

Saltus Edgar

A Transient Guest, and Other Episodes



Edgar Saltus

**A Transient Guest,
and Other Episodes**

«Public Domain»

Saltus E.

A Transient Guest, and Other Episodes / E. Saltus — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	9
III	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

A Transient Guest, and Other Episodes

I

Since the *Koenig Wilhelm*, of the Dutch East India Service, left Batavia, the sky had been torpidly blue, that suffocating indigo which seems so neighborly that the traveller fancies were he a trifle taller he could touch it with the ferule of his stick. When night came, the stars would issue from their ambush and stab it through and through, but the glittering cicatrices which they made left it bluer even, more persistent than before. And now, as the ship entered the harbor, there was a cruelty about it that exulted and defied. The sun, too, seemed to menace; on every bit of brass it placed a threat, and in the lap of the waters there was an understanding and a pact. Beyond, to the right, was one long level stretch of sand on which the breakers fawned with recurrent surge and swoon. Behind it were the green ramparts of a forest; to the left were the bungalows and booths of Siak; while in the distance, among the hills and intervalles, where but a few years before natives lurked beneath the monstrous lilies and clutched their kriss in fierce surmise, a locomotive had left a trail of smoke.

"Sumatra, too, has gone the way of the world," thought one who lounged on deck.

He was a good-looking young fellow, browner far than he had been when he left New York, and he was garbed in a fashion which would have attracted the notice of the most apathetic *habitué* of Narragansett Pier. Save for a waistband of yellow silk, he was clad wholly in that dead white which is known as *fromage à la crème*. Had his cork hat been decorated with a canary bird's feather, you would have said a prince stepped from a fairy tale. At his heels was a fox terrier, which he had christened Zut. When he wished to be emphatic, however, Zut was elongated into Zut Alors.

"The general's compliments, sir, and are you ready?"

It was the polyglot steward addressing him, with that deference which is born of tips.

Tancred Ennever – the only son of Furman Ennever, who, as every one knows, is head and front of the steadiest house in Wall Street – turned and nodded. "Got my traps up?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply sauntered across the deck. He had met the general – Petrus van Lier, Consul of the Netherlands to Siak – at the Government House at Batavia, and although the trip which he had outlined for himself consisted, for the moment at least, in making direct for that sultry hole which is known as Singapore, yet the general had so represented the charms and pleasures of Sumatra that he had consented to become his guest. In extending the invitation the general may have had an ulterior motive, but in that case he let no inkling of it escape.

And now, as Tancred crossed the deck, the general stretched his hand. He was a man whose fiftieth birthday would never be fêted again. He had the dormant eyes of his race, those eyes in which apathy is a screen to vigilance, and his chin had the tenacity of a rock. His upper lip was furnished with a cavalry moustache of indistinctest gray, the ends upturned and fierce. In stature he was short and slim. It should be added that he was bald.

Though the ship had barely halted, already it was surrounded by prahus and sampans, the indigenous varieties of skiff, and among them one there was so trim it might have come from a man-of-war. In the bow a fluttering pennon proclaimed it a belonging of the Dutch. The coxswain had already saluted, and sat awaiting the orders of his chief.

The general motioned with a finger, the coxswain touched his forehead, and in a moment the boat was at the slanting ladder. Tancred and the general descended, there was a sullen command, and the oarsmen headed for the shore.

"We are so late my people will be worried," confided the consul, as the landing was reached. "Usually – " and, as he ran on dilating on the unpunctuality of the service, Tancred remembered to

have heard that his host was about to be married to an English widow, who, with her brother, was then stopping at the consul's bungalow.

"Be still, Zut," ordered Tancred, for the dog was yelping like mad at a fawn-colored butterfly that floated, tantalizingly, just out of reach. It was as big as a bird, and its eyes were ruby. "Be still."

On the wharf a crowd of Malays and Chinese impeded the way, the Celestials garbed in baggy breeches and black vests, the Malays, nakeder, wickeder, darker, and more compact. Beyond was an open square, a collection of whitewashed booths, roofed with tiles of mottled red, and cottages of thatched palm. In the air was the odor of spices and cachous.

Guided by his host, Tancred entered an open vehicle that waited there. Then, after a brisk drive through the town, a long sweep through a quiet lane that was bordered now by rice-fields, now by giant trees festooned by lianas and rattans, and again by orchards of fruit and betel-nut, at last, in a grove of palms, a house was reached, a one-story dwelling, quaint, roomy, oblong, and still. An hour later the general and his guest were waiting dinner in the balé-balé of the bungalow.

Presently from the panoplied steps came the tinkle of moving feet. The general rose from his chair.

"My future wife," he announced, in an aside. "Mrs. Lyeth," he continued, "this is Mr. Ennever."

She was a woman such as the midland counties alone produce, one whom it would be proper to describe as queenly, were it not that queens are dowds. She just lacked being tall. Her hair was of that hue of citron which is noticeable in very young children, and it was arranged in the fashion we have copied from the Greeks, but her features were wholly English, features that the years would remold with coarser thumb, but which as yet preserved the freshness and the suavity of a pastel. One divined that her limbs were strong and supple. She held herself with a grace of her own, on her cheeks was a flush, her mouth seemed to promise more than any mortal mouth could give; in short, she was beautiful, a northern splendor in a tropic frame.

Tancred, who had risen with the general, stared for a second and bowed.

"Muhammad's prophecy is realized," he murmured; and as Mrs. Lyeth eyed him inquiringly, "At sunset," he added, "I behold a rising sun."

And moving forward he took her wrist and brushed it with his lips.

"One might fancy one's self at Versailles," Mrs. Lyeth replied, and sank into a wicker chair.

"Olympus, rather," Tancred corrected, and found a seat at her side.

"H'm," mused the lady; but evidently nothing pertinent could have occurred to her, for she hesitated a moment and then graciously enough remarked, "The general tells me he knows your father."

"Yes, it may even be that we are connected; there was a Sosinje van Lier who married an Ennever, oh, ages ago. The general, however, thinks she was not a relative of his."

"I have forgotten," the general interjected, and glanced at his future bride. "Is Liance never coming?"

From without came the hum of insects, a hum so insistent, so enervating, and yet so Wagnerian in intensity that you would have said a nation of them celebrating a feast of love. Presently the murmurs were punctuated by the beat of a wooden gong, and as the reverberations faded in the night, a young girl appeared.

The general left his chair again.

"My daughter," he announced; and as Tancred bowed he remembered that the general had been a widower before he became engaged to the divinity that sat at his side.

"You're an American, aren't you?" the girl asked.

There was nothing forward in her manner: on the contrary, it was languid and restrained, as though the equatorial sky had warped her nerves. But her eyes had in them the flicker of smoldering fire; they seemed to project interior flames. Her complexion was without color, unless indeed olive may be accounted one. Her abundant hair was so dark it seemed nearly blue. At the corners of her

upper lip was the faintest trace of down. Her frock was like the night, brilliant yet subdued; it was black, but glittering with little sparks; about her bare arms were coils of silver, and from her waist hung cords of plaited steel. She looked as barbaric as Mrs. Lyeth looked divine.

"Yes," Tancred answered, smilingly; but before he could engage in further speech, the general's "boy" announced that dinner was served.

"What do you think of it there?" asked Mrs. Lyeth, whose arm he found within his own.

And as they passed from the balé-balé, as an uninclosed pavilion is called, to the dining-room beyond, Tancred answered:

"What does one think of the Arabian Nights?"

But there was nothing Arabesque about the meal of which he was then called upon to partake. It began with oysters, rather brackish but good, and ended with cheese. Save for some green pigeons with their plumage undisturbed, and a particularly fiery karri, it was just such a dinner as the average diner-out enjoys on six nights out of seven. There were three kinds of French wine and a variety of Dutch liqueurs. During its service the general held forth, as generals will, on the subject of nothing at all. And when the meal was done, for several hours the little group, reunited in the balé-balé, exchanged the usual commonplace views. During that interchange Tancred kept himself as near as he could to Mrs. Lyeth, and when at last the party broke up and he found himself alone in his room he drew a breath which might have been almost accounted one of relief.

Through the open windows came a heaviness, subtle as the atmosphere of a seraglio. Beyond, some palms masked a cluster of stars, but from above rained down the light and messages of other worlds. In the distance was the surge of the sea, sounding afar the approach and retreat of the waves. Beneath, in the underbrush, fire-flies glittered, avoiding each other in abrupt ziz-zags and sudden loops of flame. The moon had not yet risen, but the sky still was visibly blue.

And as Tancred dropped on a seat he loosened his neck-cloth with a thrust of the thumb. "That claret was heady," he told himself, and with a bit of cambric he mopped his brow. But was it the claret? For a little space he sat gazing at the invitations of the equator. In his ears the hum of insects still sounded, and to his unheeding eyes the stars danced their saraband. The sea seemed to beckon and the night to wait.

Thus far his life had been precisely like that of any other well-nurtured lad of twenty-two. He had been educated at Concord, he was a graduate of Harvard; but during his school and college days the refinement of his own home had accompanied him afar. He was one of those young men, more common now than a few years since, who find it awkward to utter one word that could not be said aloud in a ball-room. And in this he was guided less perhaps by good breeding – for breeding, like every varnish, may cloak the coarsest fibre – than by native comeliness of thought. He shrank from the distasteful as other men shrink from the base. His parents had had the forethought to provide him with two sisters, one a year older than himself, one a year his junior; and these girls, who at the present hour suggest in our metropolitan assemblies the charm and allurements of a politer age, had taken their brother in hand. They had taught him what is best left undone, the grace of self-effacement, and they had given him some breath of the aroma which they themselves exhaled. To this his parents had added a smile of singular beauty, and features clear-cut and sure. In short, his people had done their best for him. And now that he was seeing the world in that easiest way, which consists in travelling around it, his letter of credit was not only in his pocket, but in his face and manner as well.

"I must go to-morrow," he continued. And as he tried to map his departure, the tinkle of a footfall across the hall routed and disturbed his thoughts. Unsummoned there visited him a melody, heard long since, the accompaniment of a song of love. With a gesture he forced it back. Had he not understood – ? No; he remembered now there was no boat from Siak for several days. He might engage a prahu, though, and in it effect a crossing to Perang; he could even take the train and journey to another place. Indeed, he reflected, he might readily do that. And as he told himself this, from

across the hall a tinkle fainter than before reached his ear. He heard a whispering voice, a door closed, and some one beat upon a gong of wood. It was midnight, he knew.

He threw his coat aside and stared at the stars. They were taciturn still, yet more communicative than ever before. One in particular, that shone sheer above the balé-balé, seemed instinct with lessons and sayings of sooth. And to the precepts it uttered, its companions acquiesced, and smiled. Everything, even to the immaterial, the surge of the sea, the trail of the fire-flies, and the glint of a moonbeam, now aslant at his feet, conspired to coerce his will. The very air was alive with caresses, redolent with the balm and the odors of bamboo.

Slowly he undid the lachets of a shoe.

"It is wrong," he muttered, and a breeze that loitered answered, "It is right." "I will go," he continued, and the great stars chorused, "You will stay."

Meditatively still he continued to disrobe; but in spite of the stars and the moonbeams the light must have been insufficient, for presently he lit a candle, monologuing to himself the while. And as he monologued he was aware of that fettering, overmastering force which visits youth but once – the abnegation of self before that which is.

In that struggle in which we lay our arguments down and rejoice in defeat he had wrestled with all the weakness of his years. And now, as he flung himself on the bed, he clasped a pillow in his arms and sighed. He hoped for nothing, he expected nothing; but it was bliss to be conquered and enchained. The contest was done. During the coming week his captor would move before him, a luring melody, a clear accord sounded for his own delight, and then he would go, leaving the melody undisturbed, yet bearing a strain of it to feed on, a memory of enduring joy.

From without the hum of insects still persisted, and the waves were noisier than before. His eyes closed, and he smiled. For a moment that may have outlasted an hour he dreamed of the fabulous days in which goatherds dared to fall in love with goddesses. And such is the advantage of a classical education, that he mumbled a line from a Greek pedant, another from a Roman bore. In the dactyls and the spondees he caught the rhythm of tinkling feet; and as the measures sank him into deeper sleep a monstrous beetle shot through the casement and put the candle out.

The whirl of wings disturbed him ever so little. For an instant he was bending over sandals, caressing a peplum's hem. Then all was blank.

"Tuan! Tuan!"

It was a Malay servant, hailing the foreign lord, admonishing him to rise.

The room was filled with sunlight, and on a palm tree opposite Tancred caught a glimpse of a red monkey scratching his knee, chattering and grimacing at a paroquet.

II

At tiffin, that noon, the general was absent. It was usually so, his daughter explained; the duties of the consulate at Siak claimed the clearer hours of the day, and it was only now and then, on high days and festivals, that he permitted himself the surcease of a siesta at home.

"He is indefatigable," she added, and shook her peerless head.

During the morning Tancred had explored the grounds; he had idled on the red-road and lost himself among the invitations of a green ravine. A grove of tamarinds had called to him, a stretch of aroids had entreated him that way, the sky had imprisoned him beneath a palm, a brook had murmured to him, a lake had coaxed him to its cool embrace. And then, Zut sniffing at his heels, he had returned in time for luncheon at the bungalow.

In pauses of the stroll he had promised himself that during the afternoon he would endeavor to find an opportunity in which to say something of that which was on his mind. This, however, an accident prevented. Miss Van Lier announced that she and her future step-mother were obliged to attend the funeral of a neighbor, a function at which of course it were idle for him to assist. He watched their departure without a protest, and gave a few more hours to the wonders of the woods. When the sun went down his forbearance was rewarded. The general was detained at Siak. Tancred and the ladies dined as they had lunched – alone.

That evening Mrs. Lyeth seemed even more magnificent than the night before. And beside her the sultry insouciance of the maiden heightened the matron's charm. They were sheerly dissimilar, daughters of antipodal climes and race – the one loquacious and at ease, the other taciturn and absorbed. But it was in eyes they differed most. Those of the general's bride-elect were moist as some blue flower plucked at dawn; the dew seemed still upon them. Those of the general's daughter were sidereal, not white nor cobalt, but something that combined the two. To a lapidary they would have suggested gems.

As Tancred's attention wavered between the charm of the one and the beauty of the other, Mrs. Lyeth had been describing some of the surprises in which Sumatra abounds; but her speech had been lost to him, and it was only the rising inflection with which she terminated a phrase that prompted him to reply.

"In the States, I fancy, you have nothing like it?"

"In the States, no; but in Mexico I believe – "

And Tancred was about to draw on his imagination when a servant offered him some sweets. He would have let them pass, but this Mrs. Lyeth prevented.

"You should try one," she said. "Liance" – and at this she glanced at the girl – "Liance is the inventor; she will be offended if you – "

And, as she again glanced, Liance arched her brows. At the moment it occurred to Tancred that the relations between Mrs. Lyeth and her future step-child might be a trifle strained.

With the aid of a silver prong Tancred helped himself to a confection. It was yellow of hue, and, he presently discovered, agreeable to the mouth. It had the flavor of honey and of meal, but it was slightly acid, as though the rind of a lemon had been mixed therewith.

"I will give one to Zut, if I may," he said, and thereat he tossed one, which the dog caught on the fly and swallowed with the discreetest blink. And then, with the appreciation of a gourmet, Tancred added:

"It is excellent; may I have another?"

The dish again was passed to him. Before he rose from the table the majority of the sweets had disappeared. It was evident that both master and dog had a taste for just such comestibles as these. As he devoured one and then another, he noticed that Liance was watching him.

"The general was in Mexico some years ago," Mrs. Lyeth added, inconsequently. "I have heard him speak of the beauty of the women. But in New York they are more beautiful still, are they not?"

"Yes, they are pretty enough," Tancred answered.

"I hear they propose to the men," Liance interjected.

"Ah, that is a libel. In leap-year, perhaps, and in jest, such a thing may occur, but – "

"They are well behaved, then?"

"Yes, indeed. I remember, though, one girl – her name was – there, I have forgotten it. However, a young fellow was evidently taken with her, and she, as evidently, was taken with him. But for some reason or other he never seemed to get to the point. One afternoon, when he was drinking tea with her, the heat of the room – our houses, you know, are fearfully hot – must have affected her. She went off like that! The young fellow was at his wits' end. It may be that he had never seen anyone faint before. 'What shall I do? what shall I do?' he exclaimed, and he was about to scream for assistance, when the girl in her swoon murmured: 'Kiss me.' He did so and she recovered at once. H'm – they were married last spring."

During the telling of this anecdote Tancred noticed that the girl's eyes were still on his. But as the ultimate phrase dropped from him she rose and left the room.

"She is exquisite," Tancred confided in a whisper to Mrs. Lyeth. To this that lady assented. "But you – " he added, and then stopped short.

"Let us go to the pavilion, it is cooler there." Mrs. Lyeth had risen, and Tancred, hesitant still, followed as she led the way.

"But you," he added at last, "you are perfect."

She had found a seat and he another. A fan which she held she unfurled and shut again with a sudden click. For a moment she toyed with a fold of her frock, but presently her hand fell to her side. He caught it up and kissed the finger-tips. At once she drew it from him.

"It is the climate that has affected you," she said, "not I."

"It is you," he muttered, "it is you."

"Even so, there let it rest."

"I cannot," he insisted; "I love you." As he spoke he started, startled at his own temerity. And as her eyelids drooped he tried to catch her hand again.

"Then, if you love me, say nothing." She had straightened herself and looked him now in the face. "If the general should even imagine – " A gesture completed the sentence.

Tancred nodded. He seemed confident and assured. Evidently the general had aroused no fear in him.

"It was in Mexico," she continued. "Liance was in the cradle. Her mother" – and Mrs. Lyeth turned her head and looked cautiously around – "her mother was younger than I am now. She was beautiful, I have understood; more so even than her daughter. The general suspected that she was flirting with the Austrian attaché. He had him out and shot him. His wife he drove to suicide. It is only recently I learned this. And yet it is not for that reason that I fear. I have no intention of flirting with you; you know that. It is because – because – "

"Don't hunt for a reason. I am willing to be shot."

Mrs. Lyeth hastened to laugh, but her laugh was troubled. It sounded thin, as forced laughter ever does. She unfurled her fan again, and agitated it with sudden vigor.

"It may not be," she murmured.

Her voice was so low that even the breeze did not catch it. And now, as she turned to her companion, it seemed to him that her eyes were compassionate, sympathetic even, awake to possibilities yet careless of result.

At the moment there came to Tancred that annoyance which visits us in dream. Before him was a flower more radiant than any parterre had ever produced. With a reach of the arm it could be his, but his arm had lost its cunning. Do what he might, it refused to move. And still the flower glowed,

and still the arm hung pendent and quasi-paralyzed at his side. It may be – such things have happened – it may be that of the inward effort Mrs. Lyeth marked some sign. She shut her fan again, and made as though to rise. But this movement of hers, like the clock in the fable, must have dissolved the spell. Abruptly Tancred was on his feet.

"One instant," he said. "There, you can give me that. Nay, see, if you wish to – go."

And at this he stood aside, as though to let her pass. The magnetism, however, which youth possesses, may have coerced her. In any event she made no further effort to leave; she sat, her eyes a trifle dilated, a whiteness quivering beneath the lace-work at her neck.

"That is good of you," he added; "I have but a word to say. Listen to it, will you? I was sure you would. Last night – or was it last night? – it seems a year ago. H'm, there are people whom we meet – you must have experienced the same thing – people that disturb us with suggestions of something that has gone before. When I saw you last evening – no, not that; but when I heard your voice, there came with it a reminiscence of earlier and forgotten days. It was not of the present I thought, but of a past I remembered I had dreamed. It was like a tangled skein. One after another the threads unloosed, and as they separated from each parting knot a memory returned. You were not a stranger, you were a friend I had lost. I could have sat with you, and from yesterday I could have led you back from one horizon to another until that posting-house was reached where our destiny changed its horses and our hands were first unclasped."

This fine speech delivered, he looked down and plucked at his cuff. And presently, as he was about to speak again, Mrs. Lyeth raised her fan.

"After that I have either to thank you or to go!" Her voice was less severe than pained, and she seemed to retreat yet further in her chair. "And I thank you," she added, after a pause, "but it is you that must go."

To this Tancred answered nothing. He contented himself with looking insubordinate and cross.

"My poor boy!" she murmured, and sighed – or was it a sigh? – a sound that seemed to come less from the heart than the spirit. "My poor boy! But don't you know that you are absurd? I have three brothers – one of them, by the way, is here now; he went down the coast on Tuesday with some friends; he will be back, though, to-morrow or the day after. However, each of my brothers has fallen in love with a woman older than himself, and each of them has fallen in love again and again. I am, believe me, grateful for your homage. What you have said is enough to make any woman pleased. And were I younger – well, then, since you will have it so – were I free, I would ask to hear it until I knew the words by heart. It would be pleasant, that. Oh, there might be so very many pleasant things; yet that is one that may not be. To-morrow, the next day, no matter, presently you will go; a week later you will find some beauty in Madras, and, if you think of me then, it will be but with a smile."

She had risen at last, and stood now smiling too. For the life of him Tancred could not imagine anything fairer, more debonair, nor yet more just than she.

"If I vex you," he said, "I will hold my tongue. But at least you might stay. I will promise this –"

But whatever the intended promise may have been it remained unformulated. In the entrance of the balé-balé Liance had suddenly appeared.

"It is late, is it not?" Mrs. Lyeth, for countenance sake, inquired.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. A gong in the distance answered in her stead.

"It is late," Mrs. Lyeth announced. "We had better go in."

She moved from the pavilion, and presently all three reached the house. The hallway was unlighted, a flicker from the dining-room beyond serving only to make the darkness more opaque.

"Where is Atcheh?" she asked, and called the "boy" by name.

"There," said Tancred, "let me try to find a match."

He groped down the corridor to his room and in a moment or two returned. On the way back he passed some one he took to be Liance.

"I could not find one," he exclaimed.

So well as he was able to make out, Mrs. Lyeth had not moved. To his speech she answered nothing. He advanced a little nearer and tried to take her hand again, but it eluded him. And in an effort to possess himself of it he approached nearer still. Her face seemed to be in the way; for one fleeting second his lips rested on it, then a noise of hoofs must have alarmed him, for he wheeled like a rat surprised. And presently, after he had reached his room again, he heard Mrs. Lyeth welcoming her future husband on the porch.

III

From his window the next morning Tancred caught a glimpse of Mrs. Lyeth entering the pavilion beyond. He left the house at once and hastened to join her; but Liance must have preceded him. When he reached the pavilion she was already there. On her head was a hat unribboned and broad of brim, in her hand a basket. She struck Tancred as being more restless than usual, but the widow was thoroughly at ease. Apparently the episode in the hallway had not disturbed her in the least. For a few moments there was a common indulgence in those amiable platitudes of which the morning hours are prolific, and then Liance stood up.

"If you are going to the coppice, take Mr. Ennever," Mrs. Lyeth suggested. "He looks bored to death."

"Certainly I will," the girl answered.

Her voice was cordial and her eyes and mouth seemed to invite. Tancred, however, did not on that account experience any notable desire to accompany her. On the contrary, he infinitely preferred to remain where he was. But there was no help for him, not even an excuse. He had his choice between going and being downright rude. Accordingly he smiled, but inwardly he swore.

"Show him the rafflesia," Mrs. Lyeth added.

"The what?"

"You shall see it; come."

Liance turned and led the way, and as Tancred followed he marvelled at the widow's attitude. If he had not kissed her at all she could not have appeared more unconcerned.

To the left was a grove of betel-nut palms, to the right a patch of aroids, broad and leathery of leaf. Save for a whir of pheasants in the distance, and the hum of insects, the hour was still. Even the sea was silent; and had it not been for the odors of strange plants Tancred could have closed his eyes and fancied himself in some New England intervale, loitering through a summer noon. It needed but the toll of a bell to make it seem a Sabbath. A mosquito alighted on his hand, and he slaughtered it with a slap. Presently he found himself in a part of the plantation which he had not yet visited, a strip of turf, the background defended by trees. And there, in the centre, was an object such as he had never seen before. He turned inquiringly to Liance; her eyes were on his own.

"The rafflesia," she lisped, and nodded.

And as he moved to get a nearer view she caught him by the arm.

"Be careful," she added, and warned him with a glance.

But Tancred was not one to fear the immobile; he moved yet nearer to it, the girl hovering at his side. And as he moved there came to greet him a heavy, sullen odor, a smell like to that of an acid burning and blent with rose.

"The heart is poisonous," the girl continued; "don't touch it without gloves."

The admonition, however, was unnecessary. Tancred was motionless with surprise. Before him was a flower, its petals of such consistency and of such unpleasant hue that they resembled huge slabs of uncooked veal. The chalice was deep enough to hold two gallons of liquid, the pistil was red, and the supporting stem was gnarled and irruptive with excrescences. In appearance it suggested an obese and giant lily, grown in a nightmare and watered with blood. It was hideous yet fascinating, as monstrosity ever is. And as Tancred stared, a page of forgotten botany turned in his mind, and he remembered that he had read of this plant, which Sumatra alone produces, and in whose pistil lurks a poison swifter than the cantarella of the Borgias, deadlier than the essences of Locuste.

The odor, more pungent now, drove him back a step. At the moment it seemed to carry with it a whiff of that atmosphere of creosote and tooth-wash which is peculiar to the dentist's chair. And slaughtering another mosquito, he moved yet further away.

"What do you think of it?" asked Liance.

"It would hardly do for the button-hole, would it?" he answered.

The girl nodded appreciatively. Evidently she was of the same mind as he.

"There are few of them here," she continued. "This is the only one in Siak, but back there," and she pointed to the mountains, "they are plentiful. When a Malay prepares for war he slashes the pistil with his kriss. The wound that that kriss makes is death."

"H'm," mused Tancred, with an uncomfortable shrug, "if I happened to fall out with a Malay – "

"Don't."

The monosyllable fell from her like a stone.

"I will do my best," he said.

She turned again and led him back through the coppice. The air was sultrier than ever, heavy with fragrance and enervating with forebodings of a storm. And now, as the girl preceded him, her step seemed more listless than before. She is tired, he reflected. These noons are fierce.

"You are to be with us some time, are you not?" Liance asked.

"No, a day or two at the most. When the next steamer goes, so must I."

"Could you not stay longer?" She stopped and looked at him, the little basket swaying to and fro.

"I should like to, really I should like to very much," he replied. The episode with Mrs. Lyeth was still oppressing him, and in answer to the oppression he added aloud, "But perhaps it is better I should not."

Liance lowered her eyes, and with the point of her shoe tormented a tuft of grass.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because – well, because I feel an intruder."

The girl raised her eyes at once, her lips quivered.

"You are wrong, so wrong."

And then, curiously enough, as such things happen, Tancred – who was not a bit stupider than the rest of us – felt an oracle within him. It was more than probable, he told himself, that widow and maid, being nearly of an age, had, in their Sumatran idleness, become the fastest friends; and at once, with that logic which is peculiar to those that love, he decided that, being friends, they must be confidantes as well, and he concluded that two fair heads had come together and determined he should remain. That woman is variable, was a song he knew by heart, and he also knew that woman is apt to do one thing and mean another – to dismiss, for instance, the very man whom she wishes most at her feet.

These ruminations, however long in the telling, did not in reality outlast a moment's space. It was all very clear to him now, and his blood pulsed quickly.

"If *you* tell me so, I must indeed be wrong," he answered. "And let me add," he continued, impetuously, "it is a boon to know it."

To his face a flush had come, and his eyes were eager. He had never been accounted anything else than good-looking, but now he was attractive as well.

"You will not be in haste to go, then?"

"In haste to go – " His face completed the sentence. "Tell her from me," he was about to say, when from the girl's loosening fingers the basket fell; she drooped like a flower, her eyes half closed, and he had but the time to hold out his arm when she sank unconscious on it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.