

# A PERSON OF SOME IMPORTANCE



By  
**LLOYD OSBOURNE**

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## PROLOGUE.

Lovers of Romance, attention! Here's a story you will like. It tells of mystery under the dreamy moon of the Pacific islands and of love in the shady lanes of New England—and what more can a story reader want? The mystery, of course, is introduced early in the tale, and the love-follows close after. Together they go hand in hand through the pages of the story, never parting company until the final chapter. There the mystery departs, but the love remains.

You know, of course, about the author, Lloyd Osbourne. He learned how to write in a worthy school, for he is a stepson of Robert Louis Stevenson. And no greater story teller than the latter ever lived.

## CHAPTER I.

Who is John Mort?  
HE moonlight streamed through the palms of the Pacific island of Lotoaloa, outlining on the beach a vivid tracery of fronds and stems. Across the lagoon, softened and mellowed by the stretch of glassy water, came the sound of a mouth organ and the rhythmic beat of a wooden drum as the crew of the North Star raised the chorus of "Good-bye, My Friend." At intervals there was a deeper note as some mighty cymbal rung its might against the coral and burst with fury on the seaward reefs.

In all those lonely seats there is no lonelier island than Lotoaloa. On some Pacific charts it is called the "four crowns of Quilros," with a question mark after it. On others, when it is noticed at all, it figures variously as "Melampus reef, p. d.," "Winstow aboia, p. d.," or merely "Island, c. d.," a signifying "position doubtful" and a "existence doubtful." In the fifties its handful of inhabitants was carried away bodily by Peruvian slavers. In later years it attracted the attention of Bully Hayes, who had had the intention, never to be carried out, of making it into a sort of pirate stronghold, and to this day there stands this battery of six small, rusty iron cannons, commanding the anchorage.

Here, leaning against one of these venerable guns, were two men in close and earnest conversation. One of them was about forty-five, tall and thin, with high cheek bones and a narrow, ugly, withered face, whose usual expression was one of sardonic melancholy. But it was not a commonplace face nor a weak one. The pale blue eyes were unattractive, the nose pronounced and the general air distinguished. Whatever else he had been in the past John Mort, as he called himself, was ineradicably a cavalry officer, with an underlying military harshness that on occasions could flame up like a volcano.

His companion was Matthew Broughton, a man of thirty-one, sobered, hardened and somewhat worn by eleven years on the outposts of civilization. He was an American, alone in the world. He had had two years at Annapolis, from which he had been discharged for hazing. Later he had drifted to the Pacific. He had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the life of danger, daring and romance of the south sea islands, and all he had to show for it were a few scars, a smattering of half a dozen outlandish dialects and the memory of some desperate chances taken and lost. At thirty-one he had achieved nothing more tangible than \$100 a month and the command of John Mort's schooner, and even these he was now abandoning, to begin again with nothing.

"But, my friend, is there anything you complain of?" Mort was asking, his slight foreign accent more marked than usual as the result of his concern. "Oh, no, sir."  
"Money? Shall I double your salary—trouble it? That's simple."

Matt shook his head. "It is here," he said, laying his hand to his heart. "I don't know what's the matter with me; but I'm tired of it all; homesick, perhaps, dissatisfied, depressed."

"And you are determined to leave me?"

"Do not reproach me, sir. I told you this before my last trip, not wishing to take you unawares."

"I'm sorry," said John Mort with emotion. "Sorry for myself at losing one I liked and admire, who for six years has always been so faithful, so loyal. Sorry, too, for you, my friend, that you should choose to go back among strangers—back to that accursed civilization where none fares so well as the greedy and unprincipled. Is it that you prefer? So, is it that for which you will surrender this?"

Mort raised his hand to the tropic moon. "What a choice!" he murmured. "What a choice!"

"It is an impulse stronger than I am," returned Matt after a silence. "After all, I am a white man, and those are my people. Have you never felt that sudden longing to get back—that overpowering, irresistible, unreasonable—longing?"

"No," returned John Mort savagely. "No, no, no! To me it is a hell I have left forever."

"I wonder at myself," said Matt. "There is not a soul in the world I respect more, admire more—yes, love than I do you. Yet I am going."

John Mort's eyes glinted, and he put out his hand, which the other grasped.

"Well, so be it," he said.

"Then, may I sail tonight with land breeze?"

"Yes, you may sail."

"And my accounts, my vouchers, and all that? You ought to pass them, sir, as well as arrange about the North Star's return. Pardon my insistence, but you have put it off and on."

"What amount have you in the ship's safe?"

"Nearly \$800, sir, in French, English and American gold, besides the chest of Chile silver."

"My friend, it is yours, and the schooner also, it is yours. It is small enough return for such loyal service. Ah, indeed, much too small, and I will increase it with this." As he spoke he drew from his finger a superb ruby ring and forced it on Matt, whose stammering words of thanks were cut brusquely short.

"There's another matter much more pressing," he exclaimed, "a pledge to be given and by you sacredly kept—and—"

"But, sir, how will you manage without a vessel?" expostulated Matt, altogether bewildered. "You can not allow yourself to be marooned here—utterly cut off from all!"

"Oh, I fear not that. We are self-sustaining now, and besides in a couple of years I look forward confidently for your return. Isolation has no terrors for me—rather a charm, a picturesque and a greater sense of security."

John Mort paused on the last word, peering strangely at his companion.

"Do you realize, Broughton," he continued at last, "that during our six years' close association, intimacy, you have never asked me a question; that you have never betrayed the least inquisitiveness; that you have seen me draw forth whole packets of Bank of England notes, often thousands and thousands of pounds, and never once have you disturbed me by even a look?"

"Your private affairs were none of my business, sir. I have always made it a point of honor to keep my curiosity to myself."

"And even now, when you are going away, perhaps forever, with the riddle still unsolved, are you not tempted to ask?"

"Well, I suppose it's just this, sir; if you wished me to know you would tell me."

John Mort used as though, indeed, he were very near to making a confidant of his companion. The spell of the moon, the beauty and stillness of

the tropic night, the faint, mellow throbs of the wooden drum timing a barbaric chant far across the water—all were conducive to an access of friendship, of affection and trust, that might sweep away the last barriers of reserve.

He struck a match on the corsair's cannon. It a cigarette, and, with an appearance of some indecision, took a few whiffs before he spoke.

"It is enough for you to know that I am a ghost," he said oddly. "Mort means dead, and the fancy pleased me to take it for my name. Before I died I was a person of some importance; of sufficient importance, in fact—were my existence here ever to be known—for the news of it to shake the world. Broughton, I ask no promises, no oaths. I simply tell you that my life, my happiness, all that is dearest and most precious to me, hang on your discretion. Vaster issues are at stake than you can dream of, and today there are hundreds on my track. A chance remark of yours, an unguarded word, the most innocent of confidences—and these bloodhounds might seize a clue that would destroy me. Broughton, I rely on you to guard my secret."

"I shall guard it, sir."

"And you appreciate, even in this half told way, its supreme, its vital importance?"

"I do, sir."

"Then let us go back."

In silence they walked up the path to the broad veranda of the house—the house that had taken three years to build, whose massive walls were timbered with whole trees—a low, red tiled, Spanish structure, in appearance half fort and half monastery, with a cloistered court where a fountain played.

It had taken the North Star a dozen voyages to furnish it with a splendor almost incredible, considering the remoteness of the island and how recently its only inhabitants had been crabs and seaweeds. Noble pictures, Venetian carvings and old brocades, Flemish tapestry, exquisite furniture still showing the faded gold of medieval Italy—nothing, so it seemed to Matt, could vie in taste and luxury, in grandeur delicately modernized, softened and restrained—with this coral palace that sheltered Mort in exile.

But of all the beautiful objects within its walls, none could compare with its mistress, that radiant, girlish Mirrovna, who shared John Mort's fortunes and engrossed his entire heart.

As fair as he was dark, with crisp golden hair more red than yellow, with captivating blue eyes and a mouth all wantonness and dainty impudence, she could hardly have been more than twenty when Matt first remembered her in Guadalcanar. Who she was or what she had been—actress, dancer or exalted lady, Pole, Russian, Albanian or Magyar—all was a mystery she shared with her soubert husband. Matt knew nothing save that she was one of the most adorable of women. Her caressing and pretty friendship meant much to him, and he repaid it with the profound regard of a man that had no other woman in his life.

But all that was over now, to melt forever in the swirl of receding years. He was probably seeing that familiar room for the last time and those dear faces of his friends. Matt's heart was very full and he faltered under Mirrovna's questioning gaze.

"I cannot persuade him," said Mort, with affected lightness, stooping to kiss his wife's hand, "the captain abandons us."

There was no reproach in Mirrovna's face, rather concern and regret.

"We have been fortunate to keep him so long," she said, enveloping Matt in a look of tender scrutiny. "And, oh, for six years, always so good, so loyal, so true hearted gentleman—surely never was another like our captain."

"I have one favor to ask before I go," said Matt, somewhat huskily; "just one favor. Onae," he went on,

the loss of the North Star, together with the coin in the ship's safe, cost Matt between \$18,000 and \$20,000. The vessel had not been insured, owing to the troublesome and prying questions that would have been asked, which, if truthfully answered, would have invalidated the policy. Had it not been for the ruby ring on his finger and his portion of the small sum raised by the passengers of the Mariposa he would have landed in San Francisco utterly penniless. As it was his crew and he became dependent on a seaman's charitable institution. While others had talked and telephoned and promised vague assistance, leaving the poor castaways shivering on the wharf in a circle of newspaper men and photographers, it was the Rev. John Thompson, crisply English and bustlingly practical who descended on them, checked off their names in a notebook and led them away like so many sheep.

After a night under this kindly but somewhat austere roof Matt sneaked away in the morning to try to pawn his ring. He hated to part with it, yet what else was he to do? He had not even an overcoat, and here it was January and piercingly cold. He had nothing—not a toothbrush, not a spare shirt.

His chief preoccupation, however, was more to avoid being cheated in the disposal of the ring, for, though he had little knowledge of jewels, the stone seemed unusual in size and purity and evidently was very valuable.

He determined to pick out the biggest and most fashionable jewelry store and, explaining his position, ask the favor of their expert advice. They might be obliging enough to tell him what the gem was worth and thus help him materially. Matt knew San Francisco well and accordingly chose Snood & Hargreaves for his objective. His entrance, which he attempted to make as inconspicuous as possible, caused an undercurrent of commotion in this splendid establishment. As he passed at a case of napkin rings, nervously himself for a further advance into the glittering stronghold, he was bumped into by a passing gentleman, and as he was receiving the apologies of the passing gentleman a hand from behind felt for a possible revolver or bomb in his rear pocket. It was all so quickly and coolly done that Matt had hardly time to realize he was under suspicion.

A large, imposing mirror gave him the clew. For there, at full length, he saw what a deeply tanned, wild-haired, ragged desperado he appeared and saw also, with the fall of his eye a scurry of pale employees to guard the exits and block his escape.

Flushing to the eyes, more with shame than anger, and still closely followed by the store detective, he made his way to the nearest clerk.

"Music is the only language—the divine language," he exclaimed, "and

how far surpassing the stupid commonplace of words! Captain, you are a thousand times right, and all our affection for you, all our sorrow, all our unuttered hopes and prayers for you will find their voice in what I play."

When once the violin had touched his chin John Mort became a different man. He was strangely enraptured; the glamor of his genius lent dignity and beauty to his gaunt frame; his thin, baggy, deeply lined face took on a new expression, so rapt, so inspired, that he might have been in communion with another world. That night he played as Matt had never heard him play before, with an intensity, a fire, an unendurable pathos that wrung the soul.

He had taken as a motive one of those simple, plaintive German folk songs, passing from improvisation to improvisation till it seemed the cry of all suffering, doomed humanity. Mirrovna, herself a brilliant musician, was quick and apt in following and to Matt's untraced ear marvelously responsive and marvelously perfect.

An hour later he was aboard the North Star, and the rustling land breeze was bearing him out of the harbor on the long slant north. Six years of his life were sinking with the palms behind him.

Extract from the San Francisco Chronicle of January 24, 1904:

"RESCUE AT SEA.  
"Among the passengers yesterday on board the incoming Oceanic Steamship company's Mariposa were Captain Broughton and nine south sea islanders, of the schooner North Star, captured in north latitude 34, west longitude 132, during a heavy squall. Captain Broughton was below at the time, and hardly managed to scramble out of his cabin before the ship went over.

The disaster is ascribed to the carelessness of the Kanaka crew, who were all asleep at the moment the squall struck the vessel, which was lying becalmed with her sails up.

"The crew, none of whom drowned, contrived to perch themselves on the ship's bottom, and after four days of intense suffering were picked up by the W. H. Hall of this city, in lumber for Suva, Fiji. The Hall, in her turn, transferred them to the mail steamer, which was fortunately intercepted a week later.

"Captain Broughton cannot speak too highly of the extreme kindness of Captain Hayward, Purser Smith, and the officers and passengers of the Mariposa toward himself and his crew. A concert was given in aid of the shipwrecked mariners, and the sum of \$317.75 realized on their behalf."

"The North Star was of seventy-four tons register, built at Bath, Me., in 1884, and carried no insurance. It was learned from Captain Broughton that she had been employed in the copra trade for many years, and was on her way to this port for drydocking and repairs. Western bound ship masters are warned to look out for the derelict, which was still afloat when last sighted."

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## CHAPTER II.

The Ruby Ring.

AM Captain Broughton of the shipwrecked schooner North Star," he explained. "All I had went down with my ship except this ring, and I should be glad to get some idea of its value so that the pawnbrokers can't cheat me."

"It's hardly in our line," snapped the clerk. "Expert valuation is a business in itself, and—"

The conversation was interrupted by a bald, oldish man, who, with an air of authority, demanded to know what was the matter. On its being explained, he took up the ring, looked at it with some surprise and asked Matt if he belonged to the people that had been rescued at sea by the mail steamer.

"Yes," said Matt, smiling, "and though appearances are against me, I am neither one of the James brothers nor a bandit."

The man thawed at this and requested Matt to step into his private office. "I am Mr. Snood," he said, "the managing partner of this concern." As soon as they were inside the office and seated, Mr. Snood examined the ring carefully.

"Where did you get this?" he asked suddenly, raising his keen eyes to Matt's face.

"It was given to me."

"Permit me to inquire by whom?"

"My employer—the gentleman whose ship I lost."

"Why did he give it to you?"

"I was leaving his service. I had been associated with him for years

was not a single tie that bound him to the place unless it were his parents' graves. But after years of wandering, of contented exile, of acquiescence in the life he had made for himself, something within him had at last revolted. Homesick, heart sick, weary of palms and reefs and naked savages, Manaswan appeared to him as the solution of this subtle malady of the soul. At Manaswan a miracle would happen, and he would be happy. The first use he made of his money was to buy his ticket.

He gave the clerk \$500 to assure the safe return of the natives to their various islands; and that afternoon the honest, devoted fellows, in charge of nine-year-old Master Thompson, accompanied him across the bay to cheer his departure on the Overland. Standing there in a line of nine, marshaled by that little white boy, they presented a singular spectacle on the platform, what with the earrings in their ears, two with tattooed faces, and all weeping copiously. Nor was the effect diminished by their singing a resounding hymn, and then listening, with bowed heads, to the prayer Tanielu, the Tongan, offered up amid the jostle of trunks and passengers. Matt's own eyes were dim as the train moved away, and there was a very real lump in his throat. Why was he going to Manaswan while everything he valued lay behind him? Why was he leaving tried and true friends for strangers? An island fairland for a prim little Connecticut town? Yet his resolution did not waver, and he was inspired by the thought that in five days he would be "home."

Matt was less disillusioned by his birthplace than might have been expected. The snowy landscape, the sluggish river, with its frozen shallows, the icicles and silent pines, the delight of hearing sleigh bells and watching the bright animation of scenes so long unfamiliar—all were satisfying to the craving that possessed him. On the human side, however, Manaswan was disappointing. No one seemed to care particularly whether he had come back or not. The most cordial greeting he received came from an old gentleman who mistook him for some one else. In fact, Matt remembered Manaswan a great deal better than Manaswan remembered him, and when he wrote to Washington and learned that both his uncle and aunt had long been dead he felt lonelier than ever.

Matt took up his quarters in Mrs. Sattane's boarding house on Jefferson avenue and fell into an aimless, drifting sort of life, in which the dinner bell was the most important part of the day. He took long tramps, assiduously read the daily paper, interested himself in the other boarders and vaguely turned over schemes for his future. With \$4,500 he could surely make some kind of start somewhere. But what precise form of "start" and what "somewhere?"

Meanwhile he smoked his pipe and made friends with the other boarders. The principal of these was Hunter Hoyt, a genial, fat old scamp of fifty, never altogether sober, though very dignified when in his palmy days had been a sensational journalist of some celebrity in the newspaper world of New York and San Francisco. Drink had been his ruin, and he was now doing reporter work for the local Manaswan paper, the Banner. Shabby, jolly and always with a flower in his buttonhole and a pleasant (if often articulate) word for everybody, Hoyt was one of those irresistible nuisances who are popular when better men are not. He never paid Mrs. Sattane more than half his bill; his engagement with the Banner was almost in the nature of alms to fallen greatness; the liquor dealers allowed him to fine them an incalculable number of bottles of whiskey. Even the flower he was so particular about was never paid for, except by an amiable condescension that Signor Tony Frendo performed in lieu of cash. There was everywhere a contemptuous affection for the old scallawag, whose courtly ways and husky compliments made him an especial favorite of the women.

Hunter Hoyt took an instant fancy to Matt and in many ways some of them pathetic enough, sought to win his regard. In spite of his decadence there were often times when Hoyt could be both clever and entertaining. When with the right level of whisky in his sodden old carcass he could regain his former powers and astonish one with his mocking, humorous, brilliant flow of talk. It was then that contempt changed to admiration, and intimacy followed. Except in regard to John Mort, Matt kept nothing back from the old fellow who was insignificant in his questions and as fascinated by the younger man's past as any boy.

Matt had no conception of what a picturesque figure he was to those wistful, bearded old eyes, nor how sincerely Hunter Hoyt adored him. As for his own looks, he had long ceased to give them much thought. At thirty-one most men have outgrown that. He was scarcely aware that his fine, sensitive face was recovering the color it had lost in the tropics, and that his vigorous frame and broad shoulders and wavy, clustering black hair were likewise to attract favorable attention. The key to his whole character and the underlying cause of his charming manners could be found in the modest estimate he had of himself. The principal endeavor of the naval academy in to teach the midshipman who is a person of very small importance, how to do what he is told, keep his mouth shut and respect the flag, and Matt had not wholly outlived this youthful training which had been put in his bones to stay.

In contrast to Hunter Hoyt the rest of Mrs. Sattane's boarders seemed commonplace indeed. One of them was too bumble a creature to call himself a boarder at all. Matt lived a

week at Mrs. Sattane's before he even discovered the man's existence—a grave, elderly mulatto of a kindly, open face and ingratiating manners, who was something in the nature of the boarding house skeleton. His name was Daggancourt, a possible corruption of De Goncourt—Victor Daggancourt—who, although he paid \$7 a had what might be called a fortunate position in the house. He would wait unobtrusively about the porch until the rest had dished their meal, when a second tinkle of the bell would summon him to the disordered table. Here color prejudice forbade that he should be served by Bridget, who placed the dishes near his plate and led him to shift for himself. The sitting room was, of course, forbidden to him, though he might linger for a moment in the doorway without impropriety and listen to the superior race. He was the owner of a small garage and machine shop—"Victor's garage" it was called—and was a widower without children.

"This is a hard world for a colored man, sir," he said once to Matt, "especially if he's better educated than the most of his race and is given to thinking a little, like I do. The majority of them are no company for us, with their common ways and cheap ideas; and, of course, I am personum gratia to white folks. Here I am, stuck middle-way between the two."

Matt conceived a sincere regard for the old fellow, whose loyalty, effacing life was not without a certain tragedy. There was a fine strain in the mulatto and an innate dignity and kindness that commanded respect, not to speak of a whimsical humor that gleamed out even in his most earnest moments. "You're a man," he once said to Matt, "while I have the misfortune to be a problem. That's a bigger difference between us than color itself. The darky can't go anywhere and do anything, but right off, he's a problem. When we eat, we're a problem; when we go to a hospital, we're a problem; we can't hop on a train, but there again we're a problem; when we die, we're a problem, for, Lord save us, black-bones mustn't lay next to white."

Nothing could be got from the boarders except warnings. Each one ran down his own business. On Matt's appealing to Victor the latter foretold the swift finish of the garage business. "Owners are getting to know too much," he said. "You can't sell ten dollar pair of gas lights for sixty like you did once. If I was you, Marse Broughton, I'd try mules. There never has been enough mules, and there never will be!"

Matt accordingly, though rather slackly, must be confessed, began to look into mules; he accumulated stacks of mule information; he wrote to Washington and got for nothing the concentrated wisdom of a whole mule bureau. All this was very encouraging, and was made more so by Victor's insisting on coming in as a partner. He thought he could sell out his garage for \$3,400 or \$3,800, and volunteered to be Matt's man Friday.

"I won't be any trouble to you," he pleaded earnestly. "I know my place, and I'll keep it, no matter how close we have to live; and I'll cook and wash, and do everything till we're on our feet."

Matt did not commit himself; it was so much easier to dawdle along and

coquette with imaginary mules, and work out imaginary mule profits, than to bestir himself with actualities.

One day, after breakfast, while he was in his room, he was called down to the parlor by the only visitor that had ever sought him. The grizzled, smiling man who rose to greet him was a stranger.

"I'm the editor of the Manaswan Banner," said the stranger, introducing himself deferentially. "Tom Maynard, my name is, and a very injured man, Mr. Broughton! Yes, sir, a very injured man, for surely the local paper had the first call on a local boy? Oh, Lord!" he ejaculated in the same key of pretended indignation, "to think you were hiding here all this time, and I didn't know a thing about it!"

"I don't understand," said Matt, smiling too. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"And so you are a real live king?"

"And so you are a real live king?" went on Mr. Maynard, ignoring the question, and gazing at him in humorous awe. "What a lot of stick in the mule it makes us feel that one of our boys could go out and do that, while we stayed at home with the chores."

To be Continued



"We'll advance you \$4,000 on it"

He held me in very great esteem and made me a present of the ring on my departure.

"He's a very rich man—this employer?"

"Oh, yes; very rich indeed."

"Then you have no reason to doubt that this ring was—legitimately acquired?"

"No, one who knew him could ever doubt that. Why, it would be utterly incredible."

"You must pardon me for asking these questions," went on Mr. Snood in a kinder tone. "It's a good plan to be careful, you know. After all, it is to your own interest as well as ours, isn't it?"

"Quite so," assented Matt, hoping that Mr. Snood would soon come to the point.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said the latter, hesitating and examining the ring again with evident admiration.

"Mind, I'm not saying you mightn't get a better offer elsewhere, but this is the best Snood & Hargreaves can do for you. We'll advance you \$4,000 on it at 7 per cent interest, and we'll engage to buy it outright, now or later, for \$5,500."

This was so much more than Matt had ever dreamed of that he could only gasp. Fifty-five hundred dollars! He had thought vaguely of a couple of thousand, trembling at his own presumption. Fifty-five hundred dollars! Why, that was a fortune—not that he was wretchedly poor, but that he had last extensively, now as he bewilderingly considered the proposal, did he care to take so large an advance as \$4,000. The interest charges would soon grow

beyond his powers to meet them, and the ring would be irretrievably lost. Explaining his perplexities to Mr. Snood, it was finally agreed that he was to be advanced a thousand dollars only, with the privilege of selling the ring at any time he wished for the larger sum.

A little later he left the store with fifty twenty-dollar gold pieces weighing down his pockets and the following memorandum pinned carefully inside his waistcoat.

San Francisco, Jan. 24, 1904.  
Messrs Snood & Hargreaves hereby acknowledge the receipt of a solitary ruby ring of an antique, oriental setting from their owner, Captain Matthew Broughton, who, in consideration of one thousand (\$1,000) dollars advanced to him today by Messrs. B. & H. on security of said ring, and receipt by Captain Broughton hereby acknowledged, agrees to pay B. & H. 7 per cent interest reckoned on said loan.

GEORGE H. SNOOD.  
For Snood & Hargreaves.  
MATTHEW BROUGHTON.

Matt returned to the windy street in far better spirits than he had left it. He had \$1,000 in his pockets, \$4,500 more to draw on if used by, and best of all he could now go home. It was a strange instinct that called him back to Manaswan, in the east, for there



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