like it, and they're never overthrown that I know of."

"And yet!" said Cristina, "perhaps lots of them might have got over the difficulty. Because it was so simple in this case. I really do think you must be stupid; most nice people are. I'll

have to tell you. When I came back from that visit to the poor thing in the forest, I thought hard all the way home—you know I told you not to speak to me—and that night I got up at one o'clock, and went for a walk, round and round the terrace—that's the way I think when I have to think hard. And Ash would get up and walk too, because she said it was what she was paid for ; but she never said a word, only once or twice she whispered the names of the Metropolitan Tube stations over to herself like an incantation, and three times she yawned. So in an hour or so I saw it all, and I came in.

"What I said to myself was—'Who benefits?' Because that is what you must ask in everything, not only in crimes—people are so stupid about that. And would you believe, the answer was, 'No one does.'"

"How?"

"I mean, that no one benefits as things are. Not Mrs. Van Cloon, not Captain Ord, not the people to whom the money would go. And then I asked—I don't pretend to give you the processes, only the results—'Who would benefit?' That is, if she married him. And the answer was, of course, 'The other inheritors.' Therefore they must be anxious for her to marry him. But she can't—without money. Therefore, they must provide it—it is to their interest. . . . So then I saw the whole thing. You can't believe how simple most things are, when you cut away the mass of

stupidity that accumulates round them. I asked her who were the people who would get the money. She said that her husband's relations would, if she remarried; if she did not, she could do what she liked with it, so long as she gave none of it to Captain Ord—you see, he had provided against that. Now of course, being Colonial Dutch, they are desperately money-hungry. So I said to her, 'Go to them. Say just this—"If you'll buy the estate from me for fifty thousand pounds, you can have it to-morrow. It's worth a hundred and fifty thousand, and if you wait for me to marry Captain Ord or anyone else, you'll never get it, for I couldn't marry him, and wouldn't marry any other man. So this is your chance."' Just that. Then you see, when one asks the question, 'Who benefits?' one gets a new answer. She does, and he does, and they do. So the knot comes in pieces. At least, I hope so."

"Kris-Girl, it does sound simple," I said. "Without doubt I am stupid."

"Oh no, not a bit more than anyone else," she said consolingly. "The trouble with most people is that they can't see facts that are staring them in the face. Can't get the focus of them—have looked at them too close. . . . Come and have a game of billiards."

"Come and let you walk all over me at billiards, you mean," I said. "Well, if it makes you happy . . ."

.

In the absence of Mrs. Van Cloon, we spent a pleasant time enough. There were horses, and Cristina and I went many drives—rides were tabooed, on account of that necessity of earning her money fairly, which seemed to press so hard upon Mrs. Ash, I could have wished myself that she had not been quite so fiercely honest. She evidently hated bumping about the grass roads in buggies and sulkies only a shade less than she hated the various sights we went to see; but nothing short of an attack of bubonic plague would have kept her from making one of the party. Cristina seemed used to her ways, but I must say it got upon my nerves a little at times, to see the old lady, as British-looking as the lions in Trafalgar Square, making a God-Save-the-Queen effect with her bonnet and her knitting and her elastic boots, in the middle of some exotic *kampong* full of piratical-looking Malay fishermen, and palms, and wild little naked children. There was a Chinese temple in a neighbouring town, that really turned out to be a wonder of wonders—I still dream sometimes at night of its incredible façade and sky-piercing ornaments, dragons, goblins, ten-foot centipedes, ducks, tigers, fruits, faces, flowers, all made in coloured and enamelled china, and standing out in screaming relief against a heaven of sun-steeped blue; I fancy I see its weirdly exquisite bronzes, its grinning, sea-sick lions, its wonderful gateway leading to a still green garden—just one huge circular opening in the wall; try it, and

marvel at the effect. . . . Upon these things, and all other "sights," of that district of Celebes, Mrs. Ash shed the withering blight of her utter indifference. She sat on the pedestal of an idol, and knitted hard, all through our visit to the temple; even when the chief Chinese dignitary of the quarter—and Chinese dignitaries can be exceedingly impressive—appeared suddenly in scarlet satin over blue and gold silk, knelt down at the head of a retinue of splendid followers, and bumped his lordly forehead three times on the steps of the principal altar, Mrs. Ash merely turned a corner in her work and murmured softly: "Knit twenty; purl eighteen. And the same again."

The *Juliana* returned, and the captain ro'le up to Mrs. Van Cloon's to apologise for having deserted us. It was a case of leaving us or losing the ship, he said. (Like all the captains of the K.P.M., he spoke amazingly perfect English besides Dutch, French, German, and Malay.) He was grieved beyond all expression (thank you, he would take a very little), but it had been some comfort to him to know that our charming and hospitable hostess was close to the landing, and would be sure to take us in. He was again grieved beyond expression (a mere spoonful, please) to hear that Mrs. Van Cloon had gone to Macassar. Should he have the pleasure of taking us on board again?

We were unanimous in agreeing to deprive him of that happiness. Wild Commissioners would not have shifted Miss Raye or myself, before

hearing the result of the widow's high emprise ; and as for Mrs. Ash, nothing in heaven or earth or sea would have shifted her (and quite rightly) from her duties as chaperon.

A few days later, the Macassar boat bellowed down at the landing place, and a hurried *Jonges* slammed horses into a buggy, and bounced away down the grass drive. Mrs. Van Cloon was returning.

She descended from the buggy like an Amazon queen stepping forth from her chariot ; the light of victory shone on her face, and irradiated the very plume of her Paris hat—made, I fear, strictly for export from Paris, on the same principle that governs the export of German bands from music-loving Germany. We had not time to ask her how she had fared. She threw the reins to the *Jonges*, made three steps into the hall, and enveloped Cristina in a smothering embrace.

“ You darling,” she said.

“ Then you've won ? ” asked Cristina, as soon as the widow's affectionate clutch had relaxed enough to allow her to speak.

Mrs. Van Cloon nodded, and sank into a chair. It was one of the awful musical-box chairs, and it immediately began tinkling out :

“ When Johnny comes marching home, my boys—hurrah,
hurrah !

We'll give him a hearty welcome, boys—hurrah,
hurrah ! ”

I could not stand it, and collapsed, weakly laugh-

ing, on another chair, which at once started proclaiming that "Champagne Charley was its name." It seemed to suggest an idea to Mrs. Van Cloon; she called loudly—

"*Jonges! Champagne minta!*" The two chairs played on; I could not get up for laughing, and Mrs. Van Cloon, after giving her order, seemed totally unaware that the rival musical boxes were fighting it out under her person and mine. Cristina, with what I must think was malice aforethought, sat down on the third musical chair, and when the strains of "Hold the Fort" were added to the cat-concert already proceeding, I became almost hysterical. Mrs. Ash, dry, chip-like, and unmoved, sat reading in a corner. I saw the title of her pamphlet; it was—*The Garden in December*. The boy trotted in with champagne.

"Let me give you some, Mrs. Ash—and Miss Raye," pleaded our hostess. The chairs answered forcibly, together,

"Wave the answer back to heaven,

By thy grace we—'ll all get blind drunk, when Johnny comes marching home!"

Mrs. Van Cloon got up with a tray in her hand; Cristina rose too, and as I jumped to take the glasses, the chairs snapped off on

"See the mighty host advancing, Satan—is my name!"

Mrs. Ash refused champagne politely.

"I find it goes to the head," she said, with the air of one enunciating a newly discovered fact of

nature. Cristina took some—I think—out of politeness. I poured myself a glass, because I felt I really wanted it.

“There, drink it down,” said Mrs. Van Cloon kindly. “It lies easy on the stomach at any hour of the day.” She did not inquire the reason of my untimely mirth, being apparently of the opinion of George Eliot’s “Dolly,” that “men were made so.”

“To Mrs. Ord!” I said, and drank. Cristina repeated the toast. The future Mrs. Ord acknowledged it by a few tears, and a completely blissful giggle.

“Oh, my dears and my dears!” she said, sitting down again—not on “Johnny” or “Champagne Charley” this time; I saw to that, for my ribs were shaken almost loose from my spine—“I’ve done it—thanks to the Kris-Girl! They’ve given in. They hated to—but the money fascinated them that much that they couldn’t help themselves! You should have heard them argue—there was one old cow of a notary who wanted—but there it’s done, and I’m a free woman, or will be just as soon as they can get the legal papers through. And Ord and me, we’ll go down to Gippsland by the first boat we can catch, and I’ve got a buyer for his plantation who’ll give him enough to provide him in pocket-money anyhow, the dear, and if any of you ever come to Victoria, and leave it without seeing us——”

“I can answer for myself,” I said. “I’ve had

the time of my life here." I looked at Cristina as I spoke, but she did not seem to see me. She was standing by the "Champagne Charley" chair examining its mechanism.

"Have you," I said to her, determined to make her notice me—but she suddenly sat down on one of the other chairs, and my sentence was broken off by

"We'll all get blind drunk, when Johnny comes marching home!"

The next Macassar boat left in a week. We saw very little of Mrs. Van Cloon during that time; she seemed to live on the road between her own property and the Captain's, and when in the house, occupied herself chiefly in reading Singapore drapery catalogues, and writing letters with cheques in them. When the steamer left, she pressed a splendid diamond brooch on Cristina, and wept over and kissed her to such an extent that the little lady vanished altogether in her mighty embrace.

"Ash, you take this bit of vanity," said Cristina, as we steamed out of Goonong Kuda Bay. "Couldn't refuse, but you know I don't like that sort of thing."

"I will take it, thank you," said the old lady, fastening it in her dress. "It'll buy me a bath with hot and cold water, and a good kitchen range..." She looked back at the vanishing island with relief.

"Another place seen and done with," she said, and turned down into the social hall.

Cristina was hanging over the rail looking at the blue water layered with streaming gold. I heard her quote something from Kipling, half under her breath :

"Can him who helps others help himself? answer me that, sorr."

And I, too, went below and left her.

CHAPTER II

ABOUT A GOLDEN NUTMEG

So we sailed away, and sailed on up the coast of Celebes.

Our new steamer, the *Halmaheira*, was as like the *Juliana* as one coconut is like another, and just as amazing, viewed as a product of the utmost ends of the earth. Cristina Raye voiced her feelings on the subject, as we thudded steadily along a blue, mountainous coast of wonderful loveliness, inhabited only by wild-looking Malays.

"Look at the place on the map," she said, "think about it at home—it's so remote and impossible that you don't believe it really exists, till you've taken a ticket to it—why, Borneo's a synonymous term for wildness and out-of-the-wayness, and this is a step further on. You think you'll paddle up the coast in a canoe, guarding yourself against pirates with two revolvers in your belt, a rifle over your shoulder, and a knife in your teeth—and you find things like Atlantic liners going up and down about twice a week with forty-one courses for lunch——"

"It couldn't have been forty-one," I remonstrated. We were tramping up and down the promenade deck at 3 p.m., I think, with the view of annoying the siesta folk. We felt—I did, at any rate—that they had no business to be having siestas. Whoever has suffered as the business man in the Farthest East must suffer, through that confounded habit kept up by the local whites of going to sleep every day from one o'clock till five, will sympathise with me.

"It was," said Cristina, with determination. "If you count all the things handed round on the rice-table. I am tasting six new ones every day, to see what they are like. To-day it was that thing that looks like fried worms—I think it is, by the way—and bits of inside buffalo skin, and the cleanings of fish in oil, and pieces of cuttlefish tentacles, and crabs' legs—I don't really think it was *tarantula*—and something that tasted as if one had eaten a set piece of fireworks just after it was touched off. There are eighteen more things to try, but I've given up. To-morrow I mean to ask——"

"*Minta ayam, telur, dan ikan sadja*," I interrupted in fluent Malay.

"Right," said Cristina, nodding. "I wanted to know why they had that phrase in the conversation book, and now I've found out. All the tourists begin like me, and all end in the same way. 'Bring me only chicken, eggs, and fish.' I suppose they don't want to die till they've

had the value of their ticket. It is quite pathetic."

"Phrase books generally are, except when they're tragic," I said. "Listen to this series—'I won't do it.' 'I won't give it.' 'I don't want it.' 'That's enough.' 'It is no use bothering me any more.' 'Be off.'"

"Oh, that's tragedy—remember the harbour of Macassar?" said Cristina with a laugh. I did remember; I thought we were getting on pretty well. When two travellers begin to ask each other—"Do you remember?" they are already on the way to friendship. I was quite clear in my mind that I wanted to be friends with Miss Cristina Raye.

Friends? Yes. I was sure that I meant no more. Because, you see, I was nearly forty, and she could not be more than twenty-five or so, and everyone knew that she was inconsolable for the loss of her *fiancé*, and I had always supposed, when I had time to think about it, that I was inconsolable for the loss of mine—this fifteen years or more.

I thought of her, deliberately, as we thudded on up the far strange coasts of Celebes—of Mabel, born in '75, and dead in '93—Mabel, the pretty creature who wore a "fringe" and a bustle, did not like the "new woman" (Lord! where has the phrase hidden itself, these latter days?) and who was not certain about *fin-de-siècle* manners"—Mabel, the dear little soul who had

never been further than Scotland in her life, and who was quite sure that no "really nice girl," when in London, would go outside a bus or drive in a hansom cab. . . .

I remembered the lad who had been so pleased and proud to put the ring on her finger . . . and my thoughts drifted off from Mabel for a moment. Something hummed in my brain—something of Stevenson's—

"Sing me a tale of a lad that is gone—
Say, could that lad be I? . . .
Give me again all that was there,
Give me the sun that shone,
Give me the eyes, give me the soul,
Give me the lad that's gone!"

It goes to the tune of "Over the Sea to Skye." I found myself humming the air as I leaned on the rail, watching the thunder-blue ranges of Celebes slip by, and seeing them scarce at all. And Cristina, standing beside me, took up the air, and sang in the tiniest voice—not "Skye," but Stevenson's much less widely known refrain.

"How did you know?" I asked her, turning from Celebes to her. But she only smiled.

"Was she very pretty?" she asked.

"Yes, sorceress," I said. "She was. Like a flower or a small, soft bird. She wasn't meant to stand the storms of life, and she—didn't."

The *Halmaheira* thudded on; the beat of her engines echoed against the cliffs; the silky-blue water hissed beneath her forefoot.

"I'm sorry," said Cristina, and I knew she meant it. We fell silent. I wondered if confidence were to be exchanged for confidence—if in return, I was to hear anything about—

I looked at her, and saw that I was not. She was far away from me; yes, very far. Her face was pale, and her eyes were looking—I know—

"Beyond the clouds, and beyond the tomb."

I slipped away, and went forward to the smoking saloon. I was thinking very hard about—no, you are quite wrong—about the gum damar trade.

"There's a lot of it in the Minahassa," I said to myself. "Quite a lot. We shall get to Menado the day after to-morrow. I will leave the ship there, and travel round a bit. It might pay me, as things are going in the markets just now."

I have always hated Menado.

I was there only a week or two; and the town is an extremely pretty one; and the residents are friendly, and the climate is fairly good, but—

Anyhow, I hate it. I have a right to hate any part of the earth's surface that I choose, and I choose to hate Menado. And the Minahassa. If you want to know what the Minahassa is, I shall not tell you. You have got an atlas, and you can look it up. I am not paid to teach you geography.

There is something detestable about long, long roads, very well kept and edged with shady trees all nicely clipped—and about scores and scores of native residences, set down in the midst of over-

flowing green; houses built in a fashion half European, half Malay, and filled with merry, fat, prosperous people who are any blend you like to mention except plain white. I can't see why people should be happy in droves—in thousands—driving about all day in pony karettas which they shouldn't be able to afford, and giggling inanely with each other; filling the wide quiet streets and the long, long, long roadways with a flutter of muslin and a gleam of oiled hair and flowers, and with laughter of small fat children, and jokes of *sarong*-clad young men. The Dutch residents have such pretentious villas, too, stone and brick, and sometimes marble in part—with such garden-ing about them, and avenues, and *stoeps* where ladies from Holland make embroidery and drink coffee and chat, happily and contentedly.

Pretentious—that was what I felt it all to be. The hotels were pretentious, with their marble halls and electric lights and crowds of merry people having dinner—and the motor-cars, pant-ing up and down the long roads with cargoes of Dutch tourists going to Tondano and Limboto Lakes—and the Chinese bazaar, and the harbour.

Especially the harbour. Those two great over-hanging volcanoes, the Klabat and the Lokon, smoking away above the town, had an effect that seemed to me unbearably theatrical. The whole thing was like a drop scene in a pantomime. And the canoes paddling up and down with fruit and fish and beggars—all the beggars in Malaysia,

which means almost everyone, go about in canoes—it was a nuisance from beginning to end.

And people laughed at such silly things. There was an English bagman: he came back to the hotel one day crowing with laughter, and insisted on explaining what it was all about—as if anyone wished to know. He had seen a canoe paddled by a Buginese-pirate sort of person without any clothes, and had noted that the craft had a name painted on it. And he had read the name. And it was “SHERLOX HOLM.” And the unclothed heathen had explained that this was the name of a hero exceedingly celebrated in Malaysia since some kind *Tuan* had translated his doings into Malay; that all the people had the translation, and they liked it better than the *Koran* or the *Bible*. Asked why, he explained that there were so many ways of stealing in it, and it taught people to steal cleverly. And that he was a Buddhist, when he did not happen to be going to the Dutch Mission church, and that he had quite frequently burned sticks of incense and red paper in the porcelain temple at the other side of the town, in honour of Sir Doyle, that saint of far-off countries who had written the book.

Did anyone ever hear such childish nonsense? Possibly it was true—in fact, I think it was—but who cared whether it was or not?

I left the giggling commercial on the *stoep*, and went off to my own room. It looked like a prison cell furnished with unusual luxury, and

smelt like a swimming-bath—most rooms in Dutch-Malayan hotels are like that : they build them of concrete and tiles, usually with one barred window some twenty feet up from the floor, and they hose them down every day as if you were small-pox or scarlet fever. Still, it was a refuge, and there were no commercial travellers there. I lit a pipe, and sat down on the edge of my vast Dutch bed—(apparently the Dutch expect you to bring your entire family with you, and house it under the one mosquito net)—with a paper of notes on the trade of Celebes, which I wanted to look over. I did not care a trouser button about the trade of Celebes, but I was quite aware that I ought to care.

And then I got a steamer time-table, and began calculating when the *Halmaheira* would meet the *Timor*, and on what date the *Timor* would get to Ternate, and what boat would go on to the Moluccas.

No, I wasn't going to the Moluccas. I just looked them up—because I wanted to look them up. There was no harm in that. And one had to distract one's mind somehow or other from such a hateful place as Menado and the Minahassa.

Did I mention, by the way, that Mrs. Ash and Cristina were travelling by the *Timor* ?

If I thought for a moment you would look up Celebes on the map, I would ask you to do so ; but I know you will not. You and I are alike. When they tell me, in a story, that "it is important the

reader should remember the second passage branched off from the left before one came to Sir Jasper's room, and that this second passage was parallel for about ten yards with the staircase leading from the kitchen. This staircase turned round on its way to the second floor, and the reader will understand, by consulting the appended diagram, that Lady Gladys's maid was able, herself unseen, to view the " etc.—when, I say, the writer tells me to remember and work out all these things, I turn the page, yawn, and recommend Gladys and Jasper to fight it out among themselves, and let me know the result when they've done.

So I won't explain to you about the Tomini Bocht and the routes by Tidore, and why one may, on occasion, go west in order to go east. I will only say that I went back to Macassar. Questioned as to my motives by the commercial traveller, I told him I was going to look up the trade in hair-oil—which is a real trade, by the way, though it did not, and does not, come within the province of my house.

He met me in the offices of the *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij*, the day after my return, and asked me if I was looking for hair-oil there. I told him I was looking for balm of Gilead, and walked off to the ticket office. The K.P.M., like other steamship companies, does sell balm of Gilead, on occasion. I hoped it might sell some to me.

"I say, though, I thought you were after gum damar," he said, following me up. "I thought of making a little tour myself—where did you say was the place for it?"

I hadn't said, but I was quite ready to do so.

"Oh, the Aru Islands, without a doubt," I told him.

"Thanks," he said, and I left him buying a ticket for the Arus, where you can get nothing but pearl-shell—and not much of that, now-a-days. Somehow the incident did me good. I never saw him again.

I went on my journey to the islands north and east of Celebes, where gum damar is to be had, and filled two notebooks and a half with facts that I thought would be extremely useful later on. Then I began to drift south. You can't help drifting, once you are in the full tide of the K.P.M. Its steamers are the net result of three hundred years of trading in that particular corner of earth, and they go to all the places you have heard of, and all you have not—especially the latter—with such frequency and speed, and they pelt you so constantly with pictured guides, and tempt you so cunningly with additions to tickets, and bargains in the way of inclusive trips, that you drift on and on like Maeldune, from island to island, with no particular intention, at last, of ever going home at all. . . .

I did not mean to go to Amboyna, but I found

myself there, somehow or other. I looked up the history of the place, and found it unexpectedly exciting. The world has forgotten all about the Amboyna massacre—of British subjects—and the wars that ensued thereafter; all about the extirpating of cloves in other islands, to grow them exclusively in Amboyna at an advanced price; all about the enslavement of the natives, and the fact that Amboyna once was ours, for a little while. I looked these things up, and found them interesting. And the Moluccas—did I mention that Amboyna is a Molucca?—seemed, somehow or other, much, much more attractive than the Minahassa. And as the ship went on south-eastward the attractiveness increased. We came to Banda at the last, and Banda seemed to me a jolly and a delightful place; I made up my mind that I would see something of Banda.

Now Banda—Banda Neira—is not an island where you can investigate the gum damar trade. I am quite ready to allow that, but one never knows what product of interest to a big importing house may not turn up in a place like Banda Neira. So I arranged for a stop-over, and left the steamer at the port.

I will tell you what Banda is like, whether you wish or not. There is not a place in the world like Banda. I have Cristina's authority, which is better than my own, for that.

You come in in the early morning. The ship glides softly from the blue open sea into the crater

of a volcano, floored with water that is clear and still, and jasper-green. This is the harbour, and it is so deep that your great Dutch liner moors herself right among the branches of the overhanging trees. All round you, the volcano-rim, like the edge of a giant cup, shuts away the sky; you feel imprisoned, till you look at the width of the great water-floor, and see the many islets strewn about its surface. So near that you could throw a stone into its streets, you see a town; an incredible, stone-built, mediæval town, with a fortress and a castle. Overhanging the town, and throwing a sinister shadow upon its narrow lanes, mounts the cruel crater of the Goonong Api, a volcano within a volcano. Day and night, a flag of smoke or of fire flies from the red-scarred peak; the Goonong Api is not dead, and gives constant warning of the fact. It has destroyed Banda more than once during past centuries, and may do so again to-morrow.

"That is why the town is sleepy," said Cristina. I met her on the canary tree walk, near the sea, soon after I had landed. We greeted as if we had expected one another; perhaps we had—I don't know.

"Did you ever notice," she went on, "that the people who live about active volcanoes are always sleepy and lazy? One would think a volcano was the sort of thing that might keep you awake and lively. But it doesn't. Vesuvius, Stromboli, Popocatapetl, Teneriffe—it's all the same."

"If that comparison holds," I said, "one might expect a chain of active volcanoes all round this town. I never saw anything like it. Have I lost count of time, and is it Sunday—or some holiday? and where are the inhabitants anyhow?"

We—Cristina, Mrs. Ash and I—were walking slowly along a green, silent avenue of canary trees, in what should have been a suburb of the tiny town. The wind from the sea rushed down the tunnel made by the high arched boughs. There was a grassy lawn between us and the water. On the other side were houses; quaint old bungalows built of stone, with pillars and deep tiled roofs; here and there marble steps and piazzas; here and there plants growing in stone vases. The shutters of all these houses were closed; there was no one moving about the dark verandahs. There was no one on the grass beside the blue, still sea.

"Where are they?" said Cristina, looking as one who sees visions. "If you want to know, you must ride the Pale Horse to find out. He'll carry you—where they are."

"Dead?" I asked startled.

"Dead, and gone away; last year, and last century, and a hundred years ago. . . . Banda is dying. There are people in some of those houses, but most have lain empty for years. You could have your choice of a mansion to live in, anywhere about the place, for nothing."

It seemed incredible. The avenue with its wide roadway, meant for busy traffic; the level lawns

near the sea, where hundreds of promenading folk might have sauntered up and down to take the evening air; the solid, splendid building of the houses—everything spoke of large population and ample resources. Already I had wandered away from the two or three streets near the steamer, where languid Chinamen sustained a pretence of shop-keeping, and brown women in white jacket and *sarong* passed at long intervals, carrying babies or fruit. I had found dry abandoned-looking roads shut in by enormous walls, iron-grilled doors that seemed to open upon nothing, dusty, sagging porticoes—and always, no one and no one and no one. But I had had an idea that the people were merely away—I had not paused to ask where. Now Cristina had told me.

“There are a hundred or two left,” she said, as we walked on down the empty avenue, hushing our voices through some odd instinct that I cannot explain. “But they hardly count, and they seem to live mostly about the inner rooms, sleeping. It’s the strangest place I ever was in. You can’t believe that you are awake. Sometimes I think it is the influence of Banda itself, and then again I suppose the scent of the nutmegs may have something to do with it.”

“I’ve noticed it, though I did not know what it was,” I said. “Nutmegs! Of course—that subtle sort of scent which floats through everything. Yes, I can imagine.”

I broke off; I did not quite know why. The

place seemed to hold up an invisible hand, motioning "Silence."

It was late in the afternoon; the sun was slanting low under the huge canaries, and the sea was turning gold. Someone has spoken of "the infinite sadness of a summer afternoon." He was right—I am not philosopher enough to say why. But I can add this, that sad as the English summer afternoon may be, the waning day of the tropic lands holds a subtler and deeper melancholy. There is something in that eternal summer that touches one, in such hours, like one's childish thoughts of Valhalla or the Elysian Fields—something soulless, wistful, through all its unchanging gold. . . .

"Where are we going?" I asked, as we still walked on.

"To the fort," said Cristina. "I want to show you that."

Mrs. Ash marched beside us, a little robin of an old lady, her elastic-sided boots scarcely marking the dust, her thin black clothes looking, as they always did, just as if nothing at all were inside them, and as if they were propelled along by mere force of will. She stared straight in front of her all the time, deliberately abstracting her mind from Banda.

We reached the fort, and there, under the shadow of the mighty grey walls built by the Portuguese, and finished but fourteen years after the death of England's Elizabeth, Cristina told me what had brought her to the Spice Islands.

"It was Richilda Van den Hofdyk," she explained. "I had a letter from her."

"Who in the name of goodness——?"

"She's a girl, just like myself, and a very nice girl. She had heard something about me, so she wrote to me in Macassar, and asked me to come and see Banda, and, if I could, do something for her. She says she wants me to find the Golden Nutmeg."

"May one ask what that is?"

"Oh, one may ask, as much as one likes; it's what I'm asking myself all the time just now. The thing is to find the answer. No, I'd rather not go into the details just yet; it's about the most interesting thing I have come across—but—Did you ever see anything like this fort?"

I had, but not in this quarter of the world. Great stone forts with moats and draw-bridges, and gateways that run back like a railway tunnel, are not unknown to the European traveller. But here, on this fly-speck of an island, in the far end of outer Malaysia, it was an astonishing thing to see. Nor was it the only one. I had already chanced on the ruins of three others, wandering about the town looking for—I may as well acknowledge it—looking for Cristina.

"There used to be Portuguese soldiers here—in armour, with arquebuses," said Cristina, standing within the great empty space of grass enclosed by the fort, and looking up to the untrodden ramparts, where encroaching trees spread out their

greedy hands of green. "There were girls in hoops and ruffs, who cried for them when they left Lisbon, two years' journey away. It was only the Portuguese and then the Dutch, who knew the way to get here; they hid their charts, and wouldn't tell other people. And they had forts against the pirates; the seas were full of pirates, and even fifty years ago they weren't all quite gone. And they made slaves of the natives, and forced them to work in the spice plantations, and took all their land away. There were no nutmegs anywhere in the world like these. And by-and-by, the Dutch came along and took the place."

"When?" I asked; I found this bit of history interesting.

"I hate dates. It was about that Henrietta Maria time, when men had beautiful lace collars. So when the Dutch knew how good the nutmegs were, they killed all the trees in other places, and only kept them here, and made it death for anyone to carry away a plant or a seed. And you can't think what money they made. This was an island of palaces. There are some of them still. Lots of white marble, all the way from Italy—hundreds of years ago!"

Mrs. Ash, with no expression whatever on her face, stood in the midst of the fort beside us, not listening to a word. She put me out somewhat, but Cristina was used to her, and did not mind.

"They kept that up longer than you would think," she said. "In the crinoline times, when

one wore slippers with points like a chisel, and said, 'La!' they were still monopolising. But by-and-by, people did smuggle out a few plants. And then it was all up, because they began to plant them in South America, and other places. So the prices went down and down. And Banda is dying as fast as it can. They hardly trouble to pick the nutmegs now. And any people there are are half-caste, except just a few. And the planters who used to have ivory tables, and silver kitchen kettles, are as poor as Job. So that's how Richilda Van den Hofdyk came to write to me about the Golden Nutmeg—I'll tell you about it by-and-by. I can't talk in the middle of that sunset."

On the dying glories of Banda fell the glory of the dying day. We stood silent, watching. A small wind got up and cried about the darkening walls, like the spirit of the ancient place lamenting days gone by. . . .

"Would you," said Mrs. Ash, suddenly breaking her long silence, and turning to me, "would you buy your bacon at Smith's or the Stores?"

Do you know—you may hardly believe me, but it is the truth—the remark struck me as pathetic. The old lady, in her dusty black, deaf and blind to the wonders of the Farthest East, turning wistfully, in the midst of Banda's dying beauties, to dreams of Kensington, motor-buses and grilled bacon. . . .

"I would buy it at the Stores," I said, quite seriously. "Not that I have anything to say

against any other place. But you can't get better than the best."

"I will buy it there," she said, looking animated for the first time that afternoon. We walked back to the queer, sleepy hotel, in silence.

I have said before that there is no privacy in a tropical house. I did not mean to hear Cristina say that evening, when she was lying on her verandah (I being invisible on mine)—

"I like men to have clean-shaven faces, rather hard, and to fit nicely into the shoulders of their coats."

Mrs. Ash replied, with what seemed to me the most extraordinary irrelevance—

"I suppose, when a person is paid by the year, they get a year's notice or salary."

I didn't wonder that Cristina said simply :

"Bosh !"

When breakfast was over—I remember it consisted of cold cabinet pudding and cold cauliflower, among other things ; all the flotsam and jetsam of last night's dinner, as is the custom in provincial Dutch hotels—Cristina met me on the verandah. Her dress rather surprised me ; I am no hand at describing ladies' clothes, but I may safely say that it was something from the Rue de la Paix, and that the satisfaction she evidently derived from it had nothing to do with such minor questions as comfort or ease.

"I put this on," she said, confidentially, " be-

cause I shall have such a lot of thinking to do to-day."

Probably my face showed that I did not see the connection as clearly as might have been wished.

Cristina, making an impatient mouth at me, spread out her gloved hands on her gown.

"It is beautiful, don't you see?" she said.

"I like the lining, rather," was my comment.

"Nonsense."

"The stuffing, then."

"I'll whistle for Ash. What I mean is, that it goes to my head, and makes me above myself, and one wants to be made above oneself to think one's best. I am quite half-drunk on this dress. Men drink whiskey; women drink clothes . . ."

She looked round to see that there was no one in sight, and then gave the neatest little spring-bok jump into the air, clapping her tiny heels together twice before she came down.

"That's the way it makes me feel," she said. "Now we're all going to call on Richilda Van den Hofdyk. She didn't ask us to stay with her, because she has a mother, and the mother doesn't approve of Bernhardt and Ellen Terry. Is that you, dear Ash! come on, we're waiting."

I felt rather curious on the subject of Bernhardt and Terry, thus unceremoniously shipped into a galley that seemed singularly alien from them. But there was no more talk on the subject of Richilda. We walked for a long way through

what I think must be the most beautiful woods in the whole world—the nutmeg forests of Banda, never meeting a soul, except one dark-faced Malay with the demeanour of a Buginese pirate, who was engaged in peaceably picking nutmegs off boughs with a split bamboo. Giant canaries shut out most of the sun ; beneath their shade on the open brown forest floor, stood up slight nutmeg trees of twenty feet or so. There were ripe nutmegs, like apricots, on all the trees ; drifts of the opened fruits lay on the ground, showing bright lacework, the colour of arterial blood, about the satin-black stone. There were flowers, too, on the trees and on the ground, so thick that we had to kick them away as we walked—carved-ivory flowers with a heady scent of spice. In the forest, as we walked along soft-footed upon dead leaves and drifted blooms, it was very quiet, very green and cool, and the sea breathed gently far away below.

“We aren’t going to the Van den Hofdyk house,” explained Cristina. “That’s near the town, away below. Mevrouw Van den Hofdyk knows nothing about Richilda’s goings-on with me ; I’m going to meet her at the house of the Golden Nutmeg. Now don’t ask me questions that nobody can answer yet. I don’t mind telling you that the place has had that name for a generation or two, and that no one seems to know why. I think we’re coming to it.”

We were ; a narrow, overgrown path opened off the main roadway at this point, and, following it,

we found ourselves in less than five minutes at the mysterious house.

Have you ever dreamed, when a child, of wandering through a wood, and coming suddenly upon a splendid mansion that someone had abandoned—a mansion in which you proceeded at once to settle yourself, taking possession of all the furniture and all the treasures it contained ?

This was that dream. The house of the Golden Nutmeg, built of stone and marble, green-stained with rains, and cracked with earthquake shocks, stood in the midst of a grove of tangled trees, that broke all over it in waves of forest spray. Wild banana leaves, as large as hearthrugs, thrust their huge green hands under the tiles of the verandah, and touched the dark shutters of the windows. Lianas tied themselves about the stone urns by the door. There were things growing on the roof that had no business to be there, and things living among them that had less. One such thing took flight as we came up, sending an angry hiss at us as it slipped like a coil of copper-brown rope over the side of the house.

"Richilda hasn't come," said the Kris-Girl, disappointedly. "We must wait for her a little. I know how to get in."

She took a slate-shaped stone that was lying on the terrace, levered up the sagging door with it, and let us inside. We entered upon a maze of rooms that surprised me by its extent ; there must have been a dozen, opening in and out of each

other in a curious straggling fashion. They were all big, all lofty, all beautifully tiled. The furniture was colossal—acres of dining-table upheld by legs like carved barrels; towers of sideboard rising tier on tier to the sculptured Carrara ceiling; cellarets larger than any coffin I have ever seen; four-post beds that looked like the scaffolding for a house. Everything was mahogany, rosewood, marqueterie, and carved oak; nothing plain or cheap. Most of the things dated back two or three generations, and some were even older.

“What do you think of it?” asked Cristina, coming to a pause in the middle of a room that seemed to have been used as a sort of lounge. I had opened what was left of the shutters, and the afternoon sun was spilling golden pools on the tiles of the floor, and trying vainly to call forth an answering ray of light from the dulled polish of the great chests and chairs.

“I think,” I said, “that it is fairly evident ‘Todgers could do it when it chose’ about this part of the world.”

“I’ve got a suite of maple,” said Mrs. Ash, restraining herself with a visible effort, “that I wouldn’t give for the whole lot of it.” Immediately she detached herself from her surroundings, took out a flag of knitting from some pre-Cambrian pocket, sat down, and began to click and flash.

Do you know *The Island of Dreams*? I can whistle well—it is my only accomplishment—and I began to whistle the song. There was something

about this Sleeping-Beauty sort of place, lost in the woods of far-away, lovely, dying Banda, that made me dream, hard-headed business man though I am. Perhaps I looked at Cristina. I think I did.

Cristina did a curious thing. I knew the meaning of it, years after. . . . She lifted the hand that wore the great Chinese ring, and beat it on a marble table, so that the ring struck into the flesh, and bruised her finger. There was a tall oak press breast-high between us, but I saw in the dulled panes of the window what she did.

"Come on and look over the rest of the house," she said, in a rather hard voice. "I don't believe that Dutch girl is coming."

We had been sitting very quietly in the big stone and marble hall, making no noise that could be heard through the thick walls of the house, and hearing nothing but our own low voices and the chuckling of a few green parrots in the forest outside. Now suddenly, from what we had thought was an empty room at the far side of the verandah, came a sound that stopped us dead. It was a voice—but what a voice!

No; it was not anyone singing. Richilda Van den Hofdyk (Richilda Thornivale now; she married Viscount Thornivale a year after she first came out, as everyone knows) never sang; she was like Trilby, tone-deaf, in spite of her magnificent speaking voice, and unlike Trilby, she never found a Svengali to wake unsuspected music in her. She was, on that first occasion when I heard

her—how many times have I, and you, others, heard her since!—rehearsing Lady Macbeth; and she did it in a way to stir the hair on your head, and send small shivers down your spine. Speaking, Richilda could not express herself—at that time—in commonly decent English, but reciting she was perfect. Most people know of similar cases.

She had come to the famous passage about “This little hand,” and we heard her glorious voice—who does not know Richilda’s voice of gold?—trembling down from sudden passion into despair—

“All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand!”

“Good Lord!” was all I found to say.

“Just so,” remarked Cristina. “Now you know why old Mevrouw Van den Hofdyk talks about stage divorces and so on, and has pink fits whenever she finds a European steamer time-table in the house. If Richilda had twopence to spare, or could get it, she would be off to London tomorrow. She has acted in private theatricals about the islands, and everyone went mad over her. I saw her myself in a Dutch play. She was simply wonderful—the finest thing since Bernhardt, if she was trained. And she is not too old yet, very little over twenty. You can’t think how she wants to go to Europe. . . . Listen—that’s Dutch now—she is rehearsing the part of a girl who is entreating her lover not to leave her. I suppose she doesn’t know we are here. This

place is her private stage ; her mother would never allow it at home."

"She ought to," I said with conviction. "No Mevrouw has the right to bury that in the forests of Malaysia. Besides, think of what she might earn !"

"Mevrouw Van den Hofdyk doesn't care about that. She is a determined Calvinist, and thinks the stage is perdition. Richilda's her only child, too. She could afford to let her go, with economy, but she won't, and the girl has nothing of her own. You see, up till about thirty years ago, the Van den Hofdyks were so rich that everyone called the place the House of the Golden Nutmeg—because nobody could make out how a small plantation paid so well. They always seemed to have cash to spend upon everything, though nutmegs were going down and down, and it grew into a kind of legend that they had one nutmeg tree that bore golden fruit. I can't say how much of the idea was figurative, and how much plain superstition ; these out-of-the-way corners can show you curious survivals. . . . Well, Richilda swears there is something in the idea. Her uncle, who lived here with his sons, was the last about whom they told the yarn ; he and the sons all died together in the cholera year, some time in the eighteen-seventies. So, if there was any handing down of a secret, as she thinks there was, it died with them. Since then, the other Van den Hofdyks, who have mostly died out, took

away all the light furniture, and left the place as it is. No one cares to live in it; people haven't the money to keep up these big houses now."

"And this Miss—Miss Richilda actually believes that there's a golden nutmeg tree growing about the place?"

"She doesn't know what she believes. She's thought and thought, and brooded and brooded till she hardly seems sane about the idea. Still, I think there is decidedly something in what she has told me. Come in; she must have arrived by the back door while we were talking."

We found Miss Van den Hofdyk in the further room, standing with one hand on a colossal mahogany table. I need not describe her at this time of day—everyone who is likely to read this knows Madame Richilda's round Dutch face and massive flaxen hair; can tell you how she stands on the stage, with just that trick of resting her hand lightly on some support (and what an exquisite hand and arm it is!)—can picture to you her velvets and her furs, worn in the Rubensesque manner that we have come to regard as peculiar to herself. We know Richilda; or else we are ourselves unknown.

Well, then, it was Richilda who stood there—but as we knew her at the time, just a badly-dressed, fairly pretty Colonial Dutch girl.

"You dear one!" she said in English, as Cristina appeared. She kissed the little lady affectionately. Cristina endured the embrace with

politeness, and introduced me as an English friend who was fond of the theatre.

"It is not of the theatre that I shall wish to talk," said the girl. "It is about the Golden Nutmeg. Cristina, I have thought greatly, but still I do not find the secret. And my mother always recites for me the devil influences of the stage, and says she has not the single guilder. I bought me detective novels from the steward of the steamer, but still I cannot detect."

"Oh, Richilda! what have you been doing?" asked the Kris-Girl, strangling a laugh in its birth.

Richilda drew a notebook out of her ample pocket.

"Sit down. It is still the house of a Van den Hofdyk," she said grandly; and we sat. Mrs. Ash, all the time, had been knitting like the Vengeance herself, only pausing to give Richilda an uninterested bow. She went on knitting, while we talked.

"The deductive method following," began Richilda, "I first deduct that my uncle was a clever man; therefore he will not hide any secret where the first one may find. On the roof I climb, since that is the last place of which one should think. With a magnifying glass I examine every tile; some I pull off. There is nothing. In the cellar then I looked, because my uncle would much drink, for what my mother says; so I deduct that he the secret would hide where he very much would go to. All the bottles that are left I have opened, and everyone I taste——"

“ My dear Richilda ! ”

“ But I drank not much, only to see what there might be a taste of strange thing therein. For I have read a story——”

“ So I have. Richilda, didn't it make you awfully screwed ? ”

“ Perhaps—no matter. I lie down till I am good again, and then some more I have deducted. With my magnifying glass I look at all the dust in the corners——”

The click of Mrs. Ash's needles paused.

“ Couldn't you see it without that ? ” she asked, in an accent of the bitterest scorn.

Richilda flowed evenly on, calm and passionless as one of her country's canals.

“ I have from that no result. I then on my uncle's bed lay down, and his way of thinking tried to reconstruct. At the ceiling I looked, where his eyes should most often rest. From this I deduct nothing, nor nothing from the walls. I walk like him the verandah round and round, and where his eyes should naturally fall, I say—‘ Here the idea may have come to him,’ and in that place I search and search. The gutters for this reason I have scraped all round. Down the well I have gone with a ladder, and in the well there is nothing to deduct. In the common places I have not looked at all, for my uncle was a graduate of Arts, a man of great mind, and it should never happen that he could have concealed anything in a mattress, or a hearthstone, or up a

chimney. It may be that my mind is not great, or not enough great, for I cannot solve this problem. With all the deduction I have made, there is no result."

"Well?" said Cristina. She was sitting on the corner of the massive table, dangling one narrow-toed foot, and playing with the ribbons of her dress. There was something about her, all the same, that suggested she was not inattentive. There was a certain tenseness. . . . I find it hard to describe. Most people are somewhat limp, mentally and physically. Cristina never was. In moments of excitement, one could almost see her nerves tighten up like violin strings.

All the same, she spoke carelessly:

"Well, Richilda, I'm sure you have done your best, and none of us can do more. Now you'll recite for us, to reward us for coming up all that long hill, won't you?"

But of the recitation I need say nothing. Who does not know Richilda?

It was very hot when we went down the hill, through solitary dark woods to the town that lay asleep all day and all night beside the glassy Malaysian sea. Cristina, in her airy, dainty dress, flitted from gloom to gloom among the enormous trees like some butterfly that had acquired the form of a human being, while keeping all the butterfly nature. She seemed to have dismissed the problem of the day altogether from her mind; nothing less serious, less intellectual than

she, decking herself with the ivory flowers of the nutmegs, and making "fairy wands" of peeled saplings with a star-shaped bloom set on top. Miss Van den Hofdyk trod slowly and seriously, laden with thought. Mrs. Ash walked with me (she seemed to have taken an odd fancy to me of late, varied by little flashes of resentment that I could not quite understand) and broke silence as much as two or three times on the journey back to town. I do not know that I listened to her as closely as politeness demanded, but I gathered that she was telling me how to force hyacinths in a frosty winter. It was extremely hot; my collar was a rag before we got in, and my coat clung to my shoulders, limp and soaked. When we arrived at the hotel, Mrs. Ash, putting her drenched handkerchief into her pocket-as of no further use, stopped a moment at the door to explain that snow was good for certain hardy perennials, but you mustn't mistake your kinds. Then she went in.

After dinner, when the stars had begun to glow like little moons upon the water-floor of the old volcano, and the Goonong Api was sending up a pillar of vermilion light, I wandered out into the town. There is some little business in the place, and your Colonial Dutchman does not hold the after-dinner hour sacred to friendship. I wanted to see and talk to a certain trader whom I had been hearing about. He owned a good many small islands farther north, and concerning this

matter of the corner in gum damar. . . . But I forget again. You must not be told about the new tax, and what it was going to do. . . .

Well, I went out, with an excellent Sumatra cigar for company, and walked down the sea-road. And by-and-by I met a Malay woman, tripping along in those inevitably Malay heelless slippers—flip-flop, flip-flop. It was dusk, but I could see that she had a good figure, and held herself very well, with a certain pride of carriage not common among women of savage races. She had on the usual folded table-cloth of a skirt that they call a *sarong*, and the usual white combing-jacket—about the ugliest native dress there is. Her hair was hidden under an Indian *sari*, pulled half over her shoulders; by this, I judged her to be of mixed race. She slip-slopped past me in the semi-dark, and I never should have thought of noticing her, only that . . .

I don't know the name of the perfume; Cristina doesn't use it nowadays. She did then, however; it was very dainty and delicate, not so much a perfume as a suggestion that somebody, somewhere, had been picking small golden roses, the hardly-sweet-at-all kind. . . . I stepped aside and blocked the figure's way.

"Miss Raye," I asked, "what mad freak is this?"

She answered in Malay.

"You needn't trouble, I know you," I said.

"Where are you going, and where in the name of chaperonship is your Mrs. Ash?"

At this she gave in, with a merry chuckle that no Malay could possibly have given forth.

"I'm going to the native kampong," she said. "Mrs. Ash, bless her dear heart, is off to the Lutheran Church (I suppose you forgot it was Sunday) and thinks I'm asleep on the verandah."

I threw away the cigar.

"I'm going with you," I said. "You must remember I'm not quite a new-chum here now, and I don't consider——"

"Oh, but you can't come," she said. "I must pass for a Malay, or I shall hear nothing. . . . And there's no danger, really. And if there was——"

She drew aside the folds of her *sarong*. In the starlight, I could just make out the crooked handle of a kris.

"Well, Kris-Girl," I said. "You may say what you like, but I shall stay outside any house you go into."

Cristina looked at me, and saw (I think) that there was no moving me from my purpose. She accepted the situation.

"Walk a good way behind," she said; and we went on.

It was some way to the cluster of Malay houses whither we were bound. Cristina walked on before me in the starlight, swiftly, but with the dragging shuffle inseparable from the heelless bath slipper that is worn by the coloured folk of Malaysia. I admired her dexterity in managing the wretched

things ; for myself, it was as much as I could do to get to the hotel bathroom from my own room, without losing a slipper on the way, or (more likely still) kicking it into the face of the first person who happened to be passing. The Chinese slipper of Malaysia is one of the most dangerous and unmanageable of projectiles. I have seen an innocent British female tourist, of discreet age and conduct, kick her bath slipper down an alleyway as smartly as if she had been a Rugby forward, landing it unerringly upon the bald head of an Excellency who was going in to breakfast. I have seen a shy clergyman, on the Sydney-Singapore boat, hit a golden-haired variety actress in the back, and instantly flee to the shelter of his cabin, leaving the astonished actress, who had not seen her assailant, alone with a mystery and a slipper the size of a small bucket. You are bound to come to that slipper sooner or later, travelling in Malaysia—it is so universal and so cheap and cool—but you will never, never, unless you are as agile as a professional acrobat, learn to walk in it without slip-slopping it off.

Well! I tramped behind Cristina, a little doggedly, disapproving of her errand, whatever it might be, yet determined to see her through it. What I thought about during that night walk under the huge canary trees, with the warm wind blowing off the Banda Sea, and flaring my cigarette all to one side, doesn't matter.

Perhaps I was musing on the unsuitability of

too much freedom for solitary young gentlewomen of four-and-twenty or thereabouts, and considering the advantages, for such young gentlewomen, of having a sensible business head in the immediate neighbourhood, as a permanent thing.

Perhaps I was wondering if the man who had died a horrible death two years before, had been careful of dainty Cristina, and stood between her and the rough things of the world ; if she missed that care, and had grown a little reckless in consequence. . . . We went on in silence.

When we came to the clump of native houses, showing faint light through their semi-transparent walls, Cristina held up her hand, without looking round, as a warning to me, and disappeared in the shadows. I followed her, and saw where she went in. She ran up the crazy ladder leading to the doorway as lightly as a bird, for all her shuffling native footgear. I heard her say something in Malay, and then I drew back, and peeped through the outer wall. I knew she did not want me, but none the less I was resolved to stay about.

In the brown Malay house, set on low piles, and built of bamboo, there was only one rude kerosene lamp, placed on the floor. Still, a man standing outside in the dark could see all he wanted through the chinks.

Cristina was sitting among a number of Malays, men and women, helping herself to hot rice with her hands (it struck me that the quality of her

brown paint must be good). She picked bits of fish from a pile on a banana leaf, and added them to the mass, cramming the whole into her mouth with three fingers. It seemed to be a house where there was plenty for all comers ; quite a score were scattered on the floor, munching crabs' legs, curry, and pieces of the inner parts of fowls. I judged them to be the coolies ; engaged by day in unloading steamers or carrying goods. The women were apparently their wives.

Cristina was not talking much, but she seemed to be leading a certain ancient dame, in a silk jacket and *sarong*, to converse as much as possible. That was a good deal. The old lady, warmed with food and with something out of a coarse German tumbler, seemed to be relating a long story, with much gesticulation. Cristina, keeping in the dusk, and throwing in an occasional remark in Malay, listened. I am bound to say that the porters and their wives paid her very little attention. Her disguise was good, and she was not beautiful according to the native standard, else it, and she, might have been scrutinised too closely for safety.

The old woman chattered on, moving her head about excitedly, and eating as fast as she talked. I was picking up Malay by this time—the pigeon-Malay which passes current all over the Farthest East, is one of the easiest languages in the world—and I could guess at something of what was being said, but it did not seem to be particularly

exciting. A certain "Tuan Hendrik" came into the talk; they seemed—so far as I could guess—to be discussing his love-affairs. I wondered who he might be. Cristina seemed interested in his history; she was clearly egging on the old lady, by means of certain glasses of comforting "sago-weer," to talk as much as possible. I thought—but I could not be sure—that the story seemed a trifle scandalous. If so, the Kris-Girl took it coolly; she merely nodded, and held up her small, stained brown hands, with an expressive cluck or two, purely native in tone.

"They may talk about this Miss Richilda as an actress," I said to myself, "but Cristina Raye could beat her hollow at that, if she cared."

And then I felt indignant at the idea. I suppose the man does not live, the common, masculine man, who is gratified by the thought, especially the sudden thought, of seeing his dear ones on the stage. Even in the case of dear ones who are not his, and never may be, the truth still holds. Anything of the mountebank business, from leading lady at a great theatre down to a speech in the village hall, is repugnant to man where his women are concerned. I do not venture to say whether this is right and natural, or merely an outbreak of the Grand Turk that exists, suppressed, in most of us. But I do know that I hated to see Cristina masquerading as a native, and that I was rapidly growing to hate this whole detective business of hers, from end to

end. Perhaps I understood why she clung to it—what troubles it beat away from her mind—and perhaps I liked the cause even less than the effect produced.

Banda had seemed to me a much nicer place than the Minahassa, but, somehow or other, that night I began to think that it might be rather a detestable spot too. . . .

In half an hour or so, Cristina rose to her feet, placed a half-eaten piece of fish politely back in the common stock, and nodded good-bye, explaining (as she afterwards told me) that she heard her mistress's voice somewhere outside, and wanted to get off and hide before "Mevrouw" caught her away from her work.

She joined me some distance away from the bamboo house, and walked with me by unfrequented paths back to the hotel.

"Come to afternoon coffee to-morrow, and you shall see what you shall see," she whispered, as she left me.

You cannot, generally speaking, have a private sitting-room in a Malaysian hotel, because no one stays indoors except when in bed. But the great stone verandahs take the place of sitting-rooms well enough, especially when the hotel is all but empty. Most of these strangely palatial hotels are empty, or nearly so, the greater part of the time. I used to wonder if the proprietors kept them open simply because they had fallen into the habit of doing it, and couldn't stop. . . .

In an undisturbed corner of the verandah, then, we met about four o'clock—Cristina, Mrs. Ash and I. The native servants, to a loud accompaniment of *Jonges!* ("Boy!") were bringing round coffee to the various rooms. Fat Dutchmen loomed in distant perspective, pink-pyjama'd, bare feet up on "planter" chairs. But no one was within ear-shot.

By the time the boys had got round to our corner with coffee, Miss Van den Hofdyk had appeared, walking slowly down the white-hot road. Behind her came slip-slopping a little old Malay woman, withered up like a walnut.

They joined us on the verandah, and then Cristina, without pause for anything more in the way of greeting than a quickly offered cup of coffee, dashed into her subject. There was nothing frivolous or elusive about the Kris-Girl this afternoon. Sharp, hard and keen as her namesake blade, she cut across Richilda Van den Hofdyk's leisurely politeness with :

"Does she understand English?"

"Neither English nor Dutch," said Richilda, looking at the small old woman, who was standing in an attitude of subjection close beside her.

"And yet they say in the *kampong* she was married to your uncle!"

Richilda at this fairly "sat up."

"They say the untrue," she declared, her voice shaking with annoyance. "Not a truth in it. My Uncle Hendrik had her for cook in many years.

She was the very good cook. She was pretty in those days. A man is not an angel. And this old woman, if there was some Malay ceremony, it was for her quite good enough. But married, we don't call it."

"Still, she was married according to some Malay idea, and he was fond of her."

"Oh, fond! that I shall give you," rejoined Miss Van den Hofdyk calmly. "How shall it matter? She has forgot him many years ago, and she makes a little cook for my mother and me, and we give her eat and sleep."

"Now, Richilda," said the Kris-Girl, "I want to tell you, if you understand me, that you've been barking up the wrong tree, as Americans say, all this time. I do think there is something in the idea of your uncle's secret, but the way you've been trying to find it out is—just detective-story stuff. And you must remember we aren't in a detective story, you and I; we're here in Banda, in the real world. And things in the real world aren't planned out like funny puzzles that work when you get the right key-piece. They're much more ragged. And full of loose ends. You must simplify. If I were asked for a motto, to be used in this sort of work, I should say, 'Select the relevant.' That covers nearly everything. And when you've selected the relevant, cut away everything else."

She made a downward sweeping motion with her small hand.

"Cut away," she repeated. "Now, let me ask this old creature some questions."

She turned to the old woman, and spoke in Malay. I will translate, as it was translated to me after :

"Do you remember Tuan Hendrik ?"

"I remember," came dully from the dried-up old face.

"Was it true that Tuan Hendrik was a black sorcerer ?"

The old face became suddenly moved.

"No, no—never ! The Tuan was a good man, and he was very good to me."

"Then what"—Cristina fixed the woman with her sharp blue eyes, and held up a little pointed finger—"what used he to do, when he shut himself up in that room, and forbid you to come in ?"

"Why, how do you——" began Richilda ; but Cristina silenced her.

"Hush ! I don't. I am trying to get it. Be quiet !"

The old woman had been endeavouring to speak, and now the words came out in a rush :

"I do not know, and it does not matter. Why should the Tuan not do so if he liked ?" It was strange to see how her aged face was reviving, under the influence of a feeling that must have lain dead or forgotten for thirty years. Already one could understand that this dusty wrinkled hag might have been lovely once—might have been loved herself, and loved the strength and fairness of the big blond Dutchman.

"But in that room!" Cristina watched the dark, lined face.

"Why should a Tuan not come and cook, or drink, or sleep, in his own kitchen, if he wished! I tell you, there was no sorcery. He was a good man, and he was good to me. . . ."

She put both hands over her eyes, withdrew them, and looked at them, as if wondering to find no tears on their wrinkled surface.

"It is all so long ago," she said, and, none keeping her, got up, and slip-slopped away off the verandah.

"Let her go," said Cristina. "That is enough."

"Now," she went on, turning to Richilda, "you can go up to the House of the Golden Nutmeg, look under the hearth-stone of the kitchen, and tell me what you find there."

Mrs. Ash put down the *Home Gardener*, which she seemed to have been reading all through the visit, clapped her hands emphatically, and said:

"Bravo!" She then immersed herself once more in the Directions for Budding Alpine Roses.

"I do not comprehend," said Miss Van den Hofdyk. "In what way have you deduct——?"

"I'll tell you nothing now!" said Cristina. "When you've been to the house——"

Richilda was buttoning her gloves.

"I have time to go now," she said. "It will not be dark for two hours."

"Take Mr. Garden and a crow-bar with you," said Cristina. "I'm going to my room to sleep,

and not a soul is to dare to come near me till dinner-time."

"Dinner is half-past eight. I'll see to it," observed Mrs. Ash, disappearing after her charge.

Richilda was already away down the road, tramping hard, through heat that I cannot hope to describe. With something of a sigh, I went to look for the crowbar, and followed her. I did not catch her up till she was nearly at the House of the Golden Nutmeg. By this time, it was getting cooler, and the shadow of the woods was grateful.

"What do you expect to find?" I said, ranging alongside as she stooped to lever up the door. "Let me, please?"

"Thank you. I do not know. Perhaps the secret of a bank deposit that we know not of. Perhaps hundred-guilder notes. Perhaps——Oh, I'm impatient to know. Come, come!"

The kitchen (we had seen it on the day before, among other rooms) was a massive stone building, standing a little apart from the rest of the house. It was empty, save for an old oak dresser that would have brought its weight in silver, anywhere on the Continent of Europe. The late sun slanted through the broken shutters, and made spots of irregular light on the floor, which, like all the other floors in the house, was made of small neat tiles, prettily and elaborately set.

I saw at once why Cristina had come to that conclusion about the hearth-stone. It was the

only thing that could have been lifted without leaving traces.

And it had been lifted often. Although thirty years had passed since the last raising of the stone, it came away easily enough ; the cement was a mere blind, set in a bevel about the edges.

Underneath was a hole in the ground, and nine small leather bags, full, also, I do not know how many, empty.

"Money!" screamed Richilda, upon her top note. "Money, Europe, Paris, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw—ah, ah! give me your knife quick!"

She was down on her knees on the dirty floor, tearing at the bags.

"Money! ah, ah!" she screamed.

I thought her rather premature ; I also thought her prettier than I previously judged. She had such a colour in her cheeks—such a scarlet in her greedy lip——

Well, if premature, she was right. When the bags were slashed, out came gold ; good sterling sovereigns, English every one. They were all dated in the first half of the nineteenth century ; none later than 1850. They ran out like water ; they fell in heaps. They rang with the sound that only gold in heaps can give. Did I tell you that I had once been employed in a bank ? I can judge the look of a lot of coin better than most. This heap I guessed at about nineteen hundred, and I was very nearly right, as we proved afterwards.

When I turned my attention from the gold to the girl, I was astonished to find Richilda, who had been looking at the dates, squatted back on her heels, regarding the heap of coin with horror.

"Uncle Hendrik, Uncle Hendrik!" she was saying, and then something in Dutch.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The matter it is that I am the niece of a pirate!" said Richilda, in low tones of dismay.

"And I do not like it. It is a—a disgusting ancestry."

"Pirate!" I said.

"Yes. In the early time of your Queen Victoria, there was an English ship came by the Spice Islands here. And she stopped at Banda, for water. And it was said she had very much gold on board, for the buying of merchandise. In the harbour under the Goonong Api, she sank, and it was very deep, and no one knew why she shall have thus sunk in the night. But some persons were saying that the natives it had done, and that was what we were believing. But all those English, they was drowned. And my Uncle Hendrik, he went away the same night with his own ship, and not for a long time came back; my mother she tells that. And six of his serfs of the plantation, they was dead. . . . Heer Garden, it is a clear thing for me. He did that crime, and the money he never dared to show, so all the time when he was so rich, they would say it was the golden nutmeg that on his plantation grew, and

none of them knew the true. I am a pirate's niece."

"Oh, well, it's none of your funeral, Miss Van den Hofdyk," I said. "You've got what will take you to Europe; don't you worry about what your Uncle Hendrik did. As for Miss Raye, I think she's wonderful to have found it all out."

"She is my only friend," said Richilda, inconsistently. By this time she was looking somewhat more lovingly at the gold. She gathered it up in the front of her dress, rose with my help, and stood holding the coin, a heavy load, to her breast.

"It shall be consecrated to art, for to em-purify it," she said, solemnly. "It shall purchase my freedom, and that, too, shall whiten it. I want to be free. I have told my mother this, again and again; she has again and again refused me. On one day, I spoke to her the words of Hilda Wangel——"

"Ibsen's?"

"Yes. I spoke them—like flame! And she was a stone. My freedom she would not give, even for that."

"I really don't see how you could have expected her to," I said. Indeed, it seemed to me a crazy thing, to suppose that anyone would be won over from a firmly conceived determination, by a few minutes' reciting.

"Nee?" said Richilda, using the strong Dutch negative. "Don't you?" Then she did a

strange thing. She laid down the gold, took a step forward into the middle of the room, and gave forth Hilda Wangel's speech to her husband.

"Wangel, let me tell you this! you can indeed keep me here! You have the means and the power to do it. And you intend to do it. But my mind—all my thoughts, all the longings and desires of my soul—these you cannot bind! These will rush and press out into the unknown that I was created for, and that you have kept from me."

Well! Most of you who read this have heard Richilda in the celebrated revival of *The Sea-Lady*, and you will know how she spoke. Those who have not heard her can perhaps guess, by her effect on Europe, what effect she had on me there, in the strange dead room of that dead house, on an island at the earth's far ends—Richilda the tragedienne of the twentieth century, pleading for her freedom. . . .

No, after that, with all my prejudice against the stage, I would never have lifted a finger to keep her in Malaysia, had any power lain with me. I only wondered that her mother had not, after all, been influenced by the speech, given as it was. I wonder more now. Richilda has talked many a man's and woman's soul half out of its body, since those days.

A silence followed. Richilda stood with her arms hanging down by her sides, and her eyes looking out through the window. There was not much to be seen from that window—a space of stone verandah, a springing insurgence of leaves

and lianas and spraying orchid blossoms, all run wild together in the deserted garden where Tuan Hendrik had been used, no doubt, to stroll and tend his flowers, in the days when Victoria was young. You could scarce even see the sky, save for a thread of blue above the smothering forest that walled the garden in, and threatened, soon, to blot it out altogether, as the resistless forests of Malaysia do blot out the work of man, if he leaves it unguarded for a few brief years.

Yet Richilda looked as if she saw much, and far: and I, the bystander, knew that her spirit was "pressing out into the unknown that it was created for." And in her arms, forgotten, yet held close, was the gold of dead Tuan Hendrik, the "Golden Nutmeg" that had so long been sought in vain.

Dark comes swiftly, in Banda Neira of the Spice Islands. I had to wake up the "Sea Lady," and remind her that it was a long way down to the town, and that Mevrouw Van den Hofdyk would probably send out the boys to hunt for her, if she did not make haste back. So we hurried down the narrow, darkening track a good deal more quickly than we had ascended, I carrying the gold, and Richilda "pressing out into the unknown," at such a rate that I had all I could do, laden as I was, to keep up with her.

Richilda wanted to take the gold home with her, but I vetoed that promptly. I did not wish to hear of a native murder next morning. Then

she asked me to take charge of it, an honour that I thought best to decline. Instead, we used the last gleam of daylight to hunt up the local banker, and get him to put the coin in safety. I don't know what he thought ; I fancy he shut up the human side of his mind as tight as possible, and opened the banker side as widely as it could be opened. It is not every day that a bank, in the Spice Islands, gets a deposit of nineteen hundred solid English sovereigns. I will wager that Heer De Haan treated himself to an extra bottle of wine on the strength of it. Anyhow, when I saw him in the hotel, after the tardy nine o'clock dinner, that tried my British stomach so sorely, he was seated in a long chair with a big Sumatra cigar, looking as sleek and sleepy and happy as a sea-cow in a sandy bay.

Next morning Miss Van den Hofdyk came to see the Kris-Girl, and to thank her. Nothing but Cristina's innate fine courtesy, I know, prevented her from clearing away into the nutmeg forests, to escape the ordeal ; this part of her feats was always detestable to her. She succeeded in keeping Richilda from any very violent demonstrations of affection, and as for gifts such as the Rubber Queen and others had pressed upon her (gifts that she always handed over to Mrs. Ash, when she could not possibly escape them) Richilda Van den Hofdyk had quite enough good Dutch thrift about her to keep her from any danger of committing such extravagance.

She was anxious to know how the miracle had been worked.

"Tell me, you wonder-girl," she said, "how did you think these things? Is there some sense you have that no other——"

"Nonsense," said Cristina, crisply. "Here it is in a nutshell—a nutmeg shell, if you like. Of course, I saw all that stuff about deducting and following out wasn't going to bring you anywhere, so I just went down to the *kampong* and found out what woman your Uncle Hendrik was in love with, in those days. When I heard it was a Malay, of course I knew he wouldn't tell her where anything was. But all the same, she must have been about the house enough to know when he went to look for the stuff, if he had any hidden away. So I fished. And I had a bite. And then one only had to reel in the line. That's all."

"It is magic," said Richilda, sentimentally, holding the Kris-Girl's hand.

"It's something a lot more uncommon, and that's common sense," said Cristina.

Richilda left at last, declaring her intention of breaking the news to her mother that day, and buying a steamer ticket on the morrow.

"What can I do for you?" she asked Cristina, with perhaps a little too much grace.

"Send me a ticket for your first big night," said Cristina.

"I will send you fifty!" promised Richilda, liberally.

But I happen to know that when Cristina met her two years later, coming out of the Duchess Theatre in Piccadilly, she had lost all recollection of the "Kris-Girl." There is nothing people hate more than the remembrance of having been helped out of a difficulty.

CHAPTER III

THE GHOST OF MACASSAR

Is there anything in all the world so weary as a Dutch-Indian hotel ?

The "Daendels," of Macassar, was buried in its afternoon sleep. A baking wind blew down its dry stone corridors ; the blinds in the cloistered archways clicked and swung. Through the slats of the blinds the glare of the central courtyard sifted in. It was a Sahara of a courtyard, wide and dry, and coloured like the cheap blue and yellow Bible pictures of one's youth ; and it had a Biblical sort of stone-curb well in the middle, which wanted nothing but a Rebecca and a camel or two to be complete. Behind Venetian shutter doors, or stretched on long-armed planter chairs, the guests of the "Daendels" slept. The German manager, in his Pompeian-bath bedroom, slept. The native clerk, in his official tank ; the native "boys," under the arch of the great stone staircase, lay coiled and piled and sleeping.

The locust that ought to be called the brain-fever locust, whether it is or not, had started, as

usual, to celebrate the hottest hour with a continuous, shrieking zizz-zizz, somewhere among the trees out at the back. It had all the sounds to itself; otherwise, the "Daendels," at this dead hour of three, was still as the Sleeping Beauty's palace.

I wandered down the interminable stone galleries alone—of all these black and white human beings awake, alone wearing the dress of daylight hours. The restless English blood, no more resembling Dutch blood in its flow, than the swift far-running rivers of England resemble Holland's dank canals, kept me on my feet and moving, in the midst of a world of dreams. But, for all occupation I could find, I might as well have been dreaming with the rest. There was no business to be done outside at this hour; no one inside or outside to talk with; nothing anywhere to read but Dutch papers full of -ik's and -je's. The stodginess, the wearifulness, the barrenness, were a British Sunday afternoon raised to the *n*th power . . . and it happened every day!

There is a breaking point for every strain. I snatched my sun-helmet, and fled into the Hooge Pad.

Well! it was better! Down the great white road, beneath the immense *kanaris*, rolled a flood of traffic—jangling *karettas* drawn by rat-like horses, and conveying jolly-looking half-castes in clean muslins; bicycles ridden by natives and "breeds" of all sorts; buffaloes in carts; strings

of blue-clad Chinese loaded with fruit, and wearing the identical umbrella hat that we all remember in the picture books ; Malays and Indians selling hot fritters, selling curry, custard apples, ice-water, pink poison in dirty blue glasses, fowls, slippers, gold embroidery, dried fish. A motor-car buzzed past, carrying more than a full load of Celebes princesses in *sarongs* of gorgeous silks ; a party of Chinese women in blue coats and black satin trousers drove by. One white man, distinguished by a fine grey beard, an aristocratic countenance, and a suit of green cotton pyjamas, went down the road on a tricycle—I had not thought there was a tricycle left in the world. For the rest, the Hooge Pad hummed and clattered and smoked with native and coloured traffic only.

I tramped along in the hot wind and the shade that was not shady, smoking for the sake of something to do, watching the traffic, and going nowhere that I knew of. I felt as usual, save for a little melancholy that had hung about me since my ship put out from Banda Neira, a week or two before. I looked as usual—at least, no one had suggested, by word or by demeanour, that there was anything peculiar about my appearance. I slept, ate, read, did business as usual. And yet—I was going mad.

This time yesterday I had been sane. To-day I was crazy. I could not believe it, and yet proof had been forced upon me.

In the early morning, walking towards the

harbour for exercise, I had strayed on to the long wooden quays that are the pleasantest walking-ground—when space permits—in the town. The breeze comes up very fresh from the sea there; the ships lie at anchor and alongside, full of quaint sights and strange peoples; there are (an important point) fewer, much fewer smells than in the crowded town itself. I was swinging along the quay, watching the big *Duymaer Van Rumphius* sling out her gangways, listening carelessly to the songs of the native sailors as they lowered away, and thinking—if I was thinking of anything—about Banda Neira and the wicked cone of the Goonong Api against a sunset sky—when I saw, coming down the jetty within a few yards of me—
“ Mabel !

Now Mabel was in her grave since ninety-three. She had had an attack of bronchial influenza that left her out of health; a relative, going to take up an official post in Singapore, had insisted she should winter there with himself and his wife. Mabel had gone, amiably, though unwillingly—she was one of that race of gentle and yielding girls, now extinct as the dodo, who always did whatever any male creature, armed with ever so little family or friendly authority, told them to do. She was to be away for the winter, and we were to be married on her return.

She never returned. The visit lengthened into spring, into summer, into autumn. Then came a cable. She was dead.

I wrote, a short, wretched letter blotted with boyish tears. It crossed one from the relatives, short and wretched also, tear-stained also. Mabel had died of cholera. She was buried in the local cemetery. They sent me a photograph of the grave, with the name and date on it.

I had loved her very dearly; her death, for the time being, broke my life in two. One recovers from any sorrow in time; I recovered from mine. But it left me changed: a sober, grave young man of business, attending strictly to work, little interested in anything outside. . . . I will not say that there were no women in my life; but, in the common phrase, none of them "mattered." Till I took the long journey that was to lay the foundation of a new Eastern trade for our house, no woman, or girl, had given me an unhappy hour.

I had loved Mabel, as I say, very dearly; indeed, after a fashion, I loved her yet. I was glad of it. It seemed likely to save me from the humiliation that waits on affection unreturned. Deep-rooted in my heart was the conviction that no girl in the world, no matter how fascinating she might seem, could ever in reality be so sweet, so pure, so lovable and loving as my dead Mabel. Even when I found myself obliged to get away from Banda, and return to affairs of business in Macassar as fast as the steamers would take me—even then I found that my sleep had grown restless, that I could not settle to reading, and that meals were always too soon and too long for

me—I put it down largely to the climate. There was no use in putting it down to anything else. And, with the fair, distant shadow of Mabel as my guardian, I knew without arguing the matter out in words, that I should be able to keep it at that—climate.

I cannot hope to explain what I felt when I saw—SAW—Mabel, her very own self, walking down the Macassar quays.

At first I thought I had got a touch of sun ; but then, I told myself, I should be feeling the other symptoms—sickness, faintness, headache. I didn't feel any of them. I was only conscious of being stunned by this sudden uprising of the utterly impossible.

“Good God !” I said to myself, and then—“I must be mad.” I stared at the slender figure in white, as I suppose a man must stare at a ghost.

From the deck of the steamer, I watched the figure advance along the quays. It walked steadily, looking neither to right nor left. The face—Mabel's face, pouted mouth, pointed chin, large, very brilliant brown eyes—was slightly drooped. That was a habit of hers—heavens, how well I remembered it ! The figure walked with a slight swing from the hips—Mabel's walk.

She came on, without pausing, passed the boat, and——

“My God, she'll be gone !” I thought, and made a wild dash to the gangway. It was raised !

I don't know what operation of ship business

had required the raising at that moment—the ship was not due to sail till next day—but I knew better than to remonstrate with Dutch steamship officers about anything concerning their work. One might quite as profitably remonstrate with a cargo winch in full swing. I fled aft to the second-class, found another gangway, took it in three jumps, and started in pursuit of the slim white figure that I could see some distance up the quays. I caught it in a minute or two—and it was another woman!

Mabel had vanished as utterly as if the grave that had given her forth had yawned in the middle of the jetty and swallowed her up again.

I remember that I put down my helmet very tight on my head before I started back to the town. "This comes of walking about at three in the afternoon," I thought; and then—"Nonsense—the jetty is full of white people." I felt as a man feels when he has had just two glasses of whisky too much. Things seemed unreal. People passed me like flat shadows; I could not feel that they had backs or other sides. The traffic in the main roadway seemed to flow past me as a river flows past a stone; I was not part of it, or of earth. I have not the least recollection of hailing a pony *karetta*, but I was in one presently, and bouncing along through the tangle of buffaloes, water-sellers, giant-hatted Chinese, half-castes slip-slopping along the pavement. The driver put me down at the "Daendels," and

I went straight to the big marble staircase, and waked up the *mandoer* (hall-porter) with my foot.

He awoke reluctantly, and stared at me with sullen eyes, which brightened instantly at the sight of a florin in my hand.

"Who is the best doctor in Macassar?" I asked him.

"*Tuan*, best doctor the *Tuan Merkus*. He will sleep this time, *Tuan*."

"What's his address?" I asked.

The Malay gave it, staring. Malays are inveterate gossips; I knew, inevitably, that the occurrence would furnish talk for all the servants of that end of Macassar, in the grand exchange of chatter that goes on every night. Doubtless the boys of the *Tuan Merkus* would have their word too. It could not be helped. I was not going to go about with this thing on my mind a moment longer than could be helped.

The waiting *karetta* galloped me away to the other side of the town among numberless small stone villas, each with its pillared *stoep*, its stone vases of ferns and flowers set out in the stone courtyard, its stone or tile paved hall visible through wide glass doors ajar . . . There seems something about the use of stone and tile that is inevitably bound up with the Dutch character. No Dutchman—still more surely, no Dutchwoman—can live happily in a house that cannot be hosed down every day like a stable or a gaol.

Heer Merkus, used, no doubt, to invasions of

the sacred siesta hour that would be tolerated by no other Dutchman—came out of the inner room, yawning, and in pyjamas. He was, like almost all Colonial Dutch, very tall, very massive, fair, and calm. He dropped into a rocking chair, pointed to one for myself, and asked, sleepily,

“Some emergency case? Perhaps my lady, your wife——”

“I want to consult you on my own account,” I said.

“Yes?”

Heer Doktor Merkus directed a calm, scrutinising gaze upon my face. He had looked more or less through me before; he looked at me now. People who disturb other people in siesta time, about the Dutch Malayan colonies, are supposed not to do so for a trifle.

“You look to be healthy,” he stated. There was no reproach in the remark; Heer Merkus merely suspended his opinion.

“Do you see anything abnormal about me?” I questioned. “Look well.”

The calm, bluish eyes fixed me as if they never meant to detach themselves again.

“No,” came the answer. “You have not drunk. You are not unsleeping. You can eat. You do not suffer pain. Your pulse——”

He took my hand.

“There has been recently some disturbance of the nerves. You have been frightened, is it not true?”

"I have," I said. "That's why I am here. I want to know if you think I'm going mad."

Over the broad, pink countenance of Heer Doktor Merkus dawned a certain brightness. Mental cases are sometimes—paying, always interesting. To a general practitioner immersed in a monotonous round of babies, fevers, chronic dyspepsias, and minor accidents, a mental case comes as a breath of fresh wind.

"What are the symptoms?" he asked, almost briskly.

"There's only one," I said. "I've just seen a dead person on the K.P.M. jetty."

"Yes? The dead person looked how?"

"Quite alive."

"Man or woman?"

"Woman. The girl I was going to marry fifteen years ago; she died."

"Yes? She had any extraordinary circumstances attending her?"

"How do you mean?"

"She had any dog, pig, snake, something by that kind?"

"No. I don't drink, Heer Doktor."

"You do not look it, but it is hard always to be sure. She had any bright light, any cloud?"

"No. Nothing fancy of any kind. She was just walking along the jetty like you or me."

"The other people, they noticed her?"

"I—I can't say they did."

"No. You have heard her speak?"

"She didn't speak," I said, and then pulled myself up. It was only at this moment that I recollected hearing her call—"Jack! Jack!" to some invisible dog that had evidently strayed away. It was a funny thing to have imagined.

"Please to be very careful. This is important."

"I think she did say something—just 'Jack,' " I told him.

"Yes." Heer Doktor Merkus deliberately picked up my card from the marble table at his side, and studied it.

"J. E. Garden. The J. stands for which ? "

"John."

"Or other words, Jack ? "

"Yes, but—I think she was calling a dog."

"You have told me that she was not by any dog attended."

"Neither was she."

"Yes." Merkus detached his gaze from my face, considerably.

"I mean," I explained carefully, "that I saw no dog with her."

"Yes. I understand." Merkus was so considerate that I could have smacked his head.

"Is this the first time you have seen visions, heard voices ? "

Put in that way, it sounded appalling. I felt myself grow white as I answered—

"Certainly it is. Do you think badly of it, doctor ? "

"I do not think yet. I will now ask you some question."

A catechism followed, embracing my family history, personal constitution, and ordinary and extraordinary habits, down to the smallest detail. Through it all something that was in the catechism, but not of it, flowed secretly and silently. The Heer Doktor was trying something; I could not tell what. I grew tired out at last. I was suffering a severe strain, and the shock of seeing Mabel had left its traces. At the four hundredth minute question, I snapped.

"That's enough," I said. "I won't be badgered any more. You've got plenty to go on." Then I apologised, realising that I had been rude.

The apology was received with a bow and a smile. Heer Doktor Merkus seemed rather pleased about something. I realised, with a shock, that I had been put through something corresponding to the American "Third Degree," and had given the expected reaction.

"What am I to do?" I said. "What do you think about it?"

Merkus was busy with the neatest of little tablets and pencils.

"You will have this prescription made," he answered. "You shall not smoke much, and drinking you must avoid. You are not sleeping well?"

"Not very," I said. "But that was before—it has been some time——"

"Yes. This other prescription you will take for night. You will not be excited of anything. You will have quiet, agreeable society."

I saw what he was coming at.

"The society of relation is always the most agreeable."

I did not answer.

"Your relation are not in this India?"

"They are all at home."

"Yes. You are making a long stay here?"

"You don't think I'm fit for an asylum, do you?" I asked bluntly.

"Nee! Nee! Mr. Garden, you must not take up me so. I wish only to say that the heats of Celebes are not good for nerve disorder; rather they produce them. You have without doubt heard of the 'run-amuck' that is common among the natives of Malaysia, but above all it is common here in Celebes. Celebes is not healthy. It has disturbed your nerve. I prescribe these medicines not only, but a change, so soon as—Yes, this side door goes into the main avenue; you will better take it. Thank you—You have your *karetta* to wait? the sun is yet—Good-day."

"So that's the verdict," I said to myself, as I drove along through the glancing shade and sun of the great canary trees, down the dead-asleep avenues of the residential quarter. "So that's what he thinks."

A Macassar horse, harnessed to a small governess-cart full of native ladies dressed in splendid

Dongola silks, went slap-bang down the road, fighting and boxing the ground as only a Macassar horse can. A string of Chinese who had apparently escaped from a willow-pattern plate padded silently by in the dust. Rattle, jingle, bounce, my *karetta* fled down the sun-spotted avenues. There was something restorative in the look of these—now familiar—sights. It seemed, after all, an agreeable, everyday sort of world, where unheard-of things didn't really happen.

"I'm damned if I *am*!" I said out loud. The Malay driver took no notice, beyond asking where he was to go next. I told him to leave me on the wharf. I was resolved to reconstruct the scene of my vision, and see whether it would be repeated.

I walked up and down the wharf till I got tired; I saw two boats come in, and one go out; I waited till the sun set, and the genteel inhabitants of the town came forth in the brief butterfly splendour of their evening dress for the ceremonial drive. Then I went back to the "Daendels." The vision had not reappeared.

"There's nothing really to worry about," I thought. "Nothing in the world. Probably Merkus is right, and the heat has upset me. Anyhow, things like that happen quite often. The records of the Society of Psychological Research have got 'em by the hundred."

I went to bed, and had a good night—perhaps, because I had had several bad ones lately. Next morning, while I was tying my tie before a mirror

that was placed in the one spot where no light could reach it, according to the inflexible rule of hotels (why do they do it, will someone tell me ?) Merkus, quite suddenly, came into my head again. I saw the way he looked at me when I made the mistake about the dog. I saw the considerate expression, the soothing manner in which he received my explanation, the deft change of subject. . . . I saw, I felt, the dead wall that stands, in talk, in discussion, in matters of truth and untruth, between the sane and the insane.

I cannot express the horror with which it smote me.

At breakfast time, I fancied that the guests were looking at me more than they had done. I thought the manager, from his distant table, was casting curious glances. . . .

"But they think like that!" I remembered. "They think that people are watching—and persecuting—and spying." Then it occurred to me that I must not let Merkus know of these ideas. Then it occurred, again, that lunatics were secretive and cunning. Was I growing secretive and cunning?

The piece of *prikkadel* dropped from my fork. The manager was coming my way!

"He wants to know if I am comfortable," I thought, and helped myself to more *prikkadel*—minced chicken, done up in a way that I have wished they knew in other countries.

I do not know if the manager was born a

Dutchman, a German, or even a Swiss or an Italian, nor does it matter. There is only one race among foreign hotel managers, and that is their own. They are all the same manager. Everyone knows their white waistcoats, their short legs, their high shiny foreheads, the hard unblinking stare of their stony pale eyes, that look at you with a look that has had suspicion stamped and branded into it, through years of dealing with mixed humanity—even while the ready tongue is uttering politenesses and offering service.

The manager of the "Daendels" was—a manager—and he looked at me like one.

"You like your rooms?" he began.

I had been right after all. . . . Of course, when a guest takes a suite, and pays handsomely, the management are specially interested in him. . . . I answered that I liked my rooms, and helped myself to an iced *mangosteen*.

The manager remained, looking genial and suspicious at the same time, and resting his pink knuckles (they always have pink knuckles) on the table.

"Shall you require it very long?" he asked. "Because I have an Austrian, an Archduke coming in by the *Waerwyck*, and I should like to know beforehand whether it will be necessary for me to throw two suites into one in another part of the house. Yours is the best. If we should unhappily be losing you——"

"You will not have to suffer that unhappi-

ness," I said, with the brief bow that ends an interview. The manager smiled with his mouth, his eyes keeping watch, and withdrew.

Inwardly flaming, but outwardly calm, I finished my meal deliberately, and went into the reading-room, which is, in most Dutch hotels, a scoured and polished wilderness during at least twenty-two hours out of the twenty-four.

"That damned doctor!" was the matter of my musings, as I walked up and down, my boots clicking on the parquet. "Now I wonder what will be the next?"

I did not have to wonder long. In the course of the afternoon, I received an official-looking paper from the Lieutenant-Governor's office. His Excellency, it seemed, had withdrawn the permission without which no foreigner may remain over a day in the country. I was requested to remove by the next steamer—no reasons given.

I should be sorry, in cold blood, to write down just what I said of the Lieutenant Governor, and of Dutch-colonial government in general.

Somehow, the fit of rage into which I had fallen, cleared my head, and I perceived that whatever I might have seen or not seen down on the wharf, whatever Merkus might have believed, said, or circulated, I was not mad. I clung to that as to a rock.

Then, how could I account for long-dead Mabel out of her grave, and walking down a steamer wharf in the light of twentieth-century day?

I didn't account for it. I went to the post-office, sent a telegram to the steamer that I knew was lying at Banda, and asked Cristina to come to Macassar by that boat. I knew that she and Mrs. Ash intended returning sooner or later, so there was nothing very unreasonable about the request. I ended it with "Bring your kris."

"That'll fetch her—in two senses," I said to myself, signing the *radio*. Then I went back to the "Daendels." I had informed the manager—who, of course, was entirely ignorant of the arrival of any Government message—that I intended going on to Borneo by the boat that left at the end of the week, my next destination being the big oil town on the east coast. I knew that I should be allowed to go, as Borneo is under yet another Governor. They have them to shy sticks at, down in the Eastern Seas.

A day or two later, the *Van Outhoorn* came in, and I was on the jetty to meet her. Cristina, in the most fascinating of her many pink dresses—she had a love for pink—waved to me from the gangway, and so—strange to relate—did Mrs. Ash. The manner of the salutation was characteristic of each, Cristina waved a handkerchief dainty and delicate as the wing of a white butterfly. Mrs. Ash flapped a large brown volume, which I afterwards discovered to be somebody's *Journal of Arctic Research*. One of the iceberg and Polar Bear pictures fell out of it, and fluttered down on the quay, where it came to rest on the

top of a crate of custard apples that were literally melting away in the sun. I wondered vaguely whether, if Cristina took a fancy for Arctic travel, Mrs. Ash would bring books on Borneo and India with her, and read them in the midst of the eternal snows? I was quite sure that, whatever she might do, she would not flatter the Arctic by taking any notice of it. . . .

The "Daendels" seemed a pleasanter place that evening. The dreary waste of reading-room suddenly blossomed into a drawing-room—a homely drawing-room—you almost expected a fire. . . .

Cristina, in another pink thing—I recall that it had edges you could see through, and was buttoned with roses, or tried to make you think it was, looked amazingly pretty. Mrs. Ash was dressed with exceeding respectability in thin black and a real cap: she had mittens, too—when does one see caps and mittens now-a-days?

Somehow, the look of the two sitting there, with their sewing and their books, made me realise sharply that I was not a married man. I do not say, made me realise that I was a bachelor. No man minds being a bachelor. There is a jolliness, a freedom, a flavour of pipes and slippers and beer, about the very word. . . .

But, as I say, there come times in the life of a bachelor when he realises that he isn't married. That bits of stitchery, and high-heeled shoes set comfortably on fenders (I do not suggest that

there was a fender in the "Daendels:" I only say that there was the atmosphere of one), and easy, leisured talk over the doings of to-day, and the prospects of to-morrow's doing, don't come into his life. You can be a bachelor all day with perfect comfort; you can be a bachelor, very satisfactorily, on all nights when there is entertainment of any kind. But on the nights when you are at home, in your boarding-house, chambers, hotel, what not, you are not a bachelor. You are just a man who hasn't got a wife.

Talking things over is the especial sport and pastime of the married. If you talk things over at your club, you will find yourself quarantined for a bore. If you discuss your doings of to-day and to-morrow at a dinner party, you will block the courses, and induce your partner to wish for your speedy death. But your wife actually wants to know—queer being!—what you said to the general manager, and what he answered, and how you then put the matter, briefly and ably, to him, and how he hadn't a word to say. She is excited to hear that you almost lost the train coming home, but relieved on knowing that you managed to catch it by running all the way down the stairs after the lift was closed. She debates anxiously the question of thin overcoat or none, now that the days are "drawing out"; she discusses with serious consideration the right place to sow the scarlet runners. . . .

Well! on that still, hot evening in the library

of the "Daendels," in company of the two women reading and stitching and ready to talk over my affairs, I realised, with the unpleasant feeling that attends the putting down of a foot on a non-existent step, that I was not a married man. That the loss of Mabel, coming at a critical age, and turning away my attention from all thoughts of "settling down," had caused me to miss something, of which Mabel herself was only a part—something, perhaps, that mattered—something represented by those dresses and books and bits of sewing, and other trivial little affairs, that mounted up into a sum by no means trivial.

I had actually forgotten that Cristina was speaking.

"Well, Mr. Garden, after putting our programme out by ten days, I hope you've furnished yourself with a suitable excuse."

"Yes," I answered. "You can take your kris out of the sheath: it's going to be wanted—I think."

"Ah!" said Cristina. She did not look at Mrs. Ash, and she was not near enough to that respected lady to kick her on the shins, but nevertheless some signal must have passed. For Mrs. Ash got up, gathered her books, papers, and work together, and tripped neatly out of the room. When she was young, I will swear she "tripped," like those Dickensian and Thackerayan damsels who were deliberately taught (I have it on the authority of one of themselves) to put the

toe down before the heel in walking. Look at the engravings of the period, and at the chisel-shaped slipper pointed out under the crinoline; realise that the girls of that day were actually compelled to walk like fowls, rather than plantigrade animals; and thank your stars that your sister or your sweetheart "flourishes," as they say of historic characters, in the age of the suffragette.

Mrs. Ash, in the sixties, had been taught to "trip." Now she tripped. Although the action was not ungraceful, and suggested, somewhat pleasantly, an atmosphere of dried pot-pourris and faded looks of beauty, of crystal chandeliers, cabbage-rose carpets, and slanted Venetian blinds, one could realise that it was not eminently adapted for climbing tropical mountains and racing about lakes and ruins.

"She's wonderfully plucky to stick it the way she does," I said, as the gauzy black figure vanished down the verandah.

"Ash? She's a dear, a darling little wooden Mrs. Japheth out of the ark; I wouldn't change her for worlds."

"We're awfully liberal with our 'worlds'; but I don't suppose Mrs. Ash would give you much for another world or so."

"She, poor dear? she wouldn't give you a half-hardy bulb for a dozen of them. It's less world, not more, that she wants . . . but about your affairs?"

I should have been content to leave them for a little ; it had seemed, in that moment, as if we were nearing the debatable ground of Cristina and her travels, but . . .

"I will tell you from the beginning to the end," I said, and I did.

"Now tell me," I said, "am I mad, or has something happened that is out of the order of nature ?"

Cristina got on her feet, and began marching up and down the library, hands thoughtfully clasped behind her back, head a little raised. She walked so for quite ten minutes. At the end of that time she said "I am glad you sent for me," and then went on walking in silence. The evening traffic of Macassar whirled madly up and down the Nooge Pad outside. Carriages, motor-cars, *karettas*, conveyed tall, intensely clean Dutchmen in white suits, and massive Dutch ladies in Paris dresses and hats, to call upon their friends or to see the one small picture show of which Macassar (very literally) boasts. Endless, rainbow-coloured native crowds flowed by in the electric light that made the town as bright as day. From the immense dining-room of the "Daendels" came clinking of glasses and plates, and loud talking in iks and je's. A giant lizard, somewhere about the cornice, swelled out its throat, remarked malignantly "Tuc-too!" and then subsided into silence.

As if that had been the signal for which she was

waiting, Cristina stopped her walk, flowed into a rocking-chair (she was incapable of "dropping") and fixed me with her bright blue eyes.

"There are some things I want to know," she said. "First, tell me all you can about Mabel."

I told her the sad little story, leaving nothing out. She listened to it without emotion, which somewhat surprised me. I should have thought that any woman, anywhere, would have found this tale of love and separation and death appealing.

"She is cold," I thought. "Bright and keen as the blade she is nicknamed after—but cold as the steel itself."

Well, it was nothing to me if she was as cold as the icebergs in Mrs. Ash's misplaced book. It was with Cristina's intellect that I had to deal, not with her heart.

She crossed her knees lightly, and regarded the point of the uppermost shoe with some interest. Like all women who have pretty feet, she was very choice with her shoes. This one was of golden bronze, with a needle toe, and an absolutely wicked heel, and it made her foot look small enough for a fairy.

"Tell me this," she said, twittering the shoe about, so as to catch the rays of the electric light on its golden polish, "when you saw her on the jetty, what was she wearing?"

"Wearing?" I answered, somewhat astonished by the frivolity of the question. "Why, what

other women wear, I suppose. I did not notice anything in particular."

"She did not seem different from the rest?"

"No. She wasn't wearing a white robe and a palm, if that's what you mean, and I didn't observe a harp. She was just dressed like a woman."

"Had she a hat on?"

"Yes—the sort of hat that other people have."

"That would be a large, deep, waste-paper-basket shape of hat," said Cristina. "And her dress would be something slim and white, and not very noticeable. This year's fashions are very simple."

"I suppose so," I said, wondering what she was driving at.

"You say she died in eighteen ninety-three?"

"That was the year," I said. Ninety-three! Ninety-three! Again through my brain sang the wild, wind-like music of Stevenson's lament—

"Sing me a tale of a lad that is gone—
Say, could that lad be I?"

No, he was not I. Twenty-four and thirty-nine—what had they in common? No one thing—except love for, reverence for the memory of, lost Mabel.

"Do you remember the fashions of ninety-three?" asked the Kris-Girl, quietly and distinctly.

I saw in a flash what she was driving at.

"Why—why—they were very extravagant, were they not?" I stammered, still a trifle dazzled with this new light.

"I can tell you just what they were. I was only nine years old then, but I can recall exactly what my mother and my young aunts used to wear. They wore tiny close-fitting toques or bonnets, such as no girl ever wears now. They had immense sleeves, stiffened out like wings, and their skirts were sometimes seven or eight yards round, flapping all over the place. They looked as unlike the girls of the present days as——"

"I see what you mean," I burst in.

"I'm not quite sure that I see myself—yet," she said slowly. "But I know one thing—you might have had a vision, or call it an illusion, of Mabel dressed as you saw her last, but I really do not see how you could have a vision of her dressed in the fashions of to-day, which she never even dreamed of, and which you wouldn't know how to reconstruct out of your own head anyhow. If the girl you saw on the jetty looked like other women, depend on it, she was like other women. If she'd been dressed as your *fiancée* used to dress, she would have stood out from the crowd like a griffin or a phoenix, or any other fabulous monster you like to name. And everyone on the jetty would have been staring at her."

"Do you know," I said, staring at her, "that with all the things Dr. Merkus asked yesterday, he never even hinted at that!"

"No?" said Cristina, with a small fine smile that did not compliment the doctor. "I suppose he had made up his mind on the whole question before he began. Now let us get down to essentials."

"Your way," I said, with a touch of admiration.

"No. The commonsense way. I've no patent on common sense. What do you in the bottom of your heart, suppose you saw?"

"I haven't an idea. It was because my mind was such a blank that I——"

"One always has an idea. Cut the way clear to it—give Truth a hand up from the bottom of the well."

"It's impossible——" I began, wavering.

"Never mind. Go on."

"Well, if I think anything, I think it was she, but I know it couldn't be."

Cristina smiled.

"You see, you had the idea. Now let's go into it. You will not mind my asking some questions about her—Mabel—I don't know her other name."

"Mabel is good enough," I said. What did it matter whether a dead little girl were "Miss'd" or not?

"How old was she when she died?"

"Not quite nineteen."

"How old when you last saw her?"

"Seventeen and a half."

"Poor baby," said Cristina, with such gentleness that my iceberg theory suddenly flew to the four winds of heaven—to collect itself again, however, before very long.

"She was very sorry to part with you?"

"Very! Very!"

"But she was well taken care of, and there were pleasant people with her?"

"Yes. Her own relations. Her aunt and uncle, and the secretaries. He took a brace of secretaries with him. They were all of them as kind to Mabel as they could be. She wrote to me about it. She had a very happy voyage—poor child!"

"Would it hurt you too much," asked Cristina, "to show me some of her letters?"

"How did you know I had them with me?"

"I thought you were that kind of man," said Cristina, very simply.

"It would not hurt me. These things don't hurt after the first two or three years. They leave you changed—yes—but you take up life again."

She sat as still as a stone, looking at me. I suddenly remembered the personal application of my words, and wondered if she thought they had been meant for her. I wondered, too, how far they fitted her case.

I left her there in the big empty reading-room, immobile, with the electric glare from above whitening the locks of her soft dark hair. I won-

dered, as I went to my room, what kind of an old woman she would make when it came to the days of real snowy locks; I wondered who would see that old age. . . . Not the casual acquaintance of an Eastern tour—for certain.

With the letters I brought back a photograph of Mabel's grave. They were all tied up together in a little Indian box of inlaid sandalwood and silver. It was years since I had opened it; the papers were yellow with being shut up, and the photograph was turning pale.

Cristina took the latter out, and examined it in silence. It was a simple thing enough—a grave fenced round with iron rails, and headed by a small white cross. The lettering had been new when the photograph was taken; it stood out very clearly—

“MABEL MEREDITH

DIED 29TH NOVEMBER, 1893

AGED 18.”

Cristina looked long at the picture.

“Who wrote the inscription?” she asked presently.

“The inscription? her aunt—or her uncle, I suppose. They must have paid for it. The Merediths were not—were not very well off.”

Cristina said nothing.

“May I take it to my room with me?” she asked presently.

“Certainly you may.”

"I wonder, might I ask you——"

"I am sure you might, though I don't know what it is."

"Don't be too sure. I was going to ask you for some of her letters."

I hesitated a moment, but no more.

"There's no reason in the world why you should not see them," I said, putting the box in her hands. She slipped the photograph inside and closed the lid.

"Good night," she said gravely. "Sleep well, and don't dream of poor little ghosts." The stars showed the flutter of her light dress as she crossed the open courtyard.

She was not to be seen next morning. I went out to look for curios, in that main street which promises so much, and provides so little, save cheap German crockery and lamps, English cottons of a jolly-Bank-Holiday character and draperies of the kind you can buy much better in Regent Street. I had just refused, for the fifteenth time, the inescapable beaten silver scarf that worries the traveller right through from Port Said to Hong-Kong, and had turned with extreme weariness from the five-hundred and fortieth ugly Japanese tray, when I caught a glimpse of Cristina and Mrs. Ash, getting into a *karetta* at the door of the steamship company's office. The manager came out after them, talking and smiling. I could see at a glance that Cristina had thought it worth while to expend

a few of her carefully hoarded fascinations on him. For what reason?

The *karetta* plunged into the whirlpool of galloping horses, bullock-carts, padding Chinese, slip-slopping Malays, soldiers, hot-pancake sellers, half-naked Dyaks, tall pink Dutchmen dressed in gleaming white. I followed on foot, wondering. I supposed I should be allowed to wonder indefinitely unless, or until, Cristina had finished her work. Somehow, I did not doubt that she would finish it. And all the time, I had not an idea what she was at.

It was getting dusk when I went in again—as much as one ever goes “in,” about the tropic world. “In,” for this occasion, meant a rocking-chair on a white stone terrace (I wonder if the American acquired their rocking-chair habit from the early Dutch settlers?) with tables in the pleasing shape of mimic liquor-barrels beside me, and drinks thereon. The traffic of the Hooge Pad went rattling and hoofing and chug-chugging by, beneath the cathedral-like arcade of the great *kanaris*. The sun had set: Macassar was abroad, and you might hope for dinner in the course of some two hours and a half, if you survived.

I sat there, contented enough, with my cigar and the inevitable liqueur, thinking of I do not quite know what, and enjoying the relief from the shadowy anxiety that had tormented me of late, but that had taken flight beneath the clear

daylight of Cristina's common sense. Whatever might be the result of the Kris-Girl's investigations, I was satisfied that madness had nothing to do with the thing I had seen. I could not understand the visit to the steamship office—unless, which I didn't believe, it had been unconnected with my affair. I put that out of my head, and tried to guess what her next move would be. There was a queer old mandarin in the Chinese quarter, reputed to be something of a wizard, and to know more about the things of the occult world than could be known by people with plain white skins and heads unpigtailed. . . . She might have—probably had. . . .

I cannot say how astonished I was when I saw the thin-edged pink dress beside me, and heard Cristina, unaccompanied for once by the inevitable Ash—speaking. Somehow, I had not expected—

“Mr. Garden,” the low, pleasant voice was saying, “I want to tell you that I had rather not go on with that investigation.”

“What!” was all I found to say. I had risen to my feet, and stood staring at her. It was dark now; a silver moon, horned like the buffaloes in the Hooge Pad, looked down a long, long way from the tops of the *kanaris*. Very pale and wan it seemed in the screaming glare of the electric lights. I could not tell whether the Kris-Girl was pale too, or whether it was only the lights that made her look so.

"Why do you wish to give it up?" I asked.

"I wish to give it up," she repeated. "You may rest assured that you personally are all right. Let it go at that. You won't be sorry." And again, beneath the pitiless clarity of the electrics, I thought I saw her face turn pale.

"If it troubles you—if it's tiresome——" I said.

"It isn't. I am interested. But you would do better to take my advice, and let it go."

I have no doubt that such situations are common enough; probably, every man and woman in the world has once, at least, been advised to hold off from some subject of inquiry, because he or she would be better without knowing. It is, without question, a "stock incident" in the drama of life. I could give dozens of instances if I paused to think, and so could you. But I could not—nor could you—give dozens, half dozens, or even one or two, instances when the advice thus offered was taken.

I acted like everybody else. I said I would rather know. Who would not run the chance of pinching his fingers in the hinge of a forbidden door, for the certainty of seeing inside?

There was a silence of quite half-a-minute. Then Cristina, looking not at me but at the clattering stream of Macassar's evening callers, said lightly—

"Why, then, I'll tell you——"

I waited, breathless. What was I going to hear?

"As soon as I know myself," said Cristina, and went back into the hotel.

I lit another cigar, and pondered on the curious ways of women.

"But she isn't 'a woman,'" protested some inner voice.

"Why not, pray?" asked I.

"She's different," said the voice.

"They always are 'different' when it comes to that," said I, and like Mrs. Primrose, for the second time in this history, I "fell into a great fit of laughter."

"Comes to what?" said the other Garden, who was not laughing at all. "How many women can a man be in love with?"

"Oh, damn it, nobody's in love with anybody, that I know of," I said, and the other Garden went out like a candle—or as a candle used to do, when we had such things. And I sat on my rocking-chair, swinging about, and thinking of where I was on the map, and wondering why it wasn't stranger. And I thought of R. L. Stevenson's—

"There's nothing under Heaven so blue
That's fairly worth the travelling to . . .
. . . But whereso'er the roadways tend,
Be sure there's nothing at the end."

A Dutchman, like all the other Dutchmen of the extreme East, which is to say that he was tall and stoutish, and pink and scrubbed very clean, came up the stone steps of the verandah.

"Heer Garden?" he said, removing his hat. I recognised him as one of a firm upon whom I had been calling.

"About that gum damar?" he said.

And I became a man of business.

The Borneo boat was not due to leave till the end of the week. I had still some few days' grace. Half of every day I occupied in conscientious sight-seeing, together with Cristina and Mrs. Ash. We saw over the fort; we went to the Spermundé Archipelago; we visited the Chinese and Malay *kampongs*; we drove to the waterfalls. I do not think Mrs. Ash enjoyed herself at all; I am sure I did not, for Cristina seemed preoccupied, and was clearly occupied in mind with matters quite other than sight-seeing most of the time. During the late hours of the afternoon, she was never to be seen. I did not ask what she was about, knowing that it concerned myself, and that she would speak all in good time, but not a moment sooner.

As for her chaperon, I had begun to develop an odd sort of liking for the plucky old lady who was earning her salary so hardly. I don't know that it is in the story, but I choose to say that I gave Mrs. Ash what Americans call "the time of her life" one morning, when Cristina was occupied, alone, and the old lady was marooned out on the verandah with her North-Sea fishermen's knitting, expressing in every line of her countenance an

ineradicable contempt for the "dirty blacks" who surrounded her. The Rajah of Palontalo was one—he had stopped to have a liqueur on the *stoep*; some three-parts-naked coolies, shifting luggage in the blinding sun outside, were others, coming under the condemnation, whom it was clear that Mrs. Ash did not differentiate in any degree from His Highness.

"Come out with me, if you aren't busy," I said. "I've been asked to call on a business friend, and you might like to meet his wife. I hear she's the smartest housekeeper in Macassar."

"Thank you, I should like it," said the old lady briskly, pulling a pair of light-coloured kid gloves out of her pocket. She was (of course) already bonneted; she put on the gloves as we drove away down the avenues. I thought her a little formal, but Dutch people like formality in their callers. Mrs. Ash buttoned up the kids, which were so pale as to look almost white, and regarded them with satisfaction. I think she must have had a pretty hand once; it was still small and neat.

When we came back to the hotel, the old lady, for the first time in my acquaintance with her, was pink in the face, and almost excited. It was close on twelve o'clock and very warm; we saw Cristina coming in as we drove up.

"I have had," said Mrs. Ash deliberately, as we met on the *stoep*, "a most delightful time."

"I am so glad," said Cristina. "Been sight-seeing?"

"God forbid," said the old lady piously. "Mr. Garden has been so good as to take me to call on Mevrouw Van Noordwyck. And I have seen her kitchen, and her bedroom, and her first spare bedroom, and her second spare bedroom, and her children's room, and her dining-room, and her drawing-room, and her store-room, and both her pantries, and the scullery. And——"

She held out her ceremonial visiting gloves, spotless as when we started.

"I tested things," she said. "Everything. I trailed my gloves as I went; I wiped them on things, my dear girl. I touched the floor with them when she wasn't looking. . . . Cristina, the Dutch are a great nation, and deserve to have colonies nearly as good as our own—though I must admit I did grudge them Java. . . . I will never do so again."

She extended her gloved hands.

"Clean as new milk," she said. "They are a great nation."

We walked in to lunch.

"*Prikkadel*," said Mrs. Ash, using a Malay word for the first time, in her agitation. Usually she scorned the heathen tongues that beat about her unheeding ears, and calmly gave her orders in English.

"She has a linen-room—I didn't tell you about that," said Mrs. Ash. "She couldn't use all the linen in it. Not if she lived a hundred and fifty years. I have more respect for the Dutch than—Water! Soda water, please."

I translated.

"We had a very pleasant talk, while you were with the husband," went on Mrs. Ash, galvanised to surprising fluency. "She told me all about the way they cheat you in the market—or try to. And how hard it is to find all the things you want fresh for the rice-table. And about the laundry-men. A most agreeable morning. She has twenty-seven——"

I do not know what she had twenty-seven of, for Cristina at this moment had a slight coughing fit, and some words were lost.

"No lace," said Mrs. Ash emphatically. "Crochet and edgings. Most respectable. She tells me that the wife of the Assistant Governor has——"

Cristina was talking to me—rather rudely, I thought—so I did not hear what the wife of the Assistant Governor had. When I came to the surface again, Mrs. Ash was just finishing a sentence with—

"Of course her position makes her a law unto herself, but I may say that the really nice Dutch-women do not approve of it. They think like me that no matter how large your stock may be, simplicity is necessary, to avoid confusion with the——"

There was another gap here. Cristina, oddly enough, could not make the Malay waiter understand her, and called me to help. When I had straightened out the difficulty, Mrs. Ash was just concluding—

"As for me I call it simply demi-monde. And Mevrouw Van Noordwyck is of my opinion. A most agreeable morning. I forgot to mention that she uses, personally, four sets of bed-linen a week, and goes over all the wash and the market accounts. There are not many like her in the world."

She contrived—I do not know how—to give this last statement the air of something pious. It was actually the last, for she shut up like an umbrella, and talked no more that day or the next.

But I owed to the morning's excursion a new understanding with Mrs. Ash, which—I told myself—was well worth the little trouble it had cost. I knew Mevrouw Van Noordwyck, and I had been certain that her house would prove a paradise to the poor lady who had seen so many "sights," and cared so little about any of them. I had no other motive than a good-natured one. Still—it put Mrs. Ash on my side.

"What side?" I asked the other Garden, who had begun to talk.

"As if you didn't know," he jeered.

"I do not know," I said to myself, determinedly.

Somehow or other, the week went by, and it was Saturday.

Our boat was to start late in the afternoon; she was due to arrive in Macassar about nine o'clock in the morning, and would just have time to land her cargo and proceed before dark. It was the *Duymaer Van Rumphius*, I remember

—the very ship that I had watched away from the jetty on the day when I saw the apparition. I went down to the landing stage to see about cabins, accompanied by Cristina and Mrs. Ash. They had been unable to promise any particular accommodation, at the office; they told us we should have to take what we could get when the ship had discharged her passengers for Macassar. It was a busy time of year.

Somehow the sight of the *Duymaer Van Rumphius*, with her piled-up strata of white decks, and the glittering range of plate-glass windows looking forward from the first-class lounge, recalled with unpleasant vividness the day when I last had seen her. The old dread began to creep back. Could a man safely call himself sane, when he had seen the dead alive, and walking down Macassar jetty, past the *Duymaer Van Rumphius*, in full glare of a tropic moon? And it was Mabel I had seen: Mabel at seventeen, as she had left me, in the year 1891; no chance resemblance, no fancied likeness in some stranger girl, born of the unsatisfied, old wish to see my young love again. . . .

Had I wished to see her? I did not know. I supposed I must have. Of course! I had always wanted to see her again.

That was it. I must have been wishing very much, and the wish projected itself—

But in that case, what about the dress?

"I give it up," I thought wearily, and turned

my attention to handing Mrs. Ash and Cristina over the gangway of the ship. She was fast to the jetty; her passengers were disembarking. We interfered with them somewhat; it was necessary to draw aside from the gangway, once on deck, and let the stream go by. Mrs. Ash found a seat on one of the deck lounges. I stood idly watching the passengers. I don't know where Cristina went to, but presently she appeared at my elbow, a trifle out of breath. And again, as under the electric lights the other night, I thought she looked pale.

I don't think that, in real life, people "get warnings" of what is going to happen; although I will allow that the "warning" is a stock property in the world of books. If you remember, you did not get warning of it yourself. You recall what I mean. It came when things were all right, and when you had every reason to suppose they were going to remain so—when you were careless and happy—coming home from a jolly day at the races, perhaps, and "feeling good," or taking a happy evening over an old pipe and a new book. And the door opened, and they said someone wanted to see you. . . . And after that, nothing was ever the same. But there is no use in saying you had a warning or a presentiment.

I had none at that moment. I only thought that Cristina had been running about the boat looking for cabins, and wondered at that, or anything else, putting her out of breath. I had not

travelled so much in her company without having the difference between the lungs of four-and-twenty and the lungs of nine-and-thirty, rubbed home pretty hard. And here she was, just at my elbow—out of breath.

“Mr. Garden!” she said, very low—but that might have been lack of strength to speak loud.

“Yes?” I said, turning round. She was beside, a little behind; she was dressed in one of her usual modish white clouds with fluttering edges; she had a hat that hid three-quarters of her face.

“Mr. Garden! remember I warned you. I would like to warn you more definitely now, but I can’t. I can’t help your knowing. You would know.”

“Know what?” I asked.

For answer, Cristina fairly pulled me round, face towards the descending stream of passengers. Then she shut both hands tightly round the ivory handle of her parasol, and looked—not at the passengers, but at me.

I think she must have seen something strange, for in that moment, past me within a couple of yards came a slim girlish shape, helped through the crowd by the arm of a strong, elderly man with white hair and pointed beard. I did not know who the man was: I had never seen him before. But the girl was—Mabel.

Mabel—in modern dress, with her bright fair hair parted and drawn back, a little higher than I remembered it in eighteen-ninety-one, but the

same hair, the same girl—Mabel, chattering, laughing, turning to speak to the man beside her; Mabel, with a basket of feather flowers that she had bought from a Malay, and was trying to shield from injury in the crowd; Mabel, here in Celebes, and alive.

I do not know what I thought. I believe I was incapable of thinking, in that moment. I simply stared.

Then I was conscious of Cristina's hand laid on my arm, and Cristina's voice saying—could it be, with a choke in it?—

“Come away.”

I came—I don't know why. I was scarcely capable of thinking or acting for myself, and was conscious of nothing, very clearly, until I found myself sitting by Cristina on a deck seat. The seat was on the quiet side of the ship; we could see nothing but boats and blue water, and were seen by no one.

“Do you want to know who that was?” asked Cristina.

“It was Mabel,” I said. “But I——”

“It was Mabel—Mabel Molyneux.”

“Molyneux?” I said. “But her name wasn't—and she is—Miss Raye, if you can't help me out of this tangle, I shall certainly think the doctor was right and you are wrong. I feel as much out of my mind as any lunatic in Bedlam.”

“I was wrong to try and break it,” said the Kris-Girl. “You shall have it straight. Your

Mabel did die, and was buried, in 1893. She didn't die of cholera. She died when Mabel—Molyneux—was born."

I tried to speak.

"Let me finish, it's best. Molyneux was her uncle's secretary; he travelled with them. He fell in love with her at once. She remembered you—till they got to Singapore. Then—don't think hardly of her—she was only a baby, poor little soul, and Molyneux was accounted the most attractive man in Singapore—they called him 'the Apollo of the East'—then, she forgot."

The Kris-Girl paused and clasped her small hands—what tiny hands they were!—more closely yet about the ivory parasol-handle.

"And they wouldn't tell me she married him!" I exclaimed. "In God's name, why? I was no baby if she was."

"They could not tell you," said Cristina very gently, "because—Molyneux had a wife."

I was silent for quite a long time—or, at least, it seemed so; perhaps it was no more than a minute or two. Time loses all significance in such moments.

There was no need to tell me the rest. I knew it now—the secret that had been hidden from me for fifteen years; not for my sake—who cared about me?—but because of Mabel's name. Mabel—the little, gentle soul who had fallen upon evil days; Mabel, who had not known how to resist "the Apollo of the East." What a name, and

what a man he must have been—no doubt, a blatant, smirking—

“It is a curious thing, but I met him once,” went on Cristina. “He was not what you might have thought. He was a fine character, but a man most unhappily married. I believe he and—Mabel—were happy for a while. . . . They ran away to some one of the islands. And he was drowned—it was a dreadful story—and her people took her back. No one knew about—Mabel Molyneux. Molyneux’s brother adopted her, and she has been brought up by him and his wife. The old lady went down with them, but you would not have noticed her. They are travelling about the Dutch islands, or rather, they have been—they go back to Singapore to-day.”

“They are Singapore people?” I asked. I still felt rather stunned; it seemed strange to me that I was not suffering more.

“Yes . . . I know what you are going to ask. I don’t think the story was guessed at till lately—but Mabel Molyneux has grown up so like her——”

“But, good God!” I said, “she can’t be seventeen—it’s only fifteen years and three-quarters since——”

“She is not sixteen. You must remember she has been brought up in the East; an Eastern reared girl at sixteen is fully eighteen to look at.”

I said nothing for some time. The shining, salt-blue water of Macassar Harbour was before

me, canoes plied up and down, the air was full of the spice-and-salt-fish perfume of the Eastern island world. But what I saw was England; grey water and black ships, and slapping waves; the dreary Southampton pier in a February rain-storm; young Jack Garden, who now was young no more, holding a girl in his arms as the last bell rang, and the calls of "Any more for the shore?" began sounding over the steamer *Branksome Hall*, bound for far away. . . .

Black ship and grey water faded; the pale, sweet vision of Mabel died. Again there was blue sea and brazen sun before me; the canoes were paddling under the big white steamers; the Kris-Girl, warm and living and alive, sat beside me, with sympathy and pity in her eyes.

I do not know why that pity should have irritated me, but it undoubtedly did. Somehow, I did not want to be sympathised with—or did not want her to provide the sympathy—or—

God knows what strange tangle of feelings filled my heart. I felt that I must speak, and break it through.

"Do you know where they are gone?" I asked. "I would like to see and speak to her."

Now it is a strange thing, after all the trouble she had taken to bring us together, but it is true, that Cristina's eyes looked momentary annoyance. She wiped the expression out immediately, but I had seen it. It did not displease me at all; I had not time to think why.

"They are staying at the 'Nassau,' " she said. "You would like to call on them?"

"I should," I said very decidedly.

"Then I can give you a letter of introduction. I don't know Mr. and Mrs. Molyneux intimately, but I once travelled to Hong-kong with them, and we got on very well. You shall have the letter at once."

She was only a minute or two writing it in the saloon. I took it away with me.

"No need to say good-bye," I said. "We shall meet again to-night."

Cristina looked at me a little oddly.

"Shall we?" she said. "Well, in any case I'll shake hands."

It was a light, formal shake, and she was gone almost as soon as my fingers released hers. I followed her with my eyes for a moment.

"Nothing weak about the Kris-Girl," I thought, as I passed down the gangway again. "And her worst enemy could not call her——"

I paused before the word I had in my mind. There was something in my mood that shied away from the term "Insipid."

I ought to have been excited and moved, driving to the "Nassau" with that letter in my hand; but, somehow, I was not. However, I reflected that it would be an exceedingly pleasant thing to see Mabel's daughter and second self, and that I was most fortunate to have discovered such an ending to my troubles. What troubles?

Why, the trouble about the supposed apparition. There could be no other with which Mabel Molyneux was connected . . . could there ?

" Her mother was a full year older," I thought, irrelevantly.

I found that the party were not in their hotel. This disappointed me.

" Annoying—most annoying," I murmured.

" The Juffrouw—she coming back, an' the Heer, one minute," volunteered the *mandoer*, watching me with glassy brown eyes. " Mynheer wait ? "

" Yes," I said, and found a seat under the stone arcade. The *mandoer* shuffled away in his heel-less slippers. It was not yet really hot ; a pleasant breeze blew down the great main road ; there was a smell of something fresh and scented. I smoked, and waited, with the letter in my hand. I meant to wait till they had gone in, and then send it with the *mandoer*. I had pencilled across my own card " Sailing to-night," so that I might be pardoned the unconventionality of calling with my own letter of introduction.

Suddenly, a question struck me. Was I " sailing to-night ? "

I saw what Cristina had meant. I understood that I had got to decide, here and now, whether I was ever to see her again, or not. I had to find out whether the obvious course—to love, follow, and wait for Mabel's daughter, the girl who was my lost love herself—was to be my course ; or whether the strange, wild wanderings about

Malaysia in the train of a girl who was for no man's taking, were to continue until—

That was just it. There was no "until." Whereas, with this "simple maiden in her flower," there would of course be a chance. Girls of sixteen usually fancied men much older than themselves. Fathers, uncles, and guardians generally favoured the suitor with the long purse. Was I going to repeat my courtship of the year ninety-one, here in nineteen-eight, to woo the gentle ghost who seemed to have risen out of the grave for my sake, or—— A tall, grey-haired man with a pointed beard came into the courtyard. A slim girl with fair hair, looking quite eighteen years of age, followed him.

I have never been able to explain what I did. Before the girl and her uncle were half way to the stone cloister, I was out in the Hooge Pad, hailing a *karetta*. The salt wind from the sea blew upon my face, as I bowled away down the road. Certainly the south-east was getting up. The fragments of Cristina's letter of introduction danced and spun in my wake like sportive butterflies.

I went out of town, and did not return till the *Duymaer Van Rumphius* was almost ready to cast off. When she sidled away from beneath the sizzling glare of the electrics, and began to tramp her way out toward the sleeping Spermundes, I went up on deck. Cristina was sitting near the saloon companion-way, in a discreet evening dress.

It was not pink this time; I think the colour was black and very pale green.

"Good evening," I said. I thought there was the least possible flash of her blue eyes, but the lashes were so long. . . .

"I am not the least surprised," she said composedly.

"You never are. I am quite certain that you knew what I was going to do much better than I did myself."

"I wonder! . . . Is the ghost laid?"

"The ghost is laid. It will never walk again."

"I wonder," said Cristina again.

Dinner was not quite over; there was no one on deck.

"I will show you," I said. I took out of my pocket a little box of sandalwood and silver, and laid it in her hands.

"What am I to do with it?" she asked.

"Bury it," I said. "Poor little box—poor little girl! Let it rest. . . . She's resting this long time. They both wandered long and far enough."

Cristina Raye rose, and let the little casket slip very softly from her fingers into the sea.

We sat for a while without talking after that.

"I wonder," I said presently, "if you would mind telling me how you found it all out."

"It won't hurt you?" asked Cristina, gently.

"No. Dreams and ghosts can't hurt—when you know what they are."

"Well," she said slowly, "it was, I think, the hat."

"What hat?"

"Hers. Of course, I did not think you mad, but I could not understand, until you told me that she was wearing a peach-basket hat."

"I never did!"

"Oh yes, you did; you told me that her head looked like other people's—and everyone is wearing peach-basket hats this year and last. Well, after that I just knew it must be someone alive. Now, of course, people don't as a rule go wandering about the quay—at least, women don't—unless they are arriving by a ship, or going away in one. You may leave out seeing friends off, in the case of an English visitor, as there are never six English staying in the town together. Well, I went to the steamship office, and looked up passenger lists for some time past—it wasn't easy to get at them, but I managed——"

"I know," I said. "I saw you managing."

Cristina did not giggle, but she twinkled just a tiny bit.

"Well, I found the list of the passengers by the *Duymaer Van Rumphius*, from the day when you saw your vision. She was going to Booton and other islands; and 'Mr., Mrs., and Miss Molyneux, Singapore,' were among the Booton passengers."

Cristina stopped a moment, and looked out across the plain of night-black sea. We had

turned out of the harbour by now ; the land and its lights lay behind, the steamer was fast gathering way on the road to unseen Borneo.

"I can't explain the way one thinks things out," she said. "It seems rather as if they thought themselves out—if one may put it so clumsily. There are a lot of detached facts, and you feel they are related to each other somehow, but you can't for the life of you tell how, and no amount of thinking would make it clear. So you don't think. You wait, and just leave the doors open. And by-and-by, if you turn your back and pretend there's no door there, something comes in through it."

"What ? "

"I wish I knew. A sort of brownie. I suppose—you remember about Scotch brownies, and how they clean and tidy up all the house without a sound when everyone's asleep. Well, it tidies up. And when you look round, it's gone—but there are your detached facts, all set in order and laid out in a row ; and you say—'Why, of course !' and that's all there is to it."

"And in this case ? "

"It sorted up Singapore, and the vision, and the *Duymaer Van Rumphius*, and—and Mabel's letters, and the—other things."

I don't know how I knew, but I did understand, very clearly, that she was thinking of that grave in Singapore, with its strange, brief inscrip-

tion, and that she did not care to bring it into the tale.

"And they all laid themselves out in a row, one, two, three, four. . . . And it was clear—so clear that I was frightened. But I knew that you would see her again, when the *Duymaer Van Rumphius* returned—because no one stays long at Booton : when you've seen the pearling, there's nothing else. And that's all."

"All that you can tell," I said. "You have a power that other people have not, and you don't tell me anything about that, because you don't know."

"Have I a power that other people haven't ? " she asked, dreamily. "I sometimes wonder if I have—or if it has me ? "

We were silent then ; the black sea, sparkled with foam, went hissing down the flanks of the ship ; the lights of Macassar were dying out behind. Something, I knew, was dying with them ; a part of my old life sank, as they sank, beneath the sea. It struggled in its death ; the old dream, the old regret, died hard, now that the end had come. For the thing that was dying was not my late, calm, temperate sorrow that was scarcely a sorrow at all, but the bitter grief of the days when I had been young, and mourned, with all my young simple heart, the girl who had played me as false as woman could play man. It seemed to be myself that I had lost, not Mabel.

Out of the dark drifted a line, half-forgotten,
from a poem I had not seen in many years—

“I am shamed through all my being to have loved so
slight a thing.”

What man would love Mabel Molyneux, that
early-blooming flower of the East? what history
would she make for him?

“Like mother, like daughter,” I thought.
“The man who loves her will take a risk. . . .
Thank God, the man will never be I.”

And the lights of Macassar sank beneath the
sea.

CHAPTER IV

THE DANGEROUS TOWN

VERY slowly the ship glided through the water, coming up to the quay. The land we were approaching was not like any land that I had ever seen; the sea was unlike every other sea. You saw no blue sparkle; it did not look alive. It had the colours of decay, corpse-yellow and livid green, and it shone with a slimy, sickening glitter. There was some small breeze that afternoon, but the water did not seem to notice it; it only heaved in an unwholesome kind of way.

"Why, it's oiled!" said Cristina, leaning over the rail.

"What did you expect, of the biggest oil town of the East?" I asked.

"Nothing half so decayed and wicked-looking. I think this is the sort of place where people ought not to live. If I were a native, I should say it was full of devils. There's something devilish-looking even in those trees."

There was; they seemed to have a personality of their own—something witch-like and wicked.

Out of a lower sea of poisonous green bush, they rose incredibly high, lifting stark trunks against a sky that was like the iron lid of a cauldron, and flinging out a branch or two at the top—dark hands extended in menace, not in welcome. Beyond the curve of the bay, where the houses and the road had been made, came rank green mangrove swamp; more trees; more brooding, iron sky.

"Why does it all look wicked?" mused Cristina. "One has seen big, solitary trees before, and mangroves, and swamps, still . . ."

"Too much lunch," said Mrs. Ash briskly. "Anything would look wicked after that. Lunch. Heat. And liver. That's all."

"Not when you don't eat lunch," said Cristina. "I never do. It's quite enough for me to watch the Dutch eating. I feel absolutely stodged after that."

The conversation languished. We were gliding in and into the oil town, and as we went, the heat of the land came out upon us, as if the door of some invisible furnace were being slowly swung on its hinges. It was the unbearable hour of three o'clock. All over the deck fat Dutchmen in pyjamas, and fatter Dutch ladies in their amazing costume of *sarong* and combing-jacket, lay spilled out on chairs, unstockinged legs candidly extended. They were nearly all asleep; it did not appear that the thirty courses of the "rice-table" had inspired them with any interest,

gloomy or otherwise, in the approach to Balik Papan.

We were all going to the oil town together. I had business with the Dutch company that runs the oil-field, and Cristina had a fancy to take a flying look at Borneo. From what we could see, up on the deck of the steamer, it seemed as though the flying look ought to be enough to content anyone.

Balik Papan is a town of some twelve thousand natives and three hundred whites, on a site that is simply one bite taken out of the jungle. The offices and workshops of the company are strung along a black cinder road, oiled with kerosene, that for roasting, blinding heat, is like the highway to hell. Warehouses rise on piles in slimy marshes. Factories stand at the far end. The unbroken forest rises up in a wall behind. Behind that, and not so very far away, are unexplored swamps and jungles, ourang-outangs, wild elephants, and head-hunting Dyaks.

"What are all those gas containers for?" asked Cristina, as we began tying up alongside, and brightly dressed coolies came running to adjust the long pipe that was to give the *Van Diemen* her drink of oil.

"To contain oil."

"Petroleum? all those dozens and scores of things, as big as churches?"

"Yes. Balik Papan has a big output, though the field isn't here, it's sixty miles away."

"What happens if they take fire?"

"They don't. And the villas are at the other side of the hill."

"If it did—whoof!" said a ship's officer, spreading out his hands expressively. "The sea itself will be on fire, if that should occur, and as to escape, they would have only the jungle."

"Where the head-hunters are?"

"We do not encourage the head-hunters. There are some, but not many, oh no!"

"One apiece ought to be enough," mused Cristina. "Don't throw away matches, Mr. Garden, while we're here."

"If he shall smoke, we will perhaps put him in gaol," observed the Dutchman, calmly. "When you go on shore, you may see the notices."

We did. Cristina insisted on going for a walk in the worst heat of the afternoon, and the devoted Mrs. Ash accompanied her. I went too, and as the officer had foretold, I saw notices couched in Dutch, English, German, Chinese, Javanese, and Hindustani, threatening with I do not know what penalties, anyone who dared to smoke. Looking upon those serried lines of oil-containers, each as large as the gasworks' receivers that most people know; seeing the colossal oil-refineries at the end of the town; noting the pipes that snaked here and there and everywhere, carrying kerosene, one understood that the notices about smoking, and the other notices about fire apparatus, and the obvious provision for dealing everywhere and

immediately with the smallest outbreak of fire, were by no means unnecessary.

"How do you like it?" Cristina asked her companion, as we struggled along the fiery road, drawn in under our sun umbrellas like so many tortoises under their shells.

Mrs. Ash, thin, black, and rigid as ever, remarked, with a comprehensive glance:

"One could save several shillings a week on kerosene, I'll be bound. They would never have the face to charge retail prices, with all that running about." She relapsed into a dream, and I could guess that she was reckoning up the price of petroleum in Kensington.

I recommended them both to go back to the ship as soon as they could, and went off about my business among the great piles of office buildings. Later in the day, we met on the windy side of the promenade deck. The sun was beginning to set; a little coolness—not much—was creeping into the hot-lead atmosphere; the slimy sea stirred faintly.

"Had enough of Balik Papan?" I asked lighting the cigar for which I had been longing all day.

In answer, Cristina said—

"What are the people here afraid of?"

"Afraid of?" I parried, for I had some idea of what she meant.

"Yes. They're afraid of something. Mrs. Ash and I were asked to go and see some people in their house, and we went and we noticed it there.

And we noticed it in stores. And some of those Javanese coolies—they seemed jumpy if you spoke to them, and they kept looking out over their shoulders. And—do you know?—every berth on the ship is engaged, for wives and daughters of officials.”

I suppressed a whistle. I had noticed something odd about the people I had been to see that afternoon; a certain suggestion of anxiety and strain. . . . But no one had made any confidences to me. And this was the first I had heard of the booking up of the ship.

“We don’t sail till the day after to-morrow; there is lots of cargo,” went on Cristina. I saw that her eyes were very bright, and I noticed—now—that she was wearing something very pretty and smart.

“Been thinking again, Kris-Girl?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t you?” she flashed. “And I’ll tell you something. It isn’t Dyaks. And it isn’t coolies rising—the coolies are frightened, too. I’m going to know all about it as soon as I can get hold of a woman. But the trouble is, most of the women don’t talk English or French. I’ve tried the men, but they pretend not to know what I mean. So it’s the women or nothing. And I don’t—think—it will be nothing.”

The sun set low and red beneath a bar of black. The astonishing electric lights of Balikpapan came out like large white stars. In their thin radiance, the looming reservoirs showed tall and

grey and very, very many. The steamer, with a snaky oil-pipe set to some hidden mouth, drank on and on. Cristina and I were silent. Before long, she nodded good-night, and left.

As for me, I sat thinking until far into the night, and my thoughts were not of the mystery that seemed to lurk about this odd, dangerous town; not yet were they concerned with prices of oil fuel to be supplied on the spot to certain cargo vessels. These vessels were named after myself, my sister, my country-house, the county we live in, and the river that supplies water to our largest works. They had been to me very much what children are to other men . . . still, my thoughts were not concerned with them, nor with their conversion to oil fuel, that night. I was thinking more about a large gold Chinese ring, marquise shaped, belting a small finger with a rosy, shining nail. I was thinking that I would like to take off that ring and throw it into Balik Papan's scummy, slimy sea. Other thoughts came; the dominant note in them all was—"She is flying from herself. . . ." Why? Why? Was there some man she should not love? Was the memory of her dead *fiancé*—no, it was not that, or not only that. My upper, reasonable self declared it must be; the subliminal Jack Garden obstinately maintained it was not.

"A man would drink," ran my disconnected thoughts. "She intoxicates herself with these intellectual feats. Once the mood is on her, she

can think of nothing else. She is glad of that. . . . She was glad to-night that there was something here for her to cut into with that sharp mind of hers. It's like chopping down trees to make yourself forget the toothache."

"Well!" I finished, strolling round the deck. "I have no right to pry. No right," I repeated. "No right." The thought struck coldly.

I threw the end of my cigar on to the jetty, and then stopped short, and cursed myself for a careless fool. The ship might still be drinking, for all I knew—and anyhow, the place was full of oil pipes, probably leaky. . . .

What a howl!

The officer in charge of the steamer came over to the landward side of the deck, above my head and looked out. I looked, too, and I saw, of all things on earth, an excited Chinaman—some sort of watchman, I supposed—flinging himself on my cigar-end, and hastily spitting upon it to put it out. He could not have seen me clearly in the shadow of the hurricane deck, but he looked up and shouted Chinese abuse at me, flapping his hands like a turtle in a temper, and pointing indignantly to the forest of reservoirs behind.

Now I had never, to my knowledge, seen an excited Chinese before, and it struck me that I might be in for trouble. The officer was already making his way to the companion. My deck-shoes were rubber-soled and silent; I slipped into my cabin as quietly as a cat, snapped off the

light, dropped coat and shoes on the floor, and fell into my berth. When someone turned a bull's-eye lantern on to me a few moments later, I was lying sound asleep—so far as anyone could tell.

Next morning, on the deck, very early, I met the Kris-Girl.

"How goes the mystery?" I asked.

"No time to find out yet," she said, rather curtly. "I mean to, though, if I stop here after the boat goes." She had found a chessboard full of pieces, left out on deck, and was doing the most amazing things with pawns and kings and castles while she spoke—juggling them through the air from one hand to another, in a flying stream; making them stop short and cross; sending them up in spirals. The curious thing was that she did it absentmindedly, and gave all her attention, apparently, to what she was saying.

"Did you hear that Chinaman howl last night?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. I told her what had happened.

The stream of bishops and knights suddenly wavered; a queen dived toward the deck, and was deftly caught. Then the pieces began to fly up in a corkscrew curve, gaily.

"Dear Mr. Garden of Eden," she said, "weren't you clever enough to see?"

"What?"

The chessmen executed a final flight, and came back to Cristina's hand like homing pigeons.

She set them all neatly back on the board before she answered.

"That's what it is they are afraid of."

"What? Chinamen?"

"Not Chinamen. Fire."

"Why, they're always afraid of fire here; look at the precautions."

"Yes, but now they're frightened of it. When a Chinaman goes on as you describe, it doesn't mean ordinary routine precautions."

"No," I agreed. "I see what you mean."

"There is some special reason for fearing it just now," she went on, "and it's evidently a reason over which they have no control. Shipping off the women and children as they are doing——"

"Are they all going?"

"Oh, no. Only twenty or thirty of them. But that's enough to show that someone is seriously alarmed."

"Well, the Dutch officer didn't know anything about it when we came in, to judge by the way he talked."

"He will now," said Cristina. "Try him."

I looked up the plump, white-and-gold clad young man to whom we had been talking when the ship came in, and asked him, by and by, what he thought of the chances of fire in the town. There was no light reply this time. He changed the subject brusquely, and told me something or other I did not want to hear, about the natural history of crocodiles.

I came back to Cristina.

"You're right," I said. "He knows. And like a true Dutchman, he won't have foreigners poking their noses into his affairs. I don't think you will make much by inquiries, in Balik Papan."

"Shan't I?" she asked, her little pointed face looking up elfishly under its halo of dark, soft hair. "Would you like to come and see?"

"I should," I answered, promptly.

Never as long as I live am I likely to forget the heat of that afternoon's walk. Again, at the unholy hour of three, did that sprite of a girl insist on setting forth, accompanied by myself and the tireless Mrs. Ash.

"I'm sorry," she explained, coolly (there was nothing else cool upon the length and breadth of Borneo that afternoon), "but it's an excellent rule to go out at the siesta hour when you want to know things. You see, no one's expected to go out then; that's why."

We paced along on the petroleum-caked roadway, under the lee of a huge rock wall that flung heat at us instead of shade. Behind us the many-coloured crowd of Indian, Javanese, and Chinese coolies, went languidly about their work; leather-skinned buffaloes with enormous horns dragged heavy carts; native women wearing pink and yellow *saris* on their heads went by with a tinkle of anklets. The coloured man and woman do not rest in the fierce hours of mid-day heat, but the white, in Dutch Malaysia, is invisible from

one o'clock till four or five. We walked on and on; a small breeze from the sea came up as we left the town. Bungalows, built on piles, began to show in front of us. We were coming to the residential quarter.

It was like a city of the dead, when we reached it. Behind shut jalousies, on enormous Dutch beds veiled with tents of mosquito netting, the inhabitants were dozing, three-quarters undressed, waiting for the cool of five o'clock. For all we could see of them, they might have been in Amsterdam. Dusty-looking dogs slept in shaded spots; beneath verandahs you could see the coiled-up bodies of Javanese house-boys. The sun struck wickedly down from the sky, and up from the road; a giant cricket, the only thing awake in this enchanted city, sat up in a mango tree and made a fiendish whizzing, boring noise, that seemed to go round and round like a centre-bit working through a door.

We stopped; it seemed that Cristina, for once, was undecided. The sea broke hotly on the burning sand; the maddening cricket kept up its ceaseless zizz-zizz, zizz-zizz.

We stood at the beginning of the little suburb, looking about us. Mrs. Ash broke the silence abruptly.

"Ordinary nigger-looking natives I don't mind," she said. "You needn't consider them human. But good-looking natives haven't any business to exist."

"But why, dear Ashie?" asked Cristina.

"I find them offensive," said Mrs. Ash, explanatorily.

"Have you seen any lately?" I asked, more for the sake of making conversation than anything else.

In reply, the lady stretched out a thin, black-silk-covered finger.

"I dislike niggers in general, and on principle," she said. "But I dislike—that—particularly."

"That," which had just come out, soft-footed, from behind a great concrete bungalow, was a Dyak—a young Dyak; a chief; a very handsome chief. The Dyaks will not work for the Dutch, and very few of them are to be seen about Balik Papan, where they have, strictly speaking, no business. This man had a slightly furtive look about him, in spite of his admirable swagger. There was no Chinese slyness about him, no Indian subservience, no Javanese meekness; he

"Trode the earth like a buck in spring,
And he stood like a lance in rest;"

yet all the same he contrived to look as if he were—up to something—I can find no other phrase. He was of a reddish-copper colour, with straight black hair half hidden under a crimson-and-gold turban; he wore nothing but a loin-cloth, but it was of fine yellow silk, and I could not be certain that the usual brass rings on arms and legs were not, in his case, gold. More than one dagger, richly hilted, was stuck in his waist-cloth.

"He really is handsome," said Cristina, looking at him narrowly. The young Dyak returned her glance, with more freedom than I liked. There was nothing savage about him except his eyes; there the wild man leapt out. They were large eyes, black and fiery as a bull's, and deep-set, under brows that frowned a little. It seemed to me that he was not altogether pleased at our presence; he muttered something, half to himself. Cristina, to my surprise, answered him.

"Do you know Dyak?" I asked.

"No. That was Dutch."

"I didn't catch it. What business had a Dyak knowing Dutch?"

"A good deal less than one, according to the authorities. They don't allow natives to learn it."

"What did the impertinent brute say?"

"Oh, he wasn't impertinent. He only said that the sun was too strong for white ladies to be out."

"Confounded cheek," I muttered. Cristina, somehow or other, was managing to lead me away. I think she had her arm in mine; I was not quite sure, because when I became fully alive to the fact, I found it was not there any longer. By this time we were on the highway to Balik Papan again, retracing our steps. I will allow that I was extremely angry, and was scarcely conscious of where I was.

"Mr. Garden," said Cristina, earnestly, "I know exactly what you are thinking, but you

really must not. The man did nothing actually rude, and he is fully armed, whereas you have only a sun umbrella. And Mrs. Ash and I don't want a row."

"As you wish," I said. The whole affair had made me angry and sulky ; I did not speak again. It seemed intolerable that any man, black, white, or red, should dare to look with admiration at the Kris-Girl.

We had gone some little way when Cristina, who seemed in very good spirits, stopped, and asked me for the loan of my field-glass. I unslung it and gave it to her. She slipped behind a rock, and looked long and steadily through the lenses. Presently she came back to us, and returned the glass. Her face was pink.

"Do you know what I saw ?" she said, addressing Mrs. Ash, who did not seem especially interested. "I saw him go beneath the verandah, put up his hand, and catch a bunch of flowers that somebody threw down."

"What flowers ?" demanded Mrs. Ash, yawning wearily behind her black silk glove.

"Big yellow alamanda. He's putting them in his hair. They've got some funny customs, these natives. They can't read, but they make appointments with each other, sometimes, by means of flowers."

"Like the lover when Maud sent him a rose to say she'd meet him among the roses ?" I asked.

"Something of the kind. These resemblances

are really very interesting, from an ethno-what-is-it point of view. I could be quite scientific, if it were all about things of that kind. Do you know, in the betrothal customs of the——”

“I want my tea,” said Mrs. Ash.

“You shall have it. *Pigi!*” ordered Cristina and we *pigi’d* straightway.

We did not talk much on the way back to the ship, but just as we reached the gangway, Cristina turned to me and remarked, incomprehensibly—

“Do you know, I believe THAT was connected with IT.”

Then she went to her cabin. After dark, about seven—the visiting hour of Dutch Malaysia—I saw her setting out with Mrs. Ash to make a call of some kind. By the beauty and delicacy of the dress she wore, I guessed that she was (as Americans say) “feeling good,” and that some further development of her enterprise was on hand.

I did not expect to see her again that night, but we met half-an-hour later. A man with whom I had been doing some business during the day, asked me to visit his wife and family, and it turned out that this was the family to whom Cristina and Mrs. Ash also had introductions. We found the fat mother, fat daughter, and three fat younger children, all on the concrete verandah, all dressed and laced and bow’ed and ribboned, as if they had never seen such a thing as a *sarong* or a bath slipper in their lives. Coffee

was being handed round, and, so far as my small knowledge of Dutch permitted me to judge, the gossip of Balik Papan was being eagerly retailed, in gross and in detail.

The master of the house said something, on presenting me, that changed the conversation to English. I don't know that I should have troubled to listen to it, had I not seen that the Kris-Girl was giving it more attention than it seemed to deserve. This made me fix my attention, though the result did not seem valuable—

. . . "No, we get on very well here the one with the other; we are not a quarrelsome—what is the word? commonwealth—no, community. It is true, there is not much to do, and we talk about one another, but we are very good friends on a whole. A great many of the town have ceased to call on *Mevrouw*" (I did not catch the name), "because of that dreadful scandal; it is true she is half-caste, but in Holland we count half-caste as white, and we do not like to see a white woman to encourage a native admiring her."

"That is her house near the beginning of the villas, with all the yellow flowers on it, is it not?" asked Cristina.

"Yes, they are beautiful, are they not?"

"Do they grow anywhere else about the town?"

"I think not that flower," said the Dutch-woman thoughtfully. "It grows all over their verandah, the back and the front. Would you like to have a cutting procured for you?"

"Thank you, I'm afraid I could not use it. But tell me about this half-caste lady—have I seen her, I wonder?"

"Oh, no," the Dutchwoman said eagerly, fanning herself with a large Japanese fan, and leaning forward to speak with more emphasis. "Why, her husband has shut her up! So angry he is—for he is old, and she is young, and he will not have her look at someone else than him, even if it was a white—that he has had the gateway of the upper staircase locked, and himself keeps the key. As soon as the boat goes, I think he will take her down to it himself, and they will go away to Holland. It is time for his leave, you see. She will not be glad to go, for she was born in Batavia, and she does not like to think of the cold and the dark of Europe, but he will make her go, for he is very angry. But, my dear lady, what does one expect? so old a man should not have married a pretty young girl. When I was married to my husband——" She went off into a long chapter of autobiography.

One or two men came in, and the conversation became general. Mrs. Ash did not join in any of it; thin and black and upright, she sat in a corner of the verandah, and surveyed the scene with that unchangeable disapproval of "foreigners" which I had come to recognise as her most notable trait. I think she enjoyed herself, in an odd, upside-down way of her own. I talked to my host, and watched Cristina in the intervals. The

rocking-chairs clicked and swung ; the filled and refilled coffee-cups tinkled as the Javanese boys carried them about. Outside the lighted verandah was the hot darkness of equatorial Borneo, warm sea breaking on warm alligator-haunted sand, great flying-foxes winging by among the stars. A few spectral flowers showed dimly in the stone vases about the enclosure. Either from the flowers, or from the near-by jungle, came every now and then a breath of perfume that was wickedly, cloyingly sweet.

A huge young Dutchman, packed into a rocking-chair that seemed a very tight fit, was talking to Cristina.

"I have heard your name, Miss Raye," he said. "Are you making some stay in Borneo? No? Going on with the boat? That is good. I think you won't like Borneo, if you stayed. And we don't want visitors much in Balik Papan; we have no place to put them, and nothing for them to see."

"Oh, I think the town is interesting enough," said Cristina, with a small fine smile.

The Dutchman's mind, apparently, did not match his slow and bulky body, for he seemed to read her unspoken meaning clearly enough.

"We don't want people to find us interesting," he said bluntly. "I have heard that you have done some clever things in other parts of Dutch India. You should rest satisfied with that. We don't want any *krises* here."

Cristina did not seem to hear him ; she played with her fan, and stifled a little yawn, in a dainty but wearied fashion. Her head dropped back against her chair ; you could see boredom and fatigue in every line of her figure, struggling with a politeness that still kept the attention nominally at work. . . . I, who knew very well she was not bored at all, could scarcely keep back a laugh at the little witch's power of acting.

"I am so sorry," she said, apparently recovering herself with an effort, "but there is something in the Dutch accent that always seems to make me sleepy. I am afraid I didn't catch—would you mind saying it again?"

The young giant, his mind suddenly turned to the fact that a pretty girl found him boresome and tedious, was incapable for the moment of catching his broken train of thought. He muttered something scarcely audible, and in the pause that followed, Cristina contrived to slip away.

She was scarcely out of the enclosure before I caught her up.

"Miss Raye," I said. "I know what you're going to do to-night as well as if you had told me, and I don't mean to let you do it."

If it had been moonlight instead of starlight—but I could almost swear her breast did heave a little faster, under its silks and laces.

Still, her voice was steady as she answered—

"You seem to know a great deal. What am I going to do?"

"You're going to take that beastly Indian dress of yours and go wandering about this dangerous place, God knows where. You shan't do it."

"You are both unexpected and unreasonable, my dear—guardian, is it, or uncle, or what relation? I'm afraid I must have forgotten. What relation are you really to me?"

"Now you're satirical, which I suppose means that you are angry," I said, rather miserably, "but I don't mean to mind what you say; you are not to go. You know I can stop you like a shot, by giving a hint to any of the authorities, but I hope you won't drive me into that."

"Well," said Cristina, suddenly giving in in the most amazing way, and turning to face me like some small bird at bay, "if you go and spoil all my plans, how do you propose to pay for it!"

"Anyway you like to ask."

"Then you shall pay for it," she said, crushing the French heel of her shoe into the gravel, as we stood. "You shall go and do what I want, for me."

"Certainly I will," I said, hardly able to believe that she had given in so readily, and feeling curiously elated at the fact. "You can command as you like."

"You will probably do something stupid," said the Kris-Girl, "but still, it might—possibly—be better to have a man. . . . Dyaks are about the worst kind of savage they've got in Malaysia."

She seemed to be thinking.

"I can run—you couldn't believe how fast," she said. "I always won the school races. But a Dyak could run faster—I suppose."

She looked behind her through the hot, heavy-scented dusk. Mrs. Ash was out of sight; we had just entered on a level bit of pathway, with a turn in it.

"What do you think?" she said. She lifted her skirt over her neat silk ankles, held it with one hand, and suddenly darted off in a run as swift and easy as the flight of a bird. Like a bird, she wheeled in her flight, and came back.

"Against a Dyak, Miss Raye," I said calmly, "that pretty turn of speed would be about as much use as a sparrow's against a sparrow hawk. Please, won't you tell me why you suppose the Dyak we saw to-day is likely to annoy you? There's nothing simpler than to give warning to the police."

"He isn't," said Cristina, simply. "I am likely to annoy him, very much indeed. I want to be among the yellow alamandas in the courtyard to-night, when he comes along—but I shan't let him see me if I can help it—and after That remains to be seen. I told you that I thought it, and he, were connected."

"Do you mean the Dyak and the danger of fire?" I asked, suddenly enlightened.

Cristina nodded.

"Well, I can't——"

"No, of course not. That doesn't alter it. I

don't know that I could tell you just why—yet. I keep asking myself—‘Who benefits if the town is destroyed?’ and the answer isn't quite, quite clear. If it was, I should know what to do. But I may tell you——”

“Imagine the waste. Disgusting, I call it. And they say the Dutch are a thrifty people.” Mrs. Ash's voice suddenly sounded just over our shoulders—I dare say we had been walking more slowly than we knew.

“What waste, dear Ashie?” asked Cristina.

“They say there's four thousand tons in each of them. If you don't call that waste, why, you won't call anything. And I dare say it might set light to something. Carelessness like that—when people at home are paying such a price by the gallon——”

I am sure Cristina did not know it—but in her excitement she actually pinched my arm, on which her hand was resting. Still, her voice was very calm.

“It was the old lady who said so?”

“No. The young married one. She looked so worried that I watched to see what the matter was. And when her husband came in, she gave a sort of jump, and said in English—because everyone was talking English just then—‘Have they stopped the running of the oil?’ And he answered her in Dutch, with a frown. They are bad-tempered, these foreigners. And wasteful. Letting tanks with four thousand tons in them—

if the place was English, there'd be none of this nonsense."

She turned off the tap of her speech, and marched silently back to the ship. I don't know what she saw, as she looked straight ahead of her into the dark of the hot, low sky. Probably a stone-paved London street, bright with frost; snow like sugar icing piled upon the roof-tops; people in furs and ulsters hurrying by. . . . What I saw was something less pleasing—a vision of great oil-tanks exploding all round us like volcanoes, of a street running into one single blaze—of twelve thousand coolies rushing about like stampeded beasts in a prairie fire . . . of the jungle, and the alligators, and the ourang-outangs, and the Dyaks, behind us; the sea covered with flaming oil, before.

When we got back to the boat, Cristina beckoned me into the empty dining-saloon, and stood there in the garish glitter of the electric light, her face paler than usual, her eyes gleaming like the blue sparks of a dynamo.

"Have you learned enough Malay to follow a conversation?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. I am a good linguist, and the pigeon-Malay of these seas is about the easiest language in the world. I was by this time fairly fluent in Malay, though my Dutch was nothing to boast of.

"Put on khaki," said the Kris-Girl, "it's less easily seen at night. And go to that house with the yellow alamanda, and stay near it for a good

while, and see if the Dyak comes. If he does, try and hear anything he says to anyone. Try your best, Mr. Garden. You don't know how much may depend on it."

"I've some idea," I said. "I'll take a revolver, though I suppose it's breaking at least half a dozen Dutch laws to do so. And if he seems to be up to any nonsense, I'll use it. Still—I can't see what connection this love-making business has with the attempts on the oil receivers. That might be the work of a lunatic—or a Malay who wants to revenge some insult; they're quite capable of it."

"It might, but it just isn't," said Cristina. The violent electric light shone full on her face; she was as pale as a pearl, but whether through excitement, or mere weariness, I could not tell. It struck me hard just then that I had not the right to ask—not the right to know—not any right to shield her, however weary or anxious she might be.

Well—I swallowed the hardness down, as one does, somehow.

"Good-night," I said, perhaps a little shortly. There was so much I could not say. . . .

She remained in the empty saloon; she did not sit down. I looked back as I went to my cabin to change, and saw her, with her head bent, standing very still. I could not make the remotest guess as to what she might be thinking of.

I did not particularly fancy the job on which I

was engaged, but still, it was clear to me that no suspicion or even guess, concerning the danger that threatened the town, ought to be neglected. It was useless, I knew, to say anything to the Dutch authorities. Neither the Kris-Girl nor I had the shadow of proof to offer, and the mind of the Hollander moves slowly. We should only have been told to mind our own business—perhaps to stop on the ship.

The night was purple-dark, with no light but starlight. The town was a blaze of electric lamps, but down the road, and nearing the villas, there were many lakes of black shadow. In one of these, the house of the yellow alamandas stood.

I thought everyone must be out, for there seemed to be no lights about the place, except a sort of nightlight in one upper room. The villa ran round three sides of a square; it had two stories, the upper supported by white stone pillars. Wide verandahs extended completely round both stories, and there was a fine staircase of some whitish stone. By the glimmer of the night-lamp, I saw something that startled me a little—an iron grille across one end of the upper verandah, tightly shut. It had no doubt been placed there originally to protect some room where valuables were kept, but it was now undoubtedly being used as a means of imprisonment, for the one lighted room was within, and I could see a white figure moving. So the story about the jealous old husband was true!

"A beastly dangerous sort of thing to do," I thought. "There's no way of getting in or out of that end verandah except through the gate. . . . What if there were a fire?"

On that my heart gave a jump, and some chain of separate links suddenly snapped itself together in my mind.

"Of course," I all but cried out. "He would—a Dyak—they'd dare anything. With an oil-tank alight in the town, the old husband would fly to unlock the gate. And she'd be let out—in the middle of the night, in a wild confusion, with no one on the look-out. And he wouldn't spirit her off a prisoner in the steamer after all."

Here I checked, feeling as if a cold drop of water had slipped down my spine.

"But the steamer leaves at daylight—tomorrow," I thought. The inference was so obvious that I felt for the butt of the revolver I had put into a handy pocket.

"No, he doesn't—with Cristina in the dashed town," I said to myself. I had been standing some way from the villa, in the shade. Now I began to walk quietly round to the back, for I judged that the room with the light had an opening on the side of the forest, and that this was the likeliest place to flush my quarry.

Providentially, there was a clump of ornamental crotons in the right place. I got into them, and looked about me. The bedroom had a window to the back, a window wreathed in yellow

alamanda. I could see that, for the light seemed to have been turned up a little. I settled down for a long wait, wishing to heaven I could smoke.

As it happened, my wait was not two minutes. I was scarcely well settled among the bushes, when the light went up a little more, and a slim figure in a very loose, transparent muslin robe, came to the window in the wall, and looked down.

"By Jove!" I said to myself, just stopping a whistle in time.

She was half-caste undoubtedly—I should have said a bit more—but she was pretty. Yes, I should think so. A dark, slender, slip of a thing, with black hair falling straight as a cloak of satin to somewhere about her knees; a figure that seemed to vibrate like a flower-stalk as she stood; eyes that even in the dim lamp-light, even at twenty feet height, shone warm and starry. And the Dyak chief thought her worth burning down a city for, did he? Well, from a mere man's point of view, he did not seem so very far wrong.

She stood leaning far out among the alamandas—for the great golden flowers were trained about the back of her room as well as the front—and I saw that she was watching. In about a minute more, the Dyak stood below. I had not heard him come, I had not even seen his approach. He seemed to have sprung up out of the earth; and I realised, with unpleasant distinctness, that his movements and bushcraft, compared to mine, were as the progress of a weasel matched with

that of a working bullock. I stiffened myself in the effort to keep still and unseen.

But the Dyak was speaking.

"Red Flower," he said softly, "is he out?"

"Hush, he is in, pretending to sleep down below," was her reply.

"Good," said the copper statue in the twilight.

"To-morrow, you and I, with my tribe, will be far away in the jungle, and after to-morrow it will be my brown tree-house for you, instead of this old monkey's home."

The girl leaned far out over the window-sill. Her hair fell a good yard or two down the wall.

"Be careful," she said, and I could see that she was breathing very quickly. "Be careful of yourself."

"I walk in the darkness like the snake, and in the forest I go like the wild monkey of the woods," replied the Dyak. "There is no fear for me."

I looked up again at the girl—she was so wonderfully pretty, that it was an inevitable thing to do, but I gave her only one glance, of that I am sure. Still when I turned my eyes back to the Dyak, he was not there. He had vanished again.

The girl, with a gesture of farewell that would have immortalised any sculptor who could have fixed it in marble, seemed to sink back among the alamandas, and the light went down. In two seconds more, I was running hard for the front of the house. I dare say I made a noise. I did not care, for I remembered that I had seen a bicycle

leaning up against the well curb in the courtyard—whose, I neither knew nor cared—and if my guess was right, it lay with that bicycle and myself to save the town.

I was horribly out of practice ; I hopped and hopped, trying to get on, like some absurd, gigantic frog. But when I got my feet on the pedals, they remembered that I had held three championships, in eighteen hundred and something, and the wheels went round to some purpose.

Ghost-white in the electric glare of the town, I saw the sinister forms of the huge oil-tanks, when I swung round the bend of the road. Surely they were well-lighted, well-watched, too, in such a place as this ? And yet—there had been two interrupted attempts already : one before we came, of what nature I did not know, the other only a single night past—for the cutting of the oil-pipe could have been nothing else. After seeing the Dyak appear and vanish as he did, I wondered less at the inability of the watchmen to catch him. Moreover, the jungle came very close up behind the tanks.

He might be there now. He might be there now. The downward stroke of the pedals beat it out, along the wide, hard road. I saw the steamer lying by the quay ; Cristina's face leapt up before me. I bent over the handle-bar, and the night wind, drenched with perfume, screamed in my face, and the pedals, speeding up, declared—"He is there now. He is there now."

Round the corner, behind the range of tanks, I swung with such a curve that the bicycle skidded violently, and staggered like a drunken thing for a hundred yards or more. As soon as I could stop it, I leapt off. It dropped on the road with a clang.

The thing was happening as I came. I had not time to think, not time to do anything but act. Cristina was running among the gigantic shadows of the tanks, where the glaring arc-lights made a maze of black and white upon the ground. She was running in and out, doubling like a hunted hare, faster than she had run that evening on the path outside the villas. I had never seen any woman thing run like it. And behind her, catching her up as a sparrow-hawk catches up a sparrow, ran the Dyak.

One cry I heard from Cristina as I rushed towards her.

“Put it out! Forty-nine!”

I thank Heaven to this day that I had the sense to understand, and the determination to leave her—yes, even to leave her to the Dyak. Forty-nine was one tank further on. I ran to it for my life, and for the lives of all Balik Papan.

In the shadow underneath the great tank a spark was creeping . . . creeping.

There is nothing easier in the world than to put out a fuse, even when it is very close indeed to the plug of dynamite. It only needs a sharp knife or a good set of teeth. I hadn't the one, but I had the other. I bit it off, in time.

Then—but it was really good luck more than anything else that caused me to wing the Dyak in one leg. I might have shot him dead, or missed him. One would have been dangerous, in the absence of evidence, the other—well, it did not happen.

At the sound of the shot, an Amboynese soldier in full uniform came trotting up, rifle over his shoulder. Of course he arrested Cristina and me; and of course there was turning out of guards, and extracting of sleepy officials from their beds, and red tape, and trouble all round. You would have thought we had been trying to burn down the town, instead of trying to save it at the risk of our lives, if you had been there. But after a while they got on to the facts, aided by the remains of the fuse, and then—

Well, then they said we had better get on to the steamer and go away as quick as we could; Balik Papan was no place for tourists. I remember a certain tall, pink, fat official in pyjamas escorted us down to the ship, yawning terribly as he went, and told us, perfunctorily, that he was obliged to us. I did not think he looked it. The night watchman on the gangway was openly curious; he seemed to think we were both under arrest for some anarchistic crime. He looked disappointed when the pyjama'd functionary and his attendant soldiers went away, without leaving any suggestions as to handcuffs.

They had tied the Dyak up promptly, with no

particular consideration for his broken leg, before they went into our case at all, so we had the satisfaction of knowing that he was likely to get his deserts. He did, at the mouth of a dozen rifles, two days later.

"Miss Kris-Girl," I said, as we separated to go to our cabins, "why did you not play fair?"

"Where would you and the town have been if I had?" was her illogical answer. "It needed somebody at both ends. I meant to ask you to help me, all along; but you were troublesome, so I had to——"

"Deceive."

"Hard words break no bones," she said coolly. "Call it anything you like. I knew it would take two to catch that Dyak, and it did—as a matter of fact, he caught me stalking him, and was going to make sure I shouldn't tell, when you came up. I hadn't even time to stop the fuse—he went for me with his kris, and I could only run. . . . You were right, but not as right as you thought; I did hold my own against him, for just a little bit, because I was so very, very frightened. Then he began to catch me up, and then—if you had not come——"

I think she saw what was in my face, for she turned into her cabin quickly. And I, seeing that she had no wish to hear me, went away to mine,

CHAPTER V

ABOUT A PINK BEAST

THE day was one of pure silver, such as one only sees in these still waters of Malaysia. The sky, shaded by a light wash of cloud, was silver, the silver-glass sea met it without a break. Back from the shearing bow of the steamer ran two blue folds of water; everything else was of the one silver hue, save for sharp pen-scratches of black made by the flying-fish as they struck and skimmed, low down on the waveless glass. It was early in the day; few passengers were about, and no land in sight. A sky, a place, an hour, of perfect peace.

Sitting in my deck armchair, I smoked and looked out over the rail at nothing in particular. I do not know that I was thinking of anything in particular either, unless certain dim visions of Cannon Street on a November afternoon could be described as thoughts. They contrasted agreeably with what I saw.

Mrs. Ash's needles had been clicking away behind me for so long that I had almost ceased to

hear the sound ; I think I must have been near to dozing, there on the high promenade deck of the Dutch steamer, with the parted seas sounding like shaken silk on the bow, and the Malayan passengers singing monotonously, somewhere forward. . . .

“ Did you get your gum ? ”

The question, to my sleepy perception, came through the air like a shot. I sat up, and swung round.

“ What gum ? ” I asked, defensively, scenting a meaning that I did not care for.

“ Gum dammit, or whatever its impious name is ? ” replied the old lady, clicking faster than ever, but lifting her eyes off her work to fix them on me.

It came into my head just then, irrelevantly and absurdly, that she must surely sleep in that preposterous black bonnet of 1880, with the three upright feathers, and the tinkling danglements of jet. I could not recollect that I had ever seen her without it. Did the late Mr. Ash—strange thought that there must once have been an Ash male!—wake up in the silent watches of the night, to see . . .

I awoke to the fact that she was waiting.

“ Oh, gum damar,” I replied. “ I didn’t want any.”

“ Didn’t you ? ” replied Mrs. Ash. “ Thought so. Hump ! ”

The small sharp snort that she emitted was not

exactly rude, but, considered as a criticism of my character and aims in general, it was mortifying.

"My dear Mrs. Ash," I said, drawing my chair back to hers, "one may be engaged in commercial negotiations about a particular product—especially one that has lately become so important as gum damar—without——"

"One may," she said, suddenly biting off a woollen thread in a way that—I cannot tell how—seemed to throw doubt on the whole of my statement.

I felt myself becoming rather hot.

"But I am so engaged," I said. "I have been getting facts of the kind I want all through. It's really important. Haven't you heard that the Army Flying Corps——"

"No," cut in Mrs. Ash. She put down the piece of web she was weaving, took up another portion, and, stabbing in a pair of fresh needles, seemed to dismiss the last remark.

"Is Pulu Panas the centre of the trade?" she snipped out, working busily.

"Why—I think Macassar is rather—but Pulu Panas is worth seeing, when one's there."

"Worth seeing when one's there," repeated Mrs. Ash. She did not say in so many words that Pulu Panas was some eighteen hundred miles from the roadsteads of Macassar, but the inference was clear.

Now, in spite of the fact that the Kris-Girl's

chaperon was thus proving herself hostile, or at least aggressive, I did not dislike the old lady. Nor did I think that she actually disliked me. So I threw away the last third of my cigar, pulled my chair closer to the flashing needles, and asked plainly, as became a plain man—

“Why don’t you want me in your party?”

But Mrs. Ash was not to be defeated by the use of her own sharp-shooting methods. She replied with perfect coolness, answering my thoughts instead of my words,

“Because—knit two, purl three—you’re too old. And because impossibilities are impossible anyhow. Seven, eight, nine, ten. And one.”

I did not agree with the first half of her remark, and I did not like the second. I said so, avoiding the main point at issue as skilfully as I could.

“Three years we’ve been at it,” was the old lady’s reply. “Steamers, trains, hotels. Hotels, trains, steamers. Waterfalls, castles, forts, islands, native dances, native kings—all of ’em dirty—customs of the countries, every one of ’em nasty. And men. White men, half-white, Europeans, colonials, German, Dutch, God knows what. All of them after her, and a lot of them after what she’s got. She doesn’t want ’em. ‘Keep ’em off, Ashie, sweep ’em out,’ she says to me. And I do. I’m paid for it.”

“How, exactly,” I said, looking the old lady straight in the face, “do you propose to keep me off?”

"Purl three, knit two," said Mrs. Ash. "Same as all the rest of 'em. By telling you it's no good. And one, two, three."

"What do they do then?" I asked.

"Some of them are fools enough to go on." The needles stabbed at me viciously, withdrawing themselves just in time, at the end of every stroke.

I said nothing, and sat still. As a business man, I have found it an excellent plan, when you want to make the other fellow talk.

Mrs. Ash was no exception. After a flourish with the needles that would certainly have been a fantasia if executed on the piano, she laid the work on her lap, looked all round, and then said cautiously—

"I'll tell you what. It won't be anyone. But it would be better you than Schintz."

"Schintz?" I said. I had been away from the Kris-Girl and her guardian for a while, trying to . . . well, no matter . . . let us say, trying to work out the gum damar problem. And having failed in . . . no matter what . . . I had joined their wanderings once more, only twenty-four hours ago. Therefore I had not heard of Schintz.

"He's a Dutch-German-Austrian, and the King of Pulu Panas. It's outside Dutch possessions, and he really owns it," explained Mrs. Ash. "As for what Cristina thinks of him, it's—one, two, three, four—never easy to say. But I think, of all the foreigners I ever saw, he's—and eight, nine,

ten—the foreignest. That's he at the other side of the deck," she explained with Victorian punctiliousness of grammar.

I looked, and behold, it was the Beast.

I had called him that to myself, when I saw him in the smoking-room, the night before. He had sat there for half an hour or so, smoked a long Borneo cigar—spitting unpleasantly the while—and gone out without addressing anyone. In the intervals of listening to the pleasant babble of the third officer, I had looked at him, and decided that he was a beast—a bounding beast. He had such flaxen hair, and it was parted in such a clipped oily way. And his face was pinkish and whitish. Moreover, his moustache was trained above his thick red lips into a Kaiser Wilhelm brush—a thing I hate. And he half shut his eyes, and looked under the lids, with his chin up. He had fat legs, and thinnish arms, a combination that tells of self-indulgence. Worst of all, he had beautiful hands, pinky-white, like his face, and flourished them as he smoked. His feet were small and very flat. I never took such a dislike to any man in my life.

And there he was on deck, in a long chair, with his chin tilted up, looking at me under his eyelids. The captain was sitting near him, and talking to him with an emphasis and interest that marked him out at once as the "star passenger" of the trip. "King" of Pulu Panas, was he? No doubt he gave and took more cargo than anyone

in the archipelago. Well, if he were Emperor of Malaysia, I disliked him none the less.

"Has that pink beast been paying attentions to Miss Raye?" I asked. The enchanted peace and beauty of the morning had gone all in a breath; it was simply a greyish shiny day, with fish jumping about. . . .

Mrs. Ash nodded her three plumes in the direction of the main companion. "Look," she said.

Cristina had come up the broad stairway, and was making for her chair. She wore something thin and pink, as crisp as a new flower, and she had little white shoes with ivory buckles. Schintz had seen her coming before I did; he got out her chair in two seconds, pushed it forward, and deftly lifted those small feet on to the rest as she sat down. Then he tucked a cushion at her back, deliberately, looking at her under his fat eyelids. Cristina just as deliberately pulled the cushion out, and dropped it on the deck.

"It's too hot," she said.

I went over and joined the two. Cristina introduced me to Herr Schintz, and seemed to pass him over to my charge. Schintz looked for a chair, drew it up unnecessarily close to Cristina's, and began to talk to her in perfect English. He turned his back on me, in doing so, with the utmost nonchalance.

I stuck to my guns, and talked to her too. She answered both of us politely, and seemed to see nothing odd in the situation. Schintz kept his

back to me, and I talked over his shoulder. I would have gone on doing so all day. But the bell for breakfast rang, and released us.

"Mr. Garden, how could you?" asked Cristina in the alley-way. "It looked so absurd."

"Well, if you don't want to look absurd all the time, don't let Schintz hang about," I replied. "How can you be civil to such a bounder——"

"Foreigners aren't bounders; they're different, that's all. And we've got to be civil to Mr. Schintz."

"Why on earth?"

"Because Pulu Panas belongs to him, and he never lets anyone see the Buddhist ruins unless he likes. Hardly anyone ever goes there, it's not on the steamer line, but the ruins are really wonderful, only second to Boro Budur. It's a pity he is so—crabby—about it. It's his launch that will take us to the island, when we leave this ship at Wangi. You can't do anything at Pulu Panas without Mr. Schintz."

"Is there a Mrs. Schintz?"

"Why—no," said Cristina hesitatingly. I guessed at the usual Oriental household. "We were thinking of staying there," she added. "It's the only place."

"Then I must be civil to Schintz," I said, "for I mean to be asked too."

I was civil, though it cost me more of my self-respect than any man can afford to dispense with. I did not fancy the idea of Cristina staying in the

house of that pink beast, with only the old lady for protection. And I attained my end. Cristina skilfully turned the talk to the accommodation on Pulu Panas one afternoon when we were drawing near the island, and expressed much distress on hearing (what she knew very well already) that there was no hotel of any kind. She asked me where I was going to stay, and I said I did not know; I might not stop at all.

"Mr. Schintz has been so good as to ask us to stay," she said. A significant pause followed. Schintz deliberately examined his glassy nails.

"But I am not sure that we can accept his invitation," she went on. "I dare say we shall go on to Thursday Island with you."

Schintz appeared to come to a decision.

"I should be happy to see Mr. Guardian too," he remarked, displaying the curves of his disgusting pinky-white hands.

"My name is Garden," I corrected.

"Really—but my knowledge of your English tongue is, unfortunately, so imperfect," replied Schintz, with easy fluency.

"I am much obliged by your invitation," I said. "I should like to see something of the Buddha Temple. It belongs to you, I understand?"

"The island belongs to me, and the ruins are included. The people also are my property."

"But that is impossible!" exclaimed Cristina.

"Pardon me, not at all. When I acquired the

island, a good many years ago, it was native owned. Subsequently Portugal took possession. The Portuguese are not opposed to a modified form of servitude—serfage—we will not call it slavery, for it is the name that smells in the nostrils of your English Puritans. For a consideration, I was allowed to retain the rights over the persons of the people that I had previously held. Without my permission, no one can leave Pulu Panas—or enter it. What work I require on my plantations is performed by labourers permanently attached to the estates.”

“Slaves?” I asked politely. Schintz’s reply was addressed to Cristina.

“If you will take the binoculars,” he said, “you can see the island, very far away from here. This afternoon we stop at Wangi, and there my launch will meet us to go to Pulu Panas.” He touched her hand—the one with the great Chinese ring on it—as he gave her the glasses.

“That is a strange ring,” he said. “May I look at it?”

“I do not take it off,” replied Cristina, and a sudden paleness crept like a thin white veil over her face. She let the hand drop to her side, and took the binoculars in the other. They began to talk about the island.

“What do you think of it all?” I asked cautiously.

“I think I’m dreaming,” answered Cristina.

We were standing out of the moonlight, in the shadow of a horse-shoe archway that led to a walled garden with flowers and fountains in it. There was a verandah just above us, and it had a wonderful screen of carved and pierced marble all down the open part—beautiful to look at, in that tropic full moon, but calculated to rouse thoughts of invisible listeners.

“To think that a—Schintz—should own all this!” she whispered. The scent of orange-trees, fruiting and flowering, the cloying sweetness of moon-white trumpet flower and pawpaw, came through the open archway of the garden. From the outer world across the wide central courtyard, stole the unforgettable odour of Malaysia—dust, sandalwood, spice, and fish. A drum began to beat down in the harbour to announce the departure of a sailing vessel; it sounded like the hot throbbing of a fevered heart. The night was still and very warm.

“Yes,” I said. “He is owner in every sense of the word.” I pointed to a slender Indonesian woman with a spangled *sari* over her head, slipping into the garden with a water-vase. “That woman wore chains the best part of last year. She had a child—it is at the bottom of the harbour.”

“Why?” asked Cristina, her face white even in the shadow of the archway.

“Better not ask—an ugly story,” I said. “I heard it in the village. I’ve heard a good many things.”

"I've guessed a good many," she said. A leaf rustled somewhere. We stopped, and looked about us.

"All to-day," I said presently, "I've had no chance of speaking to you. That wasn't accidental. Kris-Girl, I don't like this place, and I wish we had never come."

"I don't like it—but I don't wish that," she said.

I drew her a little forward into the moonlight, and looked closely at her small pale face, with the glittering blue eyes. There was something in it that I knew.

"Again, Kris-Girl?" I said, stepping back into the shade. She nodded.

"What is it this time?" I asked.

Before answering, she looked up at the screen of carved marble. It was very close.

"Come into the garden; the moonlight is better than this," she said. . . . "Maybe that screen was put up just because people were likely to hide in there out of the moon and talk . . ."

The garden did not seem to be overlooked—but in these places you never know. Anyhow, we were out of earshot, standing there by the great cool bowl of the fountain, where the stephanotis spread a milky way of scented stars along the marble curb, and orchids, pale gold and dim purple in the moonlight, dropped from the mango trees.

"I want to know," said Cristina, "where, and to whom, he takes—meat."

"Does he take meat? and why should he not?" I asked perplexedly. As usual, I found her rapid mind hard to follow.

"Every second night," she said, "he takes it in a basket. I saw him once, and then I watched—those marble screens are useful in some ways. The moon has been on the wane since we came; he waits a little later every time he goes, so that he can be sure of that dead sort of dark that comes before moonrise. Once in two nights—and not more than twenty minutes' walk away. When he comes back, the basket is empty."

"Why didn't you try and follow him—not that I think you ought," I asked. "If there's anything odd about it—though I can't see there is—that would be the best way. Let me do it for you; it wouldn't be the first time, would it?"

The Kris-Girl laughed a little.

"One might as well try to follow a Red Indian," she said. "It's well to know when you're out-classed. He can hear you breathe fifty yards away—hear you think—guess what you're going to do before you know yourself. . . . He doesn't know I have seen him, but that's because I never dared to move away from the marble screen."

"Well, what do you propose to do?"

"Keep looking out, and so must you. I don't like that—meat. And . . . it wasn't good meat. It smelt. No, I don't know anything at all, or suspect anything. But—I *feel* something."

"How am I to tell you if I hear anything that

would interest you?" I asked. "It seems as if we could never get a word together. I don't know how we have managed this."

"Oh, I'm in bed and asleep," she replied calmly, "and you've gone for a walk to the *kampong*. But it won't do to stay long. As to getting notes carried, or anything of that sort, it may not be easy. I wish you knew the Morse code; I learnt it years ago. It's the most useful thing a traveller can know, after languages."

"But I do," I said eagerly. "My greatest chum is a wireless engineer, and he taught me. I'm not rapid, but I can send fairly, and take pretty well."

"Can you read—like this?" she asked, tapping noiselessly with her slight fingers on the marble basin.

"Yes. . . . You are saying—'I—must—go—back—to—my—room.'"

"Right," said the Kris-Girl. "And I must. Just one word. We have to stay here till the next Dutch boat calls at Wangi, and that won't be for ten days. I suppose you've noticed that—that——"

"I should think so—the Pink Beast! It's like his confounded hide."

"Well, if you see me—polite,—don't be astonished. It's for a purpose."

"I wish to God you were out of it," I said. "If one had understood—but who could guess at such a mediæval arrangement of a place, in the twentieth century?"

"It's impossible—if one hadn't seen it."

"Everything's possible—east of Suez—and everything else, east of Malacca Straits, I know," she said reminiscently. "The things poor Ashie has been through! There'll be somebody or other here in a minute; I feel it in my bones. Good-night."

She fled up the archway like a night-moth on the wing; I was left alone with the dripping fountain and the moon.

Someone did come; Schintz himself, padding softly on the marble—I think he wore rubber shoes. He looked at me, and passed on into the house without a word. I saw that he carried an empty basket in his hand.

Next day we were occupied with the antiquities of Pulu Panas. It had rained punctually from one o'clock till six, wet-season fashion, for several days after our arrival. But now the weather improved, and Pulu Panas became a place of wonder and of beauty.

It was a large island, some thirty miles in circumference. The greater part of it we never saw; I think there were secrets about the Schintz plantations and their manner of working, not meant for visitors to know. But the blue-velvet mountains, the deep palm forests, the inlets and fiords starred with plummy islets, and edged with china-white coral sand, made a setting of supreme loveliness to Schintz's palatial home, which had

been built mostly in the Indian style, and was even more gorgeous than the other houses of wealthy Malayan planters, that I had seen in my wanderings up and down. Schintz, in his own way, was hospitable: he fed us royally, and provided excellent wines; he had horses for us to ride, a motor, a fine oil-launch for sea trips, and a retinue of trained Javanese performers, male and female, ready to dance and sing for our amusement at a moment's notice. All the same, I could see that he loved me not at all, and that he loved the little Kris-Girl—if such a word describes the feelings of such a man—much more than was . . . than was . . .

Much more than was safe. The phrase cut itself cleanly out in my mind, as I stood waiting for Cristina and Mrs. Ash to start on a trip to the Buddha ruins.

Why was it not safe? The answer came, sharp and plain. Because this man owned the island and all that was on it, body and soul; and if Cristina rejected his advances—as she undoubtedly would—why, there would be only myself to stand between her and plain mediæval capture or imprisonment.

“I wish to God the steamer was due,” was the result of my meditations. And then the women came out, and Schintz spun up the drive in his motor-car, and we started for the Buddha Temple.

I am not going to talk about the ruins of Pulu Panas, though they are very wonderful, and ought

to be better known. The truth is, that I hardly took in anything of the amazing panorama of terraced sculptures, smiling, squat-legged gods, rock walls carved out into heavy, complicated groups of figures and animals. It was the manœuvres of Schintz that chiefly occupied my attention. He attached himself to Cristina, and stayed beside her all the afternoon. Not a word could I slip in. Mrs. Ash, secretly hostile to "sights" as ever, and myself, were left to follow side by side, almost in silence. I thought the old lady did not like the way that things were going, but it was clear she was far from realising the actual dangers of the situation, and I had no wish whatever to enlighten her.

The yellow sun of afternoon climbed up the hill of sculptured stone, waking to momentary life the impassive faces of Buddha images, and throwing out in a relief that was almost startling, the spirited groups of battles, triumphs, funerals. Close on it followed the rising flood of dusk. From the unbroken jungle that rose behind the hill of ruins, black flying-foxes began to flit through the golden twilight, like evil thoughts invading a pious soul. It was surely time to go home. But Cristina and Schintz still lingered, away there on the top of the hill, where the ruined central shrine was drinking up the last drops of day.

"Cristina!" called the chaperon, shrilly and with determination. She had to call more than

once before they came ; but once down the hill, Schintz hurried us all into the motor, and took the driving wheel without a word. His pinky features showed no emotion of any kind, and he talked as usual. Nevertheless, I caught a look—just one—under those half-dropped eyelids, that gave the lie to every calm word, every quiet movement he made. If ever a man had self-control—when he chose to have it—that man was assuredly the Pink Beast.

Things were becoming strenuous, for a plain business man like myself.

And meeting that look, I was glad to remember that I had a Browning pistol in my luggage. I resolved to load it that night.

Schintz, with his usual demoniac cleverness, contrived by one device and another to keep Cristina and myself from speech together during the evening. But before she went up the marble stairs with Mrs. Ash to her room, the Kris-Girl contrived to give me the sign I wanted. Under the very eyes of Schintz, sitting upon a great gilt settee beside him, she dropped one hand half under her skirt, and beat out a few words—long, short, long, short, in the invaluable Morse code.

“He—proposed—I refused—look—out.”

When I went up to my room, I remembered that Schintz had not, for one moment, been absent from his guests since dark. . . . Was he going out that night with his mysterious basket ?

Somehow, I wanted to know. I leaned out of

my window, and watched, till I was tired of watching. But Schintz remained in the house. The prisoner, whoever he was, went hungry.

Every morning some party of pleasure was proposed. On the next day it was an excursion by launch to the great coral reef that extended out to sea below the house. This reef was noted for its splendid shells; the house and garden were decorated with many fine specimens gathered at low tide—immense “balers” with tessellated curves and whorls, and orange-porcelain lips; Venus’s combs, with long scarlet and yellow teeth; pearl-lined “snail” shells as large as one’s head; nautilus, gigantic clam—I cannot begin to name the different kinds. For once, Mrs. Ash was pleased with the day’s programme, and exhibited interest. She said she could put her shells in a cabinet, and save at least five pounds that would otherwise be spent on china ornaments. . . .

The launch made a long curve out, and then ran back inside the reef, bringing us fairly close to the house again. We could have walked out much more quickly from the terrace below the garden, but a coral reef is a nasty thing to walk on. It was pleasanter to work slowly along the deep-water channels in the comfortable boat, landing now and then on a prickly patch of coral to secure the coveted treasure. The sun climbed high and grew hotter and hotter as we pursued our game; the launch’s deck was covered with the spoil,

"Oh, I am hot!" sighed Cristina by and by, drawing up her arm from an aquamarine-coloured pool, out of which she had just captured a brown shell, with a blue and green "eye."

Schintz, pinker than ever in the roasting sun, smiled at her in a forgiving sort of way.

"I have thought of your comfort," he said. He nodded to the Malayan launch-driver, and the native produced a parcel from the cabin. Undoing it, Schintz handed to Cristina two ladies' bathing suits, beautifully made, of black and of light green silk. With them were tied up two silk caps, two pairs of bathing shoes, and two towels.

"In my house," he said, a little grandiloquently, "there is always everything that a guest can desire. If you wish to enjoy the refreshing water there is a little way off a shallow with a sand beach; there ladies can bathe in safety from any shark, and with no danger of being drowned."

"You are most kind," said Cristina gravely. She told me afterwards, that the bathing dresses had made her suspicious, but for the moment she could not tell of what, or why. "Mrs. Ash and myself will be very glad to have a dip."

"You need not fear that you will be observed," went on Schintz in his formal, too-good English, "for this reason, that I and Mr. Garden will also bathe, but at some considerable distance away."

"I'm not much of a swimmer," I said. "Where is it?"

The launch was going again by this time.

Schintz pointed to a natural swimming-bath in the reef, at some little distance from us—a beautiful blue-green pool edged with wonderful coral bouquets, and surrounded by the ivory-coloured rocks left clear by the low neap tide. It communicated through a narrow passage with the outer sea, but one had only to glance at it in order to know that it was free from sharks. And in any case, sharks do not come into such confined and trap-like spaces.

“Are you going to swim?” asked Cristina of Schintz.

“Yes,” he answered, pointing to a small bundle of bathing things. “It is my favourite spot, for, like Mr. Garden, I am not good enough swimmer to venture into the open sea. But that place seems to have been made by nature for poor swimmers.”

We were running on past the reef; the great pool lay like some wonderful jewel, part sapphire, part emerald, on the ivory of the reef. I never saw such a colour.

“It is deep?” asked Cristina.

“Oh, yes. But it is so narrow that one can come to the side and rest in a half-minute at any time. Now let me show you yours.”

The launch was stopping at a beautiful bit of white sand beach, wreathed with trailing creepers that fell down from the trees above. Here the water was green and clear, and very shallow.

“You will be careful,” said Schintz authorita-

tively. "You will not go out too far ; it is quite safe in the shallows, but not perhaps if you were to venture into the deep. We shall leave you here and go on to our pool."

"Mr. Schintz—please !" said Cristina, looking unusually pretty and coaxing.

I saw the heavy eyes flash under the down-dropped lids. "What is your pleasure ?" he asked.

"It is so silly—but I am nervous, to think of being all alone with Mrs. Ash in this wild place while you bathe. Do send the launch back when it has dropped you. What should I do if a shark or something did happen to come ? Please let your launchman stay near."

"But certainly," said Schintz with a killing smile. "What you wish shall be done ; I know that ladies are always timorous. The launch shall instantly return when it has left Mr. Garden and myself at the pool. Moreover, it shall continually cruise up and down in front of you while you bathe, so that you shall not have even the fear of a shark."

We went off and left them on the beach ; and I must say that I wondered a good deal at the Kris-Girl's expressed nervousness, knowing as I did that she was not afraid of anything on sea or land. However, I had long since given up the attempt to follow Cristina's mental processes. As well might a stolid house-dog attempt to keep pace with an Australian kangaroo.

The launch dropped Schintz and myself at the edge of the reef, and then started back towards the coral-sand beach. We heard its quick heart-beats growing fainter and fainter as it went.

Schintz and I climbed over the coral with care ; it was mostly the spiked, sharp kind that crumbles like biscuit under an unwary boot, and cuts you cruelly if you fall. At the edge of the swimming pool, a sort of entering place had been made by breaking away all the fragile bits, and laying bare a base of solid "brainstone." It seemed that the spot was a favourite one with our host, for I could see that a long track had been cut through the branching coral of the reef, right down from the beach below the house. At high water the place might be unsafe, owing to sharks ; but when the tide was low, as it was at present, nothing more safe or delightful in the way of a swimming place could be imagined.

Cristina has said since that she cannot imagine how anything in the shape of a man can have been as stupid and unsuspicious as I was ; but I ask the candid reader, what was there for any reasonable man to be suspicious about ; I knew that Schintz did not wish me well ; that he regarded me as the only obstacle to his marriage—forced or otherwise—with Cristina ; that he was king of the island, and could do as he chose with any creature on it. But it takes more than this to make a sensible business man from the E.C. district suspect murder. All that I saw in

Schintz's proceedings was simply another device to keep me apart from Cristina for an hour or two.

We undressed together on a rather slippery platform of brainstone coral, and got into the bathing trunks that Schintz had provided. I looked at the water carefully before diving in. I am not a very clever diver, and want plenty of depth to turn in. There seemed, however, to be plenty here. From the branching coral fringe, where living buds of lilac, pink, and green stood up in the wavering chrysophrase of the water, cavern after cavern, deep after deep, appeared to open down and down. In these dim places, the water seemed dark navy-blue colour, and the jutting walls of coral were like palest pearl. The depths of the pool were empty. Not a flower-like medusa floated, not a silver fish showed sparks. Most coral pools are full of ocean life; but this one was still and silent as a grave.

Now, one does not want to see living things in a pool one is going to bathe in—at all events, in these equatorial lands, where the sea holds every kind of stinging, biting, devouring horror in her innocent-appearing arms—but there was something about the peculiar deadness of that place that touched my nerves. Cristina says it was my subliminal consciousness. I think myself it was the effect of being in company with a damned sneak, and more or less suspecting everything he said and did. But let that pass. The fact re-

mains, that I did not want to dive in. I wanted violently not to.

Schintz, undressed and in his trunks, was balancing uneasily behind me on the brainstone corals, waiting his turn to dive. For one moment I hesitated; it seemed so absurd to say one wouldn't bathe, when one was there all ready; and then the explicable feeling of horror caught me again, and I swore to myself I would not dive. I looked at the far end of the pool; it was empty, save for a few long trails of seaweed drooping out of a crack in the coral; they waved with the slow outward running of the tide. . . .

I do not know to this day whether I meant to dive or not. But next moment the affair was decided for me. Schintz, staggering on the slippery coral, fell up against me, and I tumbled in.

I came up gasping, and saw my host still on the coral platform, swearing loudly in Dutch and German, and nursing a bleeding foot. He had fallen among the sharp-edged points and beside the smooth brainstone, and cut himself.

"Why did you not hurry with your confounded dive?" he yelled. "I have cut myself abominably."

It did not seem a very bad wound, all the same; the bleeding had almost stopped.

"Come on in; the salt water will do it good," I said. I was paddling about in my own unskilful way, rather enjoying it now that I was in the warm, pleasant water.

"I won't; it will smart horribly," he said. He sat down and began to bandage the foot with his handkerchief. Oddly enough he did not look at the foot, but at me. He watched me. I saw that his face—for the first time in my recollection of him—was not pink at all, but yellowish pale. I thought him a coward to make such a fuss about a little cut.

"It's a nice pool," I spluttered, trying to swim "trudgeon."

"Can you swim to the other end?" asked Schintz. His foot was tied up now, and he stood on the rocks, an ill-shapen, thin-armed, shrimp-like creature.

"He's ten years younger than I," ran my thoughts, "but if I looked like that, I'd keep my clothes on. . . . Yes, I think so." I headed for the far end.

It was at that moment that I heard the whistle of the launch. Long, short, long, short, it was blowing continuously and oddly.

"Is he mad, that engineer?" cried Schintz, listening, but never taking his eyes off me as I swam. His face was yellower than ever, and—a strange thing—I could see that his pinkish neck and chest were also turning pale.

Something like an electric shock went through me. It was not the engineer. Cristina was signalling.

I let my legs drop down, and paddled, listening, sick with the thumping beats of my heart. Was she in danger—what in the name of God—

. . . . Long, short, long, short, the whistles came, and I read them —

“Don’t swim. Don’t—swim.”

Then—“Death. Death.”

Then a sudden long wail of the whistle, ending in a screech. It and silence.

I said I was not a good swimmer, and it is true. But if anyone had been near with a stop watch just then, I fancy a record of twenty yards or so—if there is such a record—would have gone by the board. For I covered that distance in something like three jumps through the water. I did not aim for the place where the pink toad was squatting, I made for a spot that had a projecting tongue of coral, scrambled up on to it, regardless of cuts and punctures, and went for my clothes.

In the midst of making a Laocoon of my person and my hastily gathered garments, I was suddenly struck as still as the stone Laocoon itself. I had seen something in the water.

The long trails of seaweed were coming out of the clefts in the coral, and floating towards my end of the pool. And they were not seaweed.

You must remember that I was new to the tropics. I did not understand what I saw—at first. When the long trails of seaweed that were not seaweed floated nearer and still nearer, and I saw that they were like elephants’ trunks, tapering, grey, twining and wreathing, I could not guess what it was that I was looking at, though the hair

seemed to crawl upon my head as the thing came closer. I stood my ground on the edge of the pool, and stared.

Not even when I caught a momentary glare from a plate-like eye of sheer white and black buried among the writhing elephant trunks, did I guess. But when one of those trunks slowly lifted itself from the water, and began creeping over the coral to my feet—when I saw that it was studded on the livid grey underside with countless white sucker-cups—then I knew. I sprang to the cleared path in the coral, and I ran.

It was unnecessary ; the long grey arm of the octopus sank back into the pool as soon as I was out of reach. Panting, the sweat streaming down my face, I stood where I could get foothold, and tossed on my clothes. Then I went back to the edge of the reef, keeping well away from that deadly pool, and halloed for the launch.

Up to this moment I had forgotten Schintz ; the sight of his scattered clothes recalled him to my mind. I looked about, and behold, the Pink Beast was stumbling over the coral reef towards the house, clad only in his bathing trunks and a pair of shoes. Just to accelerate his movements, I took the Browning (which had been in my pocket all day), and sent a shot up into the air. He howled at that, and skipped faster.

I heard the launch coming now. In another minute it had run to the edge of the reef. Cristina and Mrs. Ash were in it ; two perfectly dry

bathing dresses were folded up on a seat. The Malay engineer was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's the launch-driver?" I asked, as the vessel stopped, clumsily, a good way from the reef.

"Threw him in the sea," replied Mrs. Ash. "He's not drowned, but I suppose he's cleaner than most foreigners usually are by this time."

"Threw him—who?"

"I did. He was annoying Cristina. He was on the edge. So I tipped him over, and we pulled a lever, and it went. Lucky we were able to stop it."

Her bonnet had not a ruffled feather. No human being could possibly have felt cool on that glaring reef, at that hour of the day, but Mrs. Ash looked cool, mentally and physically.

"How dared he annoy her?"

"Foreigners will dare anything. He took hold of her arm to stop her blowing the whistle. I don't know why she wanted to, but I wasn't going to see a heathen nigger annoy Miss Raye while I'm her chaperon. So I tipped him—pop!"

Cristina sitting under her parasol, looked quiet enough, but there was a sort of sparkle about her face that I was beginning to know by this time.

"I congratulate you, Kris-Girl," I said. "I haven't time to talk about it, though. I wonder can we get the launch back to where you left the Malay?"

"What for?" asked Mrs. Ash.

"He's got to run it and us through the reefs and over to Wangi before sundown to-night. We can just about do it. There's a township there—Dutch government—but better than none. I don't think that Pulu Panas is healthy for any of us just now."

I may have spoken quietly, but I did not feel quiet. Since I had seen the pink toad hopping over the reef to his house, I had realised that the minutes of safety for our little party were running out like the sand in an hour-glass when some rough hand takes it up and shakes it.

Schintz's plan had failed, and . . . we all knew too much.

"He won't drive the launch. He's his master's servant," said Cristina contemptuously. "Mr. Garden—if I had not seen one of those awful things creeping on the reef, looking like—like the Devil if he turned himself into a spider—if everything hadn't jumped together in my mind like the filings in a wireless coherer when the spark comes through; you—you—would have got into that pool. Tell me, is there anything——"

For answer, I went over to the edge of the pool—not without a qualm—and sent seven shots from my Browning right into the mass of wreathing tentacles. They thrashed out of the water at the first shot, and continued to beat the air, a horrible mill of whirling arms, until the fifth bullet had crashed home. Then they sank back, and the hideous thing sank down into the indigo

caverns below, where the silver of the reef showed dimly through deep overlying water. I sent two more shots in it as it sank, and reloaded my pistol. When I looked at the launch again, Cristina was—crying.

"I don't mean it," she flashed. "I am just—upset." She scrubbed her tears mercilessly away. "It's upsetting to have been almost too late. . . . You won't get that Malay to drive you; he wouldn't dare."

"Let me in; we've no time to lose," was my reply. I jumped the gap between the launch and the coral reef, and set her off as well as I could. The steering was not difficult, and one could see how she was stopped.

"You can't drive her to Wangi; you don't know the way," objected Cristina.

"I know the way to drive a nigger, though," I said, laying the Browning beside me on the seat, as we came in sight of a damp and miserable Malay, walking slowly through the shallows of the reef water.

"Get on board," I told him in Malay. "You've got to take us to Wangi."

The man hesitated. I took the pistol off the seat, and aimed it.

"You'd better," I said.

"The *Tuan* Schintz will kill me," he muttered, looking back towards the house. I could not see the Pink Beast now; he was safe within his own walls, and—if I knew him—busy with pressing

and immediate plans against the safety of two at least of his guests.

"He won't get the chance," I said, jumping into the shallow water, and cramming the cold nose of the pistol into the ear of the hesitater. "If you don't come before I've counted six, I'll fire." And I began the numbers—

"Satoo, doowa, tiga, ampat li——"

"*Tuan, Tuan!* I come!" he yelled, turning yellow beneath his brown. He scrambled into the launch, which was bumping unpleasantly on the sand, and I came after him, wet, but satisfied. The Malay dived into the engine-room, and set the engine going. I took the wheel; it was necessary to get her off this sand-bank as quickly as possible, if we were not to run aground. About Pulu Panas, the tides rise and fall like the water in a lock when the gates are lowered or raised; ten minutes makes all the difference between safe depth for a small craft and ignominious stranding.

"Chit-chit! pitte-pitter-pitter!" went the engine, and my heart grew suddenly lighter. The shallow emerald water of the reef began streaming past; two V-shaped lines of foam sprang backwards from the bow. We were off.

Cristina sank back upon the cushions of the bright, glass-windowed cabin, with something like a sigh of relief, and I felt that she had realised quite as clearly as I the terrible danger we were in. Whether Mrs. Ash realised it or not I cannot say. I never succeeded in understanding that

old lady's character. To all outward appearance, she was as cool as if she had been seated in a drawing-room in Sloane Square, instead of in the cabin of a launch that was chasing madly across the far-out seas of Malaysia, in flight from kidnapping and murder. I saw the flash of her needles as I came forward from the engine-room ; she was working steadily on a Cardigan helmet of fleecy wool, the very look of which, in that burning temperature, made me want to sit down and hang my tongue out like a dog.

Cristina looked pathetically at me as I came in. There was something almost like tears in her eyes.

"I can't help feeling badly about it," she said, dropping her small hands on her lap, and looking up at me with an expression that would have set a score of lances in rest to avenge and redress her wrongs, in the days when men were not ashamed of their most creditable feelings.

"About what ?" I said, taking the seat beside her. "The impudence of that beast ?"

"No. My clothes. Of course he will never send them after us. And there was a lace demi-toilette—but you don't understand——"

"I don't," I said patiently, "but tell me ; I'm sorry for anything that hurts you."

"You couldn't know. . . . When I tell you that it was a real Doucet model, and looked as if it didn't cost ten-and-sixpence——"

"Is that a virtue ?" I asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Of course !" said Cristina, wide-eyed. "It

must look as if you made it yourself in a moment of inspiration, out of a window-curtain and a yard of trimming off a hat, and it must incite the other women to try and copy it because it looks so easy, and would suit them just as well as it suits you ; and all the time, it must have taken one man thirty years to learn how to design it, and four women three months to make it, and must have cost sixty-seven—What's the use ? It's as good as dead."

"Cristina," said Mrs. Ash, raising her eyes from the North Sea fisherman's clothing, "I should not be doing my duty if I did not tell you that the taste for finery grows like the taste for drink, and is almost as destructive to the character. I should be sorry to see you give way to it."

"Drink ?" asked Cristina idly : but the old lady was not to be put off.

"Either one or the other ; there is not much to choose," she said, and finished the border of the helmet with a flash and a click.

Cristina yawned politely.

"I know you mean it well, dear," she said, "but you make me feel so Victorian that I am sure I must be growing side-whisker curls and a crinoline. I've got the proper frame of mind for it, too ; I suppose people must have lived in a continual semi-conscious state of boredom in those days, and I'm feeling frightfully bored now that it's all over and we're safe again. Isn't there something very boring in safety ?"

"You are tempting Providence in saying such things," rebuked Mrs. Ash.

"What a very poor opinion of Providence you must have, dear Ashie!" was Cristina's reply, and she yawned again delicately, behind her hand. The launch ran on; we were out from under the lee of the island now, lifting and "scending" to the swell of the open sea. Before us lay the clear ruled line of the horizon, broken only by a faint, far-away blue cloud which the launch driver told us was Wangi, the steamer port of call.

"It looks very small," I said. "I wonder that the K.P.M. think it worth while calling there."

Nobody answered. Cristina, worn out by the excitement of the last two days, and by a sleepless night or so, had sunk gently back on the cushions, and was sleeping. As for Mrs. Ash, she never answered anything that was not couched in the form of a direct question—and did not always answer that. She was knitting away, with her eyes so nearly shut that I fancied—and still fancy—she had dozed off as well as Cristina, and was working in her sleep.

We ran on steadily, the pale blue island growing nearer and darker by slow degrees. Like Cristina, I had been short of sleep during these recent nights, and the temptation to rest overcame me. It was scarcely wise to sleep at such a time; I knew it, but I argued with myself that nothing could really happen; for his own sake, the Malay would drive the launch safely, and there

had been, and was, no sign whatever of pursuit. So I placed a cushion under my head, lifted my feet on the lounge, and in twenty seconds had slid joyfully down the glissade of sleep on which my mind had been unwillingly balancing for so long. . . .

I opened my eyes. The cabin of the launch was full of red sunset. We were rocking steadily, with a new kind of rocking, short and sidewise. Cristina and Mrs. Ash were both unmistakably asleep; the knitting needles had stopped. And the pulse of the engine was still.

I reached the engine-room in two jumps. It was empty. The Malay had fled.

"Good God!" I said, appalled. I came out on deck, and looked all round. The small blue cloud had disappeared; instead, a green, low island, not a mile long and plainly uninhabited, lay a few hundred yards ahead of the launch. Some ten miles behind us, dimly visible in the sinking light, was a group of islets that I recognised as the last outliers of Pulu Panas. Schintz had pointed them out to us a day or two before, and had explained that they were geographically a part of his domains, but actually owned by Malays; they were eleven or twelve miles away from his great island, scattered in a string out from its farther end.

The Malay, I guessed, had slipped overboard as we passed the group, and swum to the shore—a mile or so, more or less, is nothing to these

sea-rovers. He had left the launch running, not in the direction of Wangi—probably it had never been headed there at all—but towards the open sea, with this indefinite green island somewhere on the horizon. I had not been mistaken when I thought it too small for the steamer port of call.

Doubtless he would find means to tell his master where we had gone; and if there was another launch at Pulu Panas—not at all an unlikely chance—we might depend on seeing it out in pursuit before very many hours. Schintz would surely not let us away without a struggle.

I realised all this in a few minutes, and in no more than a few seconds the horror of it had passed away from my mind, driven out by the cold determination to think of nothing, care for nothing, but safety and escape. It is only so that men find their way out of the “tight places” that are frequent in earth’s far-off corners.

First I overhauled the engine, saw that it had stopped for want of petrol, and that—as one would expect—the reserve stock had been thrown overboard. The launch could no more be moved from her place than if the engines had been taken out and thrown into the sea.

“What a fool I was—what a fool I was!” I thought bitterly. “To let myself sleep—and yet I never meant it. I intended no more than a few minutes’ doze.” I looked at my watch. “Lord, I must have slept an hour and a half. I wish I could kick myself—why, that Malay devil

might have sunk the launch if he liked, instead of merely slipping overboard. I suppose he was afraid to harm Cristina. He knew we'd all wake up if he stopped the engine ; he must have planned the whole thing nicely."

An unpleasant thought struck me. Surely the Malay could not have anticipated leaving the launch to drift very long. His master would certainly take vengeance on him if he endangered Cristina's life. Consequently, pursuit must be near. Consequently, something must be done, and that immediately.

I left the useless engine-room, went on deck, found that the dinghy was untouched—clearly the Malay had feared to awaken us by removing it—and that there was a big locker containing tins of food and zinc bottles of water, screwed down to the deck planking. I slung the dinghy loose—she was small, smaller than I liked—put all the food and water I thought she would carry into her, and turned back to the cabin to get rugs and cushions. I meant to tell Cristina and Mrs. Ash what had happened, as soon as everything was ready, breaking the news as well as I might ; but I found the necessity had been saved me. They were broad awake, and watching me. Mrs. Ash had already collected the rugs and cushions, and made them into the neatest of strapped bundles, which she handed to me with perfect calm, remarking—

"I've had everything except being wrecked on

a desert island, and I knew that was bound to come. You needn't tell me desert islands aren't damp and dirty. Give me a hand to take up the linoleum on the floor."

I gave her a hand, and we ripped it, shrieking, from its place. Mrs. Ash rolled it up and tied it, settled her bonnet strings, and briefly remarked "Come on." It was the oddest experience. No one asked questions, no one wanted explanations; the situation seemed to have made itself clear at a glance, and more than that, the possibilities that lay behind had made themselves clear also. Cristina said not a word, but she worked as a nigger is supposed to, and does not, putting the parcels into the dinghy and helping me to lower Mrs. Ash comfortably from the deck of the launch. She dropped in after, took a seat and, as I was about to follow, pointed me back to the boat."

"Sink her," was all she said; but I understood at once. Our only chance of making ourselves safe—or temporarily safe—on the island, lay in leading Schintz and his people to suppose that we had either got the launch to go on, or had all been drowned together.

It was not so easy to sink the boat as one might have thought. I am not experienced in the crime of "barratry," which most people meet with solely on the backs of their steamship tickets; and I tried ineffectually to upset the launch at first. Now a smallish launch may rock till you

think she is about to stand on her head, in a sea-way ; she may heel horribly when something heavy is put on board ; but when you try to upset the same launch deliberately and of malice aforethought, you will find that she is not a dinghy and does not behave as such. Cristina watched me for a minute dancing ineffectually on the gunwale, with every movable piled in place to help me, and then ordered briefly—

“Open the bilge-cock !”

“I beg your pardon ?”

“I don't know what a bilge-cock is. But it sinks things. Don't you remember Kipling's poem about the man who

“Ran her or opened the bilge-cock, precisely as he was told.”

That must be the proper way to sink ships ; Kipling never makes technical mistakes.”

I found the “bilge-cock” ; I am not sure to this day if that was its name, but it yielded to persuasion and a spanner, and the sea came gushing in with alarming energy. I thought she would have foundered before I got into the dinghy ; but it seemed that I had still a thing or two to learn about the business of scuttling launches. She stayed so long above water that I was afraid I had made a mistake ; it was not till we were almost too far off to note any gradual sinking that she began to grow shallower, inch by inch, she was a mere raft, resting upon the

water ; and even then she hung for quite a little bit before suddenly and decidedly sticking up her nose, depressing her stern, and plunging out of sight.

I drew a long sigh of relief. Cristina calmly possessed herself of the two lifebuoys that I had put into the dinghy, and cast them overboard.

"Let them have something to pick up," she said. I pulled in silence. The island was further off than I had thought ; the sun was sinking fast, and once it was fairly below the horizon, dark would be a matter of a very few minutes. Moreover, save that the island appeared to be uninhabited, I did not know anything at all about it.

In a green gloom of after-sunset the keel of the dinghy grated on the sand. I had time to help the women out, tumble the goods ashore, and draw the dinghy above high-water mark, before stars leaped out in a velvet sky, and night, like a cool dark hand, dropped on the burning shore and sea.

"The tide is coming in," remarked Cristina with satisfaction. "Our footmarks will be—Ashie dear, please walk in the creepers when you leave the sand ; it's necessary."

"There may be snakes," stated Mrs. Ash, standing up black, slim, and incredibly civilised-looking, in the pale light of a first-quarter moon.

"I prefer them," was Cristina's elliptic but comprehensible answer. "Sit down there and

rest ; we'll give you some tea by-and-by. Mr. Garden and I are going to bury the dinghy."

"I was just going to suggest something of the kind," I said, I did not want all the honours of the situation to rest with the Kris-Girl, and it was quite true that the necessity of covering up our tracks, in a very literal sense, had already occurred to me. "But it won't be easy to make the sand look as if nothing had been buried."

"It will be quite easy," said Cristina. In the pale moonlight, I saw her stooping down and lifting something with her hands. "We've only got to put aside some of these trails of beach convolvulus—they're fathoms long—and put them back when we've done."

It was managed accordingly. Together Cristina and I dragged the light dinghy up the beach to high-water mark, and buried her in the sand just beyond it, using pieces of driftwood to scrape away the soft sand, and carefully putting back the thick trails of creeper when we had done. The whole thing seemed extraordinarily secret and criminal. I felt as if I had been burying a murdered body.

"There," said the Kris-Girl, panting, and standing up to brush the sand off her skirt. "That's safe. Now for our camp."

"In the boys' books which one must take as chief guide," I said, "they tie the sail to four trees. But we haven't a sail, and the trees don't grow separately. There ought to be a cave."

"There ought," agreed Cristina, little knowing what she wished.

"Since there isn't," I suggested, "let's get into the shelter of the bush with our rugs and pillows, and sleep till daylight."

Mrs. Ash lifted the edge of her skirt, and shook the heavy dew from it.

"I knew desert islands were damp," she said, resignedly. "Are we going right into the jungle? If so, I shall take my umbrella."

"It won't keep off the dew, dear Ashie," said Cristina.

"It will keep off tigers, which is more important."

"No wild animal, I understand, will face an umbrella opened before it suddenly. If you should observe a tiger, Cristina, I beg you to——"

"My dear lady," I broke in, "there are no tigers on these small islands; only on the big ones like Java and Sumatra. Probably there won't be anything to annoy you, and it won't even be damp; we can make our camp behind this big rock on the sand."

It was a very big rock, a pile of white coral shaped like a gigantic sponge, full of caverns and points and hollows. I saw at once that it was just what we wanted to hide us from boats scouting past the beach. We could sleep there till dawn, and then find a safer spot in the interior of the island. As to what was to come next, I was by no means clear in my mind. We had the

dinghy ; it would carry us a good way in these quiet seas. I hoped that at the worst we might get to Wangi in it when Schintz's pursuit should have slackened. But I preferred to think there might be a village somewhere on the far side of the island, where one could hire a good seaworthy Malay *prau* for some of the coins stowed away in the sovereign purse on my watch-chain. The Malay is exceedingly covetous, and I did not think that Schintz's rule was likely to extend beyond his own actual serfs. He was not the sort of man to serve for love.

In the meantime supper and bed were the chief things to be considered.

The sand behind the great rock sloped into a sort of hollow, where one could be comfortably sheltered from the chill of any land breeze that might come up during the night. The rock itself shut off the sea-wind. We had not only the rugs and cushions from the launch, but also mosquito nets ; no one, in the tropic seas, travels without these necessities, and Schintz was not the man to run the risk of discomfort on his own boat. We had food—tinned prawns and peaches, caviare, biscuits, macaroons, and what not ; I had put a couple of pints of champagne among the stores, and Cristina had a vacuum flask full of hot tea. Behind the big rock, under the stars, with the small gold boat of the crescent moon faring slowly up the sky, we camped upon the sand and ate. There was one plate and one fork ; Mrs. Ash

had them both, while the Kris-Girl and myself ate with our fingers out of tins. The old lady, eating prawns delicately with her fork, and sitting perfectly upright upon a stone, looked, as usual, like a piece of London dropped accidentally down in Malaysia, and, as usual, made one feel that she was nothing but an optical delusion, bound to vanish if you turned your eyes for a moment to something else. . . .

I have never seen any human being who so completely possessed the power of detachment from his or her immediate surroundings. I remember I once suggested to Cristina that Sir Boyle Roche's famous problem of the bird might have been solved had he known Mrs. Ash; for that lady was always in two places at once—London and the Eastern seas. But Cristina would have it that I was wrong. "Ashie is not in two places," she said: "She's in one, and that one isn't here."

As for me, the sense of place had never been stronger in my mind than it was that night. A wild, unknown island in far Malaysia—a coral beach, a dark sea full of stars, strange scents from the invisible forest drifting on warm whiffs of wind, danger, perplexity, fear, not far away; and at my side, a beautiful girl, alone in the wilderness with——

Well no; the situation was not, after all, the stock situation of the romantic novel. The outfit of that type of tale does not include an old lady

in a beaded cape and a Victorian bonnet, breathing hostility upon the leaning palms and the coral shores, in that the one harboured spiders, and the other was not guiltless of crabs; breathing, further, an atmosphere of chaperonage and conventionality. Where are the thrills of such a situation, in face of a Mrs. Ash? I reflected that I was let in for all the unpleasantnesses of a wreck on a desert island, without any of the usual compensations. How was I to display my delicacy and consideration, to avoid pressing my society upon the distressed beauty, with a noble look that should remain in her mind as long as life lasted; to bow over her little hand and vanish, leaving her to rest alone, yet not unguarded, by the camp fire, while I paced all night in the forest, listening for the slightest sound, and ready to rejoin her instantly at the break of day—how, I say, was I to play this star part of the chivalrous hero, with an Early-Victorian chaperon sitting in my pocket?

“I’m dashed glad,” was my entirely unchivalrous thought. “I can’t imagine a more beastly nuisance all round than the left-alone-on-the-island situation, and I don’t know which of us would like it least. Thank God for Mrs. Ash!”

And I pressed the old lady to have a little more champagne.

“Drink to our safe arrival at Wangi,” I said. “The other bottle we’ll open to celebrate it when we get there.”

"Thank you, I will," said Mrs. Ash, filling the deep clam shell with which I had provided her. "Cristina has the modern dislike of stimulants, but I was brought up to think that wine was given us to make glad the heart of man, and ladies also, within the limit of two glasses, beyond which indulgence becomes vulgar."

"But, Ashie dear," said Cristina wickedly, "that clam shell must hold two champagne glasses at the least."

"The principle is the same," pronounced Mrs. Ash, with the air of one giving forth a moral truth. She drank the champagne, and I am sure it did her good, though there was rather less than half the bottle left for me.

After supper I cut sticks and slung two mosquito nets upon them, in the shelter of the sand hollow ; piled cushions and rugs underneath, and left the Kris-Girl and her chaperon to sleep. I was not quite as clear in my mind as I should have liked about that matter of tigers, in spite of what I had said to Mrs. Ash. It came upon me now that I had heard something about tigers swimming the Straits of Sunda . . . and surely most of the islands about there were of no very great size ? Certainly some of them were no bigger than the island on which we had landed.

At any rate, I thought it best to camp behind another rock almost inconveniently near, with my automatic under my head.

That ill-omened sleep of the afternoon cheated

me of any deep repose ; I lay long awake, watching the palm-trees sway against the stars after the moon was down ; listening to the talk of the waves on the beach, that grew louder and louder as night went on, more and more like human voices plotting and muttering ; hearing the strange sobs, laughs, tolling and tinklings of night-birds in the forest, and the sharp smack of leaping fish in the lagoon. . . . Oh, a wild, ghostly, lonely spot ; a strange galley, indeed, for the head of the firm of Garden, Whitecross, & Garden, to find himself in, here at the end of the world !

“I’d feel safer if we could light on a cave,” was my last thought as I went to sleep. . . . If I had had ever so little second sight—just enough to stretch over twenty-four hours—I would have strangled that wish at its birth.

Dawn woke me up, or the birds—I don’t know which. They began laughing, bleating, whistling, shrieking, like a ward of lunatics let loose, before ever the grey in the sky had changed to palest gold. There are singing birds in Malaysia, but they are few ; for the most part, those great tropic forests are silent, unless where they ring to the yell of the parrot, the wild cries of beautiful birds that look as though they should sing like angels and don’t, or the rude, angry gabble of the monkey.

There was something just a trifle depressing about the witch’s chorus that greeted the day on our desert island. Or else it may have been a

touch of malaria. In any case, I felt the wind of misfortune blowing near.

Of course I said nothing about it. I woke Mrs. Ash and Cristina with a cautious hail, and when they had made their toilet, helped them to roll up their beds. Mrs. Ash displayed the linoleum with triumph.

"As damp as possible underneath," she said. "Dry as a bone above. We should certainly have caught our deaths."

Cristina said nothing. I think she realised that it was not an affair of linoleums and such trifles. At all events, she shot a keen glance across the lightening sea that told me where her thoughts were.

"They will look here," she said presently.

"One can't be certain," I said. "But we'll have to provide for it. We have an hour or two to spare. Even supposing the Malay gets the news to Pulu Panas this morning—which would be pretty quick going—they couldn't put out another boat till full daylight, on account of the reefs, and no boat in these seas could possibly do the run under three hours at the very least."

Cristina, standing on the wide white beach that was swept by the wind of dawn, looked out to seaward, and made no answer.

"Don't you think so?" I asked.

She did not answer for a moment, and then—

"I think," she said, "that we had better get under cover this very minute."

"You don't see anything?" I asked, somewhat startled.

"Not with my eyes. But my mind doesn't agree with my eyes this morning. No, don't stop to ask why. I think we had better get back into the scrub."

She was picking up rugs and pillows as she spoke. I made haste to help her; I did not understand, but experience, by this time, had given me a thorough respect for the workings of the Kris-Girl's mind, little though I followed them. Mrs. Ash took her full share of the labour. In ten minutes, we had brought all our belongings within the shadow of the bush; and behold, there was indeed a cave!

"This is lucky!" I exclaimed, looking at the coral rock, dark inside, dazzling white without, and heavily wreathed with creepers. "We can stow our things here, and then cross the island carefully, and see if we can find a village before dusk. It doesn't look inhabited, but one never knows."

We put away the things—the cave, after all, was but small—and covered them with trails of vine. You would never have guessed that anyone had disturbed the spot, when we had finished covering up our tracks. I felt rather proud of my scout-craft; but Mrs. Ash remarked briefly—

"I have no opinion of caves"; and somehow, I felt my satisfaction dimmed.

By now the sun had leaped from the sea, and the beach was bathed in pure gold; a strong

wind swept out of clean blue distances ; the world came fresh and sharp-edged from the mould of the new day. It seemed hard to leave all this splendour, and bury ourselves in the sinister dark forest ahead, but I felt Cristina's instinct to be right. We were too conspicuous on that bright beach, even though it seemed all but impossible that there should be any pursuit. So I loaded myself with food for the day, not forgetting a bottle of water, and we plunged into the forest.

It was incredibly tangled. I had to use my knife—which was luckily a large one—at every second step, to cut clear of the lianas, bush lawyer vines, and coils of green rattan cane. The women came after me, with full leisure to use their eyes.

"Why, here's another cave!" said Cristina in a minute. "And another. And—Mr. Garden, this is all caves!"

"I have no opinion of caves," repeated Mrs. Ash, stepping along with her black draperies kilted up at exactly the judicious height. "I have no opinion of this place altogether. You may remember, Cristina, that I warned you yesterday against foolish expressions of discontent with a state of comparative comfort. You see now."

"It looks almost," said Cristina wickedly, just too low for Mrs. Ash's ageing ears to catch—"as if Providence had been tempted after all. How very small of Providence!"

At this point she disappeared, exactly as if the

earth had opened and swallowed her up. Mrs. Ash gave a cry, and I sprang to the spot where Cristina had vanished.

Do you know that unpleasant dream in which the earth gives way underneath you, and lets you down a gigantic drop, at the end of which you wake gasping? In broad daylight, that dream happened to me. The earth gave way, and I went down through a smother of greenery, crashing and smashing, snatching at things that gave way and slithered through my hands, until I came to a stop with a heavy bump upon a mass of decayed vegetation. I was half stunned for the moment, and remained where I had fallen, looking stupidly up at the glimpses of sky that appeared through a mesh of leaves and liana some distance above. Cristina's voice brought me to my senses.

"Would you mind," she said, "taking your boots off my lap?"

"I beg your pardon!" I exclaimed. "Please pardon me—I didn't know——"

"But they are still there," said Cristina with a small laugh. I gathered my scattered wits, saw that Cristina and I were together at the bottom of a sort of pit with perpendicular walls, choked and tangled in trails of greenery; that we were at exceedingly close quarters, and that my feet, undoubtedly, were in her muslin lap.

"Good gracious!" I said, removing them. "I hope I haven't hurt you?"

"Not at all. I don't think the fall has hurt me either—there was such a heap of stuff at the bottom. I'll stand up and find out."

We both stood up, and ascertained that scratches and bumps were the worst of our damage.. I called out to reassure Mrs. Ash, and we then began scrambling up the rocky sides of the pit, which had a good many projections hidden among the green. With some difficulty, we got out. Mrs. Ash was nowhere to be seen. Cristina called to her.

"Here," came the answer from somewhere underground.

"Lord!" I said, "she's got into one too!"

"I think," said Cristina, poising herself on a small, sharp pinnacle half covered with twining leaves, "that we've got on to the wrong kind of coral island."

"How do you mean?"

"They aren't all green lawns covered with beautiful palms, and picturesque peaks going up to heaven. Once in a way you hit on this. I never saw it, but I've heard of it. I'm afraid we are in for—Ashie, dear, are you hurt?"

"I am not hurt," came the chaperon's accents from somewhere under our feet, "but I am greatly inconvenienced. I understand that you and Mr. Garden were wishing for caves. I said before, and I repeat, that I have no opinion of them."

"We didn't raise them by wishing for them," I objected, aside. Mrs. Ash heard me.

"I have observed," came her voice, issuing ghostly from the bowels of the earth, "that Providence at times allows rash wishes to bring their own fulfilment, for our—I don't wish to hurry you, but there are spiders down here."

We had a difficult job to get the old lady out ; it was just such a cavern, masked with vines, as Cristina and myself had fallen into, and the sides were almost straight up. At last, however, we stood on safe ground, ready to make another move forward. By this time, we were well within the forest, and without anything to guide us ; but I looked at the compass on my watch-chain, and directed our course forward, towards the far side, where that problematical village and *prau* might be.

We had not taken five steps before I put my foot on an apparently sound piece of earth, slightly veiled in creeper, and plunged straight through it into another cavern. This time I knocked myself about a good deal ; I was bleeding from head and knee when I got out, and had to accept Mrs. Ash's first-aid with a couple of handkerchiefs. I could have wished—but no matter. We went on cautiously, and for a time had no further accident. By-and-by, however, Mrs. Ash fell off a sharp pinnacle that looked like a solid rock, and turned out to be a mere support for more of those cursed vines. She was just disappearing down a cave, when Cristina and I got hold of her skirts and dragged her back.

"It's like a nightmare," I said, panting for breath, and trying to balance myself on something like the bristles of a giant hairbrush, reproduced in stone, and covered with leaves. I failed, and sat down upon the bristles. What I said matters to no one but myself; it did not get beyond my teeth.

"We have got to get back to the beach at any cost," I said. "This is impossible."

I looked at my compass, and behold, it was smashed: the glass had cracked, and the needle was hopelessly bent.

"We came that way," pronounced Mrs. Ash, pointing.

One way was as good as another now; we struggled on, anxious for only one thing in the world—to get out of this nightmare tangle of pinnacles, caves, and creepers. Warned by experience, we tested every step with sticks before venturing to set our feet down; but even so, we managed to score a few more sudden disappearances among us. The heat was terrible; our hands and faces dripped like melting butter, and our clothes clung to us as if we had been dropped in the sea. I don't know how we escaped serious injury from the many falls we had: it may have been the creepers that saved us—but at all events, though we all suffered endless scratches and bruises, no bones were broken or sprains inflicted. I think we had forgotten all about Schintz; it was not till the increasing heat told us mid-day

was at hand, and suggested the wisdom of a camp and a meal, that anyone spoke of the pursuit.

I had found, with much difficulty, a place clear enough of spikes and pitfalls to give us room to sit down ; the water bottle had been brought out, biscuits and meat produced, and a sort of rude lunch spread upon a rock. We had rested and fed, and felt refreshed. I found a cluster of wild rose-apples growing near, and offered the fruit for dessert. Cristina was just raising one glossy pink sphere to her lips, when she paused, holding the fruit in air, and appeared to listen.

“Do you hear anything ?” she said presently.

I listened for the sound of a launch, but there was nothing audible from the sea, beyond the steady, far-off beat of waves on the shore. Mrs. Ash sat still as a black marble statue on her rocky pedestal, and listened also. Cristina listened ; and of the three, she alone heard anything. I could tell by her face that some sound, unnoticed by Mrs. Ash or myself, had reached her.

“What is it ?” I asked. For answer, she raised her finger, and laid it on her lips. Again she listened, with an intensity that fixed her eyes to hard, moveless sapphires, and made of her delicate figure a small white statue to match the black one beside her. And now—I heard too.

Someone was coming through the forest, a very long way off. One could not have heard him, or them, but for the extraordinary conformation of

the island ; no one (I thought) could make progress noiselessly through that network of rocky pitfalls and spider-webs of greenery. For all that, the newcomer was a better traveller than we were ; he dropped at times with a smashing sound into some vine-covered pit, or stumbled on some one of the million hidden pinnacles, but he came steadily on. Even as we listened, the sound grew clearer.

Mrs. Ash turned to the girl.

"Cristina !" she whispered, appealingly ; and I saw that the old lady's face had turned very pale. Out of a hundred difficulties and tight places, the Kris-Girl had cut her way ; surely she could find a road to safety, in this last extremity ! This was the silent speech of Mrs. Ash's face.

I don't know what Cristina was going to do ; I did not wait to see. Whether she saw any loophole of escape or not, I had no intention whatever of leaving the defence of our party, in design or in carrying out, to a woman.

As well as if I had seen him, I knew—and we all knew—that Schintz and his men were on that island ; were hunting for us ; were likely enough to find us. This was my business.

"Cristina," I whispered—it was only long after that I remembered I had used her name—"We must pick up every scrap of this stuff"—pointing to the food and debris of food, upon the rock—"and we must get down at once into the nearest big cave. There are thousands of them on this

island, and it's impossible to hunt them through before dark. This one"—I drew the vines aside from the opening of a deep cavern-pit beside us—"is as good as any other; it seems large. If we pull back the creepers as we go down, no one could see us; and we're safe for another night at least. That'll give us time to turn round. Now."

We had been rapidly clearing as I spoke; all scraps and fragments were removed, and the remainder of the food and water I now dropped cautiously down the cleft. Moving with the utmost care, I helped Mrs. Ash down first, then gave my hand to Cristina, and then dropped down myself, pulling the clustered vines back as I did so.

We found ourselves, after a sharp scramble, at the foot of a pit in the coral rock, some twenty feet deep. To my delight, it ran backwards below ground, and we were able to creep into a subsidiary cave, entirely hidden from above. It was much cooler here than in the forest; and there was something very like relief in the liberty to lie back and rest, and cease from the nightmare scrambling and struggling among hidden pit-falls. Mrs. Ash, helped by Cristina and myself, had stood the exertion wonderfully; but I feared she would not endure much more of it. She lay up against the rock, after carefully testing it for damp, and closed her eyes; I thought she slept.

The day wore on ; we could gauge the passing of the hours by the gradual slant of the sunrays that found their way down between the leaves. It smelt warm and ferny down there ; it was very still, and by some lucky chance, there were no mosquitoes. At first, Cristina and I listened for further sounds of pursuit—it was strange how completely convinced we were that Schintz had found and tracked us : I can't even now recall on what evidence we based the belief, but we seemed to entertain no doubt whatever. After a while the faint sounds of crackling, trampling, plunging about, died away altogether, and for a long time we heard nothing. The stillness, the pleasant warmth, the exertion we had been undergoing, combined to lull us both into a half-dreaming state ; as for Mrs. Ash, she had been sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion for some hours.

More and more, the green light above grew like the light of sun on the green sea ; the rustle of the leaves overhead sounded like foam upon sand ; the faint breath of air that crept from the back of the cavern made me think of the cool wind that streams from the bow of a moving vessel. . . . The launch was running fast ; I had found that petrol after all. How green the water was ! we must be over a . . . Why, the launch had stopped ; that Malay must have scuttled her and jumped overboard to save himself from drowning. No, there he was, clinging on to the gunwale and staring at me—two of him—three !

I was broad awake now. I knew that I was lying at the bottom of a cave on an unknown island, with Cristina and Mrs. Ash; and that three Malay faces, dark, evil, fiery-eyed, were staring down through the green vines above.

I touched Cristina's hand—I did not dare to turn—and the slightest possible pressure told me that she was on guard. We hardly dared to breathe; speech was impossible, but she took my fingers in hers, and tapped out a word or two in the Morse code—

“They can't see us.”

I thought indeed that they could not; but I should have been glad to be quite sure. What were they looking down the hole for?

The three faces vanished, and then I felt Cristina's hand close fast on mine. Another face, round, pink, pale-eyed, and evil, had taken their place—Schintz!

My hand closed fast on the pistol. In that moment, I was more than half inclined to aim at the gap among the trailing vine-leaves and rid the world for ever of the Pink Beast and all his ways. His men were doubtless armed, but it was unlikely that they would fight if he were killed. And that he intended mischief to all of us, I did not doubt for a moment.

I still think that I should have done an entirely excusable thing, if I had pressed that trigger. But it takes long for a peaceable Englishman to train his hand to killing in cold blood. And the

man had actually done nothing ; it was all suspicion. . . .

Cristina read my mind ; she shook her head determinedly, and made "No—no !" with her mouth. She pointed to the inner part of the cave ; I could not conceive what she meant, but I was content to wait. It was barely possible that we had escaped observation, but—it was possible. Looking down into the coral pit, they had seen it plainly enough to be sure that there was no one there. And no one standing in the brighter light above, could distinguish the inner cave ; we had not seen it ourselves till we were right upon it. Schintz, sharp as he was, cleverly as he had tracked us up to that point, silently as he had stolen on us at last, was fooled. He thought we had left the pit.

We heard him tell his men as much.

"They have been here," he said cautiously, "but they have gone again. Scatter over the forest, and do not dare to leave it. They will have to come out at last. This is a hell's pit of a place ; what possessed you to leave them so near it ?"

"*Tuan*," said the voice of the launch-driver, "I did not mean to ; the currents must have carried them much further than I thought. And you will remember, *Tuan*, I had to slip off when I saw the *prau* coming, or else I should have been many hours later in getting to you."

"You were late enough," said Schintz, in a

grating voice. They were speaking in Malay, but I understood them fairly well. "If it had not been that the gunboat came along, and gave me the passage to reach my dying native wife on this island—ah-ha-ha!—we should not have got here till to-morrow. . Any more lateness of that kind, and you will have a finger the less, like that lazy brother of yours. *Pigi!* get on!"

They moved away. I was horrified to observe that they went through the bush as silently as tigers. That crashing and smashing in the earlier part of the day must have been meant to start us into flight. It was well indeed that we had not tried escape.

I drew a long breath when they were really gone, but I did not dare to move for quite a while. It was Cristina who made the first move. She crept nearer to me, and whispered—

"Do you feel the draught through the cave? There is a passage there. Do you know, this sort of island very often communicates with the sea through some of its caves—they are all originally marine. We might have a chance."

"I'll go back and look," I said. Somehow, the mention of the gunboat that Schintz had fooled into taking him here, gave me fresh hope. It was doubtless a Dutch vessel, but one could always depend on a man-of-war for help out of a tight place, and she might not have gone on. . . .

But would Schintz have started his hunt if she had not?

The ray of hope faded.

There remained the chance of the cave itself ; and I was more delighted than I can say, when I found that this ray was not to fail me. Back and back, after one preliminary turn, ran the passage ; narrow, rough, wet, and full of holes and pitfalls, but undoubtedly leading somewhere.

Hope now began to dawn full-orbed. We waked Mrs. Ash—she seemed much rested, and quite ready to go on—and cautiously, for fear of pitfalls and for fear of making noise, we made our way through the passages of the branching coral cave. It had all been under the sea some thousands of years ago, and only on the surface had the mass of coral, that was the island, acquired any likeness to ordinary land. Down among the caves and vent-holes below, it was like wandering among the halls of Neptune, abandoned for a day by the ocean king and the element in which he ruled. One could not help fearing vaguely that the tide would come in—that tide which had flowed out in the ages before the dawn of human life, and never come back again. It was not altogether dark, for the cave system communicated with the upper air by many chinks and splits in the coral rock, and as our eyes became accustomed to the gloom, we were able to make our way much better than on the surface. Down here, the seas of long ago had smoothed and made ready the road for us.

My fear was that we should encounter Schintz

and his Malays at some of these breathing holes ; but they must have been almost indistinguishable from above, and I judged from what he said that he had never been on the island before, and did not know of the caves. We kept hard on, Mrs. Ash supported by my arm, Cristina walking without help, as lightly as if she had never heard the word fatigue. In an hour or so, the light began to broaden ; we were coming to some large opening. At the same time, the sound of waves reached our ears.

I called a halt. We were clearly near the shore now, and must emerge into the daylight somewhere on the beach. My plan was to lead the way out cautiously, look for Schintz and his men before I allowed the women to come out, and if the enemy appeared, fire without hesitation. We were in a better position for defence now, and I had no doubt at all that Schintz would rush us, and give me an honest excuse for putting him out of the way.

I explained my plan to the two women, standing close to them, and speaking low. I remember, as if it were this morning, the pale, growing light in the cave ; the old-ivory look of the rocks, dotted sparsely with ferns that had somehow strayed down from above ; the wet, warm smell of the place, the cool and determined look of Cristina's little bright face. Mrs. Ash, as ever, had no expression at all.

I had not quite finished speaking, when the

air was split with a wild shriek from above—a shriek that ran on and on far beyond the limits of any human voice. At first I had really taken it for a cry from some one of Schintz's party, but in a moment I knew what it was, and I seized Mrs. Ash and the Kris-Girl by the hands, crying—"Hurry, hurry!"

We were out of the cave, and on the open beach in two minutes; the fresh sea-wind was blowing in our faces, and right before us, just getting under way, there lay off the reef a long, grey, armoured steamer, flying the Dutch naval flag.

We hailed her with all the force of our lungs. She did not hear; she began to turn out. We were small, whitish figures against the whitish rocks; a cold fear struck my heart. Would she not—

"Look the other way, please," came an order from Mrs. Ash. There was a brief rustling pause, and then—

I don't know how she could have endured a red flannel petticoat in the tropics; she says it saved her life at least a dozen times in damp places. It certainly saved ours in a tight place, that day. For the gunboat, which had been waiting for the tide, saw it, and turned round.

And in twenty minutes we were on board.

The adventure was over.

You will want to know when and how we told

our tale to the officer of the gunboat, and what was done to the Pink Beast. My answer is—Never, and nothing.

The Dutch colonies are not England ; people there are more than a little suspicious of foreigners, and our tale, however told, would have sounded very thin. Schintz, no matter what his intentions had been, had actually done nothing. The only person who had done anything was myself ; and I had stolen and sunk his launch. It might have been difficult to explain in a thoroughly convincing manner. . . .

The gunboat received us as a band of distressed foreigners, left stranded by the sinking of the launch they had obtained to go to Wangi. They very kindly took us on to that port, which, with man-o'-war speed to help us, we reached in less than three hours. And there, so far as they were concerned, the matter ended. I don't think Schintz had known they were still hanging about the island waiting for the tide, or he would never have risked hunting us up. No doubt the siren of the gunboat, which brought us out on the shore, scared him away. At any rate, that is all of Schintz.

That night, on the deck of a rough little steamer bound from Wangi to Thursday Island, we had time to talk at last ; and first in the subject of our talk was the recent exercise of Cristina's curious powers.

"It depresses me," she said. "I feel my little

powers, such as they are, must be going. I count that affair a failure."

"But I don't see how——"

"Oh yes, it was; only accident saved you. I should have known. How I could have been so—— Why, I knew all about those things; how they are found on just such reefs; how they live for years in one cave or pool; how they need food, ever so much food, and like it high, if it isn't alive. . . . And I never guessed, till just that last minute."

"I don't see how you could have," I said.

"Of course you don't," she answered, with a flash of amusement. "If you could—but that isn't your job, Mr.—what was it he called you?—Guardian."

I think any man who has been in like case can guess what I said next.

"No, no, no," said Cristina, bending over the rail, with her face in her hands—and for the second time that day, she seemed to be crying—Cristina, who feared nothing. "It isn't possible. If it were——"

"If it were?" I echoed eagerly; but she only lifted her head and her hands from the rail, and went down into the tiny cabin.

.

And the night-wind blew up, as we rolled on our way to Australia.

CHAPTER VI

MERMAID JANE

"WHEN you get to Australia, you think you are there, and then you find out you aren't after all," was Mrs. Ash's criticism on Torrestown. It is undeniably true that Australia, approached from the back door by way of Malaysia, is not the country known to the orthodox traveller along P. and O. routes. To me, however, it seemed likely to prove more interesting. Torrestown—dusty, sandy, glaring, with hot salt-windy streets, mangoes and paw-paws growing in its back yards, goats sleeping on the footpath of its principal boulevard, and wild-looking, bearded Australian blacks riding about the suburbs on half-tamed horses, had certainly more local colour about it than Sydney or Melbourne; or so I imagined, not having seen the last. Mrs. Ash had seen both cities, after her own fashion; that is, she had journeyed conscientiously with Cristina through all the tourist sights, reading her gardening papers, and knitting North Sea fishermen's waistcoats, through the Blue Mountains and the

Jenolan Caves, sailing and steaming, woodenly unresponsive, among the world-famous splendours of Sydney Harbour. . . . I think, nevertheless, she regretted Sydney and Melbourne, here in the wilds of tropical Northern Australia. The housewife who can make a successful fight against the dust of Queensland and the Northern Territory has yet to be born.

It was a matter of silent agreement that I should continue to journey with the party, and, in any case, Torrestown has few calling steamers. We refitted as best we could from the local shops, found quarters in an hotel that looked as if it had not seen a broom since it was built, and settled down to wait for the next Sydney boat. Torrestown does a good deal of pearling, though not as much as Thursday Island or Broome, and we had a pleasant week or so—at least Cristina and I had—going out with the fleet and seeing the pearlshell fishery. Mrs. Ash's comment on that industry was characteristic.

"I thought there couldn't be anything in the world dirtier than Malaysia," she said. "But there's one clean thing in Malaysia, and that's the Dutch. There isn't one clean thing of any sort in Torrestown, and pearling is the dirtiest and most disgusting job from Spitzbergen to King Edward Land."

Nevertheless she continued to earn her salary, shedding the respectability that accompanied her three nodding black plumes over things and places

that assuredly had never been so honoured before. Torrestown, like most places of tropical Australia, has a rather large proportion of scamps and ne'er-do-wells of both sexes among its population ; it drinks more than a little, and Mrs. Grundy holds the reins of propriety with an uncertain hand. Yet the people of Torrestown are kind-hearted in the main, generous to their own destruction, impulsively good-natured on the whole, if impulsively bad-natured now and then. They partake of the nature of their own violent climate and burning skies ; if you offend a man of Torrestown, he is your enemy till death ; if you are his friend, he will stay beside you and die of thirst with you in the wilderness, or jump in among the man-eating sharks to pull you out on a thousand-to-one chance for his life and yours. . . . There are worse people in the world than the specked and spotted folk of Torrestown. We had not been there more than a few days when Cristina came up to me under the verandah of the biggest pearl store, where (I must admit) I was silently pricing rings, and comparing them with the size of a certain gold Chinese ring for which I had no liking.

“What do you think ?” said the Kris-Girl, twirling her white umbrella round and round above her wide shade hat. “They’re at it again—here !”

By this time, I had learned Cristina’s elliptic form of language, enough of it, at least, to understand her as a rule.

"They are, are they?" I said. "And what is the knot they want you to cut now?"

"Rather a curious one," answered Cristina. "Walk on, and we'll talk about it."

I left the pearl half-hoops behind, and sauntered side by side with her along the dry, sandy main street of the town. They build, in these remote places, with a liberal sense of the future—a future that does not always arrive. It had not arrived for Torrestown, but the preparations remained; streets so wide that it was quite a little walk across; great spaces full of nothing but dust and sun and shining tin cans, waiting to be covered with Government offices and lofty warehouses, that assuredly no one would ever build; fine compounds about the houses, running back to jungle as fast as they could. Four o'clock was the hour; usually a stirring time in tropical cities—but the population of the main street consisted, on that afternoon, of nine goats, two hobbled horses, an aboriginal, and a hospital nurse out for a walk.

We sauntered aimlessly along, talking. Everyone is aimless in Torrestown; everyone talks . . .

"It was at church yesterday—Sunday," explained Cristina. "You didn't go, so you didn't see. When Ashie and I were coming out, a queer little man stepped forward from the road, and introduced himself to me. He said he was Belleville Hobbs, and that he followed the profession of mule-driver for Torrestown and the surrounding

country." Cristina exploded slightly; it seemed that Belleville Hobbs had made an impression. "He said he had been deputed by some of the other people of Torrestown to address me, because his profession was one that made a man fluent in his speech."

It was I who exploded now.

"Be quiet," ordered Cristina, "or I can't go on without laughing myself. Mr. Belleville Hobbs told me that they had heard of my salubrity, and were anxious to take advantage of it, concomitantly with my unexpected visit to Torrestown. He said things were being stolen——"

"I hope you told him you weren't a police detective," I said rather indignantly, for I was jealous of these public claims on the undoubted gifts of my Kris-Girl.

"I didn't tell him anything; it isn't so easy to stem the torrent of Mr. Bellville Hobbs' eloquence—remember all the practice he has on the mules! He said that nothing of any value was going, but small things were being taken from almost every house, half loaves of stale bread, pieces of cotton, knives, a tomahawk or two, fish-lines, and so on. He said it wasn't an aboriginal, because books had been taken from time to time, and it wasn't a common thief, because money was always left. They had sat up and watched night after night, but whatever house was watched was always the one to be let alone, and they couldn't watch the whole town. And of course,

in such a climate as this, there can be no question of shutting your house up. Nobody minded the small things that went, he said, but the 'impermeability of the whole matter' had got on the public mind, and people were even beginning to say that there was something supernatural about it; or, as Mr. Belleville Hobbs put it, 'that the whole thing was not dictated by any being of a contemporaneous kind.'"

"What do you think about it?" I asked.

"You know I never *think* about things of this kind," said Cristina, as if repelling an offensive insinuation. "One asks oneself a question or two——"

"Whom does it benefit?" I quoted.

"You're learning," said the Kris-Girl. "You've got as far as the point where the police begin—and end. Yes, one asks that. And if there is no answer, you shut your think, and open your take-in, and just let things run along. You have to be careful not to think; it seems to shut the take-in door. And through that door when you swing it wide open, come lots and lots of things, some of them no use, and some of them useful. And something in you stretches out a hand to the useful ones, and says——"

"Do you want your tea or do you not?" It was Mrs. Ash. She had dropped behind for a minute or two, after a praiseworthy fashion she had acquired of late; but one was never left very long without her.

"I know you do, dear Ashie, and we'll go and get it at once," replied Cristina patiently, the curious light dying out of her face, and leaving her just an ordinary pretty girl in an ordinary Torrestown muslin frock. As for me, I lifted my hat and swung off by myself, mentally cursing Mrs. Ash's anxiety to earn her salary. . . .

I wanted Cristina to come for a stroll in the moonlight after dinner, but she could not be moved from the drawing-room of the hotel, where, among the awful relics of mid-Victorian furniture that one finds cast away on the shores of these desolate up-country hotels, she was sitting on a sofa surrounded by newspapers. A table drawn up before her was full of newspapers also, and there were more on the floor.

"Thank you, I want to read," was all the reply I could get. I took up some of the papers at random. *Torrestown Weekly Courier*, *Torrestown Weekly Courier*, *Torrestown Saturday Times*, *Torrestown Saturday Times*, was what I read. Cristina was going through back numbers of the local press.

"But, Miss Raye," I said, "this thing is comparatively new ; it has only been happening during the last few weeks, so far as I can gather. What is the good of going over all those old papers ?"

Cristina flapped her handkerchief at me as if I had been an intrusive chicken.

"Shoo !" she said.

I shoo'ed. I went out into the immense, deso-

late main street of Torrestown under a moon of impossible silver brilliancy, and wandered up and down among the goats and tin cans, waiting till it should be time for bed. There were a few unhappy-looking coconut palms near the jetty ; they leaned and shook in the wind that blew up from the Timor Sea. A sudden sense of the map of Australia came into my mind, and I saw Torrestown, cast away as it were on the endless, desert, northern coast of this far-away continent. Where was the multitudinous brilliant East we had left but a day or two behind us ? I think no traveller with a mind above the level of the beasts that perish could cross the mysterious sea-frontier of Wallace's line, without marvelling over many things he cannot understand. . . .

Mr. Belleville Hobbs, alone in the desert street, went past me at five minutes after eleven o'clock closing time, with a determinedly steady step. I knew him at once ; there was something in the very cock of his cabbage-tree hat and the lines of his loose-belted shirt, that advertised his "profession," even if one had not noted the spurred feet, looking oddly small in their high-heeled rough-rider's boots.

He was not entirely sober. He jerked his head at me as he went by, with an odd sort of defiance, and asked—

"Are you her bloke ?"

Without waiting for an answer, he went on. I found myself wondering at the number and

variety of Cristina's victims; and then that wonderment died away in another—

Was I her "bloke"?

The wind—the lonely wind of North Australia, halloeing among the palms beside the Timor Sea, had no reply for me.

Cristina hired a sloop next day—an unpleasant vessel with a cockpit cabin, and one leg like a grasshopper's. I believe that this is not the correct definition, but I can only describe the *Colonel Burns* (such was her inappropriate name) as she appeared to me. We spent a not very happy morning in her; I do not enjoy the motion of small sailing boats, and Mrs. Ash, though unaffected by sea-sickness, as apparently by all other weaknesses of humanity, did not seem to think that the owner and skipper was giving value for his employer's money.

"Don't tell me he can't go straighter than that if he likes," she said bitterly, as we tacked and tacked against the "trades," on our way to a little island that Cristina had some fancy to visit. "You may say what you like about slants and boards; I only ask you, are you paying by the hour, or are you not? You are? Then don't talk to me."

We visited quite a lot of small coral islands before lunch time, having started early from the hotel. Torrestown, like most North Australian settlements, has a perfect constellation of these wonderful sea-gems at her very gates.

Each was more or less like the last, and yet each seemed lovelier than its fellows. The soft, sloping beaches of sand that looked like powdered sugar; the little green lawns ("those Paul and Virginia sort of places," as Cristina called them) running right down to the water's edge, between high walls of leafage—the bare-branched flame trees alight with vermilion flowers, the long, long fingers of convolvulus reaching out to the water across the sand—these were the same in every island. But some were round and solid like plates, and others held an aquamarine-coloured lagoon in the centre, much bigger than the slender wreath of island that surrounded it—these were "atolls," Cristina said, and her favourites; while others yet were set in surrounding moats of wonderful pale green water, breaking sharply off into the Prussian blue of the outer sea.

There was a wonderful, haunting fascination about them all—about their leaning ivory-stemmed palms, dropping colossal nuts from their far-up crowns; about the unexpected fairy glades, sown with strange flowers, that we found hidden in the arms of tangled forests; about the dead-white sands, unmarked by any foot save our own, where yellow wild oranges, pandanus fruit, lay undisturbed on the wide, wave-pencilled floor. . . .

. . . . In the pullulating human ant-hill called Malaysia, what does one know of the charm of island life? One must cross Wallace's sea-frontier to feel it. At least, that was how it seemed to

me, Robert Garden, senior partner in the firm of Garden, Whitecross, & Garden, wandering here in the East beyond the East, where I had no conceivable right to be.

Cristina seemed to be getting slightly dispirited by the time that half the morning had worn away. I did not in the least know what she might be about, but whatever it was, it was not prospering. We went over island after island, Mrs. Ash tramping with us determinedly, her impassive face regarding, with equal absence of interest, atoll, lagoon, green lawn, and leaning palm. We stopped at last on the beach of the last and biggest island, which lay some four miles from Torrestown. We had inspected the place, had circled the edges of the dense thicket of hibiscus, cottonwood, wild fig and other trees, that filled the middle of the island; had looked at and admired the hundred-foot limestone crag that stood up like a spire above the green deeps of the lagoon; had tramped along the shore at high-water mark, looking for heaven knows what. . . . Cristina gave up at last, declared herself tired, and sat plump down on the sand. Mrs. Ash, as in duty bound, told her she would "take her death," and, finding her warning useless, began to pace back and forwards upon the beach, awaiting Cristina's pleasure to go.

I shared in the Kris-Girl's disappointment—though I did not know what it was about—and further, I had certain worries of my own which

kept me from being uproariously cheerful at any time. So I stood near her, looking out at the blinding green of the lagoon and blinding blue of the outer sea, listening to the dry patter of the palm-leaves as the south-east trade shook their plumes, and thinking that there was, after all, something hard and heartless in these places of eternal summer. . . .

. . . . On this, Cristina burst out laughing, and I looked to see what the matter might be. The reader may believe me or not, but it is true that that housewifely person, Mrs. Ash, was tidying up the island—tidying up Michaelmas Island, the biggest of the Dampier group, off Torrestown, in the Timor Sea. She was walking down the strand, a good way off, pushing loose palm-leaves and streaks of weed away from the ivory smoothness of the low-water beach, into the slowly retreating ripples. I do not think the good lady knew what she was about; doubtless her mind was far away in Kensington and the parks of smoky London, leaving her body to act mechanically after its accustomed way.

“Look!” said Cristina naughtily, “the dear thing is setting out to sweep the Timor Sea.”

“It sounds like a pirate,” I said rather weakly, and then was conscious that I was speaking to myself alone. The Kris-Girl had suddenly risen and, with that wonderful light speed of hers, was running down the beach. I saw her pounce on something, just before Mrs. Ash swept it into the sea.

"You builded better than you knew, dear chaperon," I heard her say (naturally, I had followed her).

Some women would have asked for an explanation. Mrs. Ash's fine contempt for what she did not understand never failed her.

"I suppose you will order the man to sail us back, some time or other," she said. "You may not have noticed it, but they have a very inferior system of warming up food in that hotel."

Cristina made no answer; she was fingering what she had picked up. It did not look very interesting—a sort of toy raft, two or three feet long, apparently made by some child out of the kind of material handy in the neighbourhood of Torrestown—light corky wood, lashed together with strips of fibrous bark, and pointed fore and aft. A long, bark cord trailed from what seemed to be the forward end.

"I suppose that's some kid's toy that has drifted over from the town," was my remark. Cristina's face took on a mischievous sparkle.

"I congratulate you," she said. "It looks like that, doesn't it?"

"It couldn't be anything else," I said, encouraged. "You see, a raft of that size could not support more than about ten pounds weight—I know a little about displacements," I explained apologetically. "We have so much shipping business of one kind and another. So you see, it

must be a toy, and Torrestown is the place it must have come from."

"But what," asked Cristina, "if Mrs. Ash found it above high-water mark, as she did—she was sweeping away a bunch of dried palm-leaves, just there, and the raft was under it; wasn't it, dear?"

"It was; they charge a minimum of two and sixpence for meals out of hours," replied Mrs. Ash, without a break.

"Well, then," I answered, briskly, "it looks as if there had been a picnic here."

"Congratulations again. There has been, and perhaps there is," said Cristina.

"A picnic, now?"

"Will you come and take another walk round that wood in the middle of the island?" was Cristina's reply.

Mrs. Ash, with a God-give-me-patience expression, placed the raft on a sloping bank of sand and sat down upon it. Cristina and I went off, the Kris-Girl looking particularly bright, and myself (I must confess) feeling a little puzzled. We began to circle the wood, but we had not gone more than a third round it before we heard steps—soft steps upon the sand—behind us.

"I never saw an old lady with such a—confounded—conscience," I exclaimed, feeling a little sore at the constant shadowing.

"Oh, yes, you did," replied Cristina, "I will bet you a—a sack of gum damar". (I know I blushed at this), "that that isn't Mrs. Ash at all."

"But who could it——" I swung round, and looked behind me. Cristina turned after the deliberate fashion of one who knows what he is going to see.

"It's the picnic," she said, with a single glance.

It was a young man. A smallish young man of twenty or thereabouts, dressed in a rough loose shirt and trousers some sizes too large for him. His feet were bare ; he was badly sunburned. He had dark, defiant eyes, and very close-cut dark hair. There was something attractive about his face, and yet something I did not like. He looked to me just the sort of young scamp that one is apt to meet in out-of-the-way-corners of the Empire—a lad who sticks at nothing, and yet contrives, by some worthless gift of personal charm, to evade most of the consequences of his own ill deeds.

But whatever his ill deeds had been, if any, they did not seem to have prospered him much. Even his clothes were clearly not his own. What was he doing there, hidden on Michaelmas Island all by himself ? and was he responsible for the thefts that had been disturbing the town ? Just as likely as not. . . .

"But how could you think that when he has no boat ?" said Cristina, at this point, answering the thought in my mind after a rather startling fashion.

The young man was coming nearer ; it was plain he meant to speak to us.

"He might have a canoe," I said rather sulkily, for I felt I was being played with.

"They have had the shore watched for boats and canoes, of course; Mr. Belleville Hobbs said so," replied Cristina; and by this time the bare-footed person in the misfit clothes was so close that we had to stop. He looked at us boldly with his sharp black eyes—they were handsome eyes, too, and I did not like to see Cristina regarding him with the interest that she undoubtedly displayed—and said:

"Can you oblige me with a cigarette?"

"You look as if you fed on them; I know your kind," was my mental remark. Aloud, I said merely:

"Sorry; I smoke a pipe."

"I'll take some tobacco, and a bit of paper, then," he said, coolly. I gave them to him, and he began rolling a cigarette with eager fingers. The skin was deeply bronzed, but not so much that I could not see the stain of nicotine on one slight forefinger.

"Any matches?" he said. I gave them, and he lit the cigarette and sucked at it greedily. All this time, Cristina was looking at him, and I (I must confess) was growing angrier and angrier at her obvious interest in the handsome young waster.

"Did you never see a fellow down on his luck before?" he said to her, with a tone in his voice that made me feel I would like to thrash him.

Cristina, oddly enough, did not avert her gaze. Not even when the young wretch deliberately winked at her did she turn away, and her calm, pale face showed no trace of a blush.

"Look here," said I, "I don't know what brings you here, or what your confounded name is——"

"Smith—John Smith," he interrupted, grinning.

"But I can tell you that if you don't behave more respectfully to this lady——"

"Mr. Garden, I'm going home," interrupted Cristina, and I could see that she was suppressing a laugh. It occurred to me that the best and most modest of women has a streak of plain brass somewhere in her composition, if you are unlucky enough to light on it.

"You are not staying on this island?" she threw out at the man.

"Got it in one," he nodded. "Staying over at the native village there, beyond Torrestown a good way. The confounded niggers were to have called to take me back in their canoe, but they haven't turned up yet."

"We can give you a seat as far as Torrestown in our sloop," offered Cristina. She was looking at "Smith" very closely, but I could not see what she was looking at.

"No, thanks, I don't want to go to that hole. The niggers for me," replied the man. He seemed to feel the roughness of his clothes a good deal

—small wonder, in the case of such a dainty little lady as Cristina—and I thought that he actually winced under her look. But he carried it off with another wink, and a “So long!” as we turned away. I felt my fingers tingling.

“Of all the confounded young cubs——” I said.

“He’s not such a cub as you think,” said Cristina; and I was so annoyed by this that I did not speak till we reached Torrestown again.

There was little pleasure for me in Cristina’s society, in the days that followed the trip to Michaelmas Island. The weather was hot, despite the strong trade-winds; but she scarcely left her room. She seemed to be busy with papers all the time—uninteresting chronicles of the doings of North Australian towns, barren, I should have supposed, of all possible interest for any created being. Once or twice she honoured me by sending me about Torrestown to look for more.

“North Australian papers—any you can get,” she said. “Up to six months old if you like; only get them.”

She was exceedingly pleased when I came in one evening with a bundle of weekly newspapers covered in raspberry pink. They were stout and stodgy, and had columns and columns about sheep, also pages on pages of the minutest gossip about many (obviously) minute people.

“I like the look of those,” said Cristina. And nobody saw anything more of her that night.

I was fain to occupy myself with Mrs. Ash, for

the want of anything better. The old lady, who seemed, as usual, to be vibrating between an odd liking for, and an equally odd distaste towards, myself, received me rather better than usual. She was knitting with insatiable fury, beside a lamp, on that verandah of the hotel that came nearest to being cool. It was dark; there were stars in the sky, but no moon. A flying-fox, stealing bananas out of the back yard, made a drumming noise with its wings. The smell of dust and goats came up from the road below.

"How's the inquiry getting on?" I asked, finding a chair.

"Cristina doesn't talk," was the reply. "Not to me. The mule-driving man was up here an hour ago, and told her there had been some more things stolen. Seems they, or it, stole a pair of shoes this time."

"A pair of shoes?" I said. Something in the nature of a memory was wandering darkly about my mind, but I could not drag it out into the light. Shoes? . . . Shoes? . . .

"How much longer are you and Miss Raye going to travel?" I asked, to change the subject.

"About eighteen months now. No, you needn't ask. Don't know anything more than I did. Never will know. Don't care. I'm not curious."

"But I am—more than curious," I said, drawing my chair nearer. I recognised something propitious in the moment, and did not mean to let it slip. "I mean to know, one of these days,

why Miss Raye will not marry. I—I have a—a right,” I said, getting a little breathless. “I have a notion—it seems preposterous——”

“So have I; I really think she does,” replied Mrs. Ash, answering what I had not said, after the manner of women. “But that makes no difference. She’s set in her own way. I’m honest. I don’t pretend to be sorry. Why should I give up a year and a half’s income to you?”

“Why should you, indeed?” I asked, seizing at the opportunity. “I’m a business man before anything else; I expect ‘nothing for nothing, and—a—uncommonly little for sixpence.’ Naturally—as a business man—if I deprived you of a year and a half’s income, I should feel it my duty to make good the loss.” I waited anxiously for the reply. There was never any knowing how Mrs. Ash would take things.

The stabbing needles stopped; the wooden, yet kindly face turned towards me. In the orange glow of the kerosene lamp, I saw, or thought I saw, a light of hope dawning upon it.

“You—you could go right back to London,” I said, unsteadily. “You could take the B.I. boat that calls here every week or two. You might be in your own house in six weeks.”

There was a pause—a long one. Then Mrs. Ash answered.

“It’s not a bribe,” she said. “I’ve seen plenty of that. It’s what you say—business. Justice.

Nothing more. . . . I'll tell you all I know. If you or anyone else can get Cristina to take off that ring, the thing's done. Don't ask me why, I don't know. But from things she's dropped, I know that. Of course——"

The door of Cristina's bedroom opened, and she came out. She was carrying a huge pile of newspapers. I sprang to relieve her of them.

"Give them to the boy to throw out," she said. She busied herself, when her hands were free, with scissors and a small piece of paper.

"Is the knot cut, Kris-Girl?" I asked.

Cristina lifted a tired, small face, with a faint smile playing over it like a breeze over a silver lake.

"We'll know to-morrow," she said. She put the slip of paper carefully up her sleeve, having of course no pocket.

"Good-night, all," she said, and disappeared.

I thought to please the Kris-Girl, on the morrow, by ordering the sloop again; and I must confess to an attempt at "kris" work on my own part, in arranging that it was to go to the native village. You see, I was quite certain she meant to look up the mysterious and impertinent young man. I told her so, when we were ready to go down to the boat.

"I do mean to," she agreed. "That's why I am going to Michaelmas Island."

"But he isn't living there."

"He is not living there," she echoed, pulling on her long, loose gloves.

"You think he is the thief?" I asked, giving up the island question.

"He is not the thief," she answered, mischievously. "If you will kindly give me your hand, I can get over the gunwale."

She seemed unusually thoughtful on the way over; I fancied that something was troubling her. But once the boat had touched the white sand of Michaelmas Island she was herself again.

"The toy raft is gone," I said, as we walked up the beach, leaving Mrs. Ash comfortably seated in the sloop.

"Yes," said Cristina. "That wouldn't happen twice. Finding it, I mean."

I did not understand her in the least, but that mattered nothing. The errand we were on mattered nothing, either. Mr. Belleville Hobbs and the distresses and curiosities of Torrestown were of no conceivable importance. The only thing that mattered in the world was the fact that Cristina and I were walking about Michaelmas Island by ourselves, and that she seemed inclined to be amiable.

Yet she was preoccupied, too—preoccupied and sad. That touched me, though the troubles of Torrestown did not. I asked her what was distressing her, and she said she could not tell me—yet.

"It may be nothing at all," she said. "Or it

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may be—very much something. Perhaps I shall have to deliver over a common sort of pilferer to Torrestown——”

“I can understand you wouldn’t like policeman work of that kind.”

“I should. It is the least thing I have to fear. I’m afraid of something with much more cruelty in it.”

“Cruelty to you?”

“No. To the—person who lives on this island.”

“Then you think,” I said, pacing beside her through the soft, hot sand (for we were slowly circling the beach), “that he really does live here, and that he took the goods?”

“I can only answer that he does not, and he didn’t. Nevertheless, we are going to look.”

“Well, I give it up,” I said, contentedly. It was enough to have the walk with her.

“Walk quietly,” warned Cristina, though it was hardly necessary.

“We were heard coming the last time. I think we weren’t wanted on the other side of the island, somehow, where all the big rocks are, and probably caves as well. Now we had better not speak for a little.”

We did not. The sand was a trying road to follow; it scorched our faces with fierce, reflected heat, and dazzled our eyes almost unbearably. But it was soft and silent; we made no noise as we advanced. I began to think less about Cris-

tina and more about the interest of the hunt on which we were engaged. I had none of her obvious sympathy for the young waster we had seen the other day; nothing would have pleased me better than to see him handcuffed.

We must have been nearly half-way round the island when we came in sight of the great white pinnacle that we had seen in the distance, a few days earlier. Seen near at hand, it was an imposing sight. At its base was a rubble of broken creamy rocks, overgrown with green vines; its forefoot seemed to break off in deep blue water, where a stream had made a passage through the coral reef.

I think our eyes—Cristina's and mine—were both badly dazzled by the glaring sand, for we did not see at once that there was something on the top of the pinnacle. I saw it first, and pointed it out, shading my scorched face with a banana leaf, as I looked up. Cristina looked too, and clutched my arm tight. There was some reason, for the thing on the pinnacle was a human being, roughly dressed in a piece of calico that was wound under one shoulder, and about the body. As we looked, an incredible thing happened. The figure, which was standing with its face turned away from us, suddenly spread out its arms, leaped into air, and flashed down through eighty feet of empty space into the sea.

"God, what a dive!" I breathed. "I was at the Olympic Games at Stockholm two years ago,

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and I'm shot if there was anything better than that."

Cristina's hand slid from my arm, leaving the world suddenly emptier. I saw with some astonishment the white distress of her face.

"I've got to, but it is dreadful," she said, half to herself. "If it weren't for those innocent creatures in Torrestown—the women and the little children."

"I suppose you know that my small remnant of intellect is fast giving way," I observed. "Was that a real thing we saw? and where in the name of common sense do the innocent women and children come in?"

"I dare say you can understand the raft now," was all she said, hurrying me on as fast as we both could go. "Hush, don't speak. We must follow and get there before we are seen or heard."

We came out in another minute at the far side of the pinnacle. For the moment there was nothing to be seen. Cristina imperiously motioned me to duck behind a rock with her, and I had no objection in the world. Some rays of light were beginning to dawn. I did understand what a miniature raft might be used for, if towed behind a man who could dive like a fish-hawk, and doubtless swim like a fish. What I could not understand was how she had known it, days past. Nor could I fathom the meaning of her last sayings.

Presently she touched my arm, and pointed, and I saw a small, sleek head cutting through the

water. It went at a rate that surprised me, in spite of the many surprises I had had that day. It was making for the shore, a good way off. But we saw it come to land; saw a slim body, covered in a yard or two of calico, land among the boulders; saw it disappear into what looked like a crack between two projecting buttresses of rock. . . .

"There is a cave there," pronounced Cristina with confidence. "Mr. Garden, will you promise to do just what I ask you for the next few minutes."

"Certainly," I agreed.

"Then let me go there alone."

"Where that young cub has gone? Certainly not."

"You promised."

"Then I take it back," I said coolly. "He would simply insult you, if his behaviour the other day is any guide."

Cristina hung on one foot, puzzled, yet not (it seemed) angry.

"I see I shall have to," she remarked. She felt in one of her sleeves, and pulled out two newspaper cuttings.

"Read those," she said, keeping her eyes on the crack into which the swimmer had disappeared. "You know that I agree with the proverb about unfinished work as a general rule——" (the unpleasantness of the implication showed me that she was rather angry)—"but if you take up that position——"

One of the slips—a fairly old one—told of the illness of a certain famous woman swimmer, Miss Jane Mortimer of Sydney, commonly nicknamed “Mermaid Jane.” Mermaid Jane, it said, was never likely to swim or dive in public again. She was seriously ill. Nothing was said as to the nature of the illness, but a good deal about the girl’s celebrity ; how she had broken all the women’s records in the world ; how she had competed at—

“ Why, I saw her at Stockholm ! ” I exclaimed, finishing the slip. “ She and that fellow dive just alike. Australian style, I suppose. It seems a sad story, but——”

“ Read the other,” said Cristina, impatiently.

The other slip was quite different. It was a cutting from a fairly recent number of the raspberry-pink paper, and it told of the escape of a leper from Compass Island, off the Queensland coast. There are a good many lepers in Australia, and the Health Department makes short work of them wherever found. Black, brown, or white, they are taken off to one island prison or another, and there their lives must drag through to the inevitable, terrible end. There is a gruesome sort of secrecy maintained about these lazarets and their life prisoners. Names are often not known ; the feelings of families must be spared in all possible ways. Sometimes a man or woman reported dead is not dead at all, only gone to Compass Island.

Escapes seldom occur, but when they do, they

make a sensation. It is no joke to have an officially certified leper, who may present no visible signs of the disease, wandering about in the midst of an unprotected community. The Queensland papers had fairly "spread themselves" over the matter. The fugitive was a woman, name not mentioned, who had got away from the island by swimming. . . .

At this point I looked up.

"You see?" said Cristina.

"I do, at last," I answered her. "She played her game well, poor soul. . . . Yes, I suppose you must; there are all those folk in Torrestown to think of."

"She didn't think of them," said Cristina. "That's the only thing that gives me courage. One knows a lot about Jane Mortimer; she was a famous person—once. Everybody said she was the incarnation of selfishness; she seemed to have concentrated herself body and soul on her swimming and diving, and cared for nothing else. . . . I suppose it was that that made her so wonderful. You know, there was never a woman swimmer like her. She swam at Torrestown once; she must have remembered these islands, and got to them by stowing away on a steamer—or going simply as we saw her, disguised. She might have lived here for years. . . . Poor thing!"

"If you think of the risks she had made the town run already——" I said.

"Yes—there was no excuse."

"I see how you found it all out—now," I said. "It seems simple enough, after all."

"Everything is simple, when you look into it enough," replied the Kris-Girl. "Now I have got to do what I hate, and that is, tell poor Mermaid Jane that she is discovered, and must—go back."

I looked round at the beautiful, peaceful island; at the towering pinnacles of rock, the white sand, the green lagoon, and deep-blue sea.

Everyone has seen pictures of barren, desolate Compass Island and its prison lazaret. I thought of them as I looked. I thought of the confinement, the living death among those other creatures who had trod the leper's *Via Dolorosa* almost to its bitter end—I thought of Mermaid Jane with her defiant dark face, and tameless spirit, mewed up on that rock of death—Mermaid Jane, who had spent her life in the arms of the clean salt sea . . .

Cristina was gone. I watched her as she walked, slowly and unwillingly, it seemed, down to the beach, and behind the opening in the rocks.

She was away some time, and when she returned, it was alone. I saw that she was white with emotion. She sat down on a rock without speaking.

I gave her a minute to recover—looking out the while at the wide, sweet, free world of sun and sea that was free to her and to me, though not to all. Presently she pulled herself together and spoke.

"I've seen her. Poor soul—she is brave. She says she will let us take her away; she even said we could tow her on her little provision raft behind us, so that there would be no trouble about the boat—after . . . You would never know—anything was wrong. . . . She asked me one favour—to let her take one more 'swallow dive' from the big rock. 'You know,' she said, 'I shall never—never again——'"

Cristina's voice failed her.

"You did right," I said, to give her time. "Poor Mermaid Jane!"

We said nothing more until the small sleek head appeared again in the sea, swimming to the base of the giant pinnacle. Then the slim figure in its swathing of calico began to climb. We watched it go up and up against the lowering sun—up to the very crest. We saw it poise on the verge, in the inimitably beautiful attitude of the swallow dive. We saw it spring out and down—oh God!—not towards the sea, but on the landward side.

Cristina cried out, and flung her hands over her eyes. I could not move.

I saw it all. The beautiful little figure came through the air as I had seen it come at Stockholm, in the matchless flight that all Europe had applauded and admired. It struck the cruel rocks just as a diver strikes the sea—hands and head. It rolled over, and lay still.

Mermaid Jane had made her dive.

CHAPTER VII

THE TALE OF THE BEAUTIFUL BARMAID

AFTER Torrestown comes Monday Island. If you go to the one, either from Sydney way, or from Broome way, you are sure to go to the other. Having come so far away from anywhere that is anywhere, you may as well go a little further. . . .

Monday Island has something oddly English about it, and something very Asiatic. It is a patch not belonging to the original stuff, sewn on to one end of Australia's mighty robe. In Monday Island, you have a Residency on the top of a residential-looking hill, inhabited by a British naval officer and his Victorian-mannered family. You have a garrison, with barracks and bugle calls. You have tennis parties, at homes, and packs of cards dealt out according to the strictest rules, from verandah unto verandah, all the island over. Also, you have Chinese and Japanese in their national dress, shops where they sell things labelled with gilt tea-chest letters ; persons of inextricably tangled nationality, with a general tendency towards turban and cummerbund, squatting in

the dust ; *kava*, *saké*, and Christian whisky, all on sale ; and a hospital where the doctors get excellent practice in the treatment of knife wounds.

That is Monday Island.

The Kris-Girl, Mrs. Ash and myself went there because you can only get the worst class of steamers from Torrestown, while through Monday Island run the B.I., the N.Y.K., the E. and A., the K.P.M., the B.P., and other lines none too well known to the travelling public of Great Britain, but nevertheless regarded with wondering admiration, and used with thankfulness, by all who travel in the East beyond the East. The very best of these lines—you wish to know which that is, but you will not get a business man with a big export trade to tell you—had not any boat due for a week or two after our arrival ; so we preferred to wait, especially as the shops of Monday Island are not quite so bad as those of Torrestown.

For a long time, this wandering existence in the train of Cristina and her chaperon, through strange places and stranger adventures, through lands of ruined palaces, buried treasures, mysterious prima donnas, and “ pink beasts ” who kept tame devil-fish in pools, had seemed to me like something in a dream. The studious pretence of business interests, which had been at least half real in the first instance, had somehow flickered out. Reasons for wandering on and on like this I had none, any more than had Maeldune of the many isles. Like

Maeldune, I took what was coming, and went on to what came next.

If it was a dream, however, I felt that it was one from which I should one day wake. What the waking might be, I did not know. It might be that I should wake to dark and loneliness, or to golden sunrise with all the birds singing, and bells that were sweeter than bird-voices ringing in the opening of another life. That, Cristina knew. I was minded that she should tell me, before much longer.

"If you could get her to take off that ring," Mrs. Ash had said. There was something in the ring, then—the great marquise-shaped trinket of carved Chinese gold—that stood between me and my happiness—I had begun to think of late, between the Kris-Girl and her happiness too.

In the meantime, she seemed to show more confidence in me with every day. It had been my work to console and soothe her, in the shock of Mermaid Jane's terrible death—for which Cristina, unreasonably, felt herself responsible. It was my task to find hotels, arrange about boats, suggest "sights" that ought to be seen (thereby awaking the unspoken hostility of patient Mrs. Ash). It was my privilege to attend the two in their walks, and on their calling excursions; indeed, so much had fallen to my share that I knew very well Monday Island, not to speak of Torrestown and Wangi and places further back, regarded me as one to whom much more was yet

coming. I made no attempt to correct the impression, since I hoped that it might not, in the end, prove to be incorrect after all.

But Cristina herself began to see some of the nods and winks, and, after we had been a little while at Monday Island, decreed that Mrs. Ash and herself must do their visiting alone. So they set forth along the mango-shaded roads, parasol'd, card-cased, and feathered and frilled, while I loafed disconsolately about the town, thanking my fortunate stars that at least Cristina seemed to have given up her "Kris-Girl" fancies, and to be settling down to ordinary young-ladyhood.

This being the case, I was somewhat taken aback when the sudden turning off of day at half-past six o'clock brought the Kris-Girl and Mrs. Ash back to the hotel with all the visible signs of a new quest about them. That is, Mrs. Ash looked unusually wooden, and was talking about how to put hot-water pipes into your north walls, so as to grow peaches in the open (I had noticed of late that Cristina's wild adventures acted on Mrs. Ash in inverse ratio to their wildness), while Cristina herself was bubbling over with brightness and fun.

"It isn't time for dinner yet, because the dinner hour is not twenty minutes past," I said resignedly. "You had better sit down on the verandah and tell me about it. Who has killed whom, or who wants the stolen diamond necklace taken out of the hole in the water-butt, or what——"

"You are perfectly disgusting," pronounced Cristina, working her pretty fan rather harder than was necessary before her flower-bright face. "You know quite well that I never hunted a murderer or a necklace in my life."

"I'm speaking figuratively. What is it this time?"

"Well, if you really want to know—I don't think you do, so you shall—it's the Beautiful Barmaid."

"The how much?"

"Don't tell me you don't know about her," warned Cristina, "for the whole island is talking about nothing else."

"Do you mean the good-looking little piece in the hotel down the street?"

"Yes. It seems she's a new arrival; only been here about three weeks, but in that time she has contrived to turn the heads of most of the men—the eligible men—the men who were paying attention to the ladies of the town before. It's like a sort of hypnotism. The girls are awfully upset about it. One of them has quarrelled with the man she was engaged to, and another's likely to, and how many engagements the affair has nipped in the bud, I shouldn't like to say."

"Well, I haven't seen much of Australia yet," I said, "but from what I have seen, it didn't appear to me that the average Australian takes barmaids very seriously, though he does hang

about in their company a good deal more than a man of the same class would do at home."

"The Beautiful Barmaid seems to have made a record then, for they are taking her seriously. They say she's quite a gentlewoman, and very 'refined.'"

"When I was a governess, I used to give any girl an extra hour on the blackboard, if she used that word," remarked Mrs. Ash. "You might as well say a 'perfect lady,' Cristina."

"But I understand," said the Kris-Girl, with a little sparkle, "that that is what the Beautiful Barmaid is—refined, and a perfect lady who keeps herself to herself, and who meets all advances with the discouraging reply, 'No.' 'Who are you addressing?'"

"Cristina, you are getting extremely vulgar; I should not think I was earning my salary honestly if I did not tell you so," remarked Mrs. Ash.

"Thank you, dear, I'll try and remember. But it may be difficult, because the girls of the town, headed by the Resident's daughter, have been asking me to try and do something, and I'm afraid it may be a case of fighting the devil with fire before we've done."

"Then you are on the side of the society girls?" "I asked."

"If you had seen little Emmy Windermere," replied Cristina, in her crossways fashion, "trying not to cry, when she told me about Captain

Jolliffe, whom she's going to marry next month—and Miss Crackenbury, that very pretty girl who plays the violin; why, she's lost half a stone weight this week—and that girl with the red wavy hair, whom you admired down at the boat; she's Lord Walburg's granddaughter; they came out to Australia in the fifties—and lots more——”

“Why, the barmaid must be a perfect Helen of Troy, to do so much damage! Can't say I noticed it particularly. I'll go and hold an inspection after breakfast to-morrow.”

“Of course,” said Cristina, with a tilt of her pointed chin. I hoped she was jealous; as a matter of fact, I was not at all interested in the barmaid. The lover of the dainty Kris-Girl, aristocrat from her sleek small head to her little French toes, was not likely to transfer his affections to a Perfect Lady who sold drinks over a counter to leering, swearing men. However, like the hero of a Victorian novel, I thought it good to “dissemble.”

“Someone brought her to the tennis-club last week,” went on Cristina, “and none of the women would speak to her; and when the men saw that, they crowded round the barmaid, and left the ladies to themselves. Then next tennis afternoon they brought her again, and there wasn't a woman there. Last night there was a subscription dance, and the barmaid came; and Miss Walburg, and the Resident's daughter, and all

the rest were left sitting while the men fought over her. When she isn't about they try to come back to their allegiance, but the girls won't have it, and then the men tell them they're narrow-minded and spiteful, and jealous of another woman's looks."

"Well, aren't they?" I said teasingly.

"I must go and dress," was Cristina's reply; and I saw that she had ranged herself heart and soul on the side of the deserted society girls of Monday Island.

I did not wait till next morning, after all. It seemed to me that there might be something interesting to be seen, if I went down to the hotel at the end of the street, and that it was likely to be more, rather than less, interesting, in the sentimental hour that follows dinner and its accompaniments.

In London, or in the country, for the matter of that, the partners of Garden, Whitecross, & Garden, are not to be seen hanging about public bars. Australia has different standards. I accepted them, and went into the bar that enshrined the loveliness of the Beautiful Barmaid, resolved to unriddle, if I could, the secret of her astonishing fascinations.

It was a big place, full of marble and looking-glasses and polished counters and brass rails. Though it was just about dinner time, there were a number of men there—loafers from the quays, remittance men of the type only too familiar to

every Australian traveller, clerks, shopmen, and a large sprinkling of young fellows who seemed to be of good social position. Half a dozen of them stood round the barmaid, trying to attract her attention. The young lady, behind her mahogany fortress, was wiping glasses with an amateur non-committal sort of air, holding herself very erect, and looking at no one. There was a smell of beer and whisky and sawdust; the moon, half full, shone in at the door, but its silver-pure rays were almost drowned in the flood of harsh incandescent gas.

I ordered an iced lager, and the young lady detached her attention from the glass that she was (very imperfectly) wiping, long enough to hand me the drink. She did so without looking at me, and dropped my money into the cash register as if it burned her fingers. I perceived that someone had been talking, and that Cristina had been involved in the talk. Before long I understood this more distinctly, for, drinking the beer, I heard her say a word or two to the nearest man, and I could have sworn that the phrase her "fancy-man" was spoken. The admirer turned round and looked at me, and then buried himself in his whisky again.

Now I will confess that up to this I had been neither on the one side nor the other, I did not consider the profession of a barmaid a desirable one for any woman in the abstract, but in detached instances, I suppose I was as capable of making

exceptions as are most men. I had thought the young lady a decidedly pretty girl when I had caught a glimpse of her, passing down the street, and I was rather inclined to suppose that the society section of the town was making a fuss about nothing in particular. But when I heard what sounded like a scornful reference to Cristina Raye, made over a beer-slopped counter in a public bar, I saw red. I could do nothing; the men had not spoken, and you can't drag a girl out by the neck and make her swallow her words—but from that time on I was on the side of my Kris-Girl, heart and soul, and consequently, on the side of the maltreated young gentlewomen of Monday Island, whose lovers, so it seemed, had been boldly snatched from their arms. . . .

I had a good look at the barmaid before I went out. Her name, I recollected, was Lily Laurence, and she was reputed to be a match for her name in reserve of character, elegant refinement of behaviour. She was quietly dressed, but I had seen a good deal during these last few months of quiet dresses that might have fairly howled had they given forth their prices, and I had an idea that the quietness was not cheap. She had some very handsome jewellery; they told me later on that it was a gift from her brother. She spoke very little, and made good play with a pair of exceedingly handsome black eyes, when they were not modestly veiled under their long lashes. She was not rouged or made up in any way, and I

judged her excellent figure to be her own. When a half-drunk remittance man, in the far corner of the bar, began to swear at his companion, Miss Lily turned sharply on him, and told him to remember that there was a lady in the room. The man was somewhat roughly assisted out of the door by his neighbours, who immediately came up to Lily's corner to obtain their meed of a smile and a word. His mate, however, seemed inclined to dispute the justice of the eviction.

He was rather far gone himself, and seemed to have reached the quarrelling stage.

"People who are so—so—so beautiful particular shouldn't ought to be selling booze in a public bar," he stammered. "What're yer here for if it isn't to make us fellows drink? What're yer grumbling at mud for, when ye've picked a damn muddy road to walk——"

"Turn him out," said the barmaid, without raising her voice or even her eyes. Two devoted admirers ran him into the street.

"I'll have no language in my bar," said Lily. "I'll have you to know who I am." She resumed her low-voiced conversation with the heir of the biggest shipping house in Northern Australia.

"That's what she is," gushed a man close to myself. "Not such a lady in any bar of Australia as Lily. All the girls down on her, just because the poor thing has to serve behind a bar to keep her poor old father. Lily don't like it. She's refined by nature. She had to go into a bar,

but she lets everyone know she's a real lady all the same, and she wouldn't be doing it if she could help it."

"I don't know Australia," I said. "I suppose there are no shops or offices a girl can go into, or any job she can get teaching children, or nursing sick people. It seems a pity. We manage things better in England."

The man was too stupid with drink to understand me, and I do not think Miss Lily could have caught my words; but at this point she leaned over the bar and asked me rather sharply if I wanted anything more.

"No, thanks," I replied.

"Then you can go; we don't want loafers," she ordered. I lifted my hat, and went.

Next morning, when I came downstairs, I found Mrs. Ash waiting for me in the hall. She motioned me aside into a sitting-room.

"I want to tell you," she said, "that you needn't be surprised at anything you may see Cristina doing."

"Am I ever?" I asked.

"I don't know," was the wooden reply. "I've only got to give you my message. Cristina's been talking to me, and that's what I'm to say." She withdrew to the coffee-room.

This was calculated to excite some curiosity, and I kept a keen look-out for the next move of the Kris-Girl. I was convinced that it would be something interesting.

All morning I saw nothing of her. She was busy writing letters, so Mrs. Ash informed me when I made inquiries. As far as I had been able to judge up to the present, Cristina had few correspondents, and wrote to them seldom. But she seemed to have found a good many in the course of the last four-and-twenty hours. The messenger carried out a big bundle of unstamped notes about lunch-time, and as I was in the doorway at the moment of his passing, I could not help seeing that the envelopes were directed in Cristina's handwriting.

It was very hot that day. About five o'clock, when the sun was beginning to moderate a little, I went into the billiard-room for a game. The hotel we were staying in—its name was the Imperial Palace—had an unusually good table, and I had found myself able to make a better show on it than usual. Also, the room was on the shady side, and comparatively cool.

There were three or four men there when I came in, watching a couple of players. The marker was lounging in a corner, chalking a cue. To my annoyance, he was not my marker. He was a pasty polite young man who did not play much of a game himself, and was altogether wanting in that polite interest in a customer's progress, which is the chief glory of the perfect marker. I resolved that I would not play.

"Where's Black?" I asked one of the on-lookers.

"Gone out for a walk," said the man, sticking his hands in his pockets, and staring out of the window.

"Gone out for a walk," he repeated. "With Miss Raye."

I believe I opened and shut my mouth once or twice, like a frog, but I had the sense to say nothing. I found myself out on the landing by-and-by, without any clear remembrance of having left the room. Gone out for a walk with Miss Raye! Black!

I had a liking for the marker, I must confess. He was a fine, manly young fellow, with an up-standing sort of presence, and an expansive shirt-front that somehow suggested an expansive heart. He had been a pugilist of some celebrity before settling down to his present work, and he had the straight-glancing, quiet eye of the fighting man, also the fighting man's broad shoulders and length of arm. He wore a rather gaudy sort of moustache, and did his hair in two pigeon-wings, not innocent of oil, his socks and ties suggested rainbows and sunsets too freely; he dropped an "h" unobtrusively now and then, and didn't seem to care. He played a splendid game of billiards, and could coach a weak player effectively. He wasn't greedy after tips, and he was a sober fellow, at least, I thought so. On the whole, as good a marker as you could wish to see. But . . . Black out walking with Cristina!

I wondered if Monday Island was a bad place

for sunstrokes . . . she had a habit, that I had often begged her to abandon, of going out in full noontide with nothing but a parasol to protect her unhatted head. Could she have——

Then the truth struck me—struck me hard—and I went up to my own room to sit down on the edge of the bed and laugh.

“Oh, Kris-Girl!” was all that I could say, between paroxysms. “Oh, Kris-Girl!”

I got my hat then, and went out into the main street. I felt that I just had to see it.

Of course there is a Lovers' Walk on Monday Island; any town—especially any tropical Australian town—unprovided with a Lovers' Walk would scarcely be a town at all. Monday Island's Lovers' Walk is a fine avenue of mangoes, running out of the main street. It has a good many side approaches; I chose one of these, and advanced quietly.

It was the hour when Monday Island takes its evening drive. On a bench just beside the opening of the big main road, where all the motors, horses, and buggies must pass by, sat Bob Black, in the cleanest possible white suit, with shoes like twin lilies of abnormal size, a collar that pressed the lobes of his red ears horizontally outwards, and a Panama of much cost, set slightly sideways on a well-oiled black head. The ends of his moustache had been waxed out till they could be seen from behind his back, and he had a rose in his buttonhole as big as a biscuit. Beside him

sat Cristina, very prettily dressed, and smiling up into his face. The features of the ex-prize-fighter were glowing with mingled satisfaction and embarrassment; it was clear that he hoped everybody would see him, and equally that he feared it.

I left them, oppressed with emotions that found vent once more in the solitude of my bedroom. I believe the chambermaid thought I had been drinking, for she pushed the half-open door widely ajar, and looked in at me with an anxious expression, asking feebly the while if I had rung?

Later in the evening I saw the Kris-Girl in the hotel drawing-room, surrounded by her usual following. I have not mentioned that following before, perhaps; it always annoyed me so much that I did not care to think of it. But wherever our wanderings had led us so far, there we found the inevitable man or men who chose to flutter in the flame of her brightness, and to take the inevitable chance of getting scorched, unwarned by any cremated corpses that he might see lying about. It was so in Monday Island. Whatever the Lily of the bar had done regarding the admirers of resident belles, she had not touched Cristina's especial reserve.

Bob Black, it seemed, was the subject of conversation. I had not the least doubt that he was the subject of conversations in every drawing-room of the island that night; nor—if I knew Cristina—that he was destined to be the subject

of a good deal more, in the course of the near future.

"I can't help saying that I was surprised, Miss Raye," Ledbetter was saying, with a delicately reproachful inflexion. The Ledbetters are known all over Australia and New Zealand as the Northern Cattle Kings; they have a number of beasts that I refuse to state, knowing that no one in England would believe me; they own half-a-dozen country palaces, two yachts, and (as an enthusiastic Queenslander told me), "a mob of motor-cars." All of them have been to Harrow or Eton, and most of them to Oxford. They have special suites on the P. & O., and—to quote my Queensland authority again—they would have special angels to Paradise, and special clouds to sit on when they got there, if it could be managed by any influence in the universe.

"Do you know, I am not at all surprised at you," answered Cristina, with a very pretty smile. "I have noticed that no man ever really appreciates another man's good looks."

"Good looks!" exclaimed Ledbetter, attempting to twirl a moustache that had been sacrificed some time ago to fashion, and being obviously embarrassed by his failure. "Do you call that—that—billiard-marking fellow good-looking?"

"Here's Mr. Garden; we'll ask him," said Cristina. "Mr. Garden, you're the most honest person I know. On your oath, do you think Bob Black good-looking?"

"On my oath, and apart from any question of manners or style," I said, "I do."

"Well," said Captain Jolliffe—the man over whom pretty little Miss Windermere was supposed to be crying her eyes out—"I can't understand a gentlewoman admiring and—a—actually encouraging—that sort of a cad."

Cristina looked up at Captain Jolliffe's lank two yards of white evening suit, to his rather stupid, rather handsome soldierly brown face.

"Oh, but Mr. Black is quite above his position," she said. "He is very refined. He is fond of reading, and can quote poetry beautifully. Mr. Black is quite a gentleman."

Jolliffe, who to my certain knowledge never opened a book, and read no newspapers but those with pink covers, turned away rather abruptly. I felt a longing for a game of billiards at this point, and went to seek Bob Black, who, I knew, would be on duty at that hour.

It seemed, however, that half the men in the hotel had been seized with a desire to play. There was not a chance of getting at the table for the next hour. Neither was there a chance of getting a word with Bob Black, who could scarcely mark the game for friendly greetings and interruptions. There seemed to be a tendency to "pick" at Bob with unnecessary remarks about walks and fair ladies, but the big ex-bruiser held his own most competently. A long cigar tucked in one corner of his mouth, he attended to his customers,

entertained his friends, and answered those who were neither, without turning a hair. Whatever he might be in ladies' company, Bob was undeniably cool in that of men. Moreover, he sent back one or two shots so shrewdly that he was let alone before very long, so far as the hints and winks were concerned.

I was right in concluding that the matter would not end there. Next day was tennis day, the great occasion of the week for Monday Island. On tennis day, everyone met everyone else, clothes were exhibited and criticised, social positions made or lost, quarrels fomented, truces patched up, new arrivals were inspected and pronounced on, and—also—some games of tennis were played by rather poor players on a ground that was none of the best.

All our party had been favoured with invitations to play, soon after we arrived.

Cristina and Mrs. Ash had accepted; I had not. But it would have taken a good deal to keep me away from the tennis ground to-day. I anticipated fun.

About half-past five I strolled down to the ground. It was a pretty place, surrounded by shady "flamboyant" trees, which at this time of the year were a mass of bright red flowers. There were *frangipani* too; I remember that the scent of their thick creamy blossoms was almost overpoweringly sweet, on that hot afternoon. . . .

I wonder shall I ever see or smell a *frangipani* again, without wanting to laugh ?

I looked for the Lily of the bar, but she was not there. Perhaps her triumph of the week before had been sufficient for her ; perhaps she could not get off duty. At any rate, there was no eager group of white-clad men round a well-developed young woman in blue silk this Saturday. There was a group, but it was a group of ladies : all young and pretty, all charmingly dressed, and all very busy watching a certain player—Bob Black.

Yes, the marker was playing, and “By Jove,” I said to myself, “he can play !” His opponent, hitherto the undisputed champion of Monday Island, was getting it extremely hot. Bob’s game was perhaps not in the very highest class, but it was smashingly hard, and he was as active as a cat. Captain Jolliffe had not a chance from the first ; his defeat was handed out to him in the shortest time that the rules of tennis allow, and he went off with it, looking very glum, and atrociously hot.

“You’ve got a new champion, it seems,” I remarked to Cristina, who slipped away a little from the watching crowd when she saw me coming.

“Yes,” she said. “That was quite a chance ; no one had an idea that he could play.”

“Any ball game would be a gift to a man who plays such a game of billiards as Bob Black,” I commented. “How’s the plot progressing ?”

Cristina looked demurely at the toes of her small white shoes. "I don't know what you mean," she said. "Don't you like Mr. Black?"

"Seems unnecessary; he isn't exactly starving for want of approbation. Will you tell me one thing?"

"Probably not."

"I'll risk it. Did you ask him, or he you—to go out along the Lovers' Walk?"

Cristina ran her finger along the edge of her fan.

"If you must know," she said, "it was about six of one, and half-a-dozen of the other. Next time it'll be a dozen of one, I think. Mr. Bob Black is coming on."

"He looks like a coming-on kind," I commented.

"Not exactly," corrected Cristina. "He's sure of himself, and the sort of—toffee—we're giving him doesn't turn his head a bit. We've all agreed he is ever so much nicer than we expected. In fact, Miss Crackenbury and Rita Walburg say they don't mind how long the game keeps up, and the Resident's niece told me this morning that she hadn't an idea how little common a common man was after all. She and Rita are going to have him asked to the next dance."

I looked round the tennis court, and an idea suddenly struck me. The men whom I saw there were the "smart set" of Monday Island and its neighbourhood, the natural companions of girls such as these. They were perfectly turned out. Their tone was good. They knew the things they

ought to know, and said what they ought to say, with just the right accent on every consonant and vowel. They had the "something," the "air," the indefinable quality of good breeding. . . .

Bob Black, now busy slaughtering another champion on the court, had got quite the wrong sort of tie on, and his socks screamed like the parrots whose colours they had borrowed. He had the accent of Little Bourke Street, he oiled his hair, and neither the name nor the reality of "Form" was known to him. But—he was the only man on the court.

Captain Jolliffe, with his coat off playing tennis, looked like a plucked chicken. The great ship-owner's heir was short and tubby, and waddled like a duck. Ledbetter was a well set-up youngster, but he had a general air of not being quite awake, or alive. Five or six others, hanging uneasily about the gate, had the born-tired, bar-loafing look only too common in North Australia. Yet—I had an idea that if Bob Black had been chalking cues in the billiard-room of the Imperial Palace at that minute, the youth of Monday Island might not have made so poor a show. All classes depend on comparisons.

I went over to the gate, accompanied by pretty Rita Walburg, who had to see to the giving out of tea, else I am quite sure she would not have abandoned the billiard marker's guard of honour. She distributed cups across the table of the little tea-house, to those men who had not yet had

any, and then impounded me to bring a tray along to the other end for some of the girls. I did this very willingly, but when I had left the tray in safety, and returned to the gate, I was not too well pleased to see Bob lounging in a chair, and being waited on with tea, cake, cream, and sugar, by four separate ladies. It was, of course, not Bob's fault; he did not know the inflexible rule that forbids the serving of a gentleman by a lady, since doubtless it did not exist in his class of life. All he knew was that several pretty girls wanted to give him things to eat and drink, and he was not the man to baulk them. There he sat, with his mighty legs sprawled out in front of him, and his sleeves rolled up over his bare red arms, smiling under a rakishly cocked Panama at the feminine *élite* of Monday Island, and talking to them as pleasantly and easily as if they were one and all his long-lost sisters. I have often wondered since, just how much Bob Black may have guessed. . . .

Young Ledbetter blew in his throat like a dugong.

"I call it positively sickening," he said. "Girls oughtn't to be brought up in these countries at all, if you ask me. It weakens their moral tone surprisingly. To see these women making much of a beastly cad of a marker as they're doing——"

"Oh, Mr. Ledbetter" (it was Rita Walburg who was speaking), "you don't understand Mr. Black. He can't help being a billiard-marker.

He told us that he doesn't like it, and wouldn't do it if he could help it. But he supports nearly all his family, so the poor fellow can't choose. You've no idea how much essential refinement he has."

"No, I haven't," said Ledbetter shortly. "Nor had anyone else. Bob Black can swear fit to beat the band when he likes."

"Oh," said Rita, raising her innocent blue eyes, "but he can't help that, poor fellow; I suppose it's the dreadful company he has to keep."

My unlucky sense of humour betrayed me again here, and I had to get out of the way. The vision of the innocent young prize-fighter picking up "damns" and "devils" from myself and Ledbetter, overcame me altogether. . . . When I got to the other end of the ground, most of the girls were busy making up a mixed double; two only remained with Bob. They were sitting on either side of him upon a rather short and narrow bench. One of them, a dainty, prim-looking girl, was asking his terms for billiard lessons in the early morning. The other was biting off the end of his cigar for him, before he lit it. All this was both visible and audible to the two male members of the "mixed," and I cannot say they looked as if they were enjoying it as much as Bob.

One might have thought that Black would be fairly gayed to death over his amazing succession of *bonnes fortunes*, but, on the contrary, all chaff—and there had been a good deal—stopped after

a couple of days. Bob, quite quietly, and without a shade of temper, had taken one of his tormentors out into the back yard, and given him what he called "just a little bit to go on with." The aggressor went on with it, and did not ask for any more. Nor did anyone else.

By this time Cristina's medicine was taking its effect, though in some ways the effect was other than she had intended. Captain Jolliffe, blazing with rage, had ordered his *fiancée* to stop making an ass of herself for all Monday Island to grin at, and she had retorted with an effective "thou also" that put an end to her troubles and his. It was said they were to be married in ten days. The Resident's niece had got her lover back, but did not seem to want him; there were those who whispered that her jest had turned to earnest. As for Rita and her affairs, Cristina, in a burst of confidence, told me that she couldn't understand them. Miss Walburg, in her opinion, was not playing fair, and Bob—as I could have told the Kris-Girl myself—was off his meals, and worse, off his game of billiards. He had begged Rita for half-a-dozen dances when the ball of the season came off; Rita might or might not give them, but if she didn't Cristina was of opinion that Bob might forget his refinement. . . .

After all, she need not have troubled over the ball, for it proved the tamest affair that Monday Island had known in a very long time—all on account of something that occurred on the very

day itself. I was, and am, extremely sorry that the play was not played out to its conclusion. The sight of Lily Laurence at one end of the room, herding in all the eligible men like a particularly able collie gathering sheep, with Bob at the other, a sultan throwing handkerchiefs among the fairest womanhood of the island, would have been a thing to remember all the rest of one's life. But it did not happen, and it was Lily herself who prevented it.

At four in the afternoon, I was (I am thankful to say) in the billiard-room, watching a match of a hundred up between the marker and one of our best players. There were a good many bets on, but the odds offered against the other man were heavy, and not very freely taken. I had a sovereign on the game myself, and had backed Bob, at evens.

All the windows were open and the double doors hooked back, the swing panels in the ceiling were open too, and the electric fans were whining over our heads; but, nevertheless, the heat was pretty bad. Nobody wore a coat, and every man had something iced to drink. I sat drying my face with what had been a clean handkerchief, and watching Bob, who was going to play; the sovereign I had invested seemed as important to me, in that moment, as if I hadn't had something like a quarter of a million of these same good gold coins at my command when I wanted.

Bob tucked up his sleeves a bit further, and leaned out over the green cloth till his right leg left the ground. It was not quite an impossible stroke, but——

We held our breath ; nobody spoke.

At that precise moment came a most atrocious row in the stone passage leading to the billiard room. Bob started, with his cue just on the move. Of course he missed, and the ball——

Well, we never saw where the ball went. Something irrupted into the billiard room at that minute, that put all thoughts of ball, even of bets, out of our heads. We had to look twice to see that it was the Lily of Hogden's bar—this hundredweight or so of silk-clad flesh that came hurtling into the room, dragging behind it a remonstrant but defeated "boots."

Miss Laurence's refinement had vanished as the rainbow-coloured medusa of the sea vanishes, when stranded and licked up by the sun upon the beach. Where it had been was nought. Only a very angry woman, using words that might have startled a bullock-driver, if he were young and new to his work, was there, stamping her feet on the tiles of the billiard-room floor, and making short bull-like rushes at Bob Black.

As for Bob, the moment he saw Lily enter, he had dropped his cue, and got on the other side of the table. He was much the more active of the two, and I don't know how the matter might have ended, had not the devoted boots, in trying to

intercept the Lily, succeeded in intercepting Bob instead. Immediately the Lily's hand was upon his collar, and the Lily's voice proclaimed to a stunned and silent billiard room.

"No more goings on of this kind, not for me. Bob, you come up to your room and pack your things with me lookin' on, and then you come down to the boat with your OWN—LAWFUL—WIFE, and you go straight off to Sydney!"

The roar that went up from that billiard room sounds in my ears still. In the midst of it, Bob and the Lily disappeared.

Some wit threw a handful of rice after them as they went through the hall a few minutes later. Mrs. Bob stopped short in her tracks, put both her hands upon her hips, and addressed the crowd, with various flowers of language. She didn't want any of their etcetra'd jokes, she said. Bob Black and she were lawful husband and wife, married three years and a half, and if she'd chosen to go under her unmarried name while she was at Hogden's, it was because she and her husband wanted to set up a little shawp somewhere Sydney wye, and a married girl in a bar isn't any sort of a draw, and doesn't get any wyges worth talking of. No, Hogden's didn't know, and the Palace didn't know, and it wasn't any of their business. Bob knew her (with a coruscation of profanity), and he knew that she was the strictest woman in Australia, bar none (more display of amazing expletive). He'd have

split anyone's head that said otherwise. But she didn't know Bob, it seemed. Well, now she did know him, she was going to learn him, that was all. If she caught him up to any of his games——

Bob Black, ex-prize-fighter, put his hand timidly on his lawful partner's arm at this, and endeavoured to lead her away. Mrs. Black delivered one stinging blow upon a war-worn ear that scarce any man in Queensland could have "got home" on, and detached herself from the marker's control.

"Now, I've said my say, and I choose to go," she said, "and I shall go. Bob Black" (a shower of vividly descriptive adjectives), "you go first, and don't let me catch you up to tricks again."

A great peace fell upon the Imperial Palace Hotel, and we realised that the fun was over.

I have said that the dance of that evening was a dull one. So it was, for Monday Island in general. Scores, it was conceded, were fairly equal between the men and women of the town; neither side, therefore, enjoyed the triumph and intoxication of victory. But for Cristina and myself——

We were in the moonlight out among the kapok trees that grew near the ballroom verandah. No leaves had come upon the boughs as yet, but large honey-yellow flowers clustered thick upon them, and fell at our feet in golden showers.

Some little way off, the piano was rollicking

out a merry two-step; light skirts flashed past the verandah doors, and white suits stamped joyfully up and down. Here, in the glancing half-shade of the kapok boughs, with the warm sea creaming on the beach not far away, there was solitude enough for us.

Cristina's small left hand, with the marquise ring of carved gold, hung down at her side. I lifted it, and asked her——

“May I?”

She answered not a word, but I felt her tremble with some emotion that I could not altogether understand . . . or could I . . . perhaps? She made no resistance as I drew the ring from her hand.

On the soft white flesh where the ring had lain, there was a wide, purple scar.

Cristina covered it with the other hand, and looked pitifully at me.

“I can't tell you,” she said.

“You don't need to, Cristina,” I answered, using her Christian name for the second time. “You have laughed at me this long while for being stupid about your own especial talents—about these things, you know that you find out. . . . I acknowledge I have been; my mind isn't light enough to follow yours, in affairs that concern Tom, Dick, and Harry, and all the world. But when it's something that has to do with you——”

I stopped for a moment—it was hard to speak.

“When it has to do with you,” I went on,

"then, my Kris-Girl, I can cut as sharply through a mystery as yourself. Because, where it's love—love, Cristina—a man can always do better than his best."

I lifted her hand again.

"That scar," I said, "was made three and a half years ago, by the mad dog that bit your *fiancé*. You went through the same treatment as he did. He died, and you knew that you might have the same horrible end to face. You couldn't bear the thought, and you ran away from it—kept running away. You consulted doctors, and they told you that the longest period of incubation, fairly authenticated, was about five years. So you gave yourself five years to carry that fear about with you—alone."

"How did you know?" asked the Kris-Girl, in a low voice.

"I was with you, and—I loved you," I answered. "Besides, Miss Kris-Girl, there are doctors in every port, and other people besides—you can get dates from them, and put these dates together. Talking of ports," I said, "I've something here that I got in the last one—where the pearl fisheries are. You remember that shop kept by the old Jew?"

I took a pearl half-hoop from my pocket. Old Rosenstein had told me it was the finest he had put together for the last ten years, and I do not think he lied. I slipped it over the scar on the small white hand.

"Now," I said, "we will go down together and throw that gold marquise into the sea. And you and I, Cristina, will take what may or may not be coming—together."

That was three years ago. Cristina the Second bit a pearl out of the half-hoop last week. I shall have some trouble in getting it matched.

THE END





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