Bindloss Harold

Long Odds

Harold Bindloss

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Bindloss H.

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CHAPTER I
THOMAS ORMSGILL

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

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

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

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

His companion, who leaned upon the balustrade, nodded, for Englishmen and Americans are not held in great esteem in that country, nor are missionaries of any kind. They see too much, and

some of them report it afterwards, which, when now and then the outer world pricks up its ears in transient interest or indignation, is apt to make trouble for everybody. Still, the Lieutenant Luiz was a lethargic man and a philosopher in his way, so he said nothing, though he waved the comely brown-skinned girl who had been sitting near him back into the house. There was, at least, no occasion to provide a weapon for the enemy, and Marietta had made several attempts to run away lately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dom Erminio shrugged his shoulders. "It is a wasted effort, which is a thing to be regretted in this land, where an effort is difficult to make. Lamartine has been ill too often, and if he is ill again he will certainly die. As you have heard, the bushmen are in an unsettled state, and there are several sick men here. It is, perhaps, convenient that the Señor Nares should stay at San Roque."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," said Ormsgill, reflectively. "I don't think it did. At least, not as he meant it to, though I've been trying to worry out what he did mean exactly. One thing's certain. He wasn't prompted by any solicitude for our safety. You see, he might have been counting on my distrust of him, or my usual obstinacy, and wanted me to take the higher road after all. Or he may have been playing another game. I don't know. That's why we'll take the nearest way and not worry. When you're in doubt, it's generally wisest to do the obvious thing."

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

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

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

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

He was listening intently, but could hear nothing except an occasional rustling among the creepers and the heavy splash of moisture on the leaves. Nor could he see very much, for though here and there a star shown down between the towering trunks, a sour white steam hung almost a man's height about the dripping undergrowth. Save for the splash of moisture it was so still that Nares, with

imagination quickened by the tension the fever had laid upon his nerves, could almost fancy he could hear things growing. The growth, at least was characteristic of the country in that it was untrammeled, luxuriant, and destructive rather than beneficent. Orchids and parasites sucked the life blood from the trees, and throve upon their ruin; creepers strangled them and tore them down half-rotten. It was a mad, cruel struggle for existence, and Ormsgill, whose hot hands were clenched upon the rifle, clearly recognized that man must take his part in it. As a matter of fact, he was not averse to doing so. There was a vein of combativeness in him, and circumstances had hitherto usually forced him well to the front when there was trouble anywhere in his vicinity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II
RESTITUTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well," said Ormsgill dryly, "as you know, they didn't in this case. I nearly broke his wrist, but I took the pistol from him. You see, I rather believed in the girl's innocence. Lamartine compromised

the thing by handing her on to Herrero – though he would take no money for her. He had, as he was rather fond of mentioning, his code of honor. There was a trying scene when Herrero sent for her. The girl flung herself down and clung to Lamartine's knees. It seemed she was fond of the man, and didn't want to go away, which was, as it happens, wise of her. Though she was probably not aware of this, Herrero trains the women who take his fancy with the whip."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Padre," he said, "you are the wisest man I know, and, though distinctions are invidious, Nares is, I think, the honestest. That is why I am going to put a case before you. Well, I had a good

upbringing, and I think my English friends expected something from me before I was flung out of the British service and became a pariah. After that I never troubled them again, which was no doubt a cause of satisfaction to everybody. There was, however, a thing I had to do which was not easy, and this picture should make it clear to you. It was arranged that we should be married when I had brought my laurels home from Africa."

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

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

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

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

Father Tiebout sat silent for at least a minute, looking reflectively at the man before him. Ormsgill was young still, but his lean face was furrowed, and there was a suggestiveness in the lines on it. He had seen death and pestilence, human nature stripped naked, and unmentionable cruelty; and the priest was quite aware that one cannot live with the outcast, in Africa, and remain unchanged. Then he looked at the photograph again, for he knew that the four years had also had their effect upon the woman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ormsgill's forehead was furrowed, and the perspiration stood in beads on it. The love that had driven him out to win his spurs in the land of shadow still in some degree, at least, remained with him;

but he was conscious of the change in him which the girl with her upbringing might well shrink from. He had lived with the outcasts until he had become one of them, a hater of conventional formulas and shams, while there had crept into his nature a trace of the somberness of the dark land. What, he wondered, would the sunny-tempered English girl he had left make of such a man. Still, as the priest had said, his duty was clear, and, what was perhaps more, his inclination marched with it. He straightened himself suddenly with a little resolute jerk of his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III
HIS OWN PEOPLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I should have said delighted," he ventured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You, of course, believe those assurances?"

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

"And then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV
THE SUMMONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was, however, very hot and dazzling bright, and no protests were made when Ormsgill, who it seemed knew all about steam launches, leaned forward from the helm and started the engines. The little propeller thudded, and they slid away with a long, smooth lurch across the slopes of glittering water that were here and there flecked with foam, for the beach they skirted lies open to the heave of the Atlantic. The Trade breeze fanned their faces pleasantly, and Ada Ratcliffe sat almost contented for the time being at Ormsgill's side. It was refreshing that hot day, to listen to the swish of sliding

brine, and there was a certain exhilaration in the swift smooth motion, while she realized that the man she was to marry appeared to greater advantage than he did as a rule in the drawing room of the big hotel.

He was never awkward, or ill at ease, but she had noticed – and resented – the air of aloofness he sometimes wore when he listened to her companions' pointless badinage and vapid conversation. Now as he sat with a lean brown hand on the tiller controlling the little hissing craft he seemed curiously at home. There was also, as generally happened when he was occupied, a suggestion of reserved force in his face and attitude. He was, she realized, a man one could have confidence in when there were difficult things to be done. This however, brought her presently a vague dissatisfaction, for she felt there were certain aspects of his character which had never been revealed to her, and she was faintly conscious of the antagonism to and shrinking from what one cannot quite understand which is not infrequently a characteristic of people with imperfectly developed minds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was alongside the lighter in another minute, but she rolled wildly above the launch, big and empty, and the sea broke whitely about her, for now the men had ceased rowing she was drifting towards the reef. The hawser was also dripping and smeared with coal dust when Ormsgill, who seemed to understand such matters, hauled it in, and while the sea splashed on board the launch, streams of gritty brine ran from it over everything. Then he stirred the little furnace with an iron bar before he pulled over the starting lever, and a rush of sparks and thin hot smoke poured down upon his companions as the little craft went full speed ahead. Ada, perhaps half-consciously, drew herself

a little farther away from him. There was coal grit on his wet duck jacket, and he had handled hawser and furnace rubble like one accustomed to them, in fact as a fireman or a sailor would have done. That was a thing which did not please her, and she wondered if the others had noticed it. It became evident that one of them had.

"You did that rather smartly," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You know him?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Father Tiebout has just come in very shaky with fever," he read. "It appears that Herrero, who will not let her go, has gone back towards the interior with the woman Lamartine gave him, and has been systematically ill-using her. There is another matter to mention. Soon after you went Domingo seized the opportunity of raiding Lamartine's station, and took all the boys away while

we were arranging to send them home as you asked us to do. It will, in view of the feeling against us, be difficult or impossible to bring the thing home to him, but I understand from Father Tiebout that you engaged the boys for Lamartine and pledged your word to send them home when the time agreed upon expired. Father Tiebout merely asked me to tell you. He said that if you recognized any responsibility in the matter you would not shrink from it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

though there are plenty of lonely beaches where one could get a surf-boat off. I had a notion of trying to pick up a schooner at Sierra Leone or Lagos."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V
A DETERMINED MAN

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

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

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

It was, as he realized, a very lame story and one open to serious misconception that fell from his lips. He could, of course, say nothing in favor of Lamartine's mode of life, though it was by no means an unusual one, and he had to mention it. The subject was a somewhat delicate one in itself, but it was not that alone which brought a faint flush to his face. Mrs. Ratcliffe's pose grew perceptibly primmer as he proceeded, and he recognized that any confidence she might have had in him was being severely shaken. Still, he had not expected her to understand, and he glanced at her daughter with a certain anxiety. The girl's languid indifference was less marked now, for there was a spot of color in her cheek, and her lips were set disdainfully. Ormsgill closed one lean hand a trifle, for these things had their significance, and he had expected that she, at least, would have found his assurance sufficient.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ormsgill was stirred, as well as a trifle astonished. She had seldom shown him very much tenderness, and he had said nothing that might lead her to believe that he was undertaking a somewhat dangerous thing or that the country was especially unhealthy. Still, he could not help feeling that she was afraid of something. Then, as it happened, they heard her mother speaking to somebody in the corridor, and making him a little sign she slipped out softly. Ormsgill sat where he was, wondering why she had done so, until a rustle of dresses suggested that she and the people she had apparently spoken to had moved away. Then he went out, and met Desmond in front of the hotel.

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

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

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

The blood rose to Ormsgill's face. He fancied his companion was right in this, but it suggested another thought, and it appeared impossible that the girl's views should coincide with her mother's. It was painful to feel that she might have placed an unfavorable construction upon his narrative, but that she should believe him a libertine and still be willing to marry him because he was rich was a thing

he shrank with horror from admitting. He was aware that women now and then made such marriages, but although he did not as a rule expect too much of human nature, he looked for a good deal from the woman he meant to make his wife. He could not quite disguise the fact that there were aspects of her character which did not altogether please him.

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

"Of course," said Desmond.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In which district?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The girl laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI
DESMOND MAKES AN ADMISSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

moved quietly out of the shadow beneath the archway. It was the man who had questioned Lister, and he laid his hand upon the flask the latter held.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And my intentions are friendly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Desmond thought hard for the next half-minute. He was a man who could face a responsibility, and it was quite clear to him that Miss Figuera already knew quite enough to ruin his comrade's project if she thought fit to do so. Still, he felt that she would not think fit. He did not know how she conveyed this impression, or even if she meant to convey it, for Benicia Figuera was a lady of some importance in that country, and, as he reflected, no doubt recognized the fact. She sat impassively still, with her dark eyes fixed on him, and there was a certain hint of imperiousness in her manner, until he suddenly made his mind up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII
ORMSGILL KEEPS HIS WORD

Forest and compound were wrapped in obscurity, and the night was almost insufferably hot, when Nares, who had arrived there during the afternoon, sat in a room of the Mission of Our Lady of Pity. The little, heavily thatched dwelling stood with the mud-built church and rows of adherents' huts on the shadowy frontier of the debatable land whose dusky inhabitants were then plotting a grim retribution for their wrongs, and on the night in question black, impenetrable darkness shut it in. Though the smell of wood smoke was still in the steamy air, the cooking-fires had died out an hour ago, and there was no sound from any of the clustering huts. Nares, who sat, gaunt and worn in face, by an open window, could not see one of them. Still, he was looking out into the compound, and his attitude suggested expectancy. One could have fancied that he was listening for something.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nares shook his head, and there was a shadow of pain in his lean face. "I am not fixed as Father Tiebout is," he said. "His faith is the official one. They dare not steal his followers from him. Besides,

I have never bought the body of a man. Sometimes I heal them, and if they are grateful they are driven away from me." He broke off for a moment with a curious little laugh. "I am an empty voice in the darkness that very few dare listen to. Still, I will take a case of London packed drugs from you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.