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Mr. Blec
By Peter Blundell*

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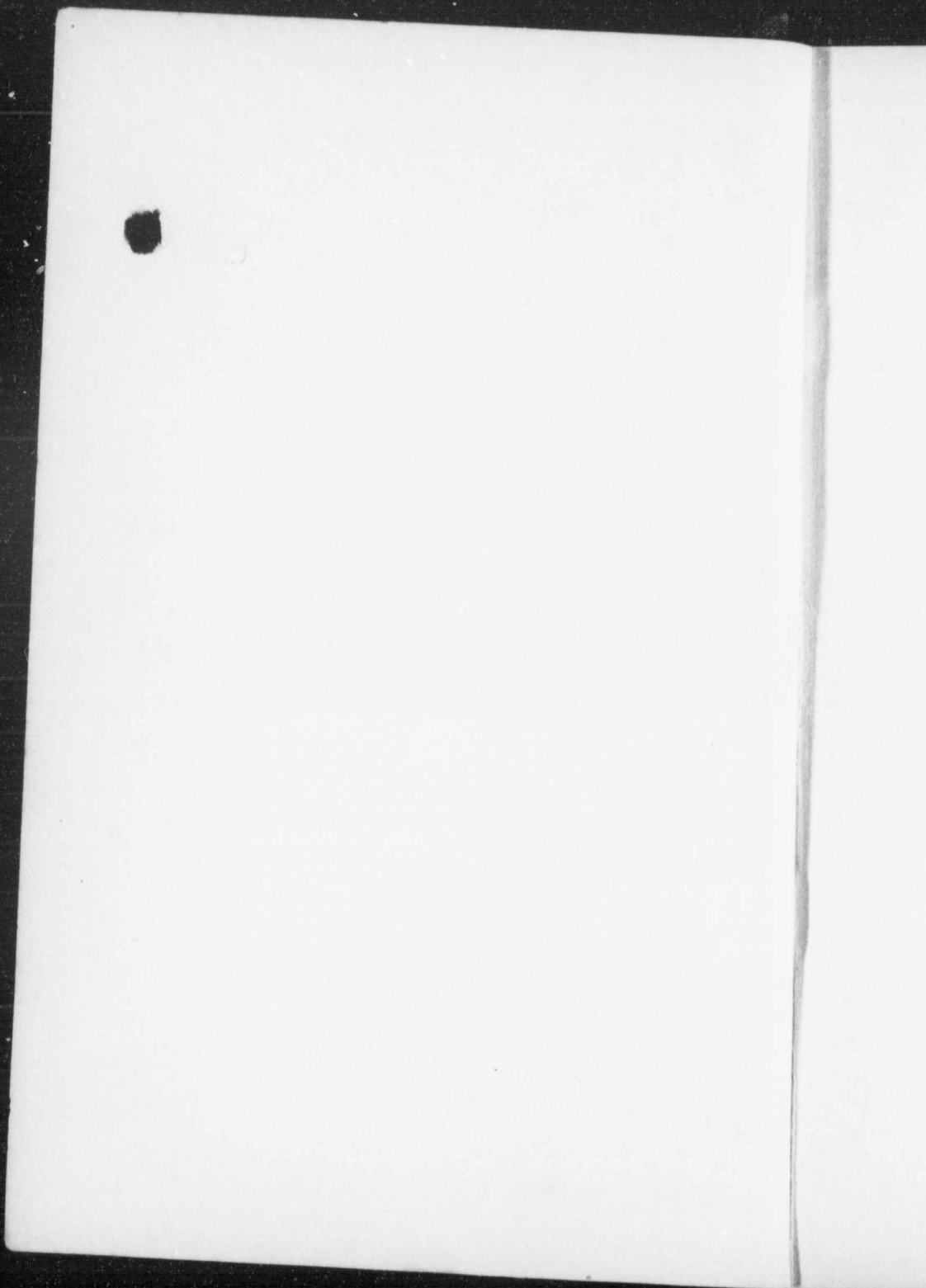
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THE FINGER OF MR. BLEE

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OF MR. BLEE

A TROPICAL COMEDY
BY PETER BLUNDELL



LONDON JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD
NEW YORK JOHN LANE COMPANY
TORONTO BELL & COCKBURN MCMXIII

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THE LONDON AND NORWICH PRESS, LTD., LONDON AND NORWICH

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The Finger of Mr. Blee

CHAPTER I

HAROLD BLEE'S first vague recollection was of a large unpainted wooden house, roofed with a thatch that leaked. He always seemed to sleep under the leak. The house stood with other similar houses amid a grove of cocoanut palms. He remembered only the trunks of the palms. They were scaly and knotted, but smooth skinned, and weathered a grey white. A regiment of them curved out of the earth and shot up somewhere beyond his infant sight. All the houses were square, and were built on posts above the ground. You could look up from underneath and see the people moving about inside through the split bamboo floors. Scraps of food and refuse fell constantly on to the ground below, and he used to like to play with the fowls and half-starved pariah dogs that fed there. Once he looked up from his game and saw an old man asleep on the floor above. He got a long stick and poked him. This only occurred once. He used to get very dirty, but that did not matter as he wore no clothes; not even on feast days, when the other boys of his age were accustomed to be

led about hand in hand by their proud elders, looking haughty in little striped trousers and pink silk long coats, with perhaps white shoes and skull caps of crocheted Berlin wool. The women of the kampong, fat, swarthy creatures, who seemed to have no other occupation than to comb each other's hair, explained, when he asked them, that he was a charity child, lucky to get even his food, and that clothes were a luxury. He did not exactly fathom what they meant at that time, but understood that he was in some way different from and not so fortunate as the other children. And though every one was kind enough to him he felt rather out of it.

Until he was eight years old he never went away from the cocoanut grove, never out of call of the houses. He had a feeling that if he were lost he would not be missed.

Then a day came when he left the kampong altogether. A strange white man arrived one morning, a man with a long, red beard, who wore a black gown like a "Mem" and a big gold cross hanging from his neck. All the people, men and women, gathered round this stranger and held a long and excited conversation. Their talk was about him, so far as he could make out. He could not hear what they said, but they all seemed to be looking his way. At last one of the women came over to where he was playing and, giving him an unwonted and it seemed to him an entirely gratuitous caress, led him up

to them. In after years he could picture himself standing there naked, with the brown, red clad natives grouped round him, while the holy father, who wore spectacles and had mild, blue eyes, talked to him and fondled the single lock of hair which in view of a future religious ceremony had been allowed to grow upon his shaven head. He did not know the peculiar looking white man was a priest then. He objected to having his hair pulled by strangers, but was too polite to say so. It appeared from what was said that somebody in the far off country of London had sent out a sum of money, and that a vague thing called the Government, which he had often heard his seniors talking about in the house at night, had ordered this white person to fetch him away to the Jallagar Mission School.

When he heard what was intended to be done he protested vigorously, but the people in the kampong, to whom the priest gave money, spoke to him reassuringly, telling him that they were sorry to lose him, but that for his own good he must go away; and at last, when he perceived that their sorrow at his departure was drowned in their determination that he should depart, he went calmly enough.

At the Mission School he lived with twenty or thirty other children like himself. Two "Mems" looked after them, or rather not "Mems," but the inferior,

husbandless things called "Missies." He held them in contempt as being old and single. They made him wear clothes and punished him when he tried to avoid doing so; and he hated them accordingly. Every day he took his place with the rest in the hot, airless schoolroom, and slowly learned to read, write, and speak English. His native tongue was Malay, but in the Mission School the use of it was discouraged. Frequently lessons were stopped while the children chanted a hymn in English. As they did not understand the words and were unaccustomed to the European tonal scale the effect was not good. But it pleased the priest and the sisters, and people passing the school liked to hear the singing. They were also taught to sing the National Anthem, and to cheer "Hip! Hip! Hurrah!" in order to be ready to make a public appearance should the Governor, or any other great man, be touring in that part of the world.

As they became older and a little fluent in the language the priest himself took them in hand and taught them, besides arithmetic and weird book-keeping, a little history and geography. And he would make them read aloud daily from Milton and Browning, by which means they acquired many words they had no idea of the meaning of. Twice a year one of the European officials, dressed in white with big brass buttons and a helmet, and looking very fierce, although he was only

head of the Jallagar Museum, called to inspect the school. And now and then as a vacancy occurred the best of the older scholars would be taken on as errand boy at the Government offices. Those not so fortunate obtained berths with merchants or storekeepers. No handicrafts were taught; it was a factory for cheap clerks, and Harold Blee was to be a clerk like the rest.

He was christened Harold Blee when he first came to the school, after the person who sent the money from London; and later on, when nearly sixteen, he was confirmed along with several others by the Bishop of the diocese.

This last act marked the finish of his education; shortly afterwards much to every one's astonishment, for he was by no means the best scholar, he was enlisted in the service of the Government as errand boy.

His appointment caused some discontent among the Eurasian community, and the Commandant received no less than six petitions from fond parents praying that their son, the most brilliant boy at the school, should have justice done to him. There was a letter about it in the local paper. The Government, however, stood firm, and in order to show their contempt for public opinion, promoted Harold Blee to an office-boy-ship as quickly as possible.

Harold no longer lived at the Mission School. When

he became a Government servant the priest gave him an outfit consisting of two white linen suits, a topee, three cotton vests, and a pair of canvas shoes, all packed in a basket, presented him with a parting blessing, and put him to lodge with a highly respectable, church-going family in the district, named De Souza.

Life with these people was infinitely freer than the one he had been used to. The only thing that Mrs. De Souza was inflexible about was that he must hand over all his monthly pay to her immediately on receipt. After that he could be as dissipated as he pleased. It was, perhaps, owing more to the fact that his credit was not good in the town than to any effect of his early training on his character that he came to no serious harm during the next few years.

Maybe the passion he conceived for Miss De Souza, unrequited though it was, had a restraining influence. She was a year or so older than Harold, and rather lighter in colour than is usual among the members of the Eastern branch of the De Souza family. She wore large white hats with flowers garlanded round them, and her black, very glossy, highly scented hair was tied with a large pink bow. When first Harold came her frocks—always light in colour—used to reach half way to her ankles, showing open-work stockings and shiny patent leather shoes.

This was how she dressed on Sundays and on afternoons when she went visiting.

Harold used to see her leaving their little rag-bag of a house, parasol in hand, nearly every day, and used to think her as beautiful as angels were alleged to be, and infinitely more interesting. On Sundays he and she with Mr. and Mrs. De Souza behind them would walk solemnly to the tin Mission Church and take part in the service.

Sunday was the only day in the week that Mr. De Souza rose to a position of any importance in the household. On weekdays he was a retiring, cadaverous little man, afflicted apparently with some obscure disease which prevented him from working, but left him otherwise healthy enough. He occupied himself mainly in smoking cigarettes and reading the newspaper, using a small plot of garden at the back of the house as a study.

But when on the Sabbath he brushed his whiskers, assumed his black frock coat, said to be an heirloom, and walked to church by the side of the rustling and bowing Mrs. De Souza, lifting his tall hat at frequent intervals, he used to appear to the awestruck Harold as having grown at least two sizes larger.

Regularly before they started Mrs. De Souza used to give her husband a five cent. piece, and Harold and Lily the daughter one cent. each for the plate. Her face

as she listened to the chinking when they dropped them in, proved she got value for the money. On their return from church there would be extra sambals with the curry for tiffin.

Mrs. De Souza ran a small dressmaking business, and the family received some slight financial help from a married daughter. But their most lucrative work was doing darning and mending for the captains, mates, and engineers of merchant steamers calling at the port.

Whenever a vessel came in, Mrs. De Souza would board it, armed with a large bundle of references from previous clients, and make straight for the captain. She had her professional card neatly printed to hand to him, and if this and the ordinary references were not enough to assure him of her high standing and perfect respectability she could, as a last resource, produce a testimonial from a missionary. But this, like strychnine with the doctors, she only exhibited when every other measure had been tried. She was usually successful in securing the mending for the entire ship without much trouble, being a pleasant spoken woman with a very outward and visible appreciation of what a great man a sea captain was.

When the garments were brought home Lily would help mend them, but her mother would never take her on board the ships. "You are much too young. No-

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body would trust you with the work," she would say. "Besides, it's not a proper place for a girl like you among all those men."

Harold thoroughly agreed with this. Complete isolation from all males except himself was what he would have prescribed for her.

He was now over seventeen, and getting on so well at the office that he could afford a clean suit every other day.

He had blossomed out into socks also, and a straw hat in the evenings, and lately, after much plucking up of courage, he had tackled Mrs. De Souza and wrung from her a promise that in future he should hand over a certain sum from his pay for the month's board and be allowed to keep the rest.

"What you want with money I can't understand," said Mrs. De Souza. "You had much better leave it with me and I will save it up for you."

"My rise in job at the Commandant's office requires some keeping up," explained Harold.

"And if you have any money left you can buy me chocolates, cannot you, eh! Harold?" suggested the modest Miss De Souza, who was present. She smiled at him bewitchingly.

Harold got quite red in the face trying to frame a suitable reply. He wanted something to put the mother

off the scent and at the same time to assure the daughter that to supply her with chocolates would be his sole hobby in future.

They watched his struggles for a moment and then burst out laughing.

"Take no notice of her, Harold," advised Mrs. De Souza. "She'll ruin you if you don't watch yourself."

But in spite of her warning Miss De Souza after this used to find a small bag of chocolates almost daily on her dressing table. And it says something for that young lady's tact that although her mother saw her eating them, and the proud Harold saw her eating them, on no occasion did they both together see her eating them.

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CHAPTER II

JALLAGAR, as most people do not know, is one of the hundred little lime-washed settlements which are scattered like daisies over the surface of the globe between Hong Kong and Papua, each with its two or three officials, its tiny band of European civilians, and its enormous parish pump. The climate of every one of these small places is extremely hot, whether the north-east monsoon blows or the south-west monsoon blusters. They all have their sandy beaches, cocoanut palms, jungles, mosquitoes, mangrove swamps, and the rest of the paraphernalia of the tropics ; their Chinese settlers who acquire fortunes, and their large mixed native populations who assist the said Chinese settlers to do so.

Jallagar is a niche above the rank and file of this company. It possesses a long line of wharves which the other places do not ; coaling sheds ; the fortnightly service of the Bung Line mail steamers, fitted with electric light, fans, and ice machinery ; rickshaws, and a permanent Malay wayang or theatre. People go to Jallagar for a week's delirious gaiety much in the same way as the dwellers in Claypuddle, for instance, take

their yearly junketing in Exeter. Jallagar is, in fact, a hub, so much so that the Pelung Government from the earliest days has made it the headquarters of a Commandery.

Although the Commandant for the time being has been always the official head of the place, its real emperor for many years was Mr. Gladstone Mortimer. It was to him that every wise commercial traveller performed homage before attempting to do any business in the locality. And social success was hopeless for any one who failed to win the good opinion of his empress.

They lived at the Castle, a large stone house built at the summit of the hill round which the bungalows of the other Europeans stood. The Commandery was just below them, and the flag of the Bung Line, whose agent Gladstone Mortimer was, flew from the flagstaff at the Castle while the Union Jack flew from the Commandery flagstaff immediately beneath.

The fact of his flag flying highest, while giving Gladstone Mortimer an added dignity in the eyes of the natives, was extremely irritating to whomsoever happened to be Commandant at the time, and always roused the Commandant's wife to fury.

Each of these ladies on her arrival at Jallagar had tried her utmost to have the flagstaff at the Castle removed, and each of them had been beaten in the attempt

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and had retired at the end of her husband's term of office leaving Mrs. Mortimer mistress of the field.

That there were two sets in Jallagar society goes without saying. The Commandant's lady and the wife of the P.W.D. made up the one, and Mrs. Mortimer and the doctor's wife made up the other. The remaining ladies, wives of estate managers in the country around, did not count for much, but such as they were, they belonged to Mrs. Mortimer's set. And Mr. Mortimer was invariably agent for their husbands' companies; that is to say he bought such supplies as the estates needed, and forwarded them; looked after the shipping of the rubber, coffee, cocoa produced, and was, people thought, in constant secret communication with the London directorates.

As a matter of course when the managers and their wives came into town they stayed at the Castle, where Gladstone taught them business, and Mrs. Mortimer deponent.

And after a few months in the jungle it made an excellent place to stay at. There was a full-sized billiard table, a cool breeze blew always, and the view from the verandah was calculated to please the taste of every one, including as it did the harbour, the town, the gardens of all the European bungalows and most of their cook-houses and bedroom windows.

In a commanding situation such as this it was no wonder that Mrs. Mortimer did not care whether she was on bad terms with the Commandant's wife or not. From her verandah with a telescope she could spy what they were having for dinner at the Commandery—and according to what she said Government people did themselves shockingly when they had no company—she could make out what sort of frock the Commandant's wife had on, and could view the one that was to be worn next in process of manufacture. Also she could see with the naked eye when the Commandant left for and arrived from office. In the case of one Commandant when feeling between the two houses was very bad indeed, she noted down this time of leaving and arriving every day for a month, and then enclosed the result with a private letter to the Governor, proving that the man had only worked three hours a day instead of six as she contended he should have done.

It was Mrs. McMucker, the wife of this Commandant, who gave Mrs. Mortimer more trouble than all the others put together. The rest of them had been poorish creatures who had yielded to circumstances after a few feeble struggles, and bowed down before the lady of the Castle and the flag of the Bung Line.

But this lady was cast in a different mould, she was young, dark and dashing—a born leader. On her

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arrival she saw the flag, and at once told her husband it would have to be pulled down. As he took no steps, and seemed rather doubtful whether any could be taken, she asked him to think of what Warren Hastings would have done in the circumstances, and be ashamed of himself. She also announced that if he would not undertake the matter she would. And when Mrs. Mortimer called on her she did.

They were sitting in the drawing-room at the Commandery on the edge of their chairs, with muscles tense, but with smiling faces, and Mrs. Mortimer had just finished condoling with her quite gratuitously on the smallness and shabbiness of the Commandery, and was telling her that if she felt lonely she must be sure and come up to the Castle.

"It's so dull and dismal down here all by yourself," she said kindly, "and mind and bring your husband with you—we shall always be pleased to see him—and he'll be glad of the chance of a game at billiards on our table."

"You're very good, I'm sure," replied Mrs. McMucker. "My husband and I go out very little, but after we're settled down here I've no doubt we shall make an exception in your favour."

"Of course you will, and we shall always make you welcome," said Mrs. Mortimer with great cordiality.

She got up to go. Mrs. McMucker accompanied her to the entrance. Both of them, though outwardly calm, were far too excited to notice Harold Blee, who had been sent up by the Commandant with a note, and who was now standing in the hall waiting to deliver it.

Through the open door of the drawing-room he had heard sufficient of their conversation to know that the barometer was veering towards stormy, and he prudently made himself as small as possible while they passed him.

Mrs. Mortimer was fat, red and perspiring. Mrs. McMucker looked very pale and appeared bored to death. The tight shut lips of both ladies indicated how hard they were trying to keep in what they wanted to let out.

They paused on the outer steps, and Mrs. Mortimer in patronizing accents continued her offer of hospitality. "Remember, now, you are always welcome," she repeated. "And don't feel shy or strange. Gladstone and I, although perhaps we do not appear so, are quite homely people."

"Of course you are," agreed Mrs. McMucker. "One look told me that."

"How clever of you," exclaimed Mrs. Mortimer, without enthusiasm.

"Not at all," Mrs. McMucker assured her. "We

service people are always on the move, and meet so many that we are able to sum up people at a glance."

"You must meet a very mixed lot," commented Mrs. Mortimer, with a galling air of superiority.

"We do, all sorts and conditions, but we at once know the sheep from the goats. For instance when we landed from the steamer on our arrival, I saw you in your carriage, and although I hadn't the least idea who you were, I said to my husband, 'That woman—lady, I mean—isn't one of us.' And you see I was right; you were not in the service."

"Very clever of you indeed," sneered Mrs. Mortimer. "But nowadays people are beginning to prefer being out of your service, or as you call it, among the goats, especially when the Government people provide their sheep with such wretched pens as this." She patted the Commandery door contemptuously. "And now," she continued rapidly, anxious to get away with the last word in her favour, "I must be trotting. A big establishment like mine gives me plenty to do. Remember what I've told you, and come up and see us when you like. We are always at home when the flag is up." She made to go.

But Mrs. McMucker detained her. "Oh! by the way, that flag," she said, "I was telling my husband the other day that I didn't think you ought to fly it."

"Not fly it!" exclaimed Mrs. Mortimer, insolently.
"And why not, Madam, pray?"

"Well, for one thing why should ordinary civilians want to fly a flag? It is not customary. And then your flag flies so much higher than ours that ignorant people might think that your husband was a more important man in Jallagar than the Commandant."

"I have my own opinion about who is the most important man in Jallagar," said Mrs. Mortimer with a laugh. "We shall never stop flying our flag for anyone, not though I climbed up myself and nailed it to the mast. So I advise you not to waste your time in worrying about it."

"Indeed," said the Commandant's wife tensely. "By the way, what does the big 'B' on the flag stand for?"

"'Bung.' My husband is agent for the Bung Steamship Company."

"Somebody told me it stood for 'Boulder' but I knew he must be wrong," explained the Commandant's wife, who had rather a hasty temper.

"Please give me the name of the person who said that," demanded Mrs. Mortimer, stiff with indignation.

"I am very sorry I am unable to do so. But surely you can find out for yourself. You must know everything that goes on. Every day, nearly, I see you with

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your telescope on your verandah. And that reminds me, I wanted to ask you in a friendly way to stop using the telescope on the Commandery. My husband and I both strongly object to it."

"I don't believe anyone told you what you say about the flag," shrieked Mrs. Mortimer, whose temper was now beyond control. "Nobody said anything of the kind. They wouldn't dare to. And as for my telescope, I shall look where I please. This is a free country. We are not slaves."

She walked away bristling. The Commandant's wife, after watching her as far as the gate turned and went slowly indoors.

"The awful woman! The impudent creature!" she exclaimed. She stamped her foot determinedly. "I've a good mind to climb up and take down their flag myself. If I were a boy, now! If I could even get hold of a boy!" She was silent for a moment, deep in thought. A slight cough at her side aroused her, and turning sharply she beheld Harold Blee.

CHAPTER III

HALF AN HOUR afterwards Harold Blee left the Commandery, bounding along in a manner that faintly indicated the state of his being within. He looked as happy as an escaped penny balloon on a hot day, and nearly as liable to burst.

Never in his life before had anyone described his character to him so accurately. Even the Jallagar palmists had failed disappointingly every time over some important detail. But this new lady seemed to know him as he knew himself. His manners, the purity of his English accent, his genteel air—she had spotted them all. He had always had a suspicion that there was about him, though nobody had yet noticed it, a something, a kind of promise and attractiveness, that differentiated him from the other youths of Jallagar. Now he was certain of it.

And there were also other qualities that she had mentioned him as possessing; for instance, his ability to refrain from gossiping about things he might see or hear while in the service of the Government, especially when at the Commandery. "Silence is golden, re-

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member," she had said when she handed him the sovereign. "Take this as a reminder." No doubt she expected him to wear it as a charm or a tie pin. That might, of course be done, but then there was Lily to consider. She would think the coin meant something else. Gifts from ladies always did among Jallagar Eurasians, and she would not know that he obtained it from a high-placed white Mem such as the wife of the Commandant. Of course if he wished he might flaunt it at the office and brag of some mysterious conquest like that wretched Tamil surveyor. They were all the same, these Tamils, and well did the Malays say, 'If you meet a snake and a Tamil on the road, kill the Tamil.' It pleased him to think that the Eastern blood in him was Malay. And this great lady liked Malays, so she said. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she seemed to have so good an opinion of him.

The great thing now was to keep this good opinion. If he could only do something to prove to her—and incidentally of course to the De Souzas, who he fancied rated him too low—that her estimate of him was a correct one, that the bulk was equal to the sample. Rescue her little boy—if she had one—from the jaws of a crocodile, for instance, and get a medal.

He racked his brain, trying hard to find himself a job as hero, but was unable to do so, and his thoughts

travelling in a circle through this realm of new experiences, like a man lost in the bush, brought him back to the start of events, and he began to consider for the first time since he left the Commandery, her conversation with Mrs. Mortimer. She said she wanted a boy. What for? He had got it at last. There was the job waiting for him. He felt absolutely dizzy.

His services for the rest of the afternoon were not of much value to the Government. His hand trembled when he wrote; he sat toying stupidly with something in his pocket: he gave a solemn wink at nothing now and then, and behaved altogether so strangely that the other clerks were convinced that he must have been drinking, and accused him of the horrible sin of doing it alone.

The De Souzas noticed his dreamy manner when he reached home, and also put it down to drink, until Mrs. De Souza, whose scent was trained by twenty years experience of Mr. De Souza, declared him innocent. They then opined that it must be love, and the same careful lady, noticing that he absent-mindedly omitted to ask for a second helping of curry at the evening meal, wished him luck and said she hoped the passion would be a lasting one. Lily's good-natured comments on him as a lover kept them all in roars of laughter, but when later on in the evening she discovered that the usual

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bag of chocolates had not been placed on her dressing-table, her remarks became so extremely cutting that he said good-night, and sought an asylum in his bedroom.

He knew that if the De Souzas got an idea of his purpose they would consider him a lunatic and lock him up therein. He had told them nothing of the day's events, and they had no idea that anything extraordinary was brewing. He smiled as he thought of their ignorance. After a time, as he lay on his bed wide awake, he heard them taking leave of each other for the night, and soon, except for the deep snores of Mrs. De Souza, the house was still. He rose silently and began preparing for the evening's adventure, first of all undressing and rubbing himself all over with cocoanut oil, a bottle of which he had previously secreted in the bedroom, and then putting on the loose sarong and baju of the native. He had intended to follow the example of some American stage-coach robbers in a story he was reading, and had secured a piece of charred cork for the purpose, but when he looked in the glass it struck him that this would not be necessary. Never until then had he realized that he was so sunburnt. The charred cork made hardly a mark on him. He decided to be more careful about his complexion in the future. According to the book the robbers always carried a whole arsenal of revolvers and other lethal weapons about with them. But the only thing he

possessed in this line was a pearl handled penknife (a birthday gift from Lily). He secreted this in the baju, and his preparations being complete, sat down to wait.

At length, when it seemed to him from the dwindling lights outside that Jallagar itself as well as his landlady was dead asleep, he arose and glided from the house. His bare feet made no noise; he knew from experience which floor boards were liable to squeak when trodden on, and avoided them neatly, managing the journey to the door so quietly that the tempo of Mrs. De Souza's snoring never varied by so much as half a beat. Creeping like a ghost from a house seemed to be much simpler than the writer he affected would have had him believe, and he caught himself wishing for creaking stairs and grating bolts to negotiate, or at least an iron gate which in unskilful hands would clank back noisily on rusty hinges.

Outside a gentle breeze was blowing, and there was a smell of rain in the air. Above, a waning moon rode high through fleecy clouds illuminating the earth but dimly. Everything was quiet, except a cat which sat where the light was strongest singing a doleful ditty. And as he neared the gate of the tiny compound a soft scuffling among the shadows at his feet told of an audience disturbed.

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lined with small bungalows similar to the one he lived in. Lampless they lay there in silent rows, each a dim mass standing in its little plot of ground ; and the palms surrounding them formed plumes of black against the sky.

Afterwards the road took him around the flank of a hill past the scattered dwellings of Europeans, eventually bringing him by many upward windings to his destination.

So far he had not met a single human being, but now, coming close to the mansion he sought, he perceived a Sikh watchman standing on guard at its entrance. He kept this man under observation for some time and was astonished to find that contrary to all precedent he was not fast asleep. This was an undreamed of difficulty. No one could have expected it. It was pure ill luck. There were two things only to do ; either to make a long detour and attack the place in the rear, or to wait and see whether the man was an ordinary night watchman, awake by accident, or something supernatural.

Harold decided on the latter plan. A minute or two would tell. He squatted under the shadow of a hedge and waited.

The moon was now overshadowed by clouds : on this high ground the breeze was blowing strongly and it struck very cold. The watchman after a turn or two up and down the path sought shelter under the lee of one

of the large brick columns which flanked the gates, and sat on the ground, his lamp beside him. Before many moments were passed he nodded, and soon his head sunk on his breast, proving him to be of common or Bengali clay. Then Harold scaled the high fence and entered the gardens of the Castle.

Inside all was very dark. He could just make out the form of the flagstaff laying like a bar across the sky. He made his way towards it, walking quickly until he discovered by falling over a hoop that what he had thought was a tennis court was in reality a croquet lawn. Luckily the turf was soft and velvety and he made no noise; and afterwards he travelled slower and his course was zig-zag, for the darkness near the ground was intense and he had to feel his way.

A sudden heavy rain had begun to fall and a growling of thunder showed that a squall was rising. The top of the flagstaff was no longer visible, but he could hear the flag he had come to capture flapping like a sail in the gathering wind. Feeling his way to the halyards he tried to pull it down, but either he was unskilled or Mrs. Mortimer had taken extra precautions, for try as he would he could not make it budge.

There seemed no other plan but to climb up and cut the flag away, and this after a little hesitation he proceeded to do, having rolled his loose garments well

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The round, smooth wood of the staff was wet and slippery with the rain, and expert as he was, he ascended but slowly, straining and sweating under the effort. He climbed like a native, gripping the wood with the soles of his feet ; and now and then he stopped and panted for breath, every muscle trembling. The creaking of the staff beneath him showed it was none too strong to bear his weight ; and as he crept higher and met the full force of the wind he began to sway to and fro in a most alarming manner. Once for about a minute he clung hard to the mast quite weak with fright. At that moment he swore a solemn oath to himself that he would never be such a fool again, and he was just about to prove his newly acquired wisdom by descending when a lull in the wind made him change his mind. He could hear the flag buzzing and flapping in the breeze a few feet above his head. With a long, last struggle he reached it and cut and hacked at the halyards, hanging on by his teeth from a rope in order to give his arms full play. At last the flag was free and in his hand, and so pleased was he with his victory that he forgot all about Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer and raised a yell of thanksgiving which sounded loud above the whistling of the wind.

Directly he had given vent to his feelings he felt

alarmed at his recklessness, and thrusting the prize into a place of safety between his coat and naked bosom he began to crawl down again very cautiously. The wind once more blew with violence and he swayed to and fro dreadfully, but he was descending, and this fact somehow decreased his fear. When he was perhaps half way down suddenly an upper window of the house opened, and two draped figures showed up black in a square of yellow light, peering out into the gloom.

"My vision is unable to descry anything," said one of the figures in a deep bass voice, slowly and ponderously. "I apprehend, sweetheart, that your fears are groundless." Harold trembled. It was the dread Gladstone Mortimer.

"I don't care tuppence what you think, I'm certain I heard a shout," exclaimed the other voice shrilly. "Be a sensible man and get a lamp, instead of standing there like a dummy saying that you apprehend this and descry that. What's the good of it?"

"I am grieved to see you so irascible, Mrs. Mortimer," said the bass voice. "Allow me to procure a lantern."

On hearing that Harold Blee shifted noiselessly round the flagstaff so that only his arms and legs were visible, and very soon he saw the bright patch of light from a bullseye lamp flirting and flicking through the garden.

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It came slowly in his direction but travelled low on the ground, and he hoped that at his height he would escape unnoticed. So for a time he did. The patch of light dwelt lovingly on the shrubs about the base of the flagstaff, and then after what seemed an eternity wandered slowly on.

"My opinion, you will perceive, was correct," said Gladstone Mortimer at last in what sounded like a tone of triumph.

"Probably the man has got away, you were that slow in getting the lamp," commented Mrs. Mortimer.

"Maybe, maybe," conceded Gladstone in sepulchral tones. "However, it is useless, sweet, to search further, and therefore let us desist and woo repose. A feeling of chilliness about my extremities warns me against further perambulations clad in a night shirt only. A last glance at the flag, and then, sweetheart, we will again seek the arms of Morpheus."

"Hurry up," said Mrs. Mortimer. "I shall catch my death."

The light flashed quickly past Harold. "Why! the flag's gone," Mrs. Mortimer cried loudly.

"Perhaps it has fallen," suggested Gladstone. He searched for it, flashing the light down the post.

"Look! Look! There's a man on the flagstaff," shrieked Mrs. Mortimer suddenly.

"Where's my fowling piece and ammunition?" roared Gladstone.

Harold knew he was discovered. Caution left him and he made for the ground with all speed. In his excitement he took no thought about the strength of the staff. It creaked and swayed dangerously under his desperate efforts. Suddenly with a sharp crack it parted like a rotten cabbage stalk, and after a quick journey through the air he found himself lying face downwards in the middle of a lot of prickly bushes. Lights were already showing in the house and he could hear the voice of Gladstone Mortimer.

There was clearly not a moment to be lost. He scrambled up and took to his heels across the croquet lawn. Fate was kind, guiding him safely by the dangerous hoops. He reached the fence without mishap, and vaulting it, sped like a deer down the road, slackening his pace to something less conspicuous when he found he was not followed. He arrived home just as dawn was breaking, and taking infinite precaution reached his bedroom unobserved. He undressed quickly, secreted the flag under the mattress, laid down, and immediately went fast asleep.

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CHAPTER IV

GETTING him out of bed the next morning was hard work for the voice, but Lily, still smarting under the slight he had put on her the previous evening by not buying chocolates, did not shirk it.

Harold, who, before she began outside his door, was dreaming he was falling down a precipice with no bottom to it, now perceived to his astonishment that he was being drawn down by a hooting motor car. With the aid of this car he of course travelled considerably faster and about 9.30 a.m. he reached the bottom, and, waking found himself lying on the bedroom floor.

"Lazee fellow!" screamed Lily outside with evident enjoyment. "Lazee idle fellow! Are you going to get up? Get up! Get up!"

"Tell him if he doesn't get up I won't give him breakfast," shouted Mrs. De Souza from the back premises.

"No breakfast for you if you don't get up," transmitted the dutiful Lily.

"All-right-oh! I shall be out in a minute," cried Harold, rising painfully. "What is the time?"

"Nearly ten o'clock."

"Wha-a-a-t?" ejaculated Harold. For the first time in his life he was late for office! He hurried on a few clothes and hastened into the living-room.

He was received by Lily, who, in scornful silence, kept sentry over him while he ate his breakfast, some cold coffee and rice cakes. Later on Mrs. De Souza came in and shared her daughter's watch. It was clear that they waited for some explanation of his behaviour.

"Well, young man," said Mrs. De Souza, who soon tired of wasting her time in not talking, "and what is the matter with you?"

"I have overslept myself. Very funny thing. Why did you not call me before?"

"Call you! Why Lily and me have been calling you since eight o'clock. The poor girl is quite hoarse with it. And not a word could we get out of you except a grunt. And nine o'clock last night you went to bed. Over twelve hours sleep! There must be something the matter with you."

"Too much work, I conjecture," said Harold. "The labour given to we Government clerks is simply immense, I assure you."

Mrs. De Souza pointed out the indignity this explanation offered to her intelligence, and invited him to try again. Then perceiving he was attempting to hide his confusion by eating too much breakfast she went away

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and resumed her house work. A few minutes after he heard her bustling about in his bedroom.

"What's your Ma busy with?" he asked.

"Doing out your room, I expect," said Lily. "She told me yesterday it wanted it."

"Wha-a-t do you mean? Doing out?" asked Harold. "There's nothing the matter with my room."

"We always do it out once a month;" explained the virtuous Lily, "make the bed and all sorts of things."

"Make the bed!" exclaimed Harold in surprise. He jumped up, and, rushing hurriedly past the astonished Lily, entered his bedroom. Mrs. De Souza was there, doing great execution, but he noticed with relief that she had not yet touched the bed.

"I beg your pardon," said he, "but going out as I am it is necessary to change my clothes." He began to do so.

"Granted," said Mrs. De Souza politely. She beat a hasty retreat, closing the door behind her. Harold hurriedly lifting up the mattress, drew out the flag, which he folded together and wrapped in a piece of newspaper.

He dressed himself carefully, and with the parcel under his arm walked quickly from the bungalow on his way to the Commandery. Choosing a long and unfrequented route in order to avoid the busy part of

the town where he might meet inquisitive friends, he stepped out quickly and arrived at his destination before the town gong had struck twelve.

This gave him plenty of time to see the gracious lady of yesterday before her husband, who did not impress him quite so favourably, returned for tiffin.

He went boldly up the front steps, clearing his throat loudly, as it is considered polite to do in Eurasian Jallagar, where houses have neither bells nor knockers ; and the object of his search, who was seated in an adjoining room, jumped up and came out to see what was the matter, prepared to render first aid if necessary.

" Oh ! It's you, Mr. Blee," she exclaimed. " Back again already. Something from my husband, I suppose ? " She held out her hand for the parcel.

Harold, with a smile on his dark but honest face, bowed low as he gave it to her.

" No note with it ? " she questioned.

" No, lady."

" Strange, I wonder what it can be." She tore off the newspaper covering. " Some new dress, I suppose," she muttered. " Extravagant fellow ! " She began to unroll the bundle doubtfully. " I do wish he wouldn't buy me these things : the poor boy has absolutely no taste."

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"Lady," interposed Harold Blee, in low, excited tones. "I beg to inform you it is no dress."

"Neither it is, I declare," she exclaimed as the edge of the 'B' commenced to reveal itself. "It's a flag . . . a flag. Why, it's Mrs. Mortimer's Bung flag! Good gracious!" She paused in astonishment. Then turning on Harold Blee: "You are quite sure that my husband gave you no note?"

"No-o, Lady," said Harold nervously. He plunged into speech. "If you can spare me a moment of your valuable time, I shall be glad to afford you my information. I have the honour to inform you that you have fallen over a misconception. Your obedient servant is the young chap who gladly makes over this rotten flag to your Lady. Kindly accept with many thanks."

"I don't quite catch your meaning," said Mrs. McMucker.

"I must endeavour to throw you a shorter one, Lady," replied Harold, punning with an ease which showed his familiarity with the language. "I have the honour to give you this flag."

"That's very kind of you. But really, I don't want it."

"Not want it, Lady," exclaimed Harold, greatly crestfallen. "But you must want it. Excuse me, did I not, when at your service at this bungalow door

yesterday, the 22nd, at 4 p.m., overhear with great care your row with Mrs. Mortimer? Did you not mention to yourself that you would like the flag drawn down?"

"You have very sharp ears, Mr. Blee. So far as I remember, I think I said I should like to find a boy."

"Exactly, Lady. And going back to the office from your house I pondered to myself that this 'Mem' seems greatly hard up for a boy, and in compassion my mind told me 'I'm the boy for her. I will be her boy,' although of course I am too old for the job."

"Oh!" said Mrs. McMucker, coldly.

"Having accepted the billet as your boy," continued the triumphant Harold, "I took the opportunity of strolling up to the Castle at about 2 a.m. this morning. I ascended the flagstaff, and seized the flag, thrust it into my bosom, causing my skin to itch most damnably, and then strolled back."

"You had the audacity to go up their flagstaff, and take their flag," exclaimed Mrs. McMucker as sternly as possible.

"Yes, Madam," brightly said Harold, who always confused audacity with agility. "I have been used to climbing ever since childhood's happy days. But last night's job was a stiff one, everything being wet with

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the rain. Also, when engaged on the flagstaff, I was put to some inconvenience by Mr. Mortimer, who took the opportunity of spotting me by the use of his bullseye lantern. On that occasion I remarked to myself, Lady, 'Bai Jove! I will never do this again,' and then the flagstaff broke, casting me into some thorny plantations which tore my clothes and scratched me devilishly. Should you think me a liar, Lady, I shall be much obliged to shew you my leg."

"I believe every word," said Mrs. McMucker, hurriedly. She sat down in a chair, and began to think. Harold Blee, trying hard not to look too puffed up, stood watching her. He felt that his affairs were in good train; plainly he had already won the confidence and esteem of this noble lady. It seemed like a dream, but it was a fact all the same. She was there: he could see her. He was there: the reflection in a glass opposite of a squat figure in a white suit, and of a dark face surmounted by a thatch of black oily hair assured him of that. He adjusted a long love-lock that had fallen down on his forehead, and then stretched his lips to see how he looked when he smiled. The effect was so pleasing that he tried it several times, only ceasing when Mrs. McMucker happened to glance up and catch him in the act. In reply to her anxious enquiries he said that he was not in pain, that he was in good health,

and that so far as he knew there was no insanity in the family.

"Well then, roll up the flag again and sit down," said Mrs. McMucker. She was silent for a minute longer. "Shall I or shall I not?" Harold heard her mutter. "It's not very dignified, and I know I oughtn't, but what an awful lark it would be."— She burst into a peal of laughter.—"I will, I couldn't miss it for anything." Then she raised her head and spoke to him again. "Now, I understand, Mr. Blee, that you stole this flag because you thought I wanted it?"

"Quite true, Lady, I——"

"Hear what I have to say first." She held up her hand. "In the ordinary way you would get into very great trouble, but as you have done it for me, I am going to try what I can to help you."

Harold bowed silently.

"If the Commandant got to know about it nothing could save you."

Harold shivered.

"Of course Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer know, but I understand they did not recognize you?"

"I concealed everything from them but my arms and legs," Harold explained.

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Harold bowed again;

"But if—now I wonder whether I am doing right to ask you—if you would like to help me to get rid of the flag, at a little risk to yourself?"

"I would be glad to oblige, always, your obedient servant," said Harold.

"There won't be any risk at all if we have luck," said Mrs. McMucker with some excitement. "Get me down that lamp. Stand on a chair and be careful, it's heavy."

Harold carried out her instructions, and placed the lamp on the ground. Next she made him fetch a basin from a bedroom near and pour the oil from the lamp's container into it. She seized the flag of the Bung Line, and with what seemed to her onlooker great relish, soaked it thoroughly in the oil.

"Stay here for a moment," she ordered. "I am going to fetch something."

She left the room, but was back almost instantly, carrying a large cushion which had a bright cover made from a Union Jack.

"Hold this," she said, putting it in his hands. She produced a piece of twine and tied it to the cushion corners.

"Come with me out to the porch," she directed.

"Make no noise, I don't want the servants to notice us."

She tiptoed over the polished floor and he followed, carrying the cushion. At the door she stopped, and very cautiously peeped out. What she saw apparently satisfied her; she smiled, and directed her faithful follower to peep out also.

"Look up at the Castle garden," she said. "Can you see anything?"

"I see a fat Mem on the lawn under the trees," reported Harold, "and there is a little maiden with long yellow hair, playing near her."

"Very good," said the Commandant's wife. "Now, you see that tree opposite us with the overhanging branch? Well, I want you to climb up and hang this cushion from the branch so that the stout Mem will notice it. While you are up there tell me what she is doing."

"Shall I go now?" asked Harold. The Commandant's wife nodded. He at once tucked the cushion under his arm, ran across the lawn, and began to climb the tree. The trunk was large and the network of creepers covering it made his ascent easy. A swarm of red ants attacked him, biting his hands and legs, but in his excitement he did not feel any pain.

He reached the horizontal branch and slid cautiously along it.

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"What's the fat lady doing now?" he heard the Commandant's wife ask him from the porch.

"Still assuming a sitting posture," he reported.

"Tie the cushion on the branch just about where you are," directed Mrs. McMucker. He did so.

"What is she doing now?"

"She has spotted me. . . . She calls the little maiden and addresses her. . . . The little maiden runs into the house."

"Come down at once," ordered the Commandant's wife.

When he reached the porch again, hot, and blazing with excitement, she said to him, "You have matches? Very well.—Now take this flag from the basin and go out on to the lawn.—Stand still when I call out and then do exactly as I tell you. Now.—Slow march."—Harold walked out and stopped when bidden in the centre of the lawn under the Union Jack cushion.

"What is the fat lady doing now?" enquired the Commandant's wife.

"The young maiden hands her a telescope and she applies it to her eye."

"Very good. Now hold the flag up high and spread it out so that she can see it.—That's right. What's she doing now?"

"She has risen from her sitting posture.—She still

applies the telescope to her eye.—The little maiden approaches her and wants to look too, but she waves her away.”

“ Now, Mr. Blee, spread your flag out on the lawn and jump on it.—Good.—Harder.—Jump a little more on the ‘ B.’—That’s right.—Jig away.—Warm work, isn’t it ? —Excellent ! What is the lady doing now ? ”

“ She is still busy with the telescope. The little maiden tries to engage her kind attention by pulling at her dress, but she shoves her away in an extremely rude manner.”

“ Very good ! Now make your flag into a heap and set fire to it. Take three or four matches at once.—So.—First rate.—What is she doing now ? ”

“ The telescope is still at her eye.—She seems very angry, for she casts it on the ground.—She seizes the little maiden who has been pulling at her dress, and smacks her often and with fury.”

“ Very good indeed,” said the Commandant’s wife in a satisfied voice. “ But I’m sorry for her little girl.—Now Mr. Blee, I must trouble you to get me my cushion again, and please bring in with it the remains of the flag.”

This was soon done, and Harold, covered with perspiration, rejoined her in the porch. “ You are an excellent fellow,” she said. “ One in a thousand. Now you must get away from here before any one discovers you.

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We've had wonderful luck. Come with me and I will let you out from the side entrance so that nobody will see you leave the Commandery."

She led the way to a door and opened it. "Good-bye," she said. "I need hardly tell you not to breathe a word to any one about this. I shan't forget to let my husband know what a great help you have been to me." He walked out into a narrow lane and heard the door close quickly after him. From behind it came shriek upon shriek of laughter.

CHAPTER V

THE half caste hero—or villain as the case may be—swims through the tropical seas of fiction, half naked, with a dagger clenched between his glistening teeth, either on the way to marry the daughter of the pirate captain or to stab that gentleman in the back and thus win promotion. But the Eurasian of Jallagar—whatever his ancestors may have been—has no such enterprise. He prefers sloth to energy, peace and a pension to piracy, and a seat in the Government office to the bloodstained deck of the fastest brigantine that ever beat up against a westerly breeze. If not in a Government office, then with a merchant. Anything so long as it is a seat. Something to sit on and while away the hours in profitable idleness until the great sun sinks, the cool night wraps the earth, and he—romantic fellow—can, without unduly perspiring, resume his peregrinations in the realm of love.

Any one who *worked* in the office of the Commandant of Jallagar except the Commandant and the punkah puller, was regarded as eccentric, dangerous, a being

infected with disease and therefore to be quarantined. The clerks watched for symptoms as keenly as health officers and were as prompt in taking preventive measures. Consequently when they came in a little after nine next morning and found Harold already full of business they gathered round and began to discuss his case. Had he caught the illness? If he had, plainly he must have been in the neighbourhood of infection. Where was he the day before? He declined to answer, maintaining an obstinate silence which they diagnosed as being due to shame. And during the next hour they made him listen to a lively argument as to whether he was capable of experiencing that emotion or not.

The matter was still being considered by them when the sound of a carriage outside signalled the arrival of the Commandant; then it was dropped like a hot copper in favour of pretending to work. Long practice had made them excellent malingerers.

Harold, feeling very self-conscious, watched the great man stride through the office and disappear into his private room. He half expected him to say good morning, or at least to give some indication that the Government knew all about yesterday's doings and wished well to their promising young official, Mr. Blee. But nothing occurred, not even an eyelid of the Commandant flickered. The promising young official might as well

have been a bit of furniture. Evidently Mrs. McMucker had kept her own counsel and he was in for a reprimand, possibly a fine, on account of his absence the previous day.

The thought of this loomed larger as the hours passed, and when later on he was summoned to the presence, try as he would to keep them stiff and heroic looking, his legs trembled visibly; which fact was joyfully noted by the grinning clerks.

"Come here, Mr. Blee," said the Commandant.

"The first time," Harold reflected, "that he has called me Mister; something must have occurred." He drew near the table.

"I want to tell you," said the Commandant in a low voice, "that trouble has arisen over the disappearance of Mr. Gladstone Mortimer's flag. Mr. Mortimer suspects one of the clerks here. He is coming to see if he can recognize the man. You had best keep out of his way. When he arrives stay in another room. Good day."

"Good day, sir," said Harold, bowing. All his courage had come back to him. He made towards the door and was about to open it when there came from outside the sound of boots which squeaked and of a deep, hollow voice which both he and the Commandant recognized.

"Is Mr. McMucker in?" enquired the hollow voice.

"He's in his office, sir," volunteered one of the clerks.

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"Accompany me, sweetheart," directed the hollow voice, and again the boots began to squeak.

"I'm afraid it's all up with you now, Blee," whispered the Commandant, who looked very much annoyed. Harold gazed around him wildly. There was not a hiding place visible anywhere, and the windows were out of reach. The squeaking sound came slowly near.

The Commandant gently turned the key in the door. "Do you think you could get inside this?" he asked, opening a large drawer half filled with old minute papers.

"With great pleasure," whispered the desperate Harold. Regardless of his clean white suit—it was new on that morning and had to last two days—he went on his knees and slithered himself in. The Commandant, taking no notice of a tap at the door, stooped and helped him to adjust himself, pressing down those parts of his anatomy which seemed to require it. One shoulder resisted the combined effort of them both. But this the Commandant rectified by using an extra effort when shutting the drawer. Then he took notice of the now very impatient tapping at the door.

"Is anyone there?" he called out.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer," cried one of the clerks.

"Really," exclaimed the Commandant in a surprised

voice as he rattled the door handle and turned the key at the same time. "Will you come in and sit down?" He opened the door.

Harold heard the grating of the chairs as the Commandant drew them over the floor, and then felt his prison vibrate slightly when the Mortimers sat down on them. Even had he been able to do so he would have hardly dared to breathe, but packed in as he was, rashness of that sort was impossible.

Through the horizontal crack in the drawer top he could see a long piece of the room about an inch in width; part of this narrow picture was now occupied by two strips of white, obviously a portion of the Commandant's legs, and two strips of grey tweed against a background of bright pink, evidently part of the Mortimers.

"I received your letter, Mr. Mortimer," began the Commandant, "and really, what you write is so extraordinary as to be almost unbelievable."

"It is not my intention on this occasion to enter into a discussion upon the credibility or the reverse of the statements contained in my communication to you," slowly boomed the deep, hollow voice.

"I don't say for a moment that you are not acting in perfect good faith," said the Commandant, "but——"

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"If you would have the goodness to allow me to continue," boomed the hollow voice, always level and polite, oozing gentility.

"I'm sorry," said the Commandant.

"I was about to observe," continued the hollow voice, "when you were good enough to favour me with a remark on the bona fides of my action in the matter now under discussion—" Harold could see the right side of the pink strip vibrating up and down more and more rapidly, and could hear the impatient tapping of a boot on the floor—"that my presence in this office was not occasioned by my desire to adumbrate on the credibility or reverse——"

"We don't mind what you believe," broke in a shrill voice. "What we want is justice and we're going to have it."

"Certainly, certainly, Mrs. Mortimer," said the Commandant, soothingly.

"Pray desist, sweetheart," continued the hollow voice. "Such negotiations as these are not suited for the genius of the weaker sex which you adorn, but rather for the coarser powers of the sterner portion of humanity of which I am, so to speak, an unworthy specimen: but, to continue: as Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer correctly, albeit rather tersely, observes, we have come here to demand as citizens of this noble Empire our

meed of the justice which is, I beg to point out, our birthright."

"Well, Mr. Mortimer," enquired the Commandant, "what do you want? A summons against somebody?"

"And this is the Empire!" exclaimed the hollow voice impressively. "He demands of us what we require! We demand justice, justice against those who stole our flag, justice against those who trod on it in your garden yesterday afternoon. We insist on it!"

"What is the name of the person or persons?" enquired the Commandant.

"I am not in position to tell you. I leave that to your force of constables and spies," said the hollow voice sarcastically.

"Name unknown. Well, can you give me a description of the person or persons you suspect?"

"I saw him with my telescope as plain as I see you now," interposed the shrill voice. The whole strip of pink was now in violent motion. Harold listened intently.

"What was he like?" queried the Commandant.

"He was the yellowest, ugliest Eurasian I ever saw in my life," cried the shrill voice, "with a face the colour of a penny bun."

"She must be lying, she couldn't possibly have seen me," thought Harold

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"One moment," said the Commandant, "let me take down what you say—Eurasian—very yellow and ugly. What next?"

"He had long, black hair streaming all over his forehead."

"Yes, and what sort of nose?"

"A nose just like a baboon. A nightmare of a nose."

"Yes. Was he tall?"

"No, stumpy, and dressed in a white suit which wanted washing."

"What a dangerous liar that Mem is," thought Harold.

"And you tell me you saw this unknown person standing on my lawn, insulting and burning your flag?"

"Yes," said the shrill voice, "as plain as I see you."

"Did any one else see him?"

"My little girl."

"I mean, any responsible person?"

"Nobody," conceded the shrill voice sulkily. "What your wife can have been doing not to see him I don't know."

"Well, she hasn't told me she didn't see him," admitted the Commandant. "She had one of her headaches last night and I didn't bother her about the matter. Had anything unpleasant occurred she would have told me."

"Did she tell you that directly I saw the wretch

burning my flag I hurried down to your house to interview her and that she wasn't in?"

"That was one of the things she told me—that you had called. She felt indisposed. Where did the man go after burning the flag?"

"I don't know. I hurried away to try and catch him on your lawn."

One of the white strips disappeared from Harold's gaze. The Commandant had crossed his legs. "Well," he said, and his voice struck Harold as being free from care again, "we have not much to go on, have we, Mrs. Mortimer?"

"No, but we have our suspicions," cried the shrill voice.

"You suspect one of my clerks. Did you see the man as you came in?"

"No, are all your clerks here?" asked the shrill voice.

"They are all here," answered the Commandant. Harold, half stifled through heat and want of air, and soaked in perspiration, wished one of them at any rate was not.

"The object of my presence in your office to-day," commenced the hollow voice, "is twofold. Primarily, I come here to advance a specific charge against a person whose face seems to Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer to be familiar, but whose cognomen is so far beyond our

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knowledge, of jumping on a flag of which I was the proprietor. Secondly, I come to protest against the lax discipline of the constables who keep watch and ward over life and property in this district, a lax discipline which enables rogues and vagabonds to wander through the domains of private citizens, breaking their flagstuffs and stealing their flags."

"I will speak to the Inspector about it," said the Commandant. "He will call upon you very soon to collect evidence. In the meantime, regarding this Eurasian, I shall ask you to help the police by keeping your eyes open."

"We shall do so," said the hollow voice.

"We've got our eye on several people," cried the shrill voice threateningly.

"That's right," said the Commandant. "You're quite sure you can't tell me more—No? Well, I mustn't keep a busy man like Mr. Mortimer any longer."

Harold heard their chairs grate simultaneously on the floor and then the sound of the door being opened. "Good morning," said the Commandant. "Good morning; here—you—show this lady and gentleman out."

Creak, creak, creak, slowly went the boots in the distance. Then the door shut again, and—oh! welcome

sound!—he heard the Commandant coming towards him.

During the next two minutes he suffered dreadful agony. The heat seemed to have made him expand inside the drawer, and the Commandant, strong man though he was, had all his work cut out to open it. Twice he pulled unsuccessfully, and each time Harold travelled another inch on the most painful journey he had ever made. It was like pulling a tooth. He was the tooth.

“Don’t be a fool. Keep calm, and shrink yourself together,” ordered the Commandant in a whisper. “Now then—One—Two—Three—GO.” He set his feet against the bottom of the chest of drawers, inserted his fingers in the chink at the top and gave a mighty tug. The drawer suddenly yielded and banged out on to the floor. Harold was free. The Commandant was under the drawer.

They both picked themselves up. Harold stood dolefully surveying what had once been a clean white suit.

His superior went back to the armchair at the table. “You are causing me a good deal of trouble, my friend,” panted he, his eyes twinkling.

“Don’t mention it, sir,” said Harold politely. “It will give me great pleasure to oblige you again at some future date.”

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"Meanwhile," said the Commandant shortly, "you had better sit down over there. It's nearly tiffin time. You will soon be able to get out of this unnoticed."

He resumed work at the desk while Harold sat down obediently and furtively began to brush the dust from his ruined white suit.

During the following week he lived an extremely quiet and blameless life, devoting his attention to evading Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer who, he was aware, were looking for him all over the town. He kept close at work in the office all day and spent the remainder of his time at home, helping Mrs. De Souza in her household work and making himself generally useful.

"About as good as a son to me is that young man," she told the missionary, when he called at Pansy Villa, pointing to Harold who was doing a little weeding in the back garden.

"A very promising young fellow," agreed the missionary, "apparently not afraid of work. Strange, strange, in one so young."

"So changed since your sermon last Sunday, you wouldn't believe it," said Mrs. De Souza flatteringly.

"It's a great thing to feel one has done some good," murmured the pleased missionary. "I should like to speak a few words to him."

When Sunday came and Harold refused point blank

to go to church nobody was more astonished than Mrs. De Souza.

"Not going," she exclaimed, "and the missionary has just been thinking of asking you to take a Bible class! I was never so surprised in all my life. Just think how bad it will look. Why, you must be mad."

"No, not mad," said Harold, "just feeling a bit underdone."

"Nonsense, that's how Mr. De Souza used to feel regularly every Sunday when he was first married to me. And look at him now. There's excellence for you! Wouldn't miss his church for anything, and drops his ten cents in the plate as good as the Governor. Make him change his mind, Mr. De Souza."

But Harold, who knew that the Gladstone Mortimers went to church on occasion, refused to budge, so Mrs. De Souza, whom he finally persuaded that he was really ill, went at last without him.

She still persisted in crediting his change of habits to a resolve to lead a better life, although the conceited Lily advanced a different hypothesis. But when Sunday came round again and he once more tried to shirk his duty they both jumped to another and less charitable conclusion.

"It's my belief," said Mrs. De Souza, "that you have committed some crime and you're afraid to go."

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"Afraid somebody in the church will see him and have him locked up," suggested Lily.

She was so near the mark that Harold turned what in a white man would have been purple.

"There you are, Ma," she continued. "Look at his face."

"He's an idle, good-for-nothing scamp, that's what he is," was Mrs. De Souza's verdict. "Come along, Lily, and leave him alone with his laziness." She walked off angrily.

But Lily, as she passed through the gate, turned round and smiled—the chocolates had long since become a habit again—and that evening when she happened to be alone with him for a moment she said with a blush, "I was only in fun this morning, Harold; if I really thought you were in trouble I should not have said what I did say. You know that, don't you, eh?"

And Harold, blushing also, said he did.

CHAPTER VI

IN a quiet pleasant way, with tiny oases of excitement when Lily was perchance a little kind, and with Mrs. De Souza enacting the part of a simoom every Sunday morning, the weeks slipped by.

Harold took up again the study of English, reading all the newspapers that came his way, and many novels; he learnt a good deal from Ouida and Charlotte Yonge, and, weekly, there was one of Horner's Penny Stories to be devoured when Lily had finished with it. Once he bought a very pink paper, attracted by the colour, but Lily and he could make very little of the contents. It disappeared after a day or two, and eventually he found it in the back garden undergoing the honour of being perused by Mr. De Souza. That gentleman promptly sat on it when he noticed he was not alone.

"Such a beautiful sunset," said he to Harold.

"Very, very," agreed Harold. "What do you think of the paper?"

"What paper?"

"Why, the one you're sitting on."

"Oh! Tha—a—t one," said Mr. De Souza with

sudden enlightenment. "What do I think of it? Trash, trash, quite trash; I wonder what people can see to buy it for. Though if one likes horseracing——"

"Just what Lily and I thought."

"Quite right, quite right," said Mr. De Souza. "I was an old racer in India when I was a young man. You did not know that, eh?"

He proceeded to tell Harold a long tale about the Calcutta Cup and why the horse he rode didn't win it, drifting on to the subject of doping horses and doping jockeys. "Why," he said, "with a pinch of this and a pinch of that in their coffee I could make everybody in the house stupid in five minutes. Please treat what I say as private from Mrs. De Souza," he continued in some alarm.

Harold looked on him with increased respect after that evening, and frequently found himself in the back garden listening to wonderful tales of the seamy side of life. The shrivelled little man seemed to have done everything except work. Even that he had apparently tried, but found wanting. "Who knows?" he said, when the topic came up, "had I been given a better chance when young I might have acquired a taste for it. But I'm too old to learn now." He shivered slightly. "Besides," he added complacently, "it always makes me ill." He had a great opinion of himself in a humble way, and

admitted to only one mistake in his career, that of marrying Mrs. De Souza to escape the workhouse. "You can get away from the workhouse," he used to complain, "but here am I tied up like a monkey to a stick, and a stick that's got a nasty aggravating tongue when it likes."

Harold also was beginning to weary of the rut of his present life and to yearn for change and excitement. It was some three months now since the adventure of the Mortimers' flag, and time must surely have dimmed their memory and weakened their hatred of him. He decided to run a little risk, and started going now and then to the centre of the town, choosing hours when his enemies were unlikely to be abroad, and hiding if he saw their carriage in the distance.

It was a dangerous game but as time went on he played it often, his inclination for variety marching with his duty towards Lily, who had lately discovered a new kind of chocolates—coffee flavoured and stuffed with ginger—which were to be purchased only at a certain shop within the area of danger. As he in after years was always careful to point out, doing his duty led to his detection. It was in this shop that his pursuers met him face to face, and recognized him as he hurried past them with a paper bag in his hand forgetting his change.

"That's the villain. Stop him!" shrieked Mrs.

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Mortimer, and Gladstone, when he grasped the situation, took up the trail like a bloodhound, relentlessly tracking his victim down the street. Crowds of natives watched the hunt.

Mrs. Mortimer having with her usual tact asked the Eurasian lady behind the counter who "that Eurasian brute" was that had just left, and received an indignant and unsatisfactory reply, rushed from the shop in a rage and zealously assisted by glittering servants, entered her carriage, got under weigh with the speed of a fire engine, and drove after her husband.

Harold walked quickly for some distance and then darted into a bye lane, where he started running and soon managed to put himself out of reach of pursuit. He took a path home that evening, the crookedness of which would, he reflected with some satisfaction, have puzzled Sherlock Holmes himself, and was stupefied to learn on his arrival from the terror-stricken Lily, that the Gladstone Mortimers had been there before him.

"They found out your name from somebody in the street and came straight on here. Mrs. Mortimer said she'd have your blood," she explained in answer to his questions.

"Oh, Harold," wailed Mrs. De Souza, "what have you been doing to call down the wrath of high people like that?"

"Five years, Mr. Mortimer said was the penalty, if he liked to press the charge," remarked the comforting Mr. De Souza.

"Not much, not much," exclaimed Harold trying to brave it out. "They have my defiance; the Government are wheels within wheels."

"The Government won't give you much help," opined Mr. De Souza. "You will soon find out the difference between a black skin and a white skin."

"If I were you when you go to see Mr. Mortimer to-morrow, I should go down on my bended knees and ask his pardon," said Mrs. De Souza.

"When I do WHAT?" exclaimed Harold in astonishment.

"Mr. Mortimer said you had to go and see him in his office at two o'clock to-morrow. If you didn't he would let the law take its course," explained Lily. "He said—these were his very words—'the scoundrel must not be allowed to conceal his confederates!'"

"'Search the house, search his bedroom if you wish, sir; you will find nothing hidden,' I told him," put in Mrs. De Souza. "And that proud, fat Mrs. Mortimer sitting in her carriage started laughing. 'You may laugh if you please, Missis; we're honest people here, although we don't ride in our carriages,' said I. She looked as though she could have struck me. 'Poor,

ignorant half castes,' she said with a nasty laugh. ' Drive on, syce.' Oh, dear ! I'm afraid it will be the ruin of all of us." She wiped away a tear.

" They did not mention what the accusation about me was ? " enquired Harold.

" No, and we did not ask," answered Mr. De Souza. " We knew you would tell us."

" Don't be worried," counselled Harold, trying to set them a good example but failing miserably. " Everything will be all-right-oh ! to-morrow." And that was all they could get out of him.

" Take away your beastly chocolates," said Lily hotly, when he tried to change the subject by bringing the bag out of his pocket. " I wouldn't eat them if they were covered with diamonds."

" Quite right, Lily ; we're honest people here, we don't take bribes here," said Mrs. De Souza, excitedly. " What do you mean by it, young man, bringing trouble on us all like this ? What do you mean by it ? Now, remember what I say to you. As sure as you're standing here if you're sentenced to prison, out you go, mind you. I won't have any young jail birds bringing shame on my house."

Harold slowly replaced the bag in his pocket and with bowed head crawled away to his bedroom. He sat on his bed a long time without attempting to undress, feeling

badly treated and very miserable. From the verandah came the faint murmur of voices. The De Souza's were still talking about him. At last the bright light ceased to shine through the door chink and presently he heard them pass along the passage on their way to bed.

Then suddenly, distinct in the stillness, he heard a faint knock at his door. He jumped up and listened.

"Harold," a voice whispered, "Harold, it's me, Lily."

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Put your ear to the keyhole. You haven't really done anything bad, have you, Harold?"

"No, nothing."

"Well, do tell me what it is."

"I promise to tell you before anyone else."

"You know I'm very sorry for you, Harold. You swear you've done nothing bad."

"I take any oath."

"Very well, I forgive you. Please give me the chocolates." She opened the door slightly and put her plump, lemon-coloured arm through. Harold caught her hand and, possibly rendered bold by the fact that she could not see him, bent and kissed it. She struggled noiselessly to free herself, but he held on firmly to her wrist and clenched her fingers over the bag of chocolates. She did not unclench them when he let her go; and this fact

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and what he deduced from it gave him so much satisfaction that once his head was on the pillow he fell into a dreamless sleep.

He took the first opportunity next morning of seeking an interview with the Commandant, and relating his misadventures of the day before.

"And why do you tell me all this?" enquired the great man, when he had finished.

"Because I am anxious to do my duty, sir," said Harold, rather astonished at the question.

"I really can't see what this matter has to do with the Government. You've got yourself into a nasty scrape and you come to me to get you out of it. Well, this time I will help you, but don't let it occur again. You say Mr. Gladstone Mortimer wants to see you this afternoon?"

"Yes—yes, sir," said Harold faintly.

"Very well, you must go and see him; but be careful not to admit anything. Listen to what he has to say and answer his questions with 'Perhaps,' 'Maybe,' 'Very likely' and so on. Above all, don't confess anything or mention my name. That would be fatal. To-morrow morning come and see me again."

"Please accept my gracious thanks, sir," said Harold. He bowed and went back to his desk, but he might as

well have gone home at once for all the work he did that morning.

"Perhaps, maybe, very likely and so on. Perhaps, maybe, very likely and so on," he kept muttering to himself in an endeavour to get word perfect.

The other clerks, noticing his wild eye and moving lips, kept away and did not trouble him with questions. Directly after tiffin he started out for the office of the dread Gladstone Mortimer.

It was the hottest hour of the day. The fiery sun, white as a furnace, blazed in the zenith amid a sky of hard and flawless blue. Not a leaf stirred on the shadowless trees in the gardens through which lay his way. There was little traffic about, and now and then where high walls gave a little shade he came across rickshaws standing with their shafts on the ground, their naked pullers curled up asleep inside under the opened hoods. The airless streets covered with a white dust in the cleaner parts of the town, grew darker in colour as he went further on ; in the busy Chinese quarter, a place of gaudy paintwork and evil smells, they were of a greyish hue, spotted here and there with pools of mud, and littered with garbage around which buzzed myriads of flies ; near the docks they wore a light pall of black dust from the coal of bunkering steamers.

It was in the row of buildings facing the docks that

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Mr. Gladstone Mortimer's offices were situated. Harold roughly gauged their position from the street corner by noting the Bung Line flag waving from an upper balcony, and after much pushing and jostling through a crowd of laden coolies along the narrow pavement, at length reached them.

A big brass plate on the doorpost notified the owner's name and a series of smaller plates detailing the companies he was agent for, testified to his importance. Harold, having cleaned the dust from his brown boots with a piece of paper, entered modestly and looked around him. Walking to the counter he made known his business to a Chinese clerk, who glided into an inner apartment from which very soon came the booming sound of Gladstone Mortimer's voice, saying, "Order him to wait." The clerk came back, pointed to a hard bench, and returned to his desk. Half an hour passed in unbroken silence except for the scratching of pens and the creaking of the punkah, and then a bell having tinkled in the inner room, the clerk got up from his work and motioned the quaking Harold to follow him.

"Perhaps, maybe, very likely, and so on. Perhaps, maybe, very likely, and so on," muttered Harold, as he entered the inner room. And even after the glass door was closed behind him, cutting off his retreat, he continued in a half unconscious way to repeat

the words, "Perhaps, maybe, very likely, and so on."

Mr. Mortimer, seated at a large table amid piles of papers, affected not to notice that anyone had entered, and continued writing. A punkah, swinging lazily, wafted a breeze through the small room, slightly stirring his somewhat scanty hair and thin grey beard. A large green safe stood in one corner against the white-washed wall; except for this and a couple of chairs there was no furniture. A brooding stillness hung in the atmosphere: a silence full of foreboding that had the effect of making Harold's heart gradually sink into his boots. But still he went on repeating mechanically, "Perhaps, maybe, very likely, and so on."

At last Mr. Mortimer ceased writing, and adjusting his glasses began to stare at him furiously, his face becoming a dull purple with the effort.

"Well!" he roared suddenly, banging with his fist on the table. Harold, who had been busy eyeing him much in the same way as a guinea-pig eyes a python, at once lost his presence of mind.

"Quite well—exceedingly well, sir, thank you—er—and so on," he gasped.

Mr. Mortimer eyed him in furious astonishment. "When I remarked 'Well,'" he roared slowly, "it was not my intention as you surmise to enquire after

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the condition of your physical well-being. No, sir!" here he banged the table again—"My intention was to demand from you an explanation of your utterly unpardonable rascality."

"Perhaps," said Harold, who by this time had partially regained his self-possession.

"Perhaps? Do you doubt my word, sir?" shouted Mr. Mortimer.

"Maybe," said the cautious Harold.

"Do you know whom you are speaking to?" yelled Mr. Mortimer, almost beside himself. "I suppose you think, you black scoundrel, that because you happen to be in a Government office you can do what you please?"

"Very likely," said Harold in a conciliatory tone.

"Ah! You do, do you?" screamed Mr. Mortimer, black in the face with rage. "I'll make you suffer, you impudent blackguard. Do you think that your precious Commandant and his fool of a wife can help you? I'll show you all! I'll write to the Governor! I'll have you all dismissed! I'll put you all in jail! I'll run you out of Jallagar!"

"And so on," faltered Harold. The prescription did not seem to be working well, but his faith in the Commandant was not easily shaken.

"Clerk," thundered Mr. Mortimer. "Put this man out! Fetch a constable to put him out!" The

clerk opened the door and Mr. Mortimer immediately seized the amazed Harold and hustled him into the street. "If I catch you in Jallagar to-morrow morning, woe betide you!" he yelled. "Woe betide the Commandant and the whole nest of you! I'll uproot you! I'll teach you who I am!"

He gave him a final shove down the steps and banged the street door behind him.

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CHAPTER VII

HAROLD, still in a state of simple amazement, picked himself up and stared for a time at the blank street door. Then, rescuing his topee from the gutter, he declined an invitation to relate the story of his life to the small crowd which surrounded him, and turning, walked slowly down the street. The crowd followed a short distance in the hope of further entertainment, but nothing being offered they soon lost interest in him and dribbled off.

Even after they went away he was not, as he wished to be, unnoticed and alone. For a rickshaw puller followed close behind him, touting for a fare, and all the rank and fashion of Jallagar were walking along the pavement that afternoon for the purpose, it seemed to him, of inspecting his mud-bespattered white suit. At the first opportunity he got behind a railway wagon and tried to clean himself ; then he wandered aimlessly by the dock side under the corrugated iron roofs of coal sheds amid heaps of shining coal.

Clearly his visit to Gladstone Mortimer had been an utter failure, and yet he could think of nothing he had

done contrary to the Commandant's instructions. His enemy was a dangerous man, unscrupulous, vindictive, and a power in Jallagar; and he seemed thoroughly roused. It was doubtful whether the Commandant fully realized the forces to be encountered. "Suppose Mr. Mortimer should capture me to-night," Harold thought with a cold shiver. "Suppose he should torture me after the Chinese fashion and make me confess; such things easily occur here." And if he confessed what would happen to him? And of equal importance—well, not quite, perhaps—what would befall that gracious lady at the Commandery? The thought of her at the mercy of Mrs. Mortimer was painful and annoying, but he felt that he, at any rate, would never betray her trust, although of course in the hands of a skilful Chinese torturer his views might alter.

He was wondering what the upshot of it all would be, and trying vaguely to form some plan to defeat the machinations of his enemy, when, with a preliminary hiss and gurgle to clear the water from her copper throat, the deep contralto horn of a vessel sounded thrice. It was the fortnightly steamer of the Bung Line crying a farewell on her departure for Pelung. This explained the bustle in the street by the docks that afternoon and the fashionable crowd on the five-foot-way. It was one of the red-letter days of Jallagar;

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the last opportunity for a fortnight of obtaining iced beer.

Harold rounded a heap of coal and found himself on the wharf alongside the vessel. With much clang and bustle the last of her cargo was being put aboard. Men on the forecastle head were already winding in the main hawsers, and merely a pair of rope springs now held her to the side. The wharf was thick with intending passengers, Tamils, Bengalis, Sikhs, Klings, Chitties, Jews, Arabs, Chinese and Malays, who were being seen off by innumerable friends. They crowded up the gangways fore and aft, clad in more than all the colours of the rainbow, carrying their luggage in yellow tin boxes, and in dirty red silk handkerchiefs. The scene, illuminated by the brilliant afternoon sun, was bright as a kaleidoscope, and the babel of many tongues was deafening.

Forward, under the bridge, stood a small group of white-clad Europeans, among whom, distinguished by his brass braided cap, was the vessel's captain—immensely popular in Jallagar as the man who controlled the flow of iced beer. But the promenade deck amidships was absolutely deserted. A small rope ladder hung from the bulwark of the deck below. Harold wondered why this solitary ladder was left unwatched when all the other entrances were guarded by the

ship's officers. It would be easy for anyone, he thought, to go on board, hide somewhere, and, given a little good fortune, secure a free passage to Pelung.

A thrilling idea flashed through his brain. Hiding the excitement it awoke within him he pushed his way to the side of the wharf, and rapidly mounting the ladder, bolted unobserved across the narrow strip of deck into the shelter of an iron doorway opposite. He hid behind the door and looked around.

His place of refuge was a narrow passage, open at either end, and with iron walls that once had been painted yellow. Within touch of him was the great brown shaft of a ventilator, encircled by the greasy cog wheel that with its attached handle served to turn the cowl above. Although he did not know it he was on the fidley of the stokehold. The floor was a grating of round iron bars, hot to the feet and extremely slippery, through which he could see in the giddy depths beneath, the tiny glimmer of a lamp. Down there everything was silent. It seemed an excellent place to hide. Spurred on by the fear of discovery—for people were constantly passing his place of concealment—he made a dash for a small iron ladder that depended from an opening in that gridiron floor and began his descent into the abyss. The air was dry and oven-hot, the circular rungs of the ladder, polished by much usage, burned

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his womanish hands, and the sweat poured out of him as it had never done before. He came to other gratings, similar to the first; flimsy stages hanging in the air, always with an opening in the middle from the rim of which hung another one of those everlasting ladders. The lower he went, the hotter grew the air. He began to pass through clouds of smoke and coal dust, light at first, but soon grown so thick that he was unable to see his way. The sulphurous gases choked his lungs, and from time to time he had to pause in his groping descent and cling tight to the red-hot ladder, coughing violently. And then all at once the air grew cool, and opening his eyes, he perceived some twenty feet below him the untenanted stokehold. At the sight the faintness and trembling of the legs that had somewhat impeded his activity left him as if by magic. He soon reached the bottom of the ladder and found himself standing on the chequered iron floor.

Down in these sunless depths it was delightfully cool, for the sea air, rushing through the mighty ventilators, blew away with a draught that put to flight the heat and noxious smoke as soon as generated. In front of him were the three boilers, like huge barrels, lying on their sides in a row: a gauge, illuminated by a small oil lamp, registered the pressure of the steam, and at each side the bunker doors, half jammed down, kept

back the coal from overflowing more than a yard or so over the floor.

Through cracks in the fire-rusted doors of the furnaces, white hot cinders and ruddy tongues of flame showed now and then. Everything else about the place—the iron walls, the breeched fantastic uptakes, the vast funnel—was grimy black and caked with soot.

The awestruck Harold stood looking around until a clanking sound made him raise his eyes. Some strange beast showed, moving over the gridded rectangle of daylight above, deliberately as a spider making its web. Now and then it emitted uncouth sounds such as a wife-beating orang-outang might be imagined to give vent to during a period of activity. And it was coming nearer all the time.

Harold in great alarm—he had never viewed a ship's donkeyman from underneath before—glided up a small alloway on the starboard side of the boilers. From this dark and intensely hot retreat he continued to observe the scene.

The newcomer, an undersized red-haired man, dressed in faded dungaree, arrived at the bottom of the ladder, and at once carefully hung the pail he was carrying, which appeared to contain drink of some sort, under the ventilator. He yawned heavily, took off his black alpaca cap, wiped his face with the sweat rag that hung

round his neck, and then, lighting a short pipe, walked across to examine the steam gauge. The result seemed to be satisfactory, for he immediately sat down on an upturned pail and went to sleep. He slept on, muttering now and then, until the loud sound of the vessel's horn blowing a second farewell wakened him. Then he slowly arose, lit his pipe again, and walking across the stokehold opened the dampers.

At once Harold heard the air humming like a thousand hives as it rushed through the furnaces, and very soon the boiler at his side began to vibrate with the generation of steam. He noiselessly retired up the dark passage, feeling his way along the iron bulkhead, until he was brought to a halt by a shut door. Voices sounded on the other side of this door and very soon the noise of footsteps coming rapidly in his direction made him, in the nick of time, draw up close against the bulkhead. The door swung violently open, hitting him in the face, and a man ran by into the stokehole.

"Shake her up and then go and call the four to eight watch," the man shouted. "We shall be getting away in ten minutes."

Harold heard the red-haired man give an answering grunt; then the rattle of the opening furnace doors, the clink of the slicer as it ploughed through the fires,

followed by the swish and bang of a steel shovel working regularly.

He was in a most uncomfortable position, unable to move without risk of swinging to the door and calling attention to his hiding-place. He saw the man go back and presently heard the sound of voices again.

After a time, impelled by curiosity and discomfort, he very slowly and carefully executed the manoeuvre known to Territorials as "Eyes Left," and looked through the door crack into the engine room. The door was ill-fitted and the wide crack gave him an ample view of the polished engine and its surroundings. Two youngish men dressed in white undervests and blue serge trousers, and wearing peaked caps, were standing on the front platform smoking cigarettes. The tail of a large ventilator ended a foot above their heads. From time to time one of them stepped to a standard on which were grouped some five glittering dials, one of which he tapped with his forefinger.

"We'll take a turn out of her now," this man said at last, pointing to the engine. "Have you opened up the checks?"

The other man disappeared but in a few seconds was back again. "She's all in order," he said.

Then Harold saw a wonderful sight. He saw them go over to the many-legged thing they called "she"

—the main engine—and begin to handle her, opening her main stop valve (at which she snorted noisily through many drains), fluttering to and fro her reversing gear, turning handles, moving levers, shutting cocks, flattering and fussing her into vitality as nurses do a fainting patient. Soon she rewarded them; she sighed and stirred slightly, and then, as they opened the stop valve full, away she glided into life.

She danced before them, moving at their will, backwards and forwards, slow and then faster, her brass work gleaming, and presently at a twirl of the wheel she stopped, the clear amber oil dropping from her like perspiration, and with little feathers of steam blowing from her here and there.

“Salome’s all right this time,” remarked the man at the stop valve.

“She is that,” agreed his friend at the reversing gear.

“Mind you keep an eye on the after main bearing. I took another liner out this morning, and it may run hot.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, and if it’s going to run hot at all it will in your watch. Put plenty of water on it and don’t slow down whatever you do, or the Chief’ll be on to you like a ton of bricks.”

“All right,” said the other. “There’s the Chief up there now starting work for the day.”

A hoarse voice sounded somewhere above. "Is everything all right, Mr. Basset?" it enquired.

"All right, sir," replied the man at the stop valve. The two men resumed their somewhat technical conversation.

What they said was double dutch to Harold, who, jammed in his hiding-place, boiling hot, covered with perspiration, and caked over with coal dust that choked his eyes and mouth and nose and ears, was having an interesting time. During the last hour he had made more discoveries per minute than Christopher Columbus ever did in a week. It seemed to him a miracle that these two Europeans—very ordinary looking men—could with a finger touch animate or bring to rest that great engine. The hugeness of the machine, the sense of illimitable power it irradiated even when at rest, awed him far more than the incomprehensible network of polished rods and glittering brass work of which it was composed.

He gazed in dreamy wonder at it, the soot falling unheeded into his open mouth. From somewhere behind sounded the plunk, plunk, of a bilge pump, beating time like a drummer, whilst a leaky steam joint shrieked and wailed a solo: the noise of clinking fire rakes came from the stokehold and presently at the bidding of the younger engineer a purring dynamo took up the chorus.

Tiny lights began to appear all over the engine room.

The man near the stop valve looked at the clock on the bulkhead. "Half-past six," he said, "we're late getting away. Ah! there we are. Chalk up the time on the board."

The pointer of the telegraph had moved with a loud clang to "Stand By." He shifted the handle over in acknowledgment and then went back to the engine, opening her drain cocks and rousing her with a little steam.

Clang, clang, went the telegraph. "Slow Astern."

Round flew the reversing engine, over went the link gear; he opened the stop valve a turn and gave the engine a flick of steam in her intermediate cylinder, and then away she went.

"Slow Astern. 6.35," the younger man wrote on the board.

Clang—Clang—"Stop." Clang—Clang—"Full Speed Ahead."

She reversed beautifully—without hesitation, like a practised waltzer—and then as the engineer slowly and tenderly opened the valve she took on a quicker step and presently she was jiggling merrily round. The engineer began to whistle, "See me dance the Polka," holding his hand meanwhile against the forward crank.

"There you are," he said. "Eighty revolutions a minute. Count her if you like." The telegraph rang again, the pointer returning to "Full Speed Ahead."

"We're off," he remarked in a tone of satisfaction. "Give her another grease round and swab the rods, and after that you can go off duty." He set one or two handles in position, examined the after bearing for signs of heating and then walked up and down the platform whistling whilst his assistant proceeded to anoint with oil the fair Salome.

CHAPTER VIII

THE patch of daylight formed by the sky overhead had faded into a sheet of swaying stars, and in the corners of the engine room beyond the well-lighted platform it was dark. The engine revolved in the twilight, the moving shadows of her limbs showing on the white painted walls. She ran now in dead silence, faintly hissing steam, and though the rate of her revolution had not changed the merry jig of an hour before seemed to have altered to a mysterious, almost ominous dance. The engineer, alone in the great engine room, moved through the fantastic shadows watching her anxiously, for in her silent moods she was most dangerous. Every few minutes with a quick touch he felt her temperature and then oiled her moving parts, going back when finished to his place under the ventilator, where he stood nervously alert for the slightest sound.

Harold had now been nearly two hours at anchor behind the door and was getting tired of waiting for the coast to clear. So far as he could see it showed no signs of clearing. The obstructions were permanent, breakers

in the shape of the red-headed man astern, and a rock ahead. It was necessary to tackle one or the other, and after some hesitation, for the choice was a difficult one, he decided in favour of the rock. Gliding softly towards it he emitted a nervous cough.

The engineer gave a jump and turned quickly round. "Who the blazes are you?" he shouted furiously.

Harold felt at a disadvantage. His appearance, which he knew went a long way with strangers, was against him. His white suit was barred and blotched piebald with grease and soot and he was covered in sweat and coal dust. "If I could have only had a wash and a change," he reflected, "I should have felt more able to deal with this extremely alarming person." He took off his dented topee and bowed low.

"Permit me, Mister, to intrude myself on your notice," said he, his voice trembling. "I have the honour to inform you that my name is Mr. Harold Blee, clerk to the Commandant of Jallagar."

"And what blooming right have you got in this engine room?" asked the engineer with a threatening motion.

"If your intention is to kick me, I shall at once tender my apologies and withdraw," said Harold handsomely. "But I shall be glad if you will favourably consider my application to remain here, as there is a lady in the case."

He noticed at once that the engineer, who had at first appeared to be about to do him a violence, was considerably impressed by his gentlemanly demeanour and the fact that he was a Government servant.

"May I venture to approach you with my explanations?" he enquired.

"That's what I'm waiting for," said the engineer sternly.

"I should have said there were two ladies in my case."

"Ho!" said the engineer brightening. "Where are they? Fetch them out at once."

"They are not here, Mister." Harold paused hesitating.

Then he continued in an impressive whisper, "Mister, you have seen that I am a gentleman although I do not look it, and in the same manner I have spotted you also, taking no notice of your clothes. In a moment of impulse I will give you my secret, relying on your favourable consideration."

He plunged into his story, keeping back the episode of the flags. The engineer got quite a wrong impression.

"Do you mean to say that you left because them two ladies were fighting about you?" he enquired unbelievably.

"Not fighting actually, just quarrelling," corrected the modest Harold.

“ Well, what they could see in you I don’t know,” said the engineer. He looked hard at him, endeavouring to find a reason for their infatuation. “ I don’t believe it, not for an instant. You must come along to the Chief and——”

“ See! see!” cried Harold pointing excitedly. “ The engine’s on fire! The engine’s on fire!”

The engineer turned quickly round and saw to his dismay that the intermediate guide up and down which the crosshead of the engine slid, had become red hot. A stream of brilliant sparks was flying from it. Salome’s quiet had meant mischief as usual. He raced to the oil tray and picking up a syringe began to throw a stream of oil on the offending part, which, hissing and crackling, gave out clouds of smoke.

“ Hello! You!” he shouted. “ Bring me another canful.”

Harold obeyed with alacrity, and for the next ten minutes was kept busy running to and fro with supplies of oil.

“ The water service must be choked, but I think she’ll do now,” said the engineer at last. He handed the syringe to Harold. “ Here, keep on squirting with this while I go and see what’s up.”

He took a polished wrench from a rack, and climbing to a narrow iron footway, unscrewed a pipe.

"That's what's wrong," he said, and jabbed at the orifice with a wire nail.

A pulsating stream of salt water swished out, splashing everything. He screwed back the pipe and returned to the platform.

"It's a good thing you noticed that," he remarked, taking the syringe. "We just caught her in time."

They were both dripping with salt water and perspiration and half choked with the vile smoke from the burning oil. The engineer went busily about the engine for the next few minutes.

"She's all right now," he said with a laugh. "I was just going to take you to the Chief, wasn't I?"

"Under the false imagination that I was a damnable liar, Mister," pointed out Harold.

"Well, I've changed my mind. If the Chief got hold of you he'd make you work in the coal bunkers for twelve hours a day and spend the rest of your time washing his clothes. It'd be your death. You don't seem a bad soul, although you are a bit of a lady killer, and I'm going to help you. What do you say to washing me and the 3rd's clothes? I'm the 2nd. How would that suit you?"

"But I cannot do this work," protested Harold. "I have never studied it."

"I'll learn you fast enough," returned the 2nd. "It's

either that or the bunkers for you, my lad, so make up your mind and no hunkersliding."

"In that case I shall have much pleasure in accepting your kind invitation," said Harold, who knew the time had come to yield gracefully. "When do I begin my lessons?"

"Four-thirty, to-morrow morning," replied the 2nd promptly.

"An early hour," commented Harold disapprovingly. "Nine a.m. is nearer my time for commencing usually."

"Four-thirty; not a minute later," repeated the 2nd. "That's one of the rules at sea. Anyone washing clothes for the 2nd and 3rd engineers must start at four-thirty."

"Well, well, of course. 'If one lives in Rome one must do, if possible, the Romans,'" quoted Harold. "But I may oversleep."

"I shall be there to wake you. Don't let that trouble your mind," the 2nd grimly assured him.

"That will be excellent, Mister. Now this matter of the gratuitous. What may we expect as salary per diem?"

"Salary! Hum! We'll see how you get on. I may give you a regular job after we get to Pelung. There are good prospects for a suitable man, as they say in the advertisements."

"I am quite satisfied," answered Harold, who saw no good in being otherwise. "I trust you will discover me a suitable man for the prospects. And now, this washing job being fixed up, I ask you, with best respects, to show me my cabin. I usually have my tub about this time and——"

"Cabin!" roared the 2nd. "Cabin! Oh Lord!" He doubled up with laughter, and then seizing the astonished Harold's arm, dragged him into the tool room.

"There's your cabin," he said, pointing to a large waste locker, "and if you want to clean the dirt off yourself you'll find plenty of hot water in the feed tank at the back of the engine and a bit of soap there too. You'd better make a start now. Catch hold of this pail and come with me. I'll show you how we do things at sea."

He led the way round the skirts of the engine, and seizing the pail, filled it at a filthy looking tank and set it on the greasy, iron floor.

"Now then," he commanded. "Off with them dirty duds and give yourself a soap down in front of me."

"What, sir?" asked Harold, who thought there must be some mistake.

"Take—off—them—blooming—dirty—duds—you ugly beggar," emphasized the 2nd, pointing.

"What, all of them?" enquired the flabbergasted Harold.

"Every blessed stitch."

"But, Mister," protested the alarmed Harold, "I am quite unaccustomed to perform these affairs of toilet before strangers. I——"

"Now then, are you going to or do you want me to do it for you?" roared the 2nd.

Harold undressed slowly and reluctantly, handing his garments one by one to the vigilant 2nd, who lifted them with offensive ostentation between finger and thumb and dropped them in a corner.

Harold sought around carefully for a place to sit on while he took off his trousers, but it was only when he slipped on the greasy floor while standing on one leg in an attempt to get rid of them that he remembered one he had overlooked: he sat on it instantly.

"That's right," said the 2nd sarcastically. "Knock the floor about. It's not yours."

Harold, much annoyed, disdained reply and slowly divested himself of his boots and socks. Then with nothing on but a scanty shirt he looked up appealingly.

"Off it comes," decreed the inflexible 2nd. "You can't wash with that thing on. Anyone would think you'd got some skin disease by the fuss you're making."

He seized the pail and dashed the water over his

modest recruit. "Here's the soap," said he, "now let's see the stuff you're made of."

Summoning all his dignity, an easy feat, the aggrieved Harold arose and began slowly to soap himself. The 2nd watched him for a moment in some impatience and then left to oil around the engine. He came back after a few minutes bringing a hand lamp and closely inspected the new washerman's handiwork, finding several untouched patches which he insisted on putting right personally.

"Don't try scamping your work here," he remarked warningly. "If this is how you wash yourself what sort of a job will you make of my pants?"

He rubbed away briskly for a little longer, and then stepped back and with some pride surveyed the result of his labours.

"There!" he said, "if you looked in the glass you wouldn't know yourself. You're clean! Dry down with your shirt and put it on."

Harold obeyed, maintaining a gloomy silence until they were back on the front platform, where his new employer produced some biscuits and a mug of hot coffee and bade him refresh himself.

"Take a good fill up," he advised. "You've got a hard day before you to-morrow."

The engine was dancing round cheerfully and a

delicious breeze blew down the ventilator. "After all," Harold thought, "it is better than the Chinese torturers."

"This is really a most overcoming experience, Mister," he remarked with a smile as he put down the mug.

"It's nothing to what's coming," said the 2nd. "And now you'll have to turn in." He led the way to the waste locker.

"Mind you don't stir out of this until I come for you in the morning," he advised. "The Chief will be about the engine room all night and he'd think no more of knocking you on the head and putting you into the boiler fires than he would of opening a bottle of beer. So look out."

He turned and left the tool room and Harold, crawling into the farthest corner of the warm locker lay down on the soft waste and immediately fell fast asleep.

That night he dreamed that he was sitting naked on the boiler fire while a Chinese torturer hit him with a club at the rate of eighty strokes per minute. As time went on the strokes became less regular and more painful, and at last he became aware of the voice of the 2nd engineer.

"Now then, tumble out there," said the voice.

"Very good, very good," exclaimed Harold, rolling over hastily. The 2nd withdrew the broom handle from the locker and went outside where a moment or two

later Harold found him pacing furiously up and down the platform.

"Do you see the time?" he said sharply. "Quarter to five and nothing done yet." He led Harold round to the back of the engine and selected a pair of trousers caked with grease from a large bundle of dirty clothes.

"Turn on to these," he directed.

Harold looked at them doubtfully. "I am unskilled in the washing line, but willing," he said. "If you will give me the favour of your instruction I will try to become your undertaker."

"There's nothing in it," said the 2nd.

He proceeded to give a demonstration in laundry work. "You see this stuff, well, that's soda; you drop it into the bucket of hot water—so—and then you put the pants in and let 'em soak. Then you take out the pants and lay them flat on the floor like this—and you rub 'em well over with soap. Then you take this scrubbing brush and you scrub hard. Here! Catch hold."

Harold took the brush and kneeling down on the iron floor went to work with energy. Presently a patch of blue began to appear amid the black, shiny grease, and in an hour, more or less, the pattern of one side of the trousers had entirely developed. For a beginner it was a very good negative, but the fastidious 2nd found some blemishes.

"Take a longer stroke with the brush when you do the next side and you won't get such a patchy effect," he directed. "You can stop work now and come round to the front. There's the mess room boy bringing the coffee."

The swinging rectangle of sky overhead now showed dim white and the light of day began to steal into the engine room. Far up the polished ladder a muddy complexioned youth in shirt sleeves was visible, descending towards them with infinite care. In either hand he held a plate and cup and when the vessel gave a roll he stopped in his descent and balanced himself and them with the skill of a Japanese slack rope dancer. They watched his progress with breathless interest. Disaster often seemed about to overtake him, but each time he escaped it by a hair-breadth and eventually he reached the bottom in safety and deposited his load on the vice bench. This done he turned, and with a sleepy stare at Harold, who still wore a shirt only, ascended the ladder again.

"That's the mess room boy," said the 2nd. "What we call a square head. He doesn't wash, but he's better than a dago."

He stopped the dynamo and the incandescent lamps died out in the daylight.

Harold drank his coffee in silence and went back to

work. The other side of the trousers was less interesting : he already knew the pattern. But he rubbed away hard, keeping step with the tireless Salome, whose mighty levers oscillated above him as they worked the pumps that clicked and clattered at his side.

CHAPTER IX

THE next couple of days Harold spent in the engine room labouring steadily at the somewhat Augean task he had undertaken, and winning the good opinion of the 2nd and 3rd engineers by reason of his tact and affability, and his willingness to oblige. He also had the good fortune to meet with the approval of Mr. Herbert Pootle, the donkeyman, and that gentleman did not hesitate to mention it. Never in his life, he was good enough to say, had he been shipmates with a washerman who showed so much promise. And Mr. Pootle was a man who had sailed the seas as fireman and donkeyman for over twenty years according to his own showing, and who consequently knew what was what.

"You don't tell me, young feller," he remarked, as he stood and tenderly watched Harold's masterly handling of one of the 3rd's undervests, "that you've never done no washing before."

"Never, I assure you, Mister," said Harold with an air of triumph.

"A gift, my lad, that's what you've got. A gift.

Most men wash with their 'ands, but you wash with your 'ead."

"Anyone could do as well," said Harold modestly. He wrung out the singlet and dropped it into the pail of finished articles, and selecting a boiler suit from the heap of soiled clothes, put it in to soak.

"No, they could not," said Mr. Pootle, dropping a lump of soda into the water encouragingly. "They think they could, but I know better. It's a gift, just like being a donkeyman. Why every fireman you meet thinks he ought to be a donkeyman, and do you think he could hold down the job?"

"I should judge not, in my ignorance," opined Harold.

"Could he? Not much!" said Mr. Pootle, twirling his large ginger moustache. "'Oo keeps the Chief's watch as good as an engineer? The donkeyman. 'Oo looks after the winches and donkey boiler? 'Oo pumps out the tanks and goes into the bunkers? 'Oo do the engineers come running to when they can't get steam? 'Oo do they send down into the bilge among all the muck and grease when a strum is choked? The donkeyman. And yet I 'ave met firemen who 'ave 'ad the neck to tell me they're as good as I am. No, no, my lad, you'll find out before you've been long going to sea what the donkeyman is aboard a ship. Who are the engineers? Tell me that. Can they handle a shovel? Can they get steam

in a boiler? No, they can't. But I'm not blown out about it. Always willing to help a mate down on 'is luck like you. You just keep quiet till we get to Pelung and as I've told you before I'll see you all right."

They were due at Pelung on the following morning, and Harold was looking forward with some excitement to a few days' stay in that famous city. He had no acquaintances there, but Mr. Pootle during their first exchange of confidences had told him that the place was full of people named De Souza, and that if none of these happened to be near relatives of the Jallagar branch of that family he—Mr. Pootle—would be happy to introduce him to a select sailors' boarding house, the landlord of which although of Chinese extraction was "a white man all over."

"I treat his boarding 'ouse just like my 'ome when I'm ashore," the friendly donkeyman had said. "In an' out at all hours, and spit on the floor. It's Liberty 'All and no mistake. Come with me and I'll see you fixed up."

With such a prospect as this before him the hours had gone slowly for Harold; the laundry work for the 2nd was finished, he had washed his own white suit, and now, mindful of future benefits, he was about to rinse out a few things for his new friend.

A line of drying clothes hung between the bulkhead

and the oil tanks. And the fair Salome, under throttled steam, danced round with lagging steps, her speed having been reduced to prevent the ship reaching port before the scheduled time. The donkeyman puffed comfortably at his pipe.

"How excessively homelike and jolly everything feels this evening," remarked Harold. And then as if in answer to the remark there floated down from above the sound of a hoarse voice raised in song.

"An' brightly gleams above them a' the Starr of Robbie Burns," sang the voice.

"That's the Chief," explained the donkeyman, "having a birthday party all by 'imself. He's always on the bust, but nobody else gets a look in. Drives me dotty to think of the cases and cases of whisky I've humped to his cabin and never such a thing as being asked if I'd got a throat on me. Ho! No! He's too mingy for that. He even sells the dead 'uns. Why, I see that man one time get through the best part of a bottle of whisky in a 'our so as to make up a dozen empties. But 'is day's coming! The old man's give 'im his last chawnce, and if he don't watch 'imself he'll be on the bone of his uppers same as the rest of us."

He ceased speaking and, blind with emotion, spat into a pail full of wrung out clothes beside him. He apologized for the error and would not allow Harold to rinse

them out again, remarking that now he looked closer he perceived that they belonged to the 3rd, who would never know the difference.

In calmer tones he conversed for some time longer about the evils of drink, and of the internal struggles which he and some of his acquaintances (all men of marvellous capacity as measured in quarts) had had with it ; of bottles of champagne he had refused, accepting beer ; of people he had met who, in times of drought, subsisted on eau-de-cologne and florida water, and of those fabulous monsters who, on the bed of sickness, clenched their teeth and, defying the doctor, waved away glasses of brandy from their pallid lips.

At last he tore himself away and, lamp in hand, departed for the shaft tunnel.

When he returned, full of further reminiscences, the engine room was empty and a faint sound of snoring proceeding from the waste locker indicated that his listener had turned in and was already asleep. It was most disappointing ; that wonderful tale about himself in a bar on the Buenos Ayres Boca would have to keep till to-morrow even though it burst him ; that anecdote about the calabooze at Santos must seethe within him until day.

He was tempted to arouse the sleeper, but knowing from experience that suddenly awakened men make

strangely unappreciative listeners, he refrained from doing so, and went on attending to the never ending requirements of Salome, whose high pressure cylinder was beginning to develop an alarming squeak. Or was it the intermediate slide valve ?

He could not be certain although he listened carefully, and as in spite of frequent doses of cylinder oil the sound became rapidly louder, he ran up on deck and roused the Chief, who was supposed to be in charge of the watch.

This was a difficult task entailing at least two minutes banging on the cabin door. When he returned the anguished Salome was screeching loud enough to disturb the whole ship.

They heard her on the bridge, and presently the Captain himself came along and enquired what was the matter.

" Is the Chief there ? " he asked.

" He'll be down this minute, sir."

" Tell him if that row doesn't stop I shall come and see him about it."

" Very good, sir," said the donkeyman obsequiously. And when his superior officer staggered down the ladder a moment later, he duly passed on the interesting information.

" Fair jumpin' he was, sir," he said with some exaggeration. " Looking for you all over the ship."

"If he comes into my engine room I'll break his ruddy neck," declared the Chief boldly.

He swayed proudly up and down the platform shouting out orders, any one of which if carried out would have at once sunk the ship.

"'A'll show the deevils what engineerin' is," he announced. "Captain! What do 'a care for Captains? Nathin'!"

Supporting himself against the bulkhead he beckoned to the donkeyman.

"Shut your dampers. Stop her. Keep her goin' on your turning gear, and call the 2nd," he said confidentially. "A've a dodderish feel aboot ma legs. It's the awfu' heat that's done it. I'm thinking I'll lay doon for a spell. If yon Captain spiars for me ye may tell him I'm awa' to the deck."

He slowly slithered along the bulkhead, clutching at everything which looked like a support, but instead of going on deck, lurched into the tool room.

The dismayed donkeyman stood as if transfixed, listening. After what seemed an hour but in reality was about five seconds there came from the waste locker a sharp exclamation succeeded by the dull sound of scuffling and then a series of terrified yells. Then something heavy bumped. Out ran the Chief and rushed blindly up the ladder. "Tak' it off! Tak' it off!" he screamed

as he went by the donkeyman. "It's gripped me, the black deevil, it's tearin' of me. Never another drop! Never another drop!"

Mr. Pootle heard him reach the deck and slam his cabin door; then he went into the tool room to explain matters to the astonished Harold.

"Something descended on my body from above, trying to smother me," said that individual. "I struck out with my total force, when it made a great noise and went away."

"It's a rotten thing—booze—too much booze," remarked the donkeyman, at last finding his opportunity. "Some fellers it takes one way and some fellers it takes another. There was one time I was out at Bonuz Airs in a beer 'all on the Boca and 'ole Bill——"

"Is the Chief down below there?" shouted the Captain from above.

"Gone up on deck this minnit, sir," replied the donkeyman, truthfully.

"Well, find him at once and send him to me. I can't have this noise going on all night."

"See yer 'gain, later," whispered the disappointed donkeyman. He went on his errand, knocked up the Chief, and then, taking his life in his hands, roused the 2nd as well.

"Things is fair orful below, sir," he explained to the

latter in extenuation of his daring. "The Chief's been down but didn't stop no time at all. Seemed to be kind of orf 'is rocker, and sez 'e'll break the Captain's neck. The Captain's lookin' for him."

"All right," said the 2nd. Jumping out of his bunk he slipped into shoes and trousers and clattered down into the engine room.

Salome's squeak he at once diagnosed as being due to want of oil in the high pressure cylinder, proving the correctness of his views with the aid of the automatic lubricator.

"No brains; that's what's the matter with you," he said to the donkeyman triumphantly. "I suppose you've shifted that chap Blee from the waste locker?"

The donkeyman admitted that he hadn't.

"Well, he'll have to come out of that," decided the 2nd. "The Chief 'll be looking all around there tomorrow. Where's the next best spot for him to hide? Some place the Chief isn't likely to visit."

They knit their brows in thought.

"'Ow would the bathroom do?" suggested the donkeyman at last, brilliantly.

"Ah, two heads are better than one, even if one is a sheep's head," quoted the 2nd. "Move him there right away and bring the key to me."

He went up the ladder and after listening outside the

door to weird noises which indicated that the Chief was asleep he walked forward and excused that gentleman to the Captain.

"He's quite tired with rushing up and down in the engine room and has turned straight in," he explained. "He will be along in the morning."

The donkeyman met him outside his cabin and gave him the bathroom key.

"Lyn' at the bottom of the bath, sleepin' like a babby, 'e is, sir. Fair wore out an' no wonder. Dropped off even when I was talkin' to 'im. Good night, sir."

Omitting to mention that, annoyed by Harold's inattention to his story about the Buenos Ayres Boca, he had left the bath tap open ready for when water was turned on in the morning, he touched his cap and went below.

Down there Salome, content with the sensation she had made that evening, danced round languidly, the soft swish and clatter of her movements and the thick heat-laden atmosphere about her wooing him to slumber. Oil can in hand he walked around, working mechanically, but half asleep. The ship was running with the wind, and but little breeze came down the ventilator. He lit his short pipe and puffed away, pacing up and down to keep awake. Then at midnight the 3rd relieved the watch and he went on deck again. The ship was gliding

in silence through the clear warm night, a column of smoke ascending erect from her funnel to the thinly veiled sky. The moving waters around her stretched away black into the darkness, glinting here and there in the distance as a wavelet caught the dim light of a star.

There was no one about the decks and all the cabin lights were out. For a few minutes he sat on the hatch and smoked, fanned by the soft salt air, and then he, too, turned in.

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CHAPTER X

AT six o'clock next morning the 2nd started pumping water on deck, and five seconds later Harold Blee had his bath, sprang smartly out of bed and undressed.

The day had dawned cool, bright, and refreshing, and a few young rays from a virgin sun were already playing in the bathroom. Through the open porthole came a faint but invigorating breeze which, blowing somewhat icily on his naked body, dried him in a few seconds.

Outside was a stretch of light green sea, gleaming like a fish, and beyond it, some half mile away on the beam, lay a range of middle-sized hills, standing ankle deep in cocoanut palms. Dotted here and there along the sandy beach were square built mansions, painted dazzling white, and somewhere at the back an occasional glimpse of yellow earth suggested a road.

Harold hung up his shirt in the breeze, and, regardless of a chilly feeling, stood gazing out of the porthole. This, then, was Pelung, where tigers roamed through the jungle, visiting rubber estates nightly to sup off

Chinese coolie ; where people planted tin in their back gardens, and having sold the plantations to Companies, lived happily ever afterwards ; whose docks and public works were the most amazing, even as its women were the most charming, its men the bravest, its merchants the wealthiest, its buildings the finest, and its climate the warmest in the world.

The ship moved gallantly through the water, the bright waves dashing and sucking at her sides, and once in a while a shower of spray came through the port-hole. Now and then she overhauled a clumsy Chinese junk, the many cornered sails of which bellied in a manner truly aldermanic as it ran before the wind. The gait of these vessels was ungainly, but they moved with speed.

It was fishermen's weather ; light clouds strewn over the heavens, a smell of rain in the air ; and the sea was dotted with craft of all sorts from big praus with vast and pointed lug sails down to small pakeranans and still smaller canoes whose occupants were fishing with the line.

Anon the ship passed close to a slender striped lighthouse which stood out of the sea like a sugar stick. And a little further on was a small coasting steamer, very dirty, and flying light, with a stream of foaming water spouting from her side, and a herd of natives

squatting under the dingy awnings spread above her deck.

These things passed by Harold regularly and inflexibly as in a cinematograph. They appeared at the forward edge of the porthole, travelled across the round field of vision and then disappeared aft. He would have liked a longer look at the little steamer and at the many other steamers they encountered as they came up to the harbour. But this proved impossible, and he had to be content with sometimes the merest glimpse of red and black hulls, of many coloured flags and funnels, and of grey battleships hung with drying clothes and armed with forbidding guns.

Presently a winch began to revolve unevenly on the deck outside and the engine room telegraph rang. There was a noise of pattering feet passing the shut door. After a while he heard the engine stop and a sudden rushing rattle forward. They had let go the anchor. Then came an interminable period of waiting, while crockery clattered in the mess room next door. The air became pervaded with the smell of ham and eggs.

Now that the ship was at rest sounds about the deck were more distinguishable: he heard the engineers pass by his door and their voices as they sat at breakfast. At the side of the ship Chinese sampan pullers shouted discordantly, abusing each other, and touting for

passengers, and soon to their music was added the noise of hammering as the hatch covers were taken off to make ready for work on the cargo.

The sun, now risen quarter high, blinded the porthole, making the little iron bathroom as hot as an oven. With the bringing up of the ship the breeze had died away. Harold, crouched in a corner, awaited events with some impatience. The tantalizing smell of cooking made him swallow continually. He compared his present breakfast with the meal that would have been provided had he remained in the engine room and chalked up another bad mark against that impossible person, the chief engineer. It comforted him to think of the fright he had given him the night before, and he wondered whether the waste locker had already been searched for its demon. So far as he could recollect he had left no trace of his occupation behind him except—he suddenly remembered—a half-eaten ship's biscuit, which, if his friends in the engine room were the men of talent they professed to be, rats would at once be blamed for. It would be curious—almost a warning—he reflected if something eatable again led to his undoing : all the present trouble had arisen through giving away chocolates to Lily. Poor Lily! Was she accepting somebody else's now? Or was she making a martyr of herself for his sake?

He was meditating these matters when the bathroom door opened and the donkeyman came in carrying a bundle.

"I'd have been here sooner," he said, closing the door, "but we've had a warm time below this morning, a regular picnic."

"Did any discoveries occur?" asked Harold anxiously.

"The Chief came down with the ole man fust thing, and they combed out the engine room looking for stowaways. It was a bit of luck that I took your clothes for'ard. They found a piece of biscuit in the waste locker wot the ole man said 'ad been bit through with a 'ollow tooth. If the 2nd hadn't shown 'is 'ollow tooth we might have been in the soup. That's what saved us. They've both gone ashore to the shipping office. I'm off myself now. If you want to pal up with me slip into your togs and come along. We've got to dodge the mate, but I'll fix that."

Mr. Pootle's method of dodging the mate was to send a Chinese fireman along with a message that the fore-peak tank had sprung a leak. When the mate, full of importance, went forward to look at the leak, Mr. Pootle and Harold, equally full of importance, walked down the accommodation ladder and entered a sampan.

"Pringle's Landing Steps," directed Mr. Pootle, who

was wearing a collar and tie and a military looking topee.

The Chinese rower stood on a platform at the stern of the boat, handling the oars after the manner of a gondolier. The sun bathed city was spread out along the shore before them. A granite wall, the top of which was a road, kept back the sea, and behind it were serried ranks of stately flat-roofed edifices, the ornamented façades of which were painted in light colours and crowded with windows. Behind, a myriad jutting eaves and parapets, sprinkled with steeples, showed what an immense place Pelung was.

"I've got five dollars of yourn wot the 2nd told me to give you for washing money," said Mr. Pootle. "And I'll show you 'ow to make it go as far as ten. You leave it to me."

Their sampan was shoving its way through a surging host of other sampans, and presently they reached the landing stage. Harold got out and walked up the steps. The donkeyman, who had remained behind to settle the fares, soon came running along and bustled him into a rickshaw.

"I give 'im ten pfennicks instead of ten cents," he said in explanation of his hurry. "I 'ad to leave 'Amburg without spending it and it's been worrying me ever since."

They bowled along through smooth wide streets, lined with magnificent cream-coloured buildings and splendid shops, and crowded with rickshaws, gharries, and carriages of all sorts. A throng of Europeans was on the pavement, for it was tiffin hour. Harold was amazed at the number of them; he had never before seen so many, they were as plentiful here as mangosteens in August. Unconsciously he rated the white man a little lower from that hour. But the evidence of wealth and lavish expenditure everywhere, the marble stairways, the carved façades of the houses, the mosaic of the pavements, the glittering carriages with their stately stepping horses and red-clad attendants, the statues, the drinking fountains, the palms in tubs, the well-kept public parks, impressed him immensely. He drank in the scene with great enjoyment.

The donkeyman noticed his air of rapture and open mouth, and although he could not understand some people's tastes, assisted by pointing out various buildings of interest as they went along, commenting favourably or otherwise on each.

"Thom's 'Otel. Star 'Otel. Wattles's 'Otel. Swan and Goose Public. Government 'Ouse. Grey'ound 'Otel. Bob Wills's beershop. Tiggles's Dance 'Ouse. Long-tailed Monkey Public 'Ouse."

They stopped at the last-named and had tiffin, the

donkeyman afterwards playing billiards with the native marker while Harold, in a state of repletion, looked on from a raised bench at the side.

Near dusk they took another rickshaw and rattled through mean and gaudy streets towards the boarding-house which was to be their home from home. The lamps were lighted in the alley where it stood when they arrived, and by the dim light of one of them Harold read the board swinging over the porch, "Mr. S. Guan. Licensed for 14 boarders," and then followed the donkeyman through the door into a broad passage where an untidily dressed woman sat knitting. It was a rough-looking place, with weather boarded walls painted dirty white and plastered with unframed coloured prints, the only furniture being a broken chair or two and a table in a corner littered with soiled newspapers.

"Ha! Ha! Mrs. Guan, back again like a bad 'apenny, you see," cried the donkeyman jovially.

"Well, Little Sunshine," said the woman. "Good evening." She got up from the chair, and shook hands, smiling pleasantly.

"That's 'er pet name for me," explained the donkeyman in a hoarse aside. "My real name of course being Pootle—'Erbert Pootle. She says I'm that cheerful and joky that I bring sunshine to their 'ome."

Intent on showing off his talent he introduced Harold

Blee as an old shipmate just back from the South Pole who had frozen on to him.

"Hee! Hee! Hee," giggled Mrs. Guan. "You'll kill me yet."

Harold, rather annoyed by this description, declined to join in their merriment.

"Put 'im in along with me," went on Mr. Pootle, noticing him. "'E'll be as good as an iceberg."

"It'll have to be the back bedroom," said Mrs. Guan, apologetically. "Our front's taken by a lady."

"A lady!" cried Mr. Pootle. "What ho!"

"Perfectly respectable," said Mrs. Guan, reprovingly.

"Of course," agreed Mr. Pootle. "What does she want in this 'ouse?"

"She's give out that she's waiting for the next boat to Jallagar."

"That's where my mate 'ere lives when he's at 'ome," announced Mr. Pootle with a flourish. "Mr. 'Arold Blee, the Commandant of Jallagar."

"Clerk to the Commandant," explained Harold, as he bowed low.

"Ah," said Mrs. Guan flatteringly to Harold. "I could see you weren't a seafaring man."

"His looks are agin 'im," admitted Mr. Pootle. "But he's going to be one. He's going to sign on with us next trip."

He led the way up some rough wooden stairs to the first floor, and after making a silent feint at opening the door of the front bedroom, was pulled by the anxious landlady into a small apartment at the back.

"Hush, you villain," she whispered with a grimace, pushing him inside. "Be'ave yourself." She gave him a smack and went out, softly closing the door behind her.

"No stuck-up-ishness about her," said Mr. Pootle complacently to Harold.

"She seems very playful," assented Harold.

"She's always like that with me," explained Mr. Pootle modestly. "They all are. A 'ard job I have sometimes." He went over and looked at himself in the broken looking-glass.

Harold sat on the untidy bed surveying the room. A dirty mosquito net was bundled on a wooden rail above him, a corner of it, bordered with grimy calico, hanging down against the equally grimy sheets. On one side lay two pillows and a bolster, in striped and greasy nakedness, and close against him was a red horse blanket. The bedstead itself was, he saw, made of wood, and from the feel of it he surmised that the mattress was stuffed with the same material.

"Tidy crib," remarked Mr. Pootle, brushing his hair and large red moustache with a brush which was

evidently part of the furniture. "Just enough stuff in it for comfort, and no litter. Nails you see all over the walls to 'ang your clothes on, and the missis will be putting in a wash 'and stand in the morning for the look of things. Nice wallpaper. I chose it myself and helped Old Sol to put it on."

He apologized for the wrinkles on it, explaining that wallpaper was not easy to stick over planks, especially on ceilings.

"It's a bit yellor and faded now with the sun," he continued, "but when it was fust on you'd have thought you was in a boodwar. Red roses everywhere. 'I can almost smell 'em,' was wot Mrs. Guan said to me. That'll show you 'ow it looked." He handed the hair-brush to Harold, and, humming a tune, watched him perform his toilet.

They descended to the passage where Mrs. Guan rose from her chair and ushered them into a large room, in the middle of which stood a long table laid for supper.

Some half a dozen rough looking men lounged awkwardly on chairs near the walls, conversing in uneasy whispers, but what held Harold's attention at once was a massive lady sitting at a piano. She wore a crimson blouse trimmed with heavy white lace, and the top of the piano stool was hidden by the rich folds of her plum coloured velveteen skirt.

Her back was towards him, but her magnificent hair, dark and shiny as the wing of a Minorca, gave promise of a beautiful face. She was turning over some music when they entered.

"Hush," whispered Mrs. Guan. "Mrs. Varapetta is going to give us a tune."

The donkeyman tiptoed to a seat.

"What would you like?" enquired the lady at the piano, turning round. "'Home, Sweet Home,' or 'The Maiden's Prayer'?"

Her face, though fat, must once have been beautiful. A broken nose made it interesting.

"A woman who has evidently seen life," was Harold's inward comment.

She surveyed the new comers with interest, smiling widely, and exhibiting perfect teeth. Her skin was dark, her eyes black, with heavy marks below them. She might have been forty.

"Let's 'ave 'Ome, sweet 'Ome,'" said the donkeyman, who had a reputation to keep up. "There's no place like lodgings."

"Good old 'Erb," said one of the men, laughing constrainedly.

"H-s-h," whispered Mrs. Guan again.

"Very well," said Mrs. Varapetta. She arranged the music on the stand, settled herself firmly on the

stool and began. Harold courageously went and stood by her, turning over the leaves as she gave him a nod.

"I used to do that myself when I was on the Ryle Yacht," murmured the irrepressible Mr. Pootle.

"H-s-h," entreated Mrs. Guan.

The piano gave forth discordant sounds, clanging like a windlass, and the audience, all of them more or less used to machinery, listened with anxious faces, fearing a breakdown.

They sighed with relief when Mrs. Varapetta had finished, and summoning all their politeness asked for more.

The witty Mr. Pootle struck the only discordant note.

"It sounds like 'Ome, Sweet 'Ome' when your old woman's banging your 'ead with a beer can," he remarked. "Give us something lively. 'The Man that Broke the Benk,' or something."

Mrs. Varapetta turned to Harold with a shrug. "Thank you for turning over," she said smiling.

"And thank you very much also," murmured Harold, with a low bow. "Will you play again?"

"No, not till after supper."

"Do. To please me," urged Harold, surprised at his own boldness. "No? Then let me honour you by escorting you to a seat."

He bent sideways, making a loop of his arm, and rising, she suffered him to lead her to a bench.

"Now we shan't be long," remarked the irrepressible Mr. Pootle.

"Do you refer to me, sir?" asked Mrs. Varapetta, with some show of indignation.

"No, to the grub," explained the ready Mr. Pootle, waving his hand towards the door, where a Chinese 'boy' dressed in a dirty undervest and black trousers reaching to the knee, had just appeared bearing a smoking dish.

"Sol told me not to wait for him. So now then, ladies and gentlemen," said Mrs. Guan.

She seated herself at the head of the table, and after much rattling and scraping of chairs over the bare floor the boarders took their places on either side of her. At her right hand sat Mrs. Varapetta and this lady had Harold for her next door neighbour. With the meat and vegetables (potatoes and onions) came lager beer for those who wanted it.

Mr. Pootle, desirous that any ill feeling should be washed away broke the silence by asking Mrs. Varapetta to have a bottle at his expense.

"No, thanks. I have already promised your friend here," was her cold reply. She gave Harold a warning nudge under cover of the table.

"No offence, I 'ope?" enquired Mr. Pootle.

"None whatever, sir," she said disdainfully.

"Never offended anyone yet by asking 'em twice," said Mr. Pootle. He finished his dinner in gloomy silence, and rising, said he was going back to the ship for a few clothes and would not return that night.

The other sailors left the table one by one, to post letters or get their hair cut, and last of all Mrs. Guan went away on the plea of work to be done in the back premises, leaving Harold alone with Mrs. Varapetta.

CHAPTER XI

"SO you're from Jallagar, Mr. Blee," said Mrs. Varapetta, laying down the novel she had been reading while the table was being cleared.

"Yes, missis," replied Harold. For some reason or other he felt rather nervous. "And you?"

"I'm Mrs. Nobody from Nowhere." She smiled. "Come and sit near me and talk."

Harold laid aside the soiled magazine he had been reading upside down.

"Tell me what you are doing in this place among all these rough people," she said, making room for him beside her. "Have you no friends in this large city or are you like poor me, all alone?"

"I have some friends named De Souza," said Harold, "but I have not yet been able to discover their place of residence."

"And do you intend to go to them? Surely you would not leave me by myself here?"

"Of course if you ask me to stay I will reconsider my decision," offered Harold politely.

"Ask you? Why should an old lonely lady like I am ask you?"

"Not old," protested Harold.

"Well, not so very, perhaps," said Mrs. Varapetta smiling, "but a good deal older than your sweetheart. You have a sweetheart, haven't you?"

"Not exactly a sweetheart," murmured Harold, beginning to explain.

"Nor have I."

"But I am sure you must have."

"Where should I get one among all these rough men? Can you tell me?"

"No, I don't know anyone about here," confessed the embarrassed Harold. "When you are in Jallagar now, there are many bachelors there."

"I'm afraid you're a sad flirt, Mr. Blee," said Mrs. Varapetta, pinching his arm.

"Will you not oblige me by playing the piano?" asked Harold, still more embarrassed.

"Yes, if you like."

She struck a chord and began to sing "Mary of Argyle" in a hoarse but rather sweet voice. Harold stood beside her and at the end of the song she looked at him.

"How lovely," he murmured. "Oblige with another." She obliged with several. "When Other Lips,"

"Annie Laurie," "White Wings," "Oh! Promise Me." Their common note, he noticed, was love.

"One more," he pleaded.

"Well, just one."

She sang "The Anchor's Weighed," vamping her own accompaniment. Then she arose and stood beside him.

"Did you like it?" she asked.

"Very immensely."

"I should be the same as that girl if you left. 'The tear dropped gently from her eye.'"

"Talking about weighing," said Harold, anxious to change the subject, "I apprehend I have lost considerably in heaviness since I left Jallagar."

"I think you're exactly the right weight for a man," returned Mrs. Varapetta. She clutched him by the arms suddenly and lifted him, bouncing him up and down like a baby. It was awful. What would Lily or the De Souzas or even Mr. Pootle think if they saw him in this ridiculous position. Then she kissed his nose!

He struggled from her grasp and sitting down at a safe distance began to straighten his hair.

"It's only my fun," explained Mrs. Varapetta. "But you're rather a nice boy. What did you do with yourself in Jallagar?"

"Reading and gardening."

" Ah, reading. I will lend you some novels. Do you know this ? " She held out the one she had been looking at.

" I do not," confessed Harold.

" Well, I will read you a bit. It's awfully romantic." She cleared her throat and began—

" ' Slowly faded into night the twilight and on the immovable bosom of the multifecund sea shone a many-pointed necklace, the reflection of the multitudinous stars. All along the line of the distant horizon was vacancy, shipless, boatless, and within the compass of the human eye on the low shore was no evidence of life, save, indeed, the hum of bee and beetle and the cries of birds and insects demonstrating the marvellous and never-resting plenteousness of Mother Earth. Brutus was alone, alone with his own soul. Smoking innumerable cigarettes whose fumes ascended to the great dome of the heavens, there he lay, pressed all around with the jewels of nature. The maiden pink, red campion, stitchwort, mignonette, ragged robin grew about his feet, while at his side, blooming in all luxuriance, blessed by their beauty, drawing their sustenance direct from Nature, from bounteous Mother Earth were bladder campion, rock rose, wallflowers, cauliflowers, field mellotts, horned poppy, red poppy, pansies, kidney vetches, yellow pimpernel, viper's bugloss, hound's tongues, corn cockles,

cinquefoil, meadowsweet, dogroses, bedstraws, yellow wort, and white helleborine.'"

"Isn't it lovely?" panted Mrs. Varapetta.

"Lovely," Harold echoed. "What were all those things pressing about him?"

"Flowers I expect. I have never been to England, so I cannot tell exactly. Shall I go on?"

"Please oblige. I have plenty of time."

"In a pond near his hand grew flaming yellow water-lilies and flowering rushes, watercress and delicate and dainty weeds where the sticklebacks built their tiny nests.

"Into it, idly, Brutus cast a pebble and watched with a loving smile the ripples, innumerable and ever-widening that were its progeny. "Nature, oh! wonderful Mother," he muttered, looking lazily towards the immense ocean over which now shone in golden beams the light of Aphrodite's Star.

"In the middle of a beam a slight movement constrained his attention. He stood impassively erect, watching it, his large calm orbs gazing intent and steady, his finely chiselled profile silhouetted against the dark and dreamy blue. With a graceful rapidity it came nearer, and at last as Nature hid her tender face and (so to him it seemed) the very firmament was veiled, Daphne arose, Venus-like from her Sea-Mother, her long

dark tresses draping mysteriously her slender ivory limbs.

“ “ Brutus,” she called, in tones as of a silver bell.

“ “ Here am I.” And oh, the wondrous sweetness of his voice.’ ”

“ They were married of course,” interrupted Harold.

“ No, they were not,” said Mrs. Varapetta. “ That’s what makes the story so beautiful and interesting.”

“ What comes next ? ” demanded Harold.

“ ‘ Daphne goes on—“ Turn your head away, my love, and then walk backwards to the ocean’s brink ; I would requisition your overcoat.”

“ ‘ Loyal and with infinite dignity he swam towards her. The bees and insects ceased from humming ; all Earth was silent watching their love. She came out on the beach, joving in her noble beauty and with an infinitude of tenderness took the ancient overcoat and robed herself.

“ “ Turn, oh, my heroic one,” she commanded.’ ”

“ But she had only an overcoat on,” objected Harold.
“ Think of the mosquitoes.”

“ There are none in England. Why shouldn’t any free woman wear what she likes ? Why, when the weather is warm enough do any of us, men or women, wear anything at all ? Are we ashamed of the bodies Nature has given us ? That is what we moderns ask.”

"How would you carry your money and pocket-handkerchief?" enquired the practical Harold.

"In a little bag of course as we do now."

"It would, I may imagine, be less expensive. One's wife could dress on a smaller allowance. One could marry on one's salary."

"Marry. Why, you're always thinking about weddings. You are a flirt, Mr. Blee."

She sat down close to him. This time he did not move away. She put her jewelled hand on his shoulder.

"Now it's your turn to kiss me," she whispered. "Just for fun. I'm fond of you, you little innocent lily."

Harold jumped up as if stung. "Talking of lilies," he said, looking at her with open dislike, "lily is my favourite name for a lady. I know a nice young lady called by that name and I am intending humbly to present myself in marriage to her."

With a bow he held out his hand. "Good-night, Mrs. Varapetta," he said, "and my gracious thanks for your singing."

She went back to her novel taking no notice of his hand.

"You're a little beast and I hate you," she said, between her teeth.

Harold slowly turned and went upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER XII

HAD Mrs. Varapetta called Harold her little buttercup or anything else but her little lily she might that evening have gained a husband and Jallagar have lost the services of a hero. On such small accidents does the destiny of beings appear to depend.

And yet her utterance of that little word, her use of an expression which she had never used before, has its interest. Why did she call Harold a lily? He did not look in the least like one. It would have been a poor Solomon who could not have given him points as regards apparel. And at the moment she spoke his face was positively greasy with excitement—as unclean as that of a passion-struck monkey. Then why?

One of those gifted London journalists who travel in the world of spooks and by this means obtain information denied to their less fortunate competitors, which, by the way, is not exactly playing the game, might possibly be able to throw light on the matter. He might begin by pointing out that there are many things in the material world that remain unexplained, as for instance, the nature of electricity, magnetism, birth, the sprouting

of seeds, the apple in the dumpling. And then he might take the enquirer for a voyage into the borderland, and rapping on a table, summon the ghost of Julius Cæsar.

Having asked Julius Cæsar a few suitable questions to put him at his ease such as, "Will peg top trousers be worn this season?" "What horse is going to win the Derby?" "Did you shave your head or were you naturally bald or was it Calphurnia's fault?" the gifted journalist would then proceed to clear up this mystery of Mrs. Varapetta's fortunate utterance.

"You know Mrs. Varapetta?" he would ask.

"I know of her," Julius Cæsar would reply with an accent on the "of."

"Then why——?" and so on.

"Ah," Julius Cæsar would answer. "Of course, I remember now. Lily De Souza, you see, in common with all her family and indeed with all Jallagar, was in a very excited and worried condition over Harold Blee's disappearance. In order to hearten her up a little, her mother made an extra fine curry for supper that evening, and directly after partaking of this curry Lily went to bed. Once there she dreamed as you mortals call it: that is to say her disembodied and de-atomized spirit wandered, part of it around a certain sweetshop in Jallagar, part of it about Harold and Mrs. Varapetta.

And it was the recognition of the latter part by Mrs. Varapetta's spirit that caused that lady to utter the word which lost her a husband."

Of course the man in the street would not place any faith in this explanation. But then, very few people believed Christopher Columbus. The fact remains that Lily did eat too much curry that evening, that she did have a dream, and that at the very time when Harold was undergoing his ordeal his disappearance was being discussed on many a verandah in Jallagar.

A garbled version of the tale of the two flags had leaked out in some mysterious manner, and the entire countryside was ringing with the praises of the boyish hero and lamentations over his rumoured fate.

The general opinion at first was that he had thrown up his clerkship and left the district to avoid compromising Mrs. McMucker, but it soon began to be whispered that he had been last seen in the gutter outside the Bung Line office, and that Gladstone Mortimer had been heard to threaten violence and had indeed laid hands on him. When the news came that the De Souzas themselves had been up to the Castle, and, demanding the right to dig up the garden in search of their adopted child had been refused with contumely, the whole town buzzed with indignation.

Gladstone Mortimer, driving through the streets was

greeted with showers of mud and rotten bananas, and the same afternoon a picked body of members of the Eurasian club, followed by a crowd of enthusiastic supporters, marched up the hill, tore down the new Bung Line flag, and demolished the new flagstaff. Their intention had been to follow this up by breaking into the Castle, and drinking all the beer, but a rumour that Gladstone Mortimer had poisoned it caused them to desist, and they contented themselves by giving three howls for the Mortimers and three cheers for Harold Blee and the McMuckers. They then marched back to the club in good order, and like true patriots slaked their thirst at their own expense.

A constant stream of callers flowed in and out of Pansy Villa, where Mr. De Souza in tall hat and frock coat did the honours with simple grace, and encouraged all suggestions for opening a public subscription. It was understood that he and his family—who, owing to grief, were unable to be present—had lost in Harold the only prop of their old age, and though many callers left nothing behind them but their heartfelt condolences, the number of pairs of old trousers Mr. De Souza received gave him a new idea of the resources of Jallagar.

It had been a strenuous time for him and his, a time of increasing grief and anxiety, beginning with the evening of Harold's disappearance and reaching a culminating

point in the distressing interview with the Gladstone Mortimers.

From the first his wife had had an annoying presentiment that some calamity had occurred, and when Harold did not come home for dinner they had known in their hearts that she was correct.

Ah, that dreadful evening when he waited patiently in the back garden sitting in his usual chair and hoping against hope, while Lily sobbed in her bedroom and his wife raged up and down the bungalow like a tigress robbed of her whelp, coming out to him every five minutes and asking him why he didn't get up and do something!

And then their visit next morning to the Castle where she and Mrs. Mortimer had wanted to fight it out, and he had expressed his eagerness to back her for anything up to five dollars, but Gladstone Mortimer had refused to lend him the money.

Anyone would have thought from the dressing down he received on the way back that he had done something wrong, whereas all he had intended was to show their opponents the determined sort of people they had to deal with.

Of course, as usual, his plans had been spoiled, his actions misunderstood.

"Always the same! When things go right I'm

nobody," he had said to Mrs. De Souza. "But when they go wrong you come crying to me. And what do I get for helping you? Nothing but abuse. It's a thankless job. But now and then the worm will turn. Mark my words, if you say anything more I shall take off my frock coat and nothing will ever induce me to wear it again."

This had cowed her. She had asked him to forgive her hastiness, and he as usual had been magnanimous, bearing up in public and working like a Trojan through the hours that followed.

Some of the visitors had advocated a monster petition to the Government demanding that a monument should be erected to Harold and a pension be given to all the De Souza family, but he had shaken his head mournfully, stating that he at any rate would do nothing to increase the public tension, and that in any case he preferred the Commandant to take the first step.

He had waited patiently for that first step; at the beginning with confidence; later, when the McMuckers seemed to his jaundiced eye to do nothing but drive about and receive the cheers of the populace, with impatience and disgust.

Meanwhile Mrs. De Souza had put on her bonnet and secretly interviewed Mrs. McMucker. News flew round of a warrant issued, a fruitless search of the Castle, of

Gladstone Mortimer under police surveillance, of increased public unrest, but nothing at all about what the Government was going to do for the head of the De Souza family.

This was the state of affairs when that well-remembered telegram came to Jallagar from Pelung—

“Blee safe hiding long tailed monkey public house.”

The enthusiasm was intense. Cheering crowds hung round the telegraph office, and another stream of callers flowed to Pansy Villa, intent on congratulating the De Souza family. Some of the meaner spirited among them tried to get back their old trousers, but such the dignified old man gently repulsed. The trousers, he told them, were to form the nucleus of a fund for the support of indigent Eurasians, and he intended when things had quietened down to call for further subscriptions. “The public spirit,” he said, as he showed them out at the gate, “that this family incident has revealed among the citizens of Jallagar is wonderful. I shall do my utmost to keep it alive.”

The Mortimers on the other hand had become thoroughly alarmed at the turn events had taken, and the news of Harold's safety came to them as a genuine relief.

Their grounds had been wrecked, their flagstaff and cherished flag demolished, and their good name—more

to them than diamonds—had suffered very considerably. Policemen had haunted the place watching them furtively, and Gladstone had been obliged to give up digging in the garden for fear of being suspected of ulterior motives. But all along they had felt that even the company of policemen was preferable to that of the crowd of excited Eurasians who continually looked over their fence, and it was only when Gladstone had received satisfactory guarantees as to his bodily safety that he allowed the serjeant to depart. Much to Mrs. Mortimer's annoyance he handed the man a tip.

"You ought to have kicked him instead of tipping him," said the disdainful lady.

"*Experientia docet*, as we used to say at college," explained Gladstone. "We are now pedestrians on an elongated, thorny, and sinuous path, sweetheart, along which it is necessary for you and I—me, that is—to ambulate circumspectly. Under the circumstances a small gratuity to the constable is not money thrown away."

He helped himself to a whisky and soda, the first for three days, and continued. "Our experience during the last sixty hours has been enormously unpleasant, but nevertheless, a few lessons may be extracted from it. We know our friends! They are fewer in number than I anticipated. We know our enemies; people who have

bitten the hand we patted them with. Let them look to themselves ! ”

He swallowed the whisky and soda ferociously, and went to the sideboard for another.

“ No more,” said Mrs. Mortimer decisively. “ You’ll upset your liver.”

He put down the glass obediently.

“ You won’t be able to do much to that little wretch Blee,” she continued, “ nor to those people at the Commandery. In the meantime——”

“ We can wait,” said Gladstone ominously.

“ Oh ! How I wish I could throw them on the floor and s—stamp on them,” cried his good lady, quivering. “ And those impudent De Souza’s ! ”

“ I shall teach them a lesson at any rate,” cried Gladstone. “ No more shall that insolent woman go on board the Bung boats sewing, if I can prevent it. I’ll introduce competition. I’ll drive her off.”

“ Sewing ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Mortimer sarcastically.

“ I have never heard anything against her,” said Gladstone. “ *Fiat justitia, sweetheart, ruat coelum. Experientia docet.* ”

“ You must make up something against her and have her chucked out,” ordered Mrs. Mortimer heatedly.

“ All in good time, my love,” Gladstone reassured her.

He went out to his damaged garden and surveyed bitterly the shattered flagstaff, the ruined flower beds, the damaged shrubs. Below he could see the McMuckers arm-in-arm walking up and down their lawn.

"Behaving like a pair of Eurasians," he muttered. "She is black enough to have a touch of the tar brush. I wonder where she comes from." He resolved to look into it.

He was destined to hear something soon enough. The East is a small world, full of talkers. And no lady occupied the official throne of Jallagar for long without something, generally derogatory, being spread about as to her antecedents.

Mrs. Guan, for instance, at breakfast on the morning after Harold's arrival told him that she distinctly remembered the niece of a school friend of hers marrying a man named McMucker; of course it might have been another McMucker, but the name was uncommon.

Harold described his superior's wife.

"That's her, I'm sure," said Mrs. Guan. "Her mother had a grocery business here in Pelung. I can remember her little girl as well as I can remember my own face."

"What were they, Eurasians?" asked Mrs. Varapetta, speaking for the first time.

"I should think so," answered Mrs. Guan, laughing.

"When first I knew them there used to be an old native wearing nothing but a sarong helping behind the counter. Their grandfather. Black as your hat."

"Was he as black as Mr. Blee?" asked Mrs. Varapetta innocently.

"When I am your age I shall be white," remarked Harold, who was rather touchy about his complexion. He left the table and taking his topee sallied into the street.

He had nowhere to go, and disliked walking without an object, but anything to get away from that evil woman Mrs. Varapetta. The look she had favoured him with at breakfast had quite taken away his appetite, small enough after a night's tossing about in his hot, dirty bedroom.

It was a treat to get out into the open air again. Even Chinatown smelt fresh and clean after the stale, smoke-laden atmosphere of the boarding-house. At the corner of the street he hailed a rickshaw and told the puller to drive where he pleased.

The puller, like most of his race understood no language but an obscure Chinese dialect, but managed to get through his work by observing two rules; one being to take every fare before six p.m. to the centre of the town; the other to take every fare after six p.m. away from the centre of the town. Harold, therefore, found

himself rattling along through the same streets he had traversed with the donkeyman the previous evening, and, after a while, saw on his lee-bow the Long Tailed Monkey Public House.

He waved to his charioteer who, taking the street corner in fine style, brought him up with a dash to the main entrance.

"No, Mr. Pootle isn't here yet," they told him at the desk.

Harold gave his name, and saying he would wait, sat down in the lounge.

The place was undergoing its morning cleansing. Chinese servants were sweeping the chequered tile floor and wiping spilt liquor and cigar ash from the marble top of the bar. Brown holland covers were on the billiard tables. Everything was very comfortless. The green distempered walls showed cracks in places, and damp was playing havoc with the broad gilt frame of the enormous looking-glass that stood against it. In this glass his reflection appeared plainly. He was certainly not looking his best ; he had never seen himself looking worse. In the office a telephone was ringing, and presently an elderly Eurasian came out and looked askance at him, evidently wondering what right a shabbily dressed fellow such as he had to be in the place. To buy a right he ordered a lemonade and stood self-consciously

at the bar drinking it. But still the elderly Eurasian stood watching him till presently in rattled a European police inspector.

“There’s your man,” said the elderly Eurasian, pointing.

CHAPTER XIII

"YOUR name's Blee," stated the Inspector, laying a heavy hand on Harold's shoulder.

"At your entire service," said Harold, who saw it was of no use to be otherwise. He attempted a bow, but the Inspector misunderstood the action and tightened his grip.

"No, no, me fine bhoy," he remarked. "Sthruggling will be of no mortal use to ye. Ye'd best come quietly."

As his captor was about seven feet high and twice as much round the waist this seemed fairly obvious to Harold.

He suffered himself to be led through the group of curious servants into a gharry, where the Inspector secured himself against any further attempts at escape by the simple process of squeezing into the next seat and jamming his captive against the wall.

"Is it far to the prison?" asked Harold timidly after a while.

"And for what reason might ye be thinking ye were going to the jail?" asked the Inspector. "Did I charge you?"

"No, sir," admitted Harold, "you have treated me truly as one gentleman might treat another."

"Did I tell you that anything you said would be used against you, and ask you why ye'd done it?"

"No, Mister."

"And sure, then, by that ye may know that the police have nothing against you—so far. No, it's to my home I'm after taking you, and thin we'll see about handing you over to your friends. Ye've powerful good friends, my young cock, and it's lucky for you it is so."

"Friends of the name of De Souza?" questioned Harold.

"Niver you mind," returned the Inspector, and relapsed into silence. Passing through an archway at the entrance of which stood saluting Sikh policemen the gharry entered a cobbled yard and drew up.

The Inspector alighted and pushed Harold before him through what was obviously the police station; then up a narrow flight of stairs into a gaudily appointed sitting-room.

"Birdie!" he called. "Birdie! Sit down," he said to Harold, pointing to a polite-looking chair covered with green plush.

Harold carefully did as he was bid. Next to him, balanced on a frail one-legged table, was a stuffed parrot in a glass case; similar cases mingled with bright pic-

tures on the walls and crowded the top of the black and gold piano, in fact everything in the room seemed to live under glass except the books, which looked as if they deserved to, but had to be content with Berlin wool mats underneath them.

"Birdie!" called the Inspector again.

"Wait a minute till I've swep' up," responded a female voice, and presently a thin, sallow complexioned woman appeared at the doorway.

"It's the young man I was telling you about," said the Inspector, introducing them. "My Missis."

A look of horror crossed the woman's careworn face. She darted away, and almost instantly came back with an ordinary cane-bottomed chair.

"Will you please sit down, Mr. Blee?" she said.

Harold arose and complied with her request.

"We're on our way to the hotel; I was thinking that maybe ye'd like to have a glimpse of him," explained the Inspector.

"You'd never shame me by being seen in the street along with 'im like that, Inspector?" cried Mrs. Inspector.

"And what's the matter?" enquired the Inspector.

"Look at 'is boots! Look at 'is clothes! Look at 'is 'at!"

The Inspector did so. Harold followed his example.

“What’s to be done? I’d lend ‘im a suit of me own, but it’s too big.”

“Slip away and get some of the corporal’s. And meantime, Mr. Blee,” she continued coaxingly, “will come along o’ me and ‘ave a nice ‘ot barf.”

Harold arose and followed her, annoyed and mystified. Every one he met seemed to want to stand him a bath. It was not so much the bath he minded as the nasty wheedling way in which the woman asked him to have it. “As though she was persuading me to take castor oil,” he muttered, following her. But the refreshing warm water, the scented soap, and the clean rig out from top to toe—brown boots, if you please, with socks, straw hat, and a snow white suit all complete, and all fitting to perfection—combined to put him in a more cheerful frame of mind and he entered the parlour again a new man.

“My wife’s engaged with the cook about a broken tay-pot,” said the Inspector who was waiting. “And, faith, we’d best not disturb her. We’ll be getting along.”

This time the Inspector much to Harold’s relief took the opposite side of the gharry.

“Upon me sowl it’s warm,” he remarked, doffing his topee and mopping his big red face. “You look cool enough, ye young blackguard, afther all the trouble you’ve occasioned. No more running away, now.”

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Harold.

"I'll tell you, and ye'd best listen with both your ears and take my advice to heart. A day or more ago word came down from Jallagar that a young man known by the name of Harold Blee had gone a-missing, and that there was holy murdher bein' done in the place for that reason. We received your description at th' office by telegraph, and I was instructed by my shuperiors to nab you if I could and run you into the lock-up."

"Is that where we are going now?" asked Harold in alarm.

"And have I not tauld you the contrary? No, you're not going to the lock-up though you deserve it. We've heard all about your goings on. There's little happens but what the polis knows of it. Trespassing into respectable householders' gardens and breaking down flagstaffs, indeed. Six months is the least you ought to get for the like. However, we've been in communication with the Commandant, and now my orders are to hand you over to his brother who has undertaken, being a bauld man, to be responsible for your safe delivery in Jallagar. It's well indeed that the powers that be seem to have taken a fancy to you. I wish, be gob, they would to me. Hushing things up for you, that's what they're doing. The business must on no account get into the papers. Oh! no indeed! Blee, if found

must be treated with consideration and warned to be discreet. Holy Moses! But it's a strange country. However, I've carried out the first part of my orders. You've had a warm bath and a clean shift give you in my own house, and you've been introduced to the best of company—that's my consideration. And now, young cock, for the warning. If you go wagging your mouth about yourself and your doings either in the hotel or on the steamer or anywhere else, by me sowl, I'll have you out of wherever you are and locked up as quick as hell will scorch a feather. So now you know. Not a whisper to the servants, never a word to this young Mr. McMucker that I'm after taking you to now. Or——"

The Inspector wagged a threatening forefinger and assumed an expression of great fierceness, much to the alarm of two well known company promoters who happened to be passing at the time—they figured in the dock a month afterwards. He retained the expression as he walked through the columned portico of the hotel, causing quite a flutter among a party of tourists (Kitchenner was in Pelung at the time), but dropped it for one of dignified respect when they arrived outside Mr. McMucker's bedroom.

"Take your hat off," he said to Harold, ringing the bell. He mopped his brow and gave his large moustache another twist.

The door opened exhibiting a slim young man whose hooked nose, big jaw and low forehead were plainly McMucker ; who was, more or less, a blond edition of the Commandant.

"Come in," he said. "I'm in an awful mess here, but you can find a chair somewhere. Tip the clothes on to the floor and take those two. As you see I've been unpacking."

"You want a 'boy,' sir. This country's too hot for attending to these matters yourself," said the Inspector, looking round the littered bedroom. And, indeed, the young man although clad in pyjamas only was sweating profusely.

"Yes," he reflected, "it seems I shall have to get one for the voyage up ; my brother wrote me that he had one waiting in Jallagar so I want a temporary one only."

"They're hard to get," said the Inspector. "Well, sir, this is the young man Harold Blee, whom I have come to hand over to you in accordance with my orders."

"All right. So you managed to find him."

"It's not much that we can't find, sir," said the Inspector impressively.

"Well, I wish you'd add to my obligation to you and find me a 'boy.'"

"We could do that maybe," said the Inspector, rather doubtfully though.

"Any ass would do in the meantime," remarked McMucker.

This decided Harold. "I have the honour of applying for the job," he said, quietly bowing.

"You!" exclaimed McMucker.

"The very thing, sir," cried the Inspector. "Just what we want to keep things quiet and get him unnoticed to Jallagar. I suppose you've heard all about him from the Commandant?"

"Me? Oh no, nothing."

The Inspector explained things meagrely.

"There's no danger of his running away?"

Harold went loudly on his honour.

"Well, I'll try you," decided McMucker.

"That's all right, sir," said the Inspector. "He won't run away. He knows what would happen to him if he did. All these Eurasians know a bit about 'boy's' work. It's more or less born to it they are. And now, what name do you propose to call him by?"

"So we can't call him by his ordinary name?"

"Not advisable, sir," returned the Inspector confidentially, "till you're safe on board the boat. The hotel people might twig something."

"Well, then, have you any suggestion, Blee?" enquired McMucker.

Harold said that if he could not be called Blee he liked the name Dick Turpin.

"And a name that fits you like a bishop's apron," said the Inspector rising. "And now, sir, time and the Chief Superintendent wait for no man. I must get down to the office and make my report. He saluted and took his departure.

The new 'boy,' anxious to make a good impression, began feverishly to tidy up the room, folding clothes neatly and stowing them away in the wardrobe, emptying basins, arranging boots in rows against the wall and smoothing down the bed.

It appeared from what his master said that they were only there for one night as an intermediate steamer sailed next morning for Jallagar. There was also he gathered, a young lady, a Miss Mortimer, staying in the hotel, No. 116, who was bound for Jallagar too, and whose luggage was to go down to the quay with theirs.

He caught a glimpse of her at dinner that evening seated opposite his master and half hidden by flowers and palms. A string band was playing in the great white hall where by the light of a myriad incandescent lamps a hundred handsome women were dining. She seemed the handsomest, the freshest-looking of them all, and he felt sorry he was not waiting at table so much did he desire a closer view of her.

It was a bewildering place, this hotel, with its multitude of guests, its hordes of white-clad, pigtailed servants who trod the marble floors so noiselessly, and its streets of bedrooms. Wandering round by the kitchens he had stumbled across a kind of under-manager who had shown him where to get a meal and where to sleep that night.

CHAPTER XIV

PEOPLE going to Pelung whether on pleasure or on business should always make a point of obtaining an introduction to one of the Government officials there. For if anything can be more unchanging than the Unchanging East it is the comfortable way in which the Pelung Government does itself and its friends. Witness for instance the manner of Harold's exit and of his entrance. He arrived in a dirty sampan, sitting on a seat where goodness knows who had sat before him, along with a companion whose appearance, though remarkable, was not distinguished, and whose first act on landing was to swindle a sampan coolie and dōdge away through the crowd. And now—No fuss! No botheration! A number of Government coolies, all dressed in uniform to take the baggage from the gharries and transport it reverently to a milk-white Government launch alongside. Crowds of salaaming natives lining the way. And nothing to do but to look big and salaam back.

Harold, walking behind McMucker and the lady, did this to perfection. He had once seen the Colonial Secre-

tary under similar circumstances, and the recollection gave him a model. Helped by the crew of the launch, watched by the reverent crowd who seemed to pray silently for his safe embarkation, he stepped slowly aboard, and then, once more erect, gave the signal for departure.

They steamed out for the roads, a large white ensign fluttering at the taffrail behind them ; on their passage every launch they met cringed aside, saluting as one salutes his king. It was all very fitting, very pleasant, and Miss Mortimer seemed to be enjoying herself as much as Harold.

"I can never thank you enough, Mr. McMucker," she said, her happy face aglow with the fresh breeze. "You've been most kind."

"I'm the lucky one I think," returned McMucker. "For my part I wish we could have the voyage over again. It's nearly ended now. We're on our last lap." He sighed gently.

At the mention of laps Harold, who never played gooseberry, turned away and stood observing them from a distance. They talked a good deal more, he noticed, when nobody was near and from his experience with Lily he had a shrewd idea of what that meant. He, at any rate, never tongue-tied, found conversation far more easy and enjoyable with his girl when they were by

themselves. And therefore, conversely—look at the way McMucker was talking, look at the way Miss Mortimer was smiling. Anyone could see with half an eye what their case was and mean spirited would be the man who did not rejoice with them. They were such a healthy, jolly pair, and she, like his master, had been very pleasant to him. Not that for a moment she compared for looks with the Commandant's wife or even with Lily. She was not so tall and she was very much slimmer than either of these; her face was not classically beautiful like theirs. But she was fair-skinned and rosy-cheeked, with very straight blue eyes and a mouth which, when she smiled, made her irresistible.

They looked at the fast-receding city; his master said something which made her flush rather, Harold noticed. Obviously she wanted to change the subject for something less pleasant, for she turned and looked again at the steamer lying at anchor out in the roads.

"Where is our boat, Turpin?" called out McMucker.

Harold asked the crew of the launch.

"Over there, the *Sherrybung*," said the Serang in Malay, pointing with his finger to a vessel some distance off.

"The *Sherrybung*?" exclaimed Harold, thunder-struck. It was the ship he came in from Jallagar, and was not due to sail for another week.

"She leaves earlier to avoid the Chinese holidays," explained the Serang.

"Oh!" said Harold feebly. "I am of opinion that there must be some unfortunate mistake."

If there were not it would be terrible. At least six people on the *Sherrybung* knew him by sight, and three knew him well. How could he dare to venture on board even under the name of Dick Turpin? He was bound to be recognized, and then doubtless that impossible person the Chief Engineer would come into his own and he, Harold, would be sentenced to the *Sherrybung's* bunkers if not to something worse. He looked towards the land. But that was very far away, and the *Sherrybung* all the time grew closer. The gilt lettering on her stern was now quite plain, and standing on the deck above holding a telescope (or was it a bottle?) stood his dreaded enemy. There was no mistake and there was no escape. The danger must be faced. He reflected that, if the worst came to the worst, he could plead to Mr. McMucker for protection. But this would mean disregarding the warning of the Inspector, a thing not to be done lightly. His best course for the present would be to keep out of sight—in the background—and put off the day of discovery as long as possible.

And in this for the first two days fortune favoured him. When the launch came alongside the officers and

engineers, who disliked governments, had business in other parts of the ship. The Captain only stood firm at the top of the accommodation ladder, and he in the excitement of the moment shook hands with Harold by mistake and was unable to apologize, owing to the presence of a lady. Then on leaving, the ship ran at once into bad weather; the passengers kept their cabins, the officers revolved in their courses between berth and bridge; the engineers between berth and engine room. Man had forsaken the wind-swept decks where Harold took the air in company with some wave-worn and complaining pigs.

These animals, confined in a draughty pen, seemed stupefied by the heaving of the ground beneath their feet and the extraordinary quantity of water that some invisible enemy was discharging at them. When Harold approached they shrank away grunting fiercely, treating a ship's biscuit he threw them as mere pearls. But later on when the weather abated they grew quite friendly and ate anything that offered, even from his hand. They were the first among the passengers on that battered ship to regain an appetite. Miss Mortimer and McMucker followed close behind them, and a day or so before Jallagar was reached, when the land began to close in, and the sea to calm, cabin doors opened and convalescents who but the night before had thought never to

enjoy a meal again paced the deck, impatient for the music of the dinner gong. So far as Harold could gather while waiting on his master at meal times in the saloon most of these poor people had been suffering from bilious attacks, headaches, or from the effects of something they had eaten in Pelung. Nobody apparently had been sea-sick. It was plain he was not such an exceptionally good sailor as he imagined.

"No," the Captain told a lady at the table. It was not by any means the roughest weather he had been in. His roughest passage took place many years before and the height and strength of the waves on that occasion could be gauged from the fact that a shark eighteen feet long was dashed down the ship's funnel on to the boiler fires, the Chinese firemen getting enough roast and smoked shark to last them throughout the voyage. Following the Captain's lead others told stories—of the East, the West, the sea, of crocodiles, two-headed snakes, of phantom tigers and monstrous sea serpents—all illustrating the fact that Truth, in the hands of commercial travellers especially, is stranger than Fiction. After the ladies had gone the men threw dice to see who should pay for a round of liqueurs, and it was only after this had been decided that the Chief came in and took a seat at the table. Claiming the prerogative of a Jolly Jack he annexed the cigar and cherry

brandy of a neighbour and drank the health of the company.

“ Now Gentlemen ! ” cried the Captain hiding a smile. “ We will call upon our Chief Engineer, Mr. Blitters, for his true story, told before the owners in Pelung four days ago, entitled :

‘ The Invisible Demon of the Engine Room. ’ ”

The Chief Engineer cleared his throat obediently, looked at his empty glass and then (Harold thought) somewhat reproachfully at the company and began—

“ Ladies and gentlemen, ever since I was a wee fellow, almost as wee as—as—that drink ye stood me the now, I have been remarkable for the fact that I niver told a lie. George Washington and Alexander Blitters, gentlemen, are the only two men in this wurld of which that can be said—present company always excepted. Verra well then, as true as I’m sitting on this chair, with an empty glass in front of me, is the disagreeable tale I’m now tellin’ ye. It was one night, not a week ago, in this very ship. The engines began sic’ a shrieking and a skrammering as ye never haird in your life. It was worse than twenty dying pigs. Never being anything but a light sleeper and always like a weasel guard-ing ma beloved engines ” (here he coughed modestly and looked at the Captain for approval), “ I was oot o’ ma

bunk in an instant and doon the ladder like a strick of lightening. I looked all about the engines and could find nothing wraung wi' them. I went over every bolt and nut with a spanner and gave 'em a bellyfull of oil, but still the unairthly, deevilish noise went on. I searched carefully the boiler room, boiler tops, tunnel, and could fin' nothing, and thin I jaloused the noise came from the store room. The donkeyman was there, half dead wi' fear, puir man, so I had to tackle the job meself. I glided carefully along the bulkhead and jumped into the store, hoping to surprise the demon. But all was still as deeth. However, when I put ma head in the waste locker something flew at me and clawed me. It was there. I got a holt on it, and although it bit and struggled like the fiend it was I kept ma grip and running up on deck threw the slimy beastly monster into the sea. Ladies and gentlemen, as true as deeth—THERE WAS NO SPLASH ; but when I threw the thing away the noise in the engine room stopped."

The Chief looked round at his awestruck listeners. "What think ye of that?" he enquired.

"I think you must have dreamt it," opined a jealous commercial traveller.

"Indeed, my laddie," sneered the Chief. "And d'ye think I dreamt this here?" He produced a large thumb, inlaid with grease, and at the Captain's request walked

round holding it out for inspection. Somebody, a demon, or possessed of one (for as the jealous commercial traveller pointed out no sane person would have been bold enough) had bitten the thumb. The teeth marks showed plainly.

"Ye'll notice," said the Chief, "that one of the teeth was hollow. Well, we searched next morning, and in the waste locker we found a piece of biscuit what had been bitten with a hollow tooth. The 2nd (him and the 3rd left this trip) said the biscuit was likely his. But his hollow tooth was of a different shape entirely.

"A stowaway left the biscuit perhaps," ventured the jealous commercial when the excitement caused by the Chief's story had somewhat subsided. "Plenty of us have hollow teeth."

"Perhaps you have one yourself, Mr. Blitters?" asked McMucker politely, pointing to the empty glass.

"I have that," returned the Chief with a wink.

"Talking of stowaways," continued the pertinacious commercial. "They told me at the hotel that the lost man, Blee, had been found in Pelung. In that case he must have come down with you."

"Don't remember any passenger answering to his description," said the Captain.

"Perhaps he had a hollow tooth?" sneered the commercial.

"I'd shuner have a hollow tooth than a hollow heid," announced the Chief.

The commercial traveller (he was young) subsided, and the conversation turned to other topics. But the twice warned Harold took care after that to leave no broken food behind him.

Fortune had so far been in his favour ; he had been recognized by no one, and the ship was already within a day of Jallagar. Now that he knew the 2nd and 3rd were not on board he felt more at ease. The donkeyman was the only man left to fear, and it was not his habit to promenade the upper decks. Cribbage with the steward in the forecastle was Mr. Pootle's relaxation. With ordinary care discovery was at least unlikely. Harold kept to his pigs on the afterdeck, watching them playing together in their sunlit pen, feeding them with such of his rations as he could not eat and generally making himself their friend. Several passengers noticed his absorption and commented on it as passengers will on other people's business. Some put it down to fellow feeling and smiled as they went by. Others saw in it natural kindness of heart, and at least three of the ship's 'boys' tried him for the loan of a dollar.

He did not see much of his master and Miss Mortimer except at meal times. They were always about together. Engaged, he heard one old lady tell another. She

wondered what the Gladstone Mortimers would say to it. And now his attention had been called to the matter he wondered also. He spoke about the Gladstone Mortimers in the cabin that afternoon and found that his master knew nothing of the ill-feeling between the two families. Neither it appeared did Miss Mortimer, for when they called upon him after dinner for fuller details she seemed very distressed by the story he told, curtailed though it was.

"There is no occasion for alarm, miss," he assured her. "If I can be of any assistance pray control me. For my references I mention the name of the Commandant."

She thanked him sweetly and they continued their walk, leaving him beside his pigs.

It was the last night on board—a lovers' night. The ship was heaving through long restful billows, legacies of the storm. The wind had died away and the sky was cloudless, and alive with a multitude of stars; and beyond the dipping stern a rising moon threw a scarf of silver over the sable waters.

"'Ullo, Blee," said a well-known voice at Harold's elbow.

The very man he wanted to avoid.

"Hush," he said quietly, raising a hand.

"What's the matter?" enquired Mr. Pootle.

"I'm travelling as Dick Turpin by Government orders. I must not be seen in your company."

"Ho!" said Mr. Pootle much offended. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing," explained Harold, "but I'm travelling with a lady and gentleman."

In a rapid whisper he told the astonished donkeyman of his adventures in Pelung, of his flight from the boarding house owing to Mrs. Varapetta's dislike; of his arrest and sojourn in the hotel.

"Ha, ha," said the donkeyman. "I see how the land lies." (He did not in the least.) "Well, I shan't give you away any'ow. But you must look out for Mrs. V."

"Mrs. who?"

"Mrs. Varapetta."

"Why, she's not on board?"

"Isn't she? All right. 'Oo's that standing looking over the rail aft?" asked Mr. Pootle, pointing.

Sure enough away at the very stern was a dim, broad outline of a woman clad in a white wrapper.

"There she is," said Mr. Pootle, triumphantly. "And there's the Chief, who's had his eye on her all the trip."

Another dim, broad figure was now visible in the moonlight beside the first one, and as the donkeyman and Harold looked, this second dim, broad figure attempted

to put its wicked arm round the first dim broad figure's waist—a task for Hercules.

There was a struggle—and then (it all happened in one breathless second) a wave struck the stern—the ship suddenly lurched—there was a shrill scream—a large foot made a notch in the face of the moon—and the Chief started running wildly forward bellowing in a cracking voice—

“ Man overboard ! Man overboard ! ”

CHAPTER XV

'LIAR," cried Harold, contemptuously, "it's a woman."

In a flash he had kicked off his trousers and slippers and, mounting the rail, was in the water before his slower-thinking companion had entirely grasped what had happened.

Up on the bridge the mate was shouting orders. Men ran by and lowered a boat. The telegraph grated and the big ship began to slow down, sweeping round the while in a huge curve. Then came the whizz and plunk of a lifebuoy which on reaching the water burst into wild unearthly flame.

This gave Mr. Pootle his cue. As a donkeyman he knew very little except theoretically about the lowering of boats. But he rather fancied himself as a quoit player, and here seemed a chance of using his special skill in the cause of humanity. Rushing round the deck he unhooked all the patent lifebuoys (they were just out from home)—and distributed them one after another among the waves. The effect was very pretty. Bright lights illumined the sea on either side of the ship and

dotted the wake. The surface of the water was clearly visible for half a mile astern.

Mr. Pootle viewed the result of his labours with much satisfaction. All this was the work of a humble donkeyman who had kept his wits in an emergency. And the humble donkeyman had not finished yet—by no means. If only the supply of ammunition held out his poor friends would by his instrumentality yet be saved. A sudden shout came to him from the misty distance ahead. With a mighty effort he launched one of his last life-buoys, which, flaring up, showed the boat with her gallant crew, rowing towards the ship.

“Hooray!” they cheered.

“Hooray!” cheered Mr. Pootle. He unhooked his last buoy and was taking aim with it in approved fashion when a heavy hand gripped him by the shoulder.

“What in thunder are you doing there?” enquired the Captain.

“It’s all right, sir,” said Mr. Pootle encouragingly. “We’ll have ’em safe in yet. What we don’t want to do is to lose our ’eads.” He resumed his interrupted aim.

“Safe, you wim-wam!” roared the Captain. “They’ve been picked up ten minutes ago. Put down that buoy and go for’ard instantly.”

The amazed quoit player dropped his weapon as though it burnt him, and with a disappointed glance

at the approaching boat, made his way to the forecastle. He turned sulkily into his bunk, heedless of the noise and cheering as rescued and rescuers were hauled on board. And although he shook hands with Harold next morning he did not evince much interest in the tale of the rescue.

"I should have done the same myself, but it was no good two of us going in," he mentioned.

Harold agreed, and said modestly that he found Mrs. Varapetta at once, that she could swim as well or better than he could, and that there had been no danger. With any encouragement at all he would have told the donkeyman more, for his encounter with the lady in the water had alarmed him and he wanted a confidant badly.

Not that he would have told everything to Mr. Pootle. It was some years before even Lily knew all the facts. This was what happened :—

When Harold dived from the rail he took a wide spring to avoid the propeller. Mrs. Varapetta had fallen into the wake and consequently was carried with the body of water which always follows a ship to near where he came up.

He heard her shrieking and spluttering very close to him.

"Where are you, missis?" he shouted. He swam towards the sound of spluttering and very soon found her.

She was treading water, rising and falling with the waves, her long hair tumbling over her eyes and floating like seaweed around her, showing black in the moonlight against the whiteness of her gown.

"Can I honour you with my assistance?" he offered.

"Why!" she said, spitting out a mouthful of salt water. "It's Mr. Blee. Yes, come and hold me up."

He closed and grasped her, and then she put her two hands on his shoulders and deliberately pushed him under. He struggled away and rose again to the surface a few feet distant.

"What did you do that for, missis?" he asked in great indignation.

"You were holding me too hard and I haven't much on and neither have you."

What an extraordinary, compromising position it must have been for the bold rescuer. She was trying to catch and drown him, and what the upshot might have been is alarming to think of. However, he eluded her and raised an agonized cry for help. It was answered, and he saw the boat and its lusty rowers coming towards him on the crest of a wave. And then Mrs. Varapetta had him again, clasping him tight.

"My noble rescuer," she murmured in his ear. "Don't try and get away from me. You'll never manage it. I'll never leave you."

She carried him under water once more ; when he regained his senses they were safe in the boat and already close to the ship.

* * * * *

Oh ! The cheering and patting on the back when he reached the deck ! Willing hands tore off his singlet regardless of buttons, willing hands rubbed him down with rough towels, willing hands forced brandy down his throat, carried him off and laid him in his bunk.

And apparently all the ladies in the ship had been waiting on Mrs. Varapetta.

"She knows you," Miss Mortimer said, as she shook him warmly by the hand next morning. "She calls you her preserver and says that never will you fade from her memory. What a pity she is so old."

"Now, now, Ethel—I mean Miss Mortimer," McMucker chimed in. "You want to pair off everybody. One at a time."

"She says your name's Blee," the next handshaking lady informed him. "Harold Blee. I told her it ought to be Hero Blee." She shook hands again warmly.

The passengers made him sit down with them at breakfast. "Never," they said, "could they allow a hero to wait on them." They talked of a purse of sovereigns.

"The finest thing I ever saw," said the Captain enthusiastically.

"Magnificent," echoed the Chief. "If I could ha' left me beloved engines I should ha' been before him."

"And most romantic too, Captain," added one of the handshaking ladies. "Are you aware that poor Mrs. Varapetta knows him? She calls him Harold Blee. They're old acquaintances, it seems."

Harold dropped the piece of biscuit he was eating and sat staring at his master.

"Is your name Blee?" asked the Captain, grown suddenly stern. McMucker nodded.

"It is," assented Harold, faintly, turning pea green.

A wave of anger passed over the Captain's face.

"And would you be good enough to tell us if you stowed yourself away in my ship?"

The passengers, taking their cue from the Captain, eyed their late hero in horror, but still his master nodded cheerfully.

"I did," replied Harold. He rose suddenly and left the saloon.

"We will see about this when we arrive at Jallagar," announced the Captain.

"And in the meantime," McMucker said, continuing the sentence, "Blee, who so far as I can see has not done anything very awful, is under my protection."

The Captain looked at him and, remembering who he was, said nothing.

"So we shall not be called on for the purse of sovereigns this trip?" asked the commercial traveller with a laugh.

This relieved the tension; conversation buzzed. Who was Blee? Was he a criminal? What was all the trouble? What had to be done? A dozen questions were flung at the Captain, but he was unable to give answers. All he knew was that Mr. Mortimer, their Jallagar agent, had wired several times about the man and wanted badly to lay hands on him.

Meanwhile the commercial traveller had been examining the biscuit on the plate.

"I'll tell you who he is," he announced. "He's the hollow toothed demon of the engine room, drowned by the Chief Engineer and now come to life again."

Everybody roared.

"Let's have another look at that thumb of yours, Chief," went on the commercial.

But the passengers had to rest content with a look at the hollow tooth mark on the biscuit, for the Chief, purple in the face, was already on his way to the door, intent on a further interview with Harold.

There was not much time to be lost: Jallagar was already showing in the hazy distance, and once there, he might never have the chance again of avenging that bitten thumb, that terrible fight in the engine room.

The owners and the Captain had hardly credited his story, and now his demon was proved a thing of flesh and blood, black at that—and he was likely to become the laughing stock of the Bung Line as he was already of the *Sherrybung's* saloon. It was enough to drive any respectable chief engineer mad, and had Harold fallen into his clutches a tragedy might have ensued. But that gentleman, guessing what was in store for him, had already climbed the foremast and ensconced himself on the crosstrees. The Chief and his assistants therefore searched cabin, holds, and bunkers in vain.¹

And while they searched the good ship *Sherrybung* steamed into Jallagar Bay.

Probably most people have heard of Jallagar: many invested in gold mining companies there some years ago—companies which seem so far to have struck their only payable lode in the pocket of the British public. But few have seen the place, and fewer still have surveyed it from a ship's bridge in the early morning. Viewed from a point of vantage such as this, when the sun still casts a shadow, and a trace of the night's dew remains to freshen everything, like water on a dusty road, the scene will be hard to beat for a certain beauty all its own. The ship glides through a land-locked bay, dotted with big rocks like molehills in a meadow. On one of these a lighthouse stands. Another, Pulau Amas, is

large enough to claim the title of island, and it wears a thatch of tangled creeper and a plume of ragged trees. Ahead lies Jallagar with its wharf and solitary hill. The red-roofed houses cluster thick along the water's edge for perhaps half a mile. Beyond them rice and cocoanut plantations are visible, extending, a chequer board of green, towards the distant forest.

Harold had never before seen so much of his native land at once. From the trade of the town and the number of country people who came in to market, he had always known Jallagar to be a largish place. But this was big enough to be a kingdom. And all ruled by the Commandant, and—he reflected—to a certain extent by the Commandant's chief clerk, who was, after all, merely an Eurasian like himself, once perhaps as lowly as he was, once perhaps as unknown and as poor. He pondered this as a short time ago he would never have pondered anything; for his strange experiences aboard the *Sherrybung*, his encounters with Mrs. Varapetta, his glimpse of the world and Pelung, and the continuous dodging of disaster during the past week or so, had altered his point of view considerably. The youth who had left Jallagar a week or so before had now come back a man.

As they drew inshore he fancied he could mark the tiny roof of the De Souzas' bungalow, and he spent a

few minutes in picturing the surprise and pleasure with which his adopted parents would receive him. He felt sure of them and of Lily, but what sort of a reception the Commandant would give him, and how matters had been arranged with the Gladstone Mortimers he could not imagine.

The flag still drooped over the Commandery, but the Castle was strangely bare of similar decoration and looked more than usually cheerless and forbidding. And what was the meaning of the lines of hanging bunting at the wharf, of those crowds of people? Of course—a royal welcome for his master; and glad he felt that Jallagar should do honour to so kind a gentleman. There was the McMuckers' carriage in the road at the back of the wharf: that of the Mortimers was just behind it.

The figures of the people were now easily distinguishable; there were ladies among the crowd, and one of them looked very like Lily. It *was* Lily, and there were Mr. and Mrs. De Souza beside her! They began waving and he waved back. Somewhere behind them a band struck up, and then as the ship drew closer every one in the crowd began to wave frantically, to flutter flags and handkerchiefs.

“There he is! There he is!” He could hear Mr. De Souza plainly, and see him pointing.

“ Three cheers for Blee ! Three cheers for the Commandant ! ” shouted a stentorian voice, and the roaring of the crowd drowned the music. What could it all mean ? What had he done that he should be welcomed thus ? Why did they cheer for him ? He lost his head, and began waving and shouting like a madman.

The vessel was alongside now and the gangway out. A guard of Sikh constables were forcing back the excited crowd. At one side of the lane they formed he could distinguish the band of the Eurasian club, all his old friends. Gomez and Rosario at the cornets, Xavier at the baritone, D’Almeida at the bassoon, and the rest of them, blowing, dear fellows, as though they would burst.

There was a stirring among the people at the back, a swift glitter of arms and the Commandant and Mrs McMucker walked up the gangway, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer. After them, with a further burst of cheering, came the De Souzas, his mother and father arm in arm, and behind them Lily, in a white silk dress. How well she carried herself ! How pleased and proud she looked ! The excitement and emotion of it all made him feel almost hysterical. As he sat half dazed and clinging to the mast he became aware of the people on deck calling, and presently a sailor climbed up and helped him to descend.

And then, amid frenzied cheering, in full view of the delighted mob, his relatives embraced him, the Commandant and Mrs. McMucker shook him warmly by the hand, and most astonishing of all, Gladstone and his wife did the same. True, there was not much friendliness about the grip these latter gave him, but it meant at least a public reconciliation and life in Jallagar more or less on the old terms.

He was taken possession of by the crowd after that, and what occurred he does not clearly know. He has a hazy recollection of shaking hands with innumerable people, of being carried shoulder-high to the Eurasian Club with a shouting mob all around him, and a band blaring in his ear: of a big tiffin, of the popping of many bottles, of making a speech, of weeping on the chairman's neck, but nothing more.

When he came to, he found himself driving along in a gharry with Mr. De Souza.

"Feel better now?" asked that gentleman.

"Yes. What's happened?"

"Well, it wasn't the drink, you only had a thimbleful," said Mr. De Souza. "It must have been the heat. I thought the air would bring you round, so I am giving you a little drive before we go home. Shall we turn now?"

They drove to the bungalow where Mrs. De Souza

insisted on another tiffin, for of course he looked ill and wanted feeding up. And he spent the afternoon in answering questions, with his mouth full, while Lily sat in the corner looking at him silently with wide eyes as at something new and rare.

CHAPTER XVI

IT must not be thought that the Commandant had derived unmixed pleasure from the demonstrations in Jallagar. He had been surprised and pleased at the evidence of his popularity among the Eurasian community. But has it not been laid down that no official can be a favourite in his district and at the same time do his duty? And did he not know that disorder in any part of the Empire would be welcomed by both political parties at home as a reason for giving or refusing Home Rule to Ireland? "Keep things quiet and don't worry the Governor, he may be asleep," is the best motto to adopt in the Pelung Civil Service. It was with some concern he had received a cablegram from headquarters, asking what the trouble was and whether it was likely to recur.

He had already sent a reassuring reply when news was brought to him that great preparations were being made for Harold's reception, that a grand procession was being organized, and that the Eurasian Club band was busy practising every night.

The position was a difficult one. Any more disturb-

ances after his telegram would mean a black mark against him in the books of the Governor. And there was certain to be further trouble if Mr. Gladstone Mortimer, rendered more than usually pig-headed by his bitter experience of the previous week, made another hostile move.

What that gentleman's intentions were he had no means of finding out, but the more he thought of it, the more probable it seemed to him that a man who had it in him to rise to the position of Agent for the Bung Line would have sense enough to bury the hatchet for the time being at any rate. He sent a note to the Castle; the answer he received showed plainly that the conclusion he had arrived at was correct.

An interview followed, and after a long discussion conducted on both sides with coolness and moderation (no ladies being present), an understanding was arrived at. The Commandant promised that Blee should take no proceedings for any threats or violence which had been offered him, and that Mrs. McMucker would hold out the olive branch to Mrs. Mortimer. Mr. Mortimer undertook with some hesitation that his wife would accept the olive branch and that Blee would not be interfered with further.

He got into trouble for this when he reached home. Women prefer fighting to diplomacy—in the other sex

—and Mrs. Mortimer in this characteristic was feminine indeed.

“How dare you arrange such a thing without consulting me?” she asked.

“I negotiated the matter to the best of my ability,” said Gladstone. “After all, sweetheart, she calls on you, not you on her, as the Commandant originally suggested.”

“He suggested that? The impudence of that man sickens me,” declared Mrs. Mortimer. “I refuse to receive her.”

“Come, come, my love, you must,” urged the alarmed Gladstone. “Don’t do it for her. Do it to oblige me.”

“I won’t.”

“You’ll cause great harm to my business if you don’t. I have been unfortunate in my relations with Government lately and the Bung Line do not care about it.”

“Just like you men: all for yourselves and your business. Why don’t you think of me?” But Gladstone saw she was relenting. He grew confident.

“My deliberate opinion is that we’ve won a great victory, sweetheart, if we examine the matter in all its bearings,” he said persuasively.

He had to talk for some time longer and overcome as many difficulties as an obstacle racer, but he won in the end, and Mrs. McMucker was received at the Castle.

True, she was kept waiting a long time, and had she not brought with her a novel and a bag of sandwiches, her temper might have suffered. As it was, she met Mrs. Mortimer's attacks with such impenetrable affability as to make that lady gravely doubt her own capacity; and she ended up by inviting the family at the Castle to be honoured guests at the birthday fête which was coming off at the Commandery in a month or so.

"And your niece too, of course," she continued. They had been wondering whether their young relatives would be travelling up together.

"I can't promise that," returned Mrs. Mortimer. "You'll have a young gentleman at the Commandery then."

"I don't think any of the spinsters here need fear for my brother-in-law."

"Is he engaged then, or married?"

"No. Well, the *Sherrybung* on Tuesday morning, then. Good-bye."

"Fear for a penniless young puppy like McMucker," thought Mrs. Mortimer. "The idea!"

"Fear for the niece of a person in her position," thought Mrs. McMucker. "Ridiculous!"

Nevertheless both of them tackled their respective young relatives about the matter at the first convenient

moment after the *Sherrybung's* arrival, and both of them, to their concern, were met with evasions, faint blushes and a general air of fluttering uneasiness.

Then of course they both went to their husbands, and of course their husbands, illogical as usual, refused to accept any blame. Irritating, wasn't it?

"I am sorry if Harry has made a fool of himself," said the Commandant. "To tell the truth I don't think he has. I took to her very much."

"So did I," acknowledged his wife. "But Harry wants something more than that."

"Very true. Well, I'll tackle him about it, and see what he has to say for himself."

Harry said a good deal, all of which McMucker faithfully retailed to his wife. "And among other good qualities Lady Balaclava is her Godmother," he ended.

"Is she," exclaimed Mrs. McMucker, who knew what that meant to an army man.

"She told him that the day before they arrived here," said the Commandant, looking very pleased. "Harry, you see, asked her to have him without knowing a little bit who she was. His usual luck. He's almost as lucky as me, my dear——"

"Don't," said his wife a moment after, faintly, "somebody might see us."

But at the Castle the course of true love did not run so smooth.

"I should, I admit, be extremely grieved and astonished should anyone bearing the name of Mortimer have entered on terms of more than formal acquaintance with, so to speak, a mere tributary of the McMucker family," quoth Gladstone,

"And on a P. and O. Boat, too," pointed out Mrs. Mortimer. "She makes me blush."

"Don't give way to any unusual emotion," urged her husband. "After all the situation may not be so portentous as you assume. Have you not, sweetheart, with your unrivalled woman's tact, been able to discover anything?"

"Nothing. When I said to her, 'No more shilly-shallying, tell me at once what your relations with that man are?' she looked me in the eye in the most brazen manner, and declined to answer."

"I shall have to speak to her myself," groaned Gladstone. He was fonder of his niece than he admitted. She felt this when they were alone together and gave him her confidence.

"It's even worse than you imagined," he told his wife afterwards. "They are affianced, actually affianced."

"Engaged! She shall not stay in my house," cried Mrs. Mortimer. "I won't have her here. Engaged

to a man she met on a steamer. The shameless minx."

"Softly, softly, sweetheart, don't allow your feelings to carry you away," urged her husband nervously.

"What do you mean by it? What do you care about my feelings? Standing there and letting a namby-pamby miss like that do what she likes."

"She will not do what she likes," explained Gladstone feebly. "She promises she will not marry without my approbation." He made to take a whisky and soda.

"Don't," said his wife. "How often have I told you that it doesn't agree with you?"

Luckily Ethel Mortimer was out just then, and Gladstone, after an hour or so, managed to talk his wife into a reasonable frame of mind. He was always acting peacemaker in these days, and like a true artist, was becoming adept at the part in spite of a disadvantage of temperament. The strain, however, was awful and there were occasions—when for instance his wife stopped his whisky—on which he felt inclined to throw caution to the winds and run amok. He had tried this a few times already during his married life, but had been obliged to give it up, as his wife, instead of being cowed, had at once started an amok of her own, which, compared to his was as Niagara to a watering-can. He therefore had to be careful in the house. In his office of course he

did as he pleased. Consequently a short time after Ethel's arrival found him with a new staff of utterly incapable clerks, who cared not what he said to them so long as he did their work. He stood it for a month or so, taking his tiffin in town and staying at the office till all hours. But man in the tropics cannot long endure work combined with worry for more than seven hours a day, and a touch of fever laying him by the heels he found himself in the ignominious position of having to ask his old clerks to come back, which they did at largely increased salaries.

Meanwhile Ethel was having a poor enough existence at the Castle. Her aunt treated her with veiled dislike and never allowed her to go out alone. Visitors came from time to time, and there was croquet. But what were croquet and coffee planters after Harry McMucker and the P. and O.? She used to see him sometimes pacing the lawn of the Commandery when she, of a morning, sat on the verandah playing with her little cousin, Daisy Mortimer. She had not spoken to him since they landed, that is to say for nearly a fortnight. This was bad enough but worse was the fact that he had never written. Although he could not see her he might, she thought, have managed that. "A mere steamer acquaintance," her uncle had called him. "Some of these men get engaged on every

voyage they make. They seem to think a first-class fare includes it."

Could it be possible that such things were? She did not know; she had never been from England before. Now that she considered the passage out more carefully, pondering the events of each vivid day, she remembered having been faintly surprised at the number of devoted couples there were about the decks. Were these playing at love for the voyage only?

"A lot of goers on board this trip," she heard one elderly man say to another, looking round. She had not appreciated what the man had meant then but she did now. Could he have included her? And those old ladies, so friendly at first, and for some unknown reason so distant later on. Was that the reason? Did they think so too? She felt herself blush from head to foot. "What," she reflected, her heart drumming, "should have made me appear different from the rest? Wasn't I like them? Didn't I behave as they did?" There was only one excuse for her, and if it proved worthless and her lover the kind of man her uncle seemed to think he was? No, she would never believe that, it could not be. He was all that was honourable and generous and she was sure of him, she told herself, for ever. And yet? Oh! Why did he not write?

She strove her utmost to crush the haunting doubts

within her, day after day fighting more feebly, growing pale and listless.

"Let it be a lesson to you," her aunt used frequently to tell her, and she, all her spirit gone, would redden and never reply. She found herself shrinking from the presence of her aunt and uncle, seeking solitude as often as she could in her bedroom or in the garden. It was a relief to get away from their staring eyes, to be alone with her thoughts, sad though they were, to sit among the green trees and share their sympathy.

There was a shady seat at the far end of the lawn, and there she rested one afternoon while her aunt slept. From this place she could look out northward and westward far over the unbroken ocean. Somewhere beyond that twinkling horizon lay England and the small country town which until now had been her home. It was morning there for day dawned with them some seven hours later than it did in Jallagar. Her father was perhaps driving down to the bank, and her mother, having seen him off would be indoors again, arranging vases, looking after linen, going to the kitchen, performing the thousand and one duties of a busy housewife.

In a day or two they would get her letter: she smiled sadly as she pictured to herself the excitement it would give cause to, the loving anxiety with which her mother

would read and re-read her glowing description of Harry, the long discussion in the evening with her father, the loving, helpful letter they would send in reply. How she wished she had her mother now to comfort and advise her! Two big tears rolled down her cheeks, falling on the book in her lap. She pulled herself together. This would not do. Never should anyone see her distress. Rising from the seat she began to walk up and down with clenched hands and set lips, her eyes on the ground. A slight rustling made her look up.

"Missy," a voice whispered. "Missy." A yellow hand appeared among the bushes, beckoning her to approach.

"Who is it?" she asked, alarmed.

"It has the honour to be me," whispered the voice. Going nearer the bushes she saw, peering out, the dark but honest face of Harold Blee. Her heart leaped. "You here? What is it?" she cried.

"Hush! I have taken on a small job as Cupid, if it behoves me so to express myself. Mr. Harry McMucker's getting enormously thin. Gone right off his grub. I am much obliged to give you this letter."

She tore the envelope open and read, at first faintly trembling and then with eager joy. "He loved her still, and would always love her. Why had she ceased to

care for him?" Ah! if he only knew! What was this? He had written to her daily and she had never answered his letters. Would she grant him one last interview? He sent this by a trusty messenger, and he hoped she would reply.

This, then, was the explanation of her aunt's activity of a morning, of her indecent haste to meet the postman. She had been a fool not to have thought of it before; to trust a woman who, after all, was not of her blood, before Harry. For that was what it amounted to. What he would think of her, she could not tell. A little longer might perhaps have meant an end of all between them.

"Where is your master?" she asked.

"He pines away at the Commandery," vouchsafed the trusty messenger.

"Wait for me in the road and we will go to him."

On the way to the Commandery, Harold, noticing her air of sadness, tried to cheer her up and interest her in other things. As a fascinating subject for discussion, he chose himself. It appeared that the second clerk to the Commandant had just been discharged for being intoxicated during office hours. There was, in consequence, a vacancy, and he, Harold Blee, had sent in his application which was now being considered by the Government. He had a copy of this masterpiece of

composition, and he read it to her. "The humble petitioner," it stated, "would be (D.V.) 22 years of age next birthday, and the enormous propensity for hard work due to his extreme youth was combated by the growing age of the humble petitioner, and the fact of his having travelled expensively." ("I allude, of course, to my tour in Pelung.")

The letter ended with a statement that, "Should the humble petitioner be favoured with job, no work, however minute, would be too small for his faithful interference." "Your Excellency's extremely obliged (in anticipation) Servant. Signed, Harold Blee," he read in rolling tones.

"I think I shall get the billet," he exclaimed.

"You certainly deserve to, Mr. Blee," said Ethel Mortimer. "Did you find all your friends well on your return?" She was smiling now.

"Jolly, most sincerely jolly," he replied cheerfully. "My affairs of the heart in excellent condition. Young gentlemen at the office heartily greeting me. Mr. and Mrs. de Souza number one chop."

"And Mrs. Varapetta?"

"Missy," said Harold, suddenly depressed, "we do not mention her. She is the cloud in my silver lining."

"I thought you were great friends."

"She is great friends. I am not. She sends me

picture postcards covered with messages of extreme sentimentalness. 'Little ducky,' and so forth. I disapprove her strongly, but still she sends postcards. Lily, my fiasco, Missy, found one. Her remarks were unpleasant, I assure you."

She came to the gate of the Commandery, where he bowed low in farewell.

She walked quickly up the drive; Harry McMucker saw her from the lawn and ran in the most undignified manner to meet her. His sister-in-law received her with more than sisterly affection, and then tactfully left the room.

CHAPTER XVII

THEIR conversation for the first few minutes is not worth chronicling ; besides, their speech was indistinct.

Then came explanations from Ethel as to why this had been thus for the past few weeks, or rather, as to why there had been no this.

" I began to think all sorts of things," she said, moving closer.

McMucker made a commonplace reply.

" How many letters did you write ? " she asked.

" Twenty-four, I think, was the number." He waxed indignant. " More letters than I have written in the last five years."

" What were they all about ? "

" About—you know—er."

" If my aunt has read them ! "

" What ! " cried McMucker, horror-struck. " She'd never dare."

This was a new side to the question.

" We must try and get them back," he suggested.

" She ought to be forced to give them back."

"I say, do you think Mr. Mortimer knows anything of this?" he questioned.

"I'm certain he doesn't. But he seems rather weak." (If Gladstone could have heard her!) "No, he never would."

"We'll go and see him at once," decided McMucker. "We'll drive down to his office."

"But——" objected Ethel, hesitating.

"My sister-in-law will come too," McMucker assured her. "She likes a little excitement sometimes."

So once did Mr. Gladstone Mortimer; but nowadays he hated it, longing like many another emperor for pipe and slippers, for a brief release from the cares and responsibilities of his high position, from the constant intrigues which had made his throne such an uncomfortable seat for the past few months. And here was another deputation. He groaned inwardly, and then, pulling himself together, had another chair brought into the private office.

"This is, if I may say so, an overwhelming pleasure," he remarked grimly, waving them to seats.

McMucker remained standing. "Can I speak to you alone a minute?" he asked.

They went into the next room.

"I think it only fair to tell you that Miss Mortimer and I are engaged to be married," said McMucker.

"I have already written to her parents, and it was our intention to have kept our plans private until I had obtained their consent."

"In other words you wished my niece to conceal the so-called engagement from her relatives," sneered Gladstone.

"Not from those who had any right to object to it," McMucker answered him squarely.

"Well, young man, learn that Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer and myself strongly object to it."

"I am sorry," said Harry. "Things would have been pleasanter otherwise. But, after all, you are not Ethel's father."

"I stand *in loco parentis* to Miss Mortimer. You will find my objection will have considerable weight."

"Shall we go back to the other room?" said Harry, moving towards the door. "I have made clear my position. What I have to say now shall be said before your niece."

They found both ladies pale but composed. Mrs. McMucker proved having posted letters addressed to Miss Mortimer at the Castle. Ethel said in a low voice that she had never received them.

"It is unbelievable," declared Gladstone loudly. "Either the postman has gone astray or——" He looked insolently at the Commandant's wife. "Allow

me to ask, Mrs. McMucker, whether you approve of this so-called engagement ? ”

“ The engagement pleases me,” acknowledged Mrs. McMucker. “ My brother-in-law will have a good wife. But I must confess I do not care about some of her relations.”

“ I am glad you are at one with me. And you still affirm you posted those letters ? ”

“ Certainly,” said Mrs. McMucker.

“ Then permit me to disbelieve you,” said Gladstone, rising.

“ Uncle ! ” exclaimed Ethel, much distressed.

“ How dare you say such a thing ! ” cried Harry fiercely.

Mrs. McMucker pressed his arm.

“ How dare I ? ” shouted Gladstone furiously. “ How dare you come to me with this innocent girl you’ve victimised—victimised, I say, and attempt to make incriminating statements about my establishment, bribing that woman to come to your assistance in your villainies ? You don’t know whom you have to deal with. The interview is ended. Go ! ” A picture of majestic wrath, he pointed to the door.

“ This is too much ! I shall put the matter in the hands of the authorities,” exclaimed Harry.

It seemed they would gain nothing by staying.

"I intended telling you, when you so rudely interrupted," remarked Mrs. McMucker coldly, turning in the doorway, "that I registered three of those letters. Good-bye, Mr. Mortimer."

Gladstone looked at her, his face blanching in spite of himself.

"Shall I stay and drive home with you, Uncle?" ventured Ethel, gazing at him sadly.

"Go, Miss!" he said violently. "You are as bad as the others. I will speak to you on my return to the Castle."

She turned with reluctance and followed the McMuckers.

Her unfortunate uncle shut the doors and sank into a chair. Here was another awkward situation. Misfortune seemed to assail him in battalions. The tale these people told had every appearance of truth. In his heart he knew it was true, but dignity had impelled him to throw discredit on it if he could. Not for the world would he have admitted to others the possibility of his wife's having appropriated the letters. But he had to admit to himself that she was quite capable of doing so, and indeed, of thinking it rather a clever move. Probably she had opened and read them; if this were so, the position was almost beyond remedy.

He scribbled a note and sent it off to the Castle. She

might, of course, have put the registered covers aside, intending to hand them back to their owner ; on the other hand, experience told him what an irresistible temptation other people's letters were to her. A sealed envelope had ever caused her fingers to itch. She always made a point of coming to the office on mail days and reading his letters before she read her own : a characteristic which at first had flattered him as showing an interest in his career, but which later took on the appearance of curiosity and distrust.

In disloyal moments he had likened her within himself to a magpie, so full was she of a restless passion for prying ; and—" Show me the man, and I will tell you what he will do," he quoted.

A message came back from the Castle : " I have burnt all the letters. I signed for the registered covers myself. Serve them both right."

" What criminal stupidity," muttered Gladstone. " The most foolish and discreditable thing she could have done."

If she had only consulted him all this might have been avoided, but now there seemed nothing for it but to go to the McMuckers and sue for mercy. They had beaten him again, hang them. If they wished they could humble him unspeakably, for stealing a registered cover was no small crime : a post office clerk had been sentenced

to five years' imprisonment just before for a similar offence. Had she not been foolish enough to sign the receipts things would not have been so bad. It would have been her word against the postman's.

He leaned back in his chair and, lighting a cigar, began to think. The punkah swung monotonously to and fro, the clock in the office ticked loudly through the silence, striking hours and half-hours, while the pens of the clerks scratched on. It was growing dark when he sat erect again and rang the bell.

"Ah Wang," he said to the clerk who answered, "you are very friendly with Mr. Sabarilly, the post-master, are you not?"

The clerk bowed.

"If my recollection is not at fault, he is—er—very fond of the society of the opposite sex."

"What, sir?" said the clerk.

"He likes the ladies," said his master more plainly.

The clerk grinned. "Quite true, sir. The Tuan gets the news of everything."

"Do you know if he likes one at present?" enquired Gladstone.

"He is very busy running after one now. A new lady. I have not seen her before."

"That's the one I mean. Go straight along to where

she lives and tell her I want to see her at the office at once."

"You know her, sir?" exclaimed the surprised clerk.

"As well as you do yourself," said Gladstone. "Off you go."

He took another cigar and waited. The clock struck seven and a boy came and lit a lamp that stood on the table. Outside there was a scraping and shuffling of feet as the clerks closed the office and departed for the night.

"Home you go too," he called out to the punkah puller, and opened the door to see the man off the premises. In a few moments the lamp-heated room became unbearably hot, forcing him to discard his coat and vest. He went back to his chair, the perspiration running off him, and sat there brooding until near eight o'clock, when the door opened quietly and a woman came in, followed by Ah Wang.

"The lady has come as requested," said the latter. "She begs me to say that she cannot stay long owing to an engagement."

"You have done excellently, Ah Wang," remarked Gladstone approvingly. "Now you can go home. I wish to see this woman alone." He waved towards the door.

"But perhaps your lady, sir, would like me to stay," suggested the clerk.

"Don't mind me," exclaimed the woman in a rich voice, "I can take care of myself."

"I was referring to master's lady, Mrs. Mortimer," explained Ah Wang. But he caught his master's eye, and at once retired in disorder.

"Take a chair, my good woman—lady, I mean," said Gladstone, generously.

This was evidently a superior sort of person with a really noble-looking figure, and very well dressed. He felt that he did not degrade himself by giving her a seat, although his conscience pricked him when he wondered what Mrs. Mortimer would have thought about it. But his wife always had preferred principle to policy. That was one of her failings. Were she present now, for instance, she would upset this perfectly respectable person's feelings at once and spoil everything. Whereas he—well, of course, every one knew his reputation for tact.

Taking a more powerful pair of eyeglasses he looked at the woman again. She would not be at all bad-looking were it not for that broken nose. Just as well, indeed, that Mrs. Mortimer was absent. She always had a prejudice against beautiful women, whereas he—

"It was extremely good of you to favour me," he commenced in his best manner, adjusting his eye-glasses.

"Who would not be glad to oblige a Gladstone Mortimer?" returned the lady, smiling. What teeth!

"Thank you, thank you," murmured Gladstone. "The sentiment does you credit. But—er—I do not remember having met you before."

"No, Mr. Mortimer. I have just come to Jallagar. But your fame is widespread."

Gladstone—flattery was as necessary to him as air to a pneumatic tyre—stuck out his chest.

"Ah! I thought as much," he assured her. "A face and figure like yours—if my admiration impels me to over-boldness, pardon—once seen could never be forgotten. It is delightful to have dealings with so much grace, and I do earnestly desire that the small piece of business that I am going to put before you shall be extremely profitable to yourself, and—er—er—that our future relations will—er—redound to our mutual credit. Would you consider it impertinent of me to ask the favour of your name?"

"Aphrosia Varapetta."

"Who gave you such a beautiful name?" enquired Gladstone, his deep voice thrilled with admiration.

"My godfathers and godmothers in my ——" said

Mrs. Varapetta, absently. "I mean I was called after my mother."

"A charming name, a charming personality," criticized Gladstone. "All the young men in the town wild with love, I make no doubt whatever. No! No! Don't shake your head, my dear lady. We have heard about Mr. Sabarilly."

"Mr. Sabarilly!" exclaimed Mrs. Varapetta with disdain.

"You have no great opinion of him then?" asked Gladstone eagerly.

She shook her head. "A bit off his trolley, like the rest of them. That's all."

"It is with reference to this Mr. Sabarilly I wish to speak to you to-night," went on Gladstone, lowering his voice. "I am in a rather unfortunate position. You will treat this interview as confidential?"

She nodded.

"Excellent. Well, my poor, poor wife—in a fit of—er—mistaken enthusiasm—burnt three registered letters belonging to a Miss Mortimer, a lady living with us, after having signed the receipts for them."

"And you want me to get those receipts back?"

"What wonderful intelligence," exclaimed Gladstone. "Yes, I will give you—er—five hundred dollars for them."

Mrs. Varapetta sat deep in thought for nearly a minute. Then she lifted her head and looked at Gladstone full with her big dark eyes.

"Mr. Gladstone Mortimer," she said impressively, "this business would mean hard labour if they caught me."

"I don't think there is much danger," urged Gladstone.

"There is. The risk is very great. And if they caught me, who would come to my aid? You would, you say?" She looked at him for a minute sadly, critically; then her face lightened. "I think you would. You've true honest eyes. Yes—I will do the job as you wish—for you. I wouldn't do it for any other man, no, not if he prayed for a week. The five hundred dollars are nothing. I will take them since you offer them. I am not a proud woman. But I'm a good friend and a bad enemy. What I make a condition is that if I do this business for you, you will help me to a berth somewhere in Jallagar."

"I promise," said Gladstone. He held out his hand.

"Wait here until I come," she said. "I may be one hour, I may be two. But there's little fear of me not bringing back what you require."

He went with her to the door and stood watching

while she disappeared among the shadows of the badly lighted street. In spite of her bulk she trod noiselessly, like a cat, flitting through the darkness as if accustomed to move by night. Four times he saw her appear and disappear as she passed the lamp posts. Finally she came into view under a glaring incandescent lamp at the crossing opposite the wharf of the Bung Line. To his surprise instead of walking towards town she turned without hesitation to the left and made straight for the *Sherrybung*, which was lying alongside, and was soon lost to sight among the dark, bunkering sheds that lined the wharf.

What this meant he could not fathom. He stood for perhaps half an hour gazing intently at the patch of light thrown by the incandescent lamp. At last he saw her re-appear, walking towards the town. She was accompanied by a man, but who the man was he could not make out. It looked rather like the postmaster. So far, so good; she evidently meant business. Her face looked that of a woman likely to be successful in what she undertook. He gave a sigh of relief and turned into the house again, closing the door softly behind him.

Some little time must elapse before her return. He reflected that he might as well pass it in working. There was a big pile of indents and letters to be dealt with for

the mail. He turned to these and began to go through them mechanically, writing directions on their backs for the guidance of his clerks.

His firm dealt in everything. Planters' wives indented for reels of cotton, mines required quotations for tons of cement c.i.f., people wanted whisky, cigars, tinned meats, flour, files, iron bars, bolts, muntz metal, liqueurs, nails, lime, corrugated iron. One man ordered a dozen pairs of socks and omitted to state the size. "Ask Mr. Brian to give dimensions," wrote Gladstone on the back of the indent. Nothing was too small for his attention. That was the secret of his success in business and of his early grey hairs.

After a while the pile of indents was disposed of, and he turned to the letters. The very first upset him. "P.S." wrote his Pelung correspondent. "Re the man Blee you enquired about in yours of the 31st ult., we are informed that he has now returned to your port and is living with a Mr. De Souza at Pansy Villa, Prospect Road." Blee again! The brute was intruding into his very business. He took a pen and savagely erased the postscript. "That will stop the clerks from talking to-morrow," he muttered. His fancy pictured them in the outer office grouped round the letter, smiling at each other, with nods and winks at the inner room. Laughing at him! The whole town was laughing at

him. He saw it in people's faces as he drove through the streets; in the eyes of his acquaintances, and of the very servants at the Castle. Now, probably, Pelung had got hold of the story and was laughing too.

All his present trouble could be traced to the rascally Eurasian. He had been a weak fool to take no legal proceedings. A decision in the courts would have silenced his enemies. But now his hands were tied—against Blee. But not, he reflected, against the De Souzas.

He had seen Mrs. De Souza on the *Sherrybung* that morning, as confident as ever, and the sight of her had reminded him of his boast to Mrs. Mortimer about introducing competition in the ship's clothes-mending business.

"I wonder if Mrs. Varapetta would care to enter the field?" he asked himself, and pinned the Pelung letter on an almanac. As he did so the street door grated faintly on its hinges and the lady he had in his mind noiselessly re-appeared. Her looks cheered him.

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

"Very well indeed, Mr. Mortimer," she said, smiling slowly.

"You—you've got them?"

"These are what you want I believe. One. Two. Three." She laid three slips of paper on the table.

Gladstone held them to the light. "Excellent," he cried. "Excellent. Pray accept my sincere commendation."

He pocketed the papers and, opening the safe, counted out five hundred dollars in notes, which Mrs. Varapetta, thanking him profusely, at once stowed away in a mysterious pocket.

"And now, Mrs. Varapetta," he said. "What about this berth you mentioned you wanted? I have under consideration the creation of an appointment on the Bung Line staff here. That—er of sewing matron. Would you care to take such a position?"

"I might see how it suits me," said Mrs. Varapetta, doubtfully.

"The position would be an improving one. The duties would be light and suitable for a lady; merely the execution of temporary repairs on such of the steamers' linen, etc., as might be required. The occupant could increase her earnings by taking care of the upkeep of the apparel of such of the officers of the steamers as might arrange to retain her services. At present such work is done by a Mrs. De Souza and—I understand—her daughter, but of course if you were appointed we should discourage the competition of these people."

"I have heard of the De Souzas," remarked Mrs.

Varapetta, slowly. "Are they relations of a man named Harold Blee?"

"They are, I believe," replied Gladstone, wincing.

"I will take the position," said Mrs. Varapetta with marked decision. She held out a bejewelled hand which Gladstone, after a moment's hesitation, took and shook limply.

He again saw her off the premises: not an instant too soon, for he had scarcely resumed his seat when he heard a carriage stop outside the door. A moment after his wife burst into the room.

"What does this mean?" she cried angrily. "Why don't you come home?"

"Duties connected with my position have detained me beyond my usual hour, sweetheart," murmured Gladstone apologetically.

Mrs. Mortimer sat down. "Somebody wearing a lot of scent has been here in this room lately," she remarked, sniffing the air and glancing round.

"Nonsense, sweetheart, nonsense," said Gladstone, reddening.

She looked suspiciously at him for a moment. "You are telling me a falsehood," she yelled suddenly. Snatching up the lamp she rushed from the room. Gladstone, in a state of terror, heard her quick, heavy movements as she searched the place.

All at once she raised a shout and burst back on him.

“What’s this?” she shrieked. “Tell me that, you with your coat and waistcoat off.”

She held up a silver hairpin.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Harold returned to office after having deposited Miss Mortimer at the gate of the Commandery, he found to his secret astonishment a letter on his desk, appointing him second clerk to the Commandant.

He was to be "Acting" only the letter stated, but later on, if his services proved satisfactory he was to be given the permanent position and the emoluments thereof.

This was quick work ; a back-ricking effort on the part of the Pelung Civil Service. He had sent in his application only a fortnight ago and already the matter was settled. It was another illustration, he reflected, of the favour in which he was held at the Commandery ; for after making allowance—and he did this generously—for the tact and ability he had shown in the successive positions of errand boy, office boy, junior clerk and typist, he had to admit that influence must have had a little to do with his promotion—influence, or as he preferred to consider it the marked intelligence exhibited by Mrs. McMucker in recognizing his merit.

He read the letter to his fellow clerks after the Commandant had departed for home, pointing out that he was the youngest 2nd clerk in the Service, and moreover that his rapid promotion constituted a record. They received his news but coldly, a man to whom he owed ten dollars being the only one among them who showed enthusiasm. There was now, this selfish fellow had said, some prospect of getting his money back. A mean-spirited band!

At Pansy Villa the De Souzas gave him a very different reception. Lily was unable to offer congratulations, not being on speaking terms with him since the arrival of Mrs. Varapetta's last postcard; but she could not prevent herself from looking pleased. He caught her in the act and smiled widely, on which she made a *moue* at him, and with averted face walked out of the room, leaving Mrs. De Souza in charge of the guard of honour.

"I always knew it would happen," declared that lady volubly. "'Mark my words,' I said to Mr. De Souza, sitting at this very table a week after you came, peeling onions, and you went out with that bad dollar and paid the milkman for me; 'mark my words,' I said, 'that boy will make his name, and if the example and training of a Christian household will be of any help to him he shall have it.'"

"And," continued the equally reminiscent Mr. De Souza, "you remember how angry you were when the milkman came back with him, and said he would never have noticed that the dollar was bad if the honest laddie had not insisted on ringing it on the doorstep."

"No, I don't," declared Mrs. De Souza shortly.

"I do," said Mr. De Souza feelingly. "I thought the house was coming down."

"You always had a nasty, spiteful memory, Mr. De Souza; if Harold had taken you as a model a poor enough man he'd be this day. It's a blessing there was somebody in this house that could lead him up to where he is now."

"Just like you to want all the credit," said Mr. De Souza, growing irritated. "I suppose you will be saying next that it was you that told him never to mix his drinks, never to lend money but always borrow it, and a few other tips that him and I know all about. I've no patience with you."

A rapping at the front door, an unusual occurrence at that time of evening, caused Mrs. De Souza to hurry away without retorting. It was Mr. Pootle in all the glory of mufti, and smelling slightly of beer.

"Well, you're a nice sort of joker," he remarked, shaking hands warmly with Harold. "Clearing out of the *Sherrybung* with never as much as 'kiss me!'

That's the way these young fellars 'ave, sir," he went on, turning to Mr. De Souza.

"Let me present Mr. Herbert Pootle, father," said Harold, bowing. Mr. De Souza rose and bowed gracefully. Mr. Pootle bowed like a debutante, and, dizzy with unaccustomed politeness, sank back into a chair containing some of Mrs. De Souza's sewing. He noticed his mistake at once, but Harold with great presence of mind turned on the gramophone and the few remarks that Mrs. De Souza caught were mistaken by her for an introductory recitative, full of local colour, to their new record, "The Bay of Biscay."

She was all smiles when she came in, having changed her dress, and she insisted on her husband and their guest having a bottle of beer apiece. It was a bread crumb in her bed of roses when Mr. De Souza—aggravating as usual—opened quarts instead of pints. She refused to share the beer, subsisting on bottled wrath.

"Well, well," sighed Mr. De Souza. "We shall have to finish it off ourselves, I suppose. There are not many ladies so moderate with drink as my wife, Mr. Pootle."

"She's all right," said the flattering Mr. Pootle, anxious to give her her due. "Many's the time I see her 'aving her drop aboard the *Sherrybung*. Why, I see you yesterday, you remember, missis, with a glass as big as a tall 'at in front of you."

"I can't say I do remember, sir," declared Mrs. De Souza reddening.

"What, don't you mind me asking how your 'usband was, and you saying, 'Where you ought to be, at 'ome minding the baby'?"

"She said I was minding a baby?" exclaimed the ex-jockey incredulously. He finished his glass at a gulp and revengefully opened another bottle.

"I was standin' outside the messroom door," continued the persevering donkeyman, intent on assisting one of the worst memories he had ever encountered. "Dressed in dungaree with a 'ammer in my 'and, talking to the Chief, who was sitting at the table with Mrs. Varapetta."

"You must be mistaken," urged Mrs. De Souza. She winked at him desperately.

"So I am," admitted the donkeyman, hedging at once. "Now I come to think of it you was only 'aving a small glass.'"

"Of what?" questioned Mr. De Souza sternly.

"Well, it looked like—like ginger ale," said the donkeyman.

He winked triumphantly at his hostess.

"It would," said Mr. De Souza coldly.

"Does Mrs. Varapetta often visit you on board?" asked Harold, turning the handle of the gramophone.

"Always there," replied the donkeyman. "Has her meals in the messroom along with the engineers. I'm no clarse with her these days, and you wouldn't be either."

"Have you heard I've been promoted?" asked Harold, changing the subject quickly. Lily had appeared and was standing in the doorway listening.

"That wouldn't make no difference. You'd 'ave no chance against the Chief."

"I don't want a chance," asserted Harold rising. "Mr. Pootle, allow me to give you the honour of presentation to Miss Lily De Souza."

"Please don't let me interrupt," cried Lily. "I am very interested in Harold and Mrs. Varapetta. Tell us all about it."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Pootle, looking very knowing. "There ain't no flies on us. We don't tell tales out of school, do we, Blee?"

"I don't recollect having conducted myself in a manner I am ashamed of," said Harold stiffly.

"What extraordinarily short memories this family seem to have," thought the donkeyman.

"Wot was you doing in the boarding 'ouse, then?" he cried. "'Ave you forgot all about that? All right, old pal, you needn't blink your eye at me. I shan't give the show away. 'Erbert Pootle wa'n't born yestiddy."

He drank some more beer and looked round sociably at the company. They appeared to him ill at ease. No life about them ; no cordiality.

" Well, I never," exclaimed Mrs. De Souza.

" I was doing nothing I was ashamed of," said Harold, very red in the face.

" You never do, you—you——" cried Lily jealously.

Mr. Pootle glanced at her. So that was how the land lay, was it ? Well, he had put things right already once that evening. He would soon put them right again.

" Don't be frightened, missy," he said, winking heavily at Harold to call attention to his masterly strategy. " She won't look at the likes of 'im now she's got the Chief."

" But you said you saw them kiss each other in the boarding house," cried Lily.

" I never kissed the woman," said Harold emphatically.

" There you are, miss, you see it must 'ave been somebody else," pointed out Mr. Pootle. He winked again. " But as I was saying," he continued kindly, " don't you worry your little 'ead about Mrs. Varapetta. He 'asn't got an earthly since she took up with the Chief. Give 'Arold time, my young lady, that's my advice to you. 'E'll settle down. Come now, we'll 'ave you lively yet. Just look at me and give us a smile."

Mindful of his reputation as Little Sunshine he lay back in his chair and laughed uproariously.

But Lily, head in air, left the room and Mrs. De Souza, taking the key of the beer cupboard, went after her. It was hard work, being cheerful in a house like this, and presently Mr. Pootle also took his departure, leaning on the arm of Harold, who had offered to accompany him as far as the *Sherrybung*.

"Glad to get out into the air again!" he said, stopping to breathe some in. "What you want in that 'ouse is brightness."

He held fast to Harold's coat with one hand and wrote notes of exclamation in the air with the other.

It appeared from what he said that he, Herbert Pootle, was a well-known specialist in brightness, and that his services would be given free of charge at Pansy Villa for Harold's sake.

"I'll come up every night, every bloomin' night I can get 'shore," he promised, oozing kindness.

They walked on slowly for fifty yards, always uphill it seemed to Mr. Pootle. With extreme cunning he took a zig-zag course, to make the slope easier. It seemed to him they were a long time coming to the top. They must have lost their way.

"Glad to get out in the fresh air again," he said, stopping to breathe some in. "Now what you want in

that 'ouse is brightness. 'Ow much longer is this 'ill going to last ? ”

“ It's not a hill, we're on the level,” said Harold.

“ Not a hill,” cried Mr. Pootle, pointing with his disengaged hand. He knew what it was now. Harold could not stand beer. But he himself had been like that once and he would overlook it. Also he would cheer him up.

“ Steady now, old pal,” he said with kindly tolerance. “ Now then, all together, ladies and gentlemen——”

As we sweep, frough the deep, when the stormy
winds do blow,
As we sweep, frough the deep, when the stormy
winds do blow ;
And the battle rages loud and long,
And the battle rages loud and long,
When the store-me-winds-do-blow,
When the store-me-winds-do-b-l-o-w,”

he carolled, beating time with his topee.

They got under weigh once more, stepping out to the music, and it seemed to Mr. Pootle, making better progress up that endless hill.

“ Glad to get out into the fresh air again,” he said, stopping to breathe some in. “ What you want in that 'ouse is brightness. Now then, chorus again—

As we sweep through the deep.

Come on, naow, you dismal blighter, cheer up ! ”

But Harold would not sing in spite of the large

audience which had collected, and he even declined to join in the step dance which Mr. Pootle, to the tune of "Egypt," executed on the well-lit pavement against the Eurasian Club main entrance.

It was enough to try the temper of an angel, and Mr. Pootle spoke quite shortly to him when they said good-bye on the wharf. He went so far as to call him a kill-joy, and told him as they shook hands that for sixpence he would knock his head off.

"What you want in that 'ouse is brightness," was the text of the earnest sermon he preached, first at Harold, afterwards when that gentleman had slipped away unperceived, at a post which looked like him.

Mr. Pootle had never before found such an attentive listener. At ten o'clock the Chief discovered him in the middle of his thirdly, and led him gently but firmly on board.

Meanwhile Harold sauntered mournfully home, making a long detour to avoid the Eurasian Club whose members, he knew, objected to strangers dancing on their doorstep.

It was a lurid ending to his red-letter day. What the De Souzas thought of him and his relations with Mrs. Varapetta he was almost afraid to think. He felt in his bones that he would know that evening; that Mrs. De Souza was too principled a woman to go to bed

leaving an unkind word unsaid. Even now she would be waiting for him on the verandah; waiting to tell him a lot of things he did not want to hear, disgraceful things about himself which he was not in a position to disprove. And Lily would be there to listen. What wicked luck!

The other bungalows in the road were in darkness, but Pansy Villa was still illuminated. He crawled up the steps. Yes! They were all waiting for him. How unmerciful they looked!

"And this," said Mrs. De Souza pointing, with infinite sadness, "is the viper for whom but a short month ago we killed the fatted calf."

"A-hoo! A-hoo!" wept Lily.

He entered like a beaten dog and stood opposite to them.

"Look at him, all of you," cried Mrs. De Souza. "Look at him with the mark of the beast on his brazen temple and fear in his false heart."

"A-hoo! A-hoo!" wept Lily.

Harold glanced at her compassionately.

"Yes, you villain, look at her; and look at that old ruin," continued Mrs. De Souza, indicating her husband.

"My dear!" protested Mr. De Souza, raising his grief-stricken head.

"A-hoo! A-hoo!" cried Lily.

"Don't," said Harold. "I can't bear it. I—A-hoo! A-hoo!"

"A-hoo! A-hoo!" wept Mrs. De Souza.

* * * * *

A minute had elapsed when Mr. De Souza peeped through his grief-stricken fingers as though in church. They were still at it, and as nine o'clock had gone, and supper had not yet been served, the position, he felt, was growing serious. He ventured a slight cough.

"Oh! You unfeeling wretch," said his wife, looking up.

"It isn't my fault. I declare it isn't," exclaimed Harold, who thought she referred to him.

He rose frenziedly and faced them. "I will make myself clean-breasted before you," he cried, a determined look coming into his face. "You shall hear my story now that I find it impossible to keep it any longer from you and you shall judge whether I am a sinner or our recent inebriated guest is a liar. Listen!"

Taking a chair with extreme dignity he motioned them around him and told the tale of his adventures with Mrs. Varapetta.

"My poor lamb," said Mrs. De Souza tenderly when he had done.

"Harold," murmured Lily shyly.

Heavens! They believed him! Noble hearts! He held out a hand to each.

"What an extremely interesting woman," observed Mr. De Souza from his chair, critically.

"What?" enquired Mrs. De Souza. "Who?"

"Why, Mrs. Varapetta to be sure," cried Mr. De Souza, enthusiastically. "I should like to meet her."

Mrs. De Souza eyed him sternly. "Tell me what you find interesting about the woman?" she requested.

"Only academically interesting, of course, my dear," explained Mr. De Souza. "To a phrenologist, for instance."

He subsided into his corner again.

"You'd better let me catch you. I'd give you phrenologist," declared Mrs. De Souza. "Well, I never, past nine o'clock and no supper. Hurry up, Lily, Harold must be famishing and it does not do to keep Governments famishing; they get nasty."

In a very short time they were seated at the table, laughing and talking as if there were no such things as Mortimers and Varapettas existing. Mr. De Souza, in the best of tempers again, rose and proposed the health of their distinguished son, equally victorious he declared in the stern battle of life and in—here he looked at the blushing Lily—in the playing fields of love.

Harold replied in some confusion, but later on in the

evening when Lily went out on to the verandah for something or other, he boldly followed her. She was leaning on the rail. The lamp was out and the stars lighted her oval face but dimly.

"A lovely night," he said as he bent down beside her.

"Yes. I was looking at the fireflies." She pointed to a bush alive with them.

"Won't you look at me, dear Lily," he said. "I want you to do me the honour of being my wife?"

He got it right that time.

CHAPTER XIX

“**W**HAT have you to say to that? What have you to say to that, I demand?” shrieked Mrs. Mortimer. She held the hairpin within an inch of Gladstone’s nose. He recoiled in horror, and then, making a mighty effort, regained his self-control.

“It seems to be an ordinary hairpin, so far as my limited knowledge of the instruments appertaining to the toilet of the other sex instructs me,” he said, eyeing the trophy with well-simulated interest.

“A woman’s been with you this evening,” cried Mrs. Mortimer. “Deny it if you can.”

“Really, sweetheart, you ought to know me better,” said Gladstone uneasily. He pulled out a large gold watch. “But it grows late, my love. I fear our prandial repast will, if we do not hasten, be slightly—er—overdone.”

“A woman’s been with you this evening, you deceitful villain,” said Mrs. Mortimer again as she dogged him to the carriage. “Deny it if you can.” When they were seated she repeated her assertion.

"My dear sweetheart," urged Gladstone soothingly. "May I beg you to exercise a little of your extraordinary common sense. Why should the mere presence of an ordinary article like a hairpin in public offices such as those of the Bung Line, be accepted as evidence that I have been in communication with a female of any description whatever? Calm yourself, I entreat, and take an unprejudiced view of the matter."

"You deny then that you have been seeing a woman in your office this evening?" asked his wife, looking at him hard.

"Really, dearest, you try me too far. Have I not already explained?"

"Answer me at once!" yelled his wife. "Have you or have you not seen a woman in your office this evening?"

"No," answered Gladstone, looking away.

"Very well, then," said Mrs. Mortimer. "We'll say no more about it. You've never lied to me yet, there's that to be said for you. I'll believe you even against my own senses."

Gladstone mopped his brow and leaned back against the cushions. To what depths, he reflected, was this miserable quarrel leading him. A few short months ago he was an upright man who always told the truth, except in business; and now—his very wife would scorn

him if she knew. He was much tempted to make a clean breast of everything to her there and then. But the knowledge that she could not be trusted with an important secret, and a dread of the jealous fury which would possess her when she heard of his lie about Mrs. Varapetta restrained him. He contented himself with relating the story of his interview with Ethel and the McMuckers.

"It was most unfortunate you burnt the letters, at any rate," he commented.

"I'd do it again," declared his wife, viciously. "How dare she use our letter box for such things? Like her impudence!"

"Certainly, dearest, certainly. Your sentiments do you credit. But I am concerned that you signed the receipts. They intend to prosecute."

"Let them prosecute! What can they do? What do I care?" cried Mrs. Mortimer defiantly.

"Well, you signed for the letters, sweetheart."

"I don't care if I did. Let them prosecute," said Mrs. Mortimer, but her voice sounded somewhat less defiant. "You can't get them back, I s'pose?" she asked.

Gladstone fished in his trousers pocket and produced the three slips of paper.

"There they are, darling," he said triumphantly. "What do you think of your old Gladdy now?"

She recovered herself instantly. "How dare you try and frighten me like that?" she cried. "You have no consideration for my nerves. Why couldn't you say you had them at once?"

"I tried to give you a pleasant little surprise," explained the chapfallen Gladstone. He began to put the receipts back in his pocket.

"Give them to me," ordered his wife. "I won't trust you with them."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tear them up and throw them out of the window."

"I know a better way than that, sweetheart," said Gladstone. He handed his wife a box of matches and held up the receipts.

"Strike a match and set the paper alight," he suggested.

She complied. He kept hold of the receipts until they were consumed, burning his hand in the process, and then dropped the charred remains on to the road.

"That part of our enterprise is now accomplished," said he, leaning back in the carriage. "If my niece asks you where her letters are you must say you did not receive any."

"Tell a lie to a tupenny-hapenny chit like her!" said Mrs. Mortimer. "I'll do nothing of the kind."

"Dearest," urged Gladstone, "do you not perceive that you will not be—er—finessing to her. It will be to the McMuckers and the Government."

"That makes a different thing of it," conceded his wife. And when they reached the Castle she carried out her husband's wishes with, as he thought, quite unnecessary emphasis.

It appeared that nothing would have induced her to touch anything of Harry McMucker's even with a barge pole, and that if her niece intended receiving communications from such a person she must have a letter-box put up outside the house and supply her own disinfectants. To all of which Ethel replied by asking once again for the letters.

"I haven't got your letters, I tell you, you obstinate minx," screamed Mrs. Mortimer. She flung off to bed.

Gladstone must have remonstrated with her during the night for next morning she sat sulkily at the breakfast table and left all the talking to him.

"My dear girl," he assured his niece, "much as I disapprove of your attitude over this matter, I beg you to believe that I and your dear aunt, who, as you know, has had a very trying time lately, would rejoice exceedingly if we were able to hand you the epistles you fondly imagine we are possessed of. Hum. But we cannot do so as we are not possessed of them."

"Then where are they, Uncle?" asked Ethel, looking very pale.

"That is a problem which for the last twelve hours has been exercising my attention," said Gladstone in deep tones. "The conclusion Mrs. Mortimer and I have arrived at is—that the letters were not delivered at the Castle."

"But, Uncle," objected Ethel, all her courage summoned up, "they must have been. They were registered."

"So people say," returned Gladstone, smiling slightly, "but I am disinclined to believe it." He drank his coffee and looked at her. "In fact I will go so far," he continued, "as to back my unfavourable opinion of your Mr. McMucker, and my belief that the alleged registered letters were never delivered—delivered, mark you—at this establishment. If you can prove that these registered letters were delivered at the Castle I will withdraw my ban on your engagement, nay, I will go so far as to acknowledge I was mistaken."

"You will, Uncle?" cried his niece joyfully.

"I think I am safe in doing so," said Gladstone grimly.

"You'll never prove it," snapped Mrs. Mortimer.

"And if not?" cried Ethel.

"You must give me a solemn undertaking never to see Mr. McMucker unless in the presence of myself or

Mrs. Mortimer, until such time as I myself shall have received the sanction of your parents to your engagement."

"I may write to him?"

"You may do that."

"Provided you have a second letter-box," interrupted Mrs. Mortimer.

"Then I accept your terms," cried Ethel, the roses leaping back into her cheeks.

Accept his terms? Of course she would. Had not Mrs. McMucker showed her the receipts proving the letters had been posted, and was not Harry going down that very morning to make enquiries at the post office? They were not terms at all. Her uncle was making her a free gift, probably in some manner calculated to save his wife from any trouble and to keep his own reputation for unbending firmness in good repair. What a delightful, absurd, pompous old gentleman he was! Trying to appear cold and stern; and all the time with one of the kindest hearts that ever beat concealed under that white waistcoat. His white waistcoat was typical of him, she thought, smiling; the least bit of damp took the starch out of it. No doubt he was fretting inwardly now about what would happen to his wife, who, it could not be gainsaid, deserved some punishment for her mean conduct. Poor Uncle Mortimer! He would find his

niece not ungrateful, very unrevengeful. The dear old man!

Musing in this fashion she hastened upstairs and began a letter to Harry, announcing the good tidings and extolling the virtues of her uncle.

Meanwhile, that gentleman having finished his breakfast, walked out to the front where his carriage stood waiting to take him to the office.

His wife was there, directing the labours of three Chinese 'boys' and a gardener. They had made a large hole in the gravel drive and were busy putting in a wooden post.

"What are you doing?" he enquired in horror. The drive, on which he had expended years of care was in a way to be ruined.

"A little idea of my own," explained Mrs. Mortimer exultantly. "This is going to be a letter-box for your niece."

"Pshaw!" cried Gladstone impatiently, "can't you leave the girl alone? You go too far——"

"What?" shrieked Mrs. Mortimer.

"Go too far into the middle of the drive," continued Gladstone, covering himself hastily. "How is the carriage to proceed past?"

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Mrs. Mortimer. "If you'd have come out before you could have told

me where you wanted it. Now you're too late. The carriage must drive over the lawn."

"But, sweetheart," urged Gladstone, "if you must have a letter-box, cannot I persuade you to have the post moved to one side?"

"I refuse to have it moved to one side. How dare you ask me? Before all the servants, too. They will think I don't know my own mind."

"But, my dear——"

"That's enough," said his wife. "Because I have given in to you over one or two little things lately, don't think you are going to get your own way about everything. For you are not."

Her eyes flashing dangerously, she seized the post and planted it in the hole.

"If anyone touches that without my orders he will be discharged," she told her assistants.

"Who would have the courage, mem?" chorussed the four Chinese.

Certainly not Gladstone. With a deep sigh he moved over to the carriage and instructed the syce to walk it across the lawn. His pet lawn!

The Orientals stared, smiling covertly at each other, he fancied, but he was too sick at heart to feel more than a dull resentment at that. What troubled him was a growing conviction that his wife must be going off her

head. A couple of months ago had anyone dared to suggest that their lawn, their beautiful lawn, should be desecrated by carriage wheels, horror would have overcome her. And now she seemed ready to blow up the very house to satisfy a whim. This looked bad enough, but a worse indication was her treatment of him. She seemed to have lost absolutely all sense of wifely respect. She spoke to him as though he were a servant. If this was not insanity, what was? he asked himself.

He pondered the matter on the way to the office and decided to have his wife medically examined at the first opportunity. The local practitioner would be valueless for this purpose, as he and Mrs. Mortimer had held the doubles ping-pong championship of Jallagar for many years. Somebody unbiassed was needed, and even then the matter would be one of extreme delicacy. In any case, nothing could be done until they went on leave. And then doctors at home would probably say her attacks were due to the Jallagar climate. It was all most unsatisfactory.

He was late in reaching town, and found the office crowded with natives who were booking their passages for Pelung.

The *Sherrybung* was sailing during the afternoon. He had his mail to finish and a hundred other things to attend to, but somehow that morning he made no

progress. There seemed to be a conspiracy to prevent him from working. The Captain worried him over his manifest, complaining about delay in loading cargo. Chinese merchants pestered him to give them cheques on Pelung in exchange for dollars, and to reduce freights on merchandise. He had dozens of bills of lading to sign, and the place appeared to be full of people who had chosen this of all days to visit him. The last of these visitors was a Roman Catholic priest who had the temerity to come and ask for a donation. He presented this gentleman with a flea in the ear, and then, in a state of extreme irritability, went to finish his mail. It was nearly two o'clock and the box at the post office closed at three. Fountain-pen in hand he sat, going through acres of typewritten sheets, altering them here and there, signing his name and flinging them aside. Trembling clerks danced attendance. Everything they did was wrong; but he made good progress in spite of that. At 2.35 he had his work well in hand. He saw that he would manage to get the mail finished in time unless something unexpected occurred.

Mr. Alexander Blitters, Chief Engineer of the s.s. *Sherrybung*, provided the unexpected. He walked into Gladstone's private office without being asked and sat down, uninvited, on an office chair, a thing which no Captain even had ever dared to do. It was more than

an intrusion, it was a desecration, and the trembling clerks waited for their master's criticism as one waits for the next flash of lightning.

But Mr. Blitters appeared to consider himself safely insulated. He produced a coin and tapped with it on the mahogany edge of the table as if tapping for a barman in a bar.

"What do you want, my man?" cried Gladstone, wrathfully, when he had recovered from his astonishment.

"I'm waiting to speak to you, ma man," said Mr. Blitters, mimicking.

"You have no business in here. Go outside and wait."

"I'll dae no such thing, ma man," stated Mr. Blitters.

"Go outside. You're the worse for liquor. I'll report you for this," roared Gladstone in a rage.

"Ye'll report me, will ye?" sneered Mr. Blitters. "And will ye send the report by registered letter?" He laid such emphasis on the last two words that Gladstone changed countenance.

"And will ye post the registered letter by Mrs. Varapetta? Tell me that, my mannie," continued Mr. Blitters, crescendo.

"What do you want?" asked Gladstone in much lower tones, waving the clerks out of the office.

It appeared that Mr. Blitters wanted an increase in salary and the discharge of the Captain.

"I will recommend you for your increase in salary," said Gladstone. "And as regards the Captain, I don't like the man myself, and I'll see what can be done."

"Ye'd better," threatened Mr. Blitters.

Another flinty bit on the transgressor's way.

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CHAPTER XX

THE Jallagar Post Office stands alongside the other Government offices on a table of shaven lawn in the upper reaches of the town. It is a square whitewashed building with a roof of blood-red tiles, and is erected on brickwork pillars some five feet above the ground. Under the floor are stored the Jallagar fire engine, three or four mail carts, some flower pots, gardening tools, coils of rope, canvas hose, and other appliances necessary for the efficiency of the Government. The red tape is kept in the office above, the timber walls and padlocked doors of which are stout enough to make a burglar weep.

But the floor of the building is just a floor, vulnerable as the stomach of a pugilist. And in the present instance the thieves had been contemptible enough to hit below the belt.

So at least unhesitatingly said the Police Inspector when the sprung planks and the Government crowbar lying alongside them were pointed out to him. What with aeroplanes and submarines the life of a policeman nowadays was not worth living, he declared, especially

when burglars burgled for mere pleasure and excitement, as seemed to be the case in the present instance. The whole office was littered with papers, but the stamps and postal orders were untouched—in fact, nothing valuable or valueless so far as could be seen was missing. It looked like sheer wantonness, equivalent as a reminder of danger to the practice run of a fire brigade.

An annoying feature was that the thieves had left no clue. They had walked along a plank to the scene of operations, forced the floor up with the Government crowbar aforesaid, done their little business inside, and then walked home again. There was not a foot or a finger print to go on with, never a dropped button or shred of cloth on a nail.

“It beats me, sir,” the Inspector told the Commandant. “It must be the work of a very clever gang of international thieves. Had they taken the stamps we could have watched the public-houses for persons trying to change stamps for beer. As it is, sir——” He smiled bitterly.

“You’ve no theory, I suppose?” asked the Commandant.

“No, sir,” admitted the Inspector, apologetically.

The Commandant smiled pityingly. He had. Later he proceeded to put it to the test by sending for the inwards registered letter book. He searched this

volume for some time and then sent for the postmaster.

"Where were you last night?" he questioned.

The trembling postmaster mumbled something about an alibi.

"You don't suspect anyone?"

"No, sir."

"That will do just now. Please send me in at once the signed receipts for these three letters." He pointed to the entries in the book.

An hour after they came and told him that the receipts could not be found.

This was strong confirmation of the correctness of his theory. He at once sent Harold Blee up to the Commandery to call Harry McMucker.

"Three registered letters are missing, Blee," said Harry as they walked down the road together. "And now my brother tells me that the evidence that these letters were delivered is missing also. It is most annoying."

How annoying he did not yet know. Ethel at that very moment was writing her letter to him.

"The post office is a bad annoyer," said Harold severely. "We have had to reprimand them several times. And now this too lax burglary makes it essential that we shall severely sit on them."

There was a non-committal air about him : he appeared as if keeping himself in restraint. So at least it seemed to Harry.

" Do you know anything about the matter, Blee ? " he asked.

" I ! Why should I, Mister ? The Commandant has not reposed me in his confidence."

" Offended," decided Harry, mentally. " Probably so proud with his new job that he imagines he ought to be consulted about everything. My brother does not know how smart he is."

" No doubt the Commandant would not wish to trouble a senior officer like yourself about trifles," he suggested, throwing oil on the troubled waters.

" But yet he sends me with a letter to you," pointed out Harold acutely.

" The only man he can thoroughly trust, no doubt. But I'm not so considerate as my brother, and I'm going to trouble you here and now. It will be a bad business, between ourselves, for Miss Mortimer and me, if we can't trace these letters. Will you give us the benefit of your local knowledge, and assist us ? "

" I will, Mister," promised Harold. " And—we shall see what we shall see. But I shall require your unlimited sanctions in the pursuit of my investigatings."

" You shall have them," said Harry.

It was owing to his intercession that Harold was allowed to be present at the unofficial enquiry held by the Commandant that morning ; an enquiry which, in spite of the severity of the Inspector's cross-examining, was entirely barren in results.

The post office clerks, accompanied by white-washing witnesses, passed through the witness box one by one. The night watchman was clear of suspicion being known as illiterate, and seen asleep. The police had so far found no clue. There was only the circumstance of the missing receipts to go on, and this the Commandant decided not to make public in the meantime. He contented himself with calling the clerks together at the close and promising them the hearty thanks of the Government should they discover the offenders. The clerks asked him respectfully to make it a reward, and on his declining to do so turned listlessly to their work.

Meanwhile, Harry in some consternation was reading Ethel's letter, and deriving little comfort from the process. Gladstone had completely out-generalled him, that much was absolutely plain. In other circumstances he would have admired temperately the man's determination and unscrupulousness, but now he had room for no other feelings than acute pity for himself and his innocent fellow-victim and deep rage against

those who had used the unsuspecting goodness of her nature for their undoing. The deceit was abominable and loathsome. He had disliked Gladstone Mortimer intensely before and now with his dislike he mixed contempt. No decent person would have tricked a woman like this. The man deserved no consideration, and when the time came, as it would sooner or later, he vowed that no consideration should be shown him.

In the meantime Ethel and he would have to wait. She had passed her word—she said so in her letter—and the fact of the Mortimers acting deceitfully was no reason for asking her to behave in a similar manner. At the worst they would have to exercise their patience for a few months only. Until these elapsed he must rest content with interviews held in the presence of Mrs. Mortimer. And they were allowed to write.

He sat down and wrote her a letter, telling her of the new difficulty that had arisen and stating that unless she forbade him he would present himself at the Castle sometime during the afternoon, et cetera—et cetera—et cetera. There is nothing like getting used to things.

It was a depressing interview, enlivened only by the fact that Mrs. Mortimer did not know a word of French, whereas both he and Ethel had received the usual lessons in that language when at school.

The conversation went something in this manner—

ETHEL. "Beautiful weather we are having, is it not?"

HARRY. "It was awfully good of you to let me come and see you."

ETHEL (with one eye on Mrs. Mortimer, who sat within earshot, crocheting grimly). "I am very pleased you came."

Mrs. Mortimer snorts and listens intently for the next remark.

HARRY. "Beautiful weather we are having, is it not?"

ETHEL. "Lovely, and this house is so delightfully cool."

HARRY. "Yes. We had it rather warm at the office this morning."

ETHEL. "Did you? I wonder why?"

Mrs. Mortimer intensely interested, crochets furiously.

HARRY. "I did not care to tell you about it in my letter."

ETHEL (smiling faintly). "I have a separate letter box of my own now. Did you notice it as you came in?"

HARRY. "I did.—But still I thought it better not to write what I thought."

ETHEL. "Oh!" (looks on the ground a minute and then says bravely), "Ma tante ne parle pas Français."

HARRY. "What? Um—um—pas un mot?"

ETHEL. "Pas un mot. Elle est très bête."

Mrs. Mortimer, getting red in the face, still crochets furiously.

HARRY. "Bon.—Aujourd'hui—hum—dans le matin—er je vais avec Monsieur Blee a l'office. Um—et la j'aperçois que les voleurs sont entrée dans—er—l'office et ont pris les papiers que votre tante avait signé."

ETHEL (who does not understand and thinks it is her fault). "Parlez lentement s'il vous plaît. Je ne comprends pas."

Harry repeats his words slowly.

ETHEL (smiling in spite of herself). "Burglars!"

Harry nods.

ETHEL. "How awful! Well, go on."

HARRY. "Nous avons pas de *trace*. J'ai désespoir—J'ai parlé avec mon frère et nous deux pensons que votre oncle est très scélérat."

ETHEL. "Pourquoi?"

HARRY. "Parcequ'il a pris les *receipts*."

Mrs. Mortimer looks up in a fever of curiosity, with a great effort restrains herself from speaking and continues to crochet furiously.

ETHEL. "Qu'est ce que vous voulez faire?"

HARRY. "Je ne comprends pas."

ETHEL. "What are you going to do?"

HARRY. "Oh! Quand nous avons trouvé si Monsieur Mortimer est un scèlerat, Monsieur l'Inspector va demander les *receipts*."

MRS. MORTIMER (unable to restrain herself any longer). "What is that you are saying about me, you insulting creatures? I won't have it."

ETHEL. "You're quite mistaken, Aunt. We were talking about something entirely different."

MRS. MORTIMER. "I don't believe it. I distinctly heard my name mentioned."

HARRY. "We were talking, Madam, about some missing registered letter receipts at the post office, and who was suspected of taking them."

MRS. MORTIMER. "Oh!— Well! It couldn't have been Mr. Mortimer as I was with him all that evening."

HARRY. "We didn't suggest to you that it was, I think."

Mrs. Mortimer, noticing her mistake, does not reply.

ETHEL. "Et maintenant?"

HARRY. "Maintenant nous devons attendre jusqu'à nous avons reçu une lettre de votre père. Je venerez ici toujours—er—j'écrirai toujours—er—er—je vous aime beaucoup."

ETHEL. "Merci, Monsieur."

HARRY. "Don't laugh—je vous aime beaucoup—"

it sounds very pale in French, doesn't it? But it's there. Won't you tell me something similar?"

ETHEL (blushing). "Je t'aime toujours."

HARRY. "Thanks awfully." Exit.

* * * * *

He left Ethel pondering the matter of the robbery. She found it hard to picture a respectable, elderly gentleman like her uncle as a burglar, but certainly there was ground for Harry's suspicion. If her uncle had had a hand in this thing, and there seemed little doubt about it, he had treated her shamefully, almost as shamefully as had this red-faced, vulgar woman who sat opposite her. But neither of them could take away from her what she had won, and knowing this, she did not feel so resentful towards them as she might have done, but experienced a faint sense of pity for their unloveliness, as they revealed it to her.

"Well! What was that young man gibbering about?" asked her aunt.

"Something which, if true, will be rather serious for Mr. Mortimer, I'm afraid," was her quiet reply, as, desirous of avoiding further conversation she left the room.

CHAPTER XXI

A FORTNIGHT later and once again the *Sherrybung* lay alongside her wharf at Jallagar.

To outward appearance the town was much as usual, calm looking as a boiler front, showing nothing of the intrigues, the hates, the loves, and passions that circulated and steamed in the bosoms of its inhabitants.

Nobody for instance would have guessed that yonder Eurasian youth who made his way politely along the street leading from Pansy Villa was the repository of the secrets of the Government, a confidant of the powers that be. He looked somewhat grave it is true, no stranger to carking care in spite of his tender years, and for this, the spectator—in his worldly wisdom—might have blamed the tight, bright yellow boots which adorned his feet. It was not the boots, however, that wrote that look of preoccupation on Harold's brow (for the youth was he), but constant thought about the chance of adding another leaf to his laurel crown—by discovering the author of the post office robbery.

He pondered little else by day and night. They put it down to love at Pansy Villa, but in spite of that Lily

nearly broke off her engagement when one evening he lifted her hand to his lips and absentmindedly used her first finger as a toothpick. At the office his work suffered slightly, most of his time being spent in the postal department, where he took full advantage of the special powers which had been granted him, and searched and searched until the entire staff was on the boil with indignation. What he was looking for they could not tell, but from the sleuthhound manner in which he went to work they surmised that he had a clue and felt disturbed accordingly. It might be a wrong one.

Had Gladstone Mortimer, sitting proudly in his carriage been able to see the smile with which Harold greeted his appearance, he also would have had misgivings. But looking as usual, over the heads of the throng, he saw nothing.

Harold gazed after the carriage as it rolled majestically down the street, the horses prancing, the brightly-dressed footmen standing at the back. He saw it stop opposite the Bung Line wharf and wondered to himself as he went along what devil's business called Gladstone to the *Sherrybung* at such an hour.

He learnt when he reached home that evening. Mrs. De Souza had quite recovered from her attack and there, in the parlour at Pansy Villa, with her daughter's hand in hers and with Mr. De Souza and Mr. Pootle (who had

brought her home) seated beside her, she told her story.

It was the same, old, sad story, the story of efficiency displaced by influence, of grey-haired service being of no account when place is to be given to a favourite.

"For ten years have I toiled and moiled once a fortnight on board the *Sherrybung*," cried Mrs. De Souza. "And now—the ingratitude of it chokes me." She sobbed loudly.

"What is the ingratitude?" asked Harold, sitting down beside her.

"Hush!" said Lily. "Don't speak so loud. Mother's got the sack."

"I've got no such thing," said Mrs. De Souza violently.

"She's got no such thing," echoed Mr. De Souza.

"Certingly not," cried Mr. Pootle.

"My mind is all in the dark," pointed out Harold. "Pray enlighten it. Where did mother get that black eye?"

"Tell him, Mr. Pootle," said Lily. "You will do it best."

"We 'ad a bit of a dust up aboard to-day," said the donkeyman, with the light touch of the born story teller.

"Talk about Johnson and Burns, it was nothing to it. The finest knock-out I ever see was the undercut what Mrs. Varapetta giv' your mother. Right on the point of the jore."

"No!" exclaimed Mr. De Souza, much interested.
"Was it a right or a left?"

"Just a right-'ander with the elber bent same as this," explained Mr. Pootle. "As quick as Jem Corbett. 'That woman will never talk again,' was what I said when I saw the smack she got."

"She has, though," pointed out Mr. De Souza in a sad voice.

"She never 'ad a chance," said the donkeyman.
"Mrs. Varapetta is about a stun 'eavier."

"But my wife is not in training," cried Mr. De Souza touchily.

"She wouldn't 'ave a chance. Why, she 'asn't got no reach."

"I bet you five dollars that when I've got my wife into good trim she'll wipe the floor with Mrs. Varapetta," said Mr. De Souza impressively.

"Make it sovereigns and I'm your man," returned the donkeyman, who knew that Mr. De Souza couldn't. They glared at each other defiantly.

"But how did it happen?" asked Harold.

"I 'aven't got the rights of it!" said the donkeyman. "I'm sorry to say I only came in at the last round. We picked your mother up and put 'er in a gharry. I brought her on here."

"Tell us how it happened, mother," urged Lily.

Mrs. De Souza sat up and dried her eyes. Harold noticed that in addition to the black eye she had a bruise on her temple.

"When the *Sherrybung* came in," she began with a sob in her voice, "I said to Lily, 'There's the key of the cupboard, and if I'm not back by five o'clock you can give Mr. De Souza his tea, but on no account is he to have any gin or beer.' I then walked down to the wharf and went aboard the ship as I have done for the last ten years and as I will do for the next ten in spite of Gladstone Mortimer. I'll have the law on him if he tries to interfere with me. I'm an honest woman, that's what I am, and no one has any right to take the bread out of my mouth. But now my mouth's full of bitterness, and if there's law in the land, which I very much doubt——"

"Did Gladstone Mortimer interfere with you?" asked Harold interrupting.

"Did he interfere?" exclaimed Mrs. De Souza scornfully. "Do I not tell you that he did and that I'm going to have him up for it?"

"Yes, yes, to be sure," acknowledged Harold soothingly. "And what did he do?"

"I was just going to tell you if you hadn't interrupted. As I was saying I went on board the *Sherrybung* as I have done for the last ten years and hope to for another ten, going my rounds as usual and talking to the

Captain on the bridge, who was telling me that they had a fine trip down and a fine trip up and that he was well and his wife in England and all his family, including one that had just arrived, a son, which I told him was a great blessing, having only daughters myself."

"I don't agree there," said Harold gallantly.

"Hear! Hear!" cried Mr. Pootle.

"Well, nor do I," acknowledged Mrs. De Souza, squeezing Lily's hand, "especially if he took after his father. But that's my way with sea captains, and he was as affable and gentlemanlike as maybe. He even told me that the chief officer had borrowed six safety pins from him during the voyage up, so anxious was he to see me get as much work as there was to be had. We were talking very comfortably on the bridge when all of a sudden I was shoved at one side as though I was dirt, and there was that old villain Gladstone Mortimer and with him, as large as life and dressed if you please all in navy blue, with a gold-braided peaked cap on with the Bung Line badge, and her ugly broken-nosed face grinning, was Varapetta. Missis, I will not call her. How do we know she's a Missis? That's what I ask?"

"She says she is," remarked Mr. De Souza incautiously.

"And all the more reason for doubting it," said Harold warmly.

"We 'ave 'eard them tales before," sneered Mr. Pootle.

"Don't you sit and backbite me in my own house," cried Mrs. De Souza.

"Go on, mother, take no notice," urged Lily.

"Well, as I was saying," continued Mrs. De Souza, with an indignant glance at her husband. "The Captain and I were talking when up comes Gladstone Mortimer and Varapetta, shoving me at one side as if I was dirt. 'Good-morning, Captain,' says Gladstone Mortimer, grinning like a cat, 'let me present you to your new comrade, Mrs. Varapetta.'

"Varapetta had looked at me as if I was nobody, and now comes smirking and smarming up to the Captain.

"'Ah!' says the Captain touching his hat. 'Very pleased; what can I do for you?'

"'You can help this lady—(lady if you please)—in her profession.' The Captain looks at the grinning Jezebel—who ought to be put in jail—and says very shortly, 'I am afraid we can't do anything for her here, Mr. Mortimer.'

"'What?' says Gladstone Mortimer, swelling up like a parrot. 'Surely you can give her some sewing? The ship's linen and so on.'

"'Sewing. Oh! This is the lady what does our sewing,' says the Captain pointing at me.

“ ‘Captain Bamberg,’ says Mortimer growing very red, ‘I ’ave no leisure to discuss the matter any further. You may employ that person to do your private work if you care to, but all the Company’s sewing is to be done by my nominee.’ With that he struts off, followed by Varapetta. He must have seen the mates and engineers for I got very little sewing on board that day. There it is, over in the corner. Not half the usual quantity. I was just going off with it when at the gangway I met that Varapetta walking off with her bundle at the same time. I wasn’t going to let her go down before me, being an older lady, although maybe she’s got an official position or thinks she has. We both rushed for the accommodation ladder and in the collision her bundle falls into the water. At this she ups and gives me such a smite as I could never believe any woman, let alone any woman who sets up to be a lady would give anyone. I tried to be at her, lady or no lady, but my bundle hampered me, and the next thing I knew I was driving up here with Mr. Pootle. But never mind, madam,” ended Mrs. De Souza. “You won’t last for ever.”

“She must have delivered a knock-out in the first round,” observed Mr. De Souza sympathetically. “Next time you’ll put up a better show.”

“But she’d never beat Mrs. V.,” asserted Mr. Pootle confidently.

"What does that matter?" said Harold. "We cannot have our family immolated in low brawlings. My position does not allow it."

"What are you going to do then?" asked Mr. Pootle. "Take it lying down?"

"We must oppose craft by craft in some manner I have not yet decided," announced Harold. "In any case it will not be long before the power of the Mortimers is absolutely sat on."

"And meantime——?" jeered the disappointed donkeyman.

"Ah! That is the trouble," said Harold meditatively. "Meantime——"

The three of them sat thinking fiercely, while Lily bathed Mrs. De Souza's eye again. Their set faces mirrored their deadly intent. They drank coffee, refusing beer. At last Mr. Pootle removed the pipe from his mouth, spat absentmindedly at where the fireplace would have been in a decently organized British household, accepted Mr. De Souza's somewhat sardonic apology for being in the way, and announced an idea.

"This 'ere Mrs. Varapetta's a great pal of the Chief's."

"And how does that help us?" enquired Mr. De Souza sarcastically.

"Well, can you do any better?" asked the donkey-

man. "'Cos if so, spit it out." He sulked. The critic seemed silenced.

"Go on, Mr. Pootle," urged Harold. "You are an invaluable."

"And one thing wot the 2nd don't know and the 3rd don't know but wot I know about the Chief is that he hasn't served his time."

"What time?" asked Mr. De Souza.

"His apprenticeship, you old pork head," explained Mr. Pootle.

"Well?" said Harold.

"Now the 2nd and 3rd are members of the Amalgamated Society of Marine Engineers, and if they was to find out that the Chief hadn't served his time they would strike and very likely he would lose his job."

"And how does that help us?" asked Harold.

"Now s'pose there was such a thing as a secret, quiet, silent local secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Marine Engineers come 'ere from Calcutta, and s'pose he was to come aboard and say to the Chief, 'Chief, I 'ear you ain't a member of our organization owing to deficiencies in your education when a boy, but I am a-going to investigate your c'reer and see whether we can't put things right for you,' what do you think the Chief would say?"

"I can't think," admitted Harold.

"'E'd say, 'Come along and 'ave a drink.' That's what 'e'd say, and this 'ere secret secretary would 'ave the 'ole ship under 'is thumb before you 'ad time to blow your nose."

"And how would that help us?" asked Harold again.

"How would that help you!" exclaimed Mr. Pootle contemptuously. "Why, if the secretary liked 'e could run Mrs. Varapetta off the ship in a week. The Chief's got a big pull in Pelung. 'E was to 'ave got the boot, but they've just given him a big rise in pay instead. How he does it beats me."

"Yes, yes," observed Mr. De Souza contemptuously. "It's all very fine and large, but where's the secretary to come from? You may say 'if this,' and 'if that,' and 'if the other.' Anyone could make a plan like that."

Mr. Pootle looked at him fixedly. "If," he said slowly, "I kin find you a secretary, will you go in for my plan?"

"I will," said Mr. De Souza.

"Right O!" laughed Mr. Pootle. "You're the man wot's got to take the job."

"Me!" cried Mr. De Souza. "Nonsense! Everybody knows me."

"Not with your whiskers off, father," observed Harold acutely.

"You're right, old boy," said Mr. Pootle. "We'll

have his whiskers off. 'E looks too much like a ruddy lawyer with them on."

"I decline your proposals," said Mr. De Souza, with great dignity.

Nevertheless when his wife and daughter came back and joined their solicitations to the sterner ones of Harold and Mr. Pootle, he weakly yielded. A large pair of scissors was produced, an old razor, and some hot water. Lily and Mrs. De Souza ran to and fro like nurses in an operating theatre while Mr. Pootle wielded the instruments, stern as an F.R.C.S.

When the patient sat up and looked round him he began to think he must be occupying his deathbed, so strained was the look of horror on Mrs. De Souza's face.

"I won't live with him again," she declared.

"Mother, you must," said Lily in a hushed voice.

"I will not," reiterated Mrs. De Souza.

"Why, what's the matter?" enquired the patient in some alarm. He passed his hand over his smooth chin and grinned self-consciously.

"Your mug hasn't got a bottom end to it," explained Mr. Pootle.

"Look in the glass, you deceitful villain," screamed his wife, in sudden rage. "Where's your chin? Where's your chin, I insist?"

They got her calmed at length, Harold pointing out

that he himself had very little under his mouth to boast of, and that after all a man with too big a jaw had, he understood, a tendency to become a wife-beater.

Next day the Chief found himself on deck talking to a small clean shaven man dressed in a frock coat and solar topee ; and it was not very long before this same small man was seated in the Chief's cabin enjoying a glass of the ship's iced beer. Mrs. Varapetta met him there and took a liking to him at once. He had all his meals with the engineers that day and the next and the next again. And if he saw now and then a greasy-looking individual whom the Chief addressed as " Pootle " he gave no sign.

CHAPTER XXII

IT was with a lighter heart than he had borne for many a day that Gladstone drove back that evening to the Castle. Bad news like an ill weed spreads apace ; disinterested people bear it to those it affects as though bearing birthday gifts. But the tidings he bore were good, and he fully anticipated being the first to bring them home.

He was mistaken. His spouse met him at the gate and with wifely tenderness assisted him to alight. There was a gracious beam on her face that he had not noticed there for many weeks, a long absent roguish twinkle glimmered in her eyes.

" You have heard the news ? " she asked.

" Yes," he replied, faintly disappointed. " Who told you ? "

" The man that brought our ice from the *Sherrybung*."

" You seem to hear everything, sweetheart."

" There isn't much passes me," she said complacently.

" Our luck seems to have turned."

" Hum," said Gladstone who did not care about the word. " Luck is hardly the term I should apply to my

action in the present instance. In the world, sweetheart, the tide will always eventually turn in favour of the strong and skilful. In this case I turned it by the application of foresight. When I engaged Mrs. Varapetta I knew exactly what would occur. She was the instrument I required for the purpose. I read her character at a glance and the result shows my prognostication was correct."

"So you engaged Mrs. Varapetta?" enquired Mrs. Mortimer with a touch of sharpness.

"I did, sweetheart," said the forgetful Gladstone proudly. "I selected her myself. She is a handsome creature; a gem of a woman in her way."

"This is the first I ever heard of it," cried Mrs. Mortimer. "What do you mean by doing a thing like that behind my back?"

"In the regular way of business—in the regular way of business," feebly muttered Gladstone.

She was about to make a violent retort when she recollected that he had not yet given her all his news.

"I shall see about it," she said. "You haven't told me yet what happened to that woman De Souza." She had put her arm through his, and walked him up and down the garden, pausing now and then to ask a question, making sure of every point.

"A black eye," she said, counting on her fingers, "a

bruise where she hit the deck, knocked unconscious, lost her job, taken home in a gharry. Who took her home ? ”

“ The donkeyman.”

“ He must be sacked,” decided Mrs. Mortimer. “ I suppose she didn’t lose the bundle of clothes she was carrying ? ”

“ No sweetheart, I fear not.”

“ No matter,” said Mrs. Mortimer generously. “ I’d give anything to see her.”

“ Drive down with me to-morrow morning,” suggested Gladstone.

Ethel was sitting in the porch and smiled brightly at her uncle as they passed through.

“ The girl looks pallid,” remarked Gladstone. “ I trust she is not sickening for anything.”

“ It’s a pity she ever came out,” said Mrs. Mortimer. “ I can’t do anything with her. Always moping in corners and writing letters to that McMucker fellow. He came to see her again to-day, but I soon got rid of him. I asked him to produce the receipts for the registered letters and told him he was a liar. He left double quick. She wanted him to.”

“ We will circumvent him yet,” said Gladstone. “ But it is far from my wish to treat her with inconsideration. I need hardly urge you, sweetheart, to be as gentle and suave with her as the occasion will permit.”

"Allow me to know my own sex, Mr. Mortimer," returned his wife. "She is only pretending—trying to incite our pity—I shouldn't wonder to see her taking to her bed, the hussy."

"I told you so," she said triumphantly next morning, when Ethel did not come down to breakfast. "No, you are not to go up and see her. When will you learn to leave these things to me? We will take no notice of her tantrums."

Knowing his chicken-heartedness she kept an eye on him until they were safe in the carriage on their way to the *Sherrybung*. She talked cheerfully about Ethel, the McMuckers, and people who had gone against her and come to grief in the process, until one of their wheels coming in contact with a brickbat on the road, gave her a new text, namely, "The Iniquities of the Jallagar Public Works Department."

"They have no time to consider the needs of the public," sneered Gladstone. "They are too busy making floral arches to attend to the highways."

"Floral arches! What for?" asked his wife.

"The Birthday Party to-morrow. Are you going?"

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Mortimer. "I am not going to help that McMucker woman to social success by attending her gatherings. And all the Eurasians in the place will be there I believe."

Gladstone left her in the carriage and went on board to make enquiries. In one of the alloways he met Mrs. Varapetta, who looked rather the worse for her encounter of the day before. Her face was crossed with scratches, and there was a piece of sticking plaster on the end of her nose. He decided swiftly that the present was a good time to introduce her to his wife.

"My dear lady," he cried holding her hand in his. "I congratulate you."

"All in the day's work," said Mrs. Varapetta modestly.

"A dangerous woman. Has she put in an appearance again?"

"Not she," replied Mrs. Varapetta. "I don't think!"

"Excellent!" murmured Gladstone. "But Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer will be disappointed. She is in the carriage, longing to witness the damage you have done. You must come with me and be presented to her."

"But my face."

"Speaking confidentially," whispered Gladstone, "I am rather glad than otherwise that you are not looking—er—quite your nicest to-day. Mrs. Mortimer is, I may say, rather inclined to be jealous. And if she found that I was on familiar terms with so much beauty," he squeezed her hand—"her demeanour would, I imagine, be somewhat alarming. May I request you as a great favour not to let her see too much of those—er—

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glorious eyes of yours, and to humour her as much as possible? Above all—if you have any wish to earn my good opinion—do not on any account let her obtain cognizance of our interview the other night in my office. Tell her you applied for work in the daytime, about three weeks ago.”

With a final squeeze of the hand he led the way down the accommodation ladder to the carriage.

Mrs. Mortimer, noting with approval Mrs. Varapetta's modest demeanour and war-worn face, received them graciously. “So this is your new sewing woman, Gladly,” she said. “A fine, strong-looking creature.”

Mrs. Varapetta raised her hand to her peaked cap, navy fashion, and fixed her eyes on the ground.

“She's well enough,” said Gladstone, playing his part. “But we don't care about rowdyism on the Bung Line boats.”

“I think you have done very well, my good creature,” cried Mrs. Mortimer, sitting straight upright in the carriage. “Here's a dollar for you, and if ever you see that woman again, give her another dressing down.” She looked disdainfully at her husband.

“I shall be very obliged, Madam,” murmured Mrs. Varapetta, saluting again, “if I can be of humble service to you.”

“I am glad we have in our employ a person of such

right feeling," remarked Mrs. Mortimer. "Have you been long in Jallagar?"

"About a month."

"Oh! And what made you go to my husband for employment?"

"Everybody knows the Gladstone Mortimers, Madam, the largest and best employers of labour in Jallagar. About three weeks ago I called at the Bung Line office."

"At what time?"

"A little after noon, Madam."

"Kindly turn round and let me see your back hair," requested Mrs. Mortimer. Mrs. Varapetta turned, and Gladstone, after an anxious glance at her *chignon*, breathed a sigh of relief. She was wearing ordinary black hairpins. The one found in the office by his wife could not have belonged to her.

"Quite satisfactory in every respect," said Mrs. Mortimer, leaning back in her carriage like a princess who has just got rid of a lady mayoress. "Really I have a good mind to give you some work myself."

"I am afraid we cannot let you have the Bung Line employees, sweetheart," pointed out Gladstone incautiously. He ought to have known better.

"Open the carriage door at once, Mrs. Varapetta, and step in," cried his wife. "Really some people think I'm a regular bonds slave."

"But, darling——," muttered Gladstone weakly.

They left him standing in the road, still muttering weakly, and drove towards the Castle. Mrs. Mortimer, whose object was not clothes mending but further information about the fracas of the day before, plied her companion with questions.

"And where did you gain your wonderful knowledge of boxing, my good woman?" she asked at last admiringly.

"My husband," explained Mrs. Varapetta.

"Where is he now?"

"Dead," said Mrs. Varapetta briefly.

"No wonder," said Mrs. Mortimer. "I shall have to ask you to give me a few lessons."

"At your service at any time," murmured Mrs. Varapetta politely. "But surely a great lady like you would not condescend——"

"Great ladies have their troubles, my good creature," said Mrs. Mortimer pensively. "There's the Commandant's wife now, I'd give a pension to be able to dress her down if need be."

"Oh! Mrs. McMucker," said Mrs. Varapetta looking mysterious. "I know all about her."

"What do you know? Tell me at once," asked Mrs. Mortimer.

"I know at any rate that she's a half caste and a poor

one at that," replied the sewing woman quietly. The effect on her patron was marvellous. She sat bolt upright, a look of intense eagerness on her face.

"What?" she almost hissed.

"A half caste," said Mrs. Varapetta emphatically.

The carriage swung through the gateway of the Castle, and stopped opposite the new letter box. Mrs. Mortimer opened the door herself and darted to the ground. Taking Mrs. Varapetta by the hand she walked her swiftly through the porch, up the stairs, and into one of the bedrooms.

She locked the door.

"Now tell me what you know," she demanded.

Mrs. Varapetta's knowledge of Mrs. McMucker's antecedents consisted of the somewhat meagre details which Mrs. Guan had supplied at the boarding house. But she was always good at embroidery and the tale she told of Mrs. McMucker would have considerably astonished that lady.

"This is a most important matter," said Mrs. Mortimer, producing a five-dollar note. "I think you are to be highly commended for fearlessly coming to me with your story. You shall be suitably rewarded. This is only an instalment."

"Her grandfather went about with only a loin cloth on," said Mrs. Varapetta. "And they do say her great

grandfather——” she whispered into her patron’s ear.

“What?—— Naked?” murmured Mrs. Mortimer aghast.

Mrs. Varapetta nodded. “Stark naked. He was living in a tree when they caught him.”

“This must be exposed,” cried Mrs. Mortimer. “This must be ruthlessly exposed. I never heard anything more disgusting in my life. And to think of me receiving that woman as an equal!”

“Truly shocking,” murmured Mrs. Varapetta.

“Of course my instinct told me all the time that there was something wrong with her.”

“It would, Madam.”

“Why, even you are better than she is.”

“No, no, Madam,” murmured Mrs. Varapetta, casting her eyes down modestly.

“You are,” reiterated Mrs. Mortimer. “You know your place at any rate and she does not. But as sure as I’m Mrs. Gladstone Mortimer she shall be taught, and taught in public too. The impudent airs of the creature! And this is what the Government puts to rule over us!”

“A great shame, Madam. Why don’t they make you and Mr. Mortimer Commandant?”

“That’s what I can never make out,” said Mrs.

Mortimer simply. "Gladstone could easily do the job in his spare time. Not that he would take it though."

"Of course not, Madam," murmured Mrs. Varapetta. "Now can I be of any humble assistance with regard to Mrs. McMucker?"

"You are quite sure?" questioned Mrs. Mortimer. "I can rely on everything you have told me?"

"How are you going to expose her?" asked Mrs. Varapetta.

"I haven't decided yet."

"There's the birthday party to-morrow," said Mrs. Varapetta rapidly. "If you wish, Madam, I will get a friend of mine to go up and tax her before the whole of Jallagar with being a low class Eurasian. I'd do it myself in a minute if it were not for this sticking plaster." She indicated her nose with her finger.

"You dear creature," cried Mrs. Mortimer. "It's the very thing. All my friends shall be there and I will give you—er—ten dollars. It will be money well spent on behalf of the public."

Mrs. Varapetta smiled slowly. "Madam," said she, "if it were not for my anxiety to oblige you I would not do the thing for love or money. I venture to remind you that ten dollars is a very small sum, and the power of the Commandant in Jallagar is immense. I shall stand in great danger of being arrested."

"What for?" demanded her patron.

"For slander. No, no, Madam, I couldn't undertake the thing for less than—er—five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred dollars, woman!" cried Mrs. Mortimer. "Why, you must be mad. I haven't such a sum. Besides you have told me the whole story."

"Except the name of the grocer's shop," pointed out Mrs. Varapetta calmly. "I have a note of that at home. If we got that wrong we should be undone."

Mrs. Mortimer sat for a minute thinking angrily. She longed to bully, but she knew very well that this woman was not to be bullied. It was a case of pay or go without, and the latter was not to be thought of. "Very well," she said sulkily. "I'll pay you two hundred now and three hundred afterwards."

"It must be five hundred down, Madam," asserted the new sewing woman with respectful firmness.

Half an hour later Mrs. Varapetta with the money safely in her pocket drove down to the *Sherrybung*. She had done well so far out of the Gladstone Mortimers, and was in half a mind to leave them to fight their battles alone. But reflecting that it would be foolishness to kill the goose before it had finished laying she went on board and called the Chief.

He came out to her as she sat in the mess room, closing the door of his cabin behind him. The Secretary

of the Amalgamated Society of Marine Engineers, who was within, at once applied his ear to the keyhole.

Being a shade deaf he was thankful for the clear way in which Scotsmen and Eurasians articulate the English language. The Chief came back after a while and found him asleep, "which," thought the Chief, "is juist as weel."

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CHAPTER XXIII

AT three o'clock the following afternoon a small party from Pansy Villa slowly proceeded along the broad, sun-battered way, leading to the Commandery

Crowds of natives—whiskered Sikhs wearing marvelous turbans, ebony-skinned Klings and Singalese, Dyaks, stately Arabs, pigtailed Hylams and Kehs swarmed in the streets, all dressed in holiday attire. Malays, wrapped in sarongs of all colours of the rainbow, flitted in and out of the red painted Chinese shops carrying tiny parcels which were done up in newspaper and tied with wisps of grass, parcels containing perhaps a cent's worth of sugar, two cents' worth of tea, a little tobacco, or some small dainty to eat with the evening rice.

Every one seemed happy, every one was smiling ; the number of rows of perfect teeth exhibited would have driven a dentist to despair. It was the birthday of our Gracious King.

The day had opened with an exhibition of performing Sikh policemen, who, under the direction of the Inspector,

had marched up and down in a state of violent perspiration before all Jallagar, executing hair-raising tricks with fixed bayonets. The control the Inspector had over these men was marvellous. He grunted and at once they formed a bristling square. He cleared his throat, and lo ! the square dissolved as if by magic and became a flying column. Babies yelled and small boys gazed fixedly, gloating in anticipation. For a rumour had gone round that if the Inspector wished he could by pronouncing a single word make his men swallow their bayonets. But nothing of the sort had occurred, and the proceedings had ended quite tamely with the Commandant taking the salute at 9 a.m.

Then people had gone home prepared to take things easily until the fireworks display in the evening. That is to say, people with no social calls upon them. Those in Jallagar society were expected to endure the grind of an " At Home " at the Commandery in the afternoon.

To this " At Home " that perspiring party from Pansy Villa was on the way. Mrs. De Souza, wearing a close-fitting black dress trimmed with old jet, white gloves and a white parasol, and Miss Lily De Souza in eau-de-nil chiffon with white gloves and a pink parasol walked in front ; behind them were Mr. Harold Blee in his new light tweed suit with yellow gloves and a brown bowler hat, and Mr. Herbert Pootle, who, except for pipe-claying his

topee and sleeping on his trousers the night before to get a crease in them, had made no special effort in honour of the occasion.

The party progressed but slowly, making frequent halts for the double purpose of enabling Mrs. De Souza to regain her breath, and of giving Harold time to point out to his guest various buildings of interest. There were churches, institutions, schools, and a drinking fountain which Mr. Pootle had never seen before, and one or two hotels which he had.

"This is our little place," said Harold, when they were half way up the hill, waving his cane at the Government buildings with the air of a proprietor. "The P.W.D., the Harbour Master's office, the post office where that mysterious burgling eventuated at a receding date, the Commandant's office where I occupy my duties seating under the third window from the further end, except when seconded for service elsewhere. A fine field of lawn you will notice, Herbert, of which we officials are obstinately proud. Nobody, not even the Governor himself is allowed to walk on it. Trespassers of all kinds we speak to in a most devilish manner. Should I see anyone you would observe my attitude of severity. You would——"

He stopped suddenly, gasping. Mr. Pootle followed his gaze. A large lady wearing a navy blue frock with

a small yachting cap balanced on her head was taking a short cut across the sacred turf in the most impudent of manners, banging with her walking stick at every "Keep-off-the-grass" signboard she encountered.

"Now's your chance," whispered Mr. Pootle. "Give 'er What 'o!"

Harold gasped and continued staring until two small boys who had eagerly taken up positions on either side of him began to get impatient and asked him if he had lost anything. Then he turned away.

"The Empire being in a festering condition on this, our King's birthday," he remarked, "I do not think myself allowable to disturb its harmoniousness by an interference with the female sex. She did not observe us, I believe?"

"I don't think so. Shall I call after her?"

"On no account," ejaculated Harold hurriedly.

She struck the road some fifty yards ahead of them, stepping out like a policeman on his way from work. They pointed her out to Mrs. De Souza.

"It's Mrs. Varapetta! If she's at the 'At Home' I shall refuse to recognize her," exclaimed that lady, quivering.

"If she's there it will be the worse for her," remarked Harold, moving the small parcel he was carrying to the

other hand and shaking his fist threateningly at the figure ahead.

"I think she's going to the Castle," said Lily. "Look at her dress."

"People like that have no shame," sniffed Mrs. DeSouza.

They continued their progress, walking at a snail's pace for fear of catching their enemy up.

As they neared the Commandery other small and highly-scented parties of Eurasians passed them, the ladies gorgeous, the gentlemen with splits in their skirt-like coats reaching almost to the shoulder. Mr. Pootle had never taken off his hat so many times in his life before. The brim was getting absolutely limp. He was beginning to realize what an expensive, vain, uninteresting, dry existence a society butterfly must lead. Why Harold always shifted his parcel to the other hand and removed his cigar before lifting his hat was a mystery to him. It seemed very unnecessary. The dust was awful and his arm ached; he felt uncomfortably hot, and his throat was so dry that had anyone offered him a glass of lemonade he would have accepted the insult almost gratefully. At his side the De Souza's, mother and daughter, chatted away. They looked happy enough. And Harold's voice when he spoke, sounded as though he could do without liquid refreshment for several hours yet.

How these people managed was a mystery. Perhaps they sucked lozenges! Or small pebbles as athletes did when in training. In his extremity he was almost picking one up himself, when a turn of the road brought them to the lawn of the Commandery, where under the shade of an enormous tree stood a table covered with a multitude of bottles and glasses which winked at him cheerfully as they caught a beam of sunlight. With a feeling of renewed vigour he followed Harold and the De Souzas to where the Commandant and Mrs. McMucker were standing.

"A nautical friend of ours, sir," said Harold, introducing him. Mrs. McMucker bowed pleasantly and turned to talk to her old friend Mrs. De Souza. The Commandant shook hands.

"I'm afraid you've had a hot walk up, Mr. Pootle," he remarked.

"Right into my hands," thought Mr. Pootle. "Yes, Mr. Commandant," he replied, mopping his brow with a red pocket handkerchief, "a hot walk *and* a dry walk. A thirsty place this, Mr. Commandant."

"Come with me!" exclaimed the Commandant, who, as Mr. Pootle said afterwards, was quick at taking a hint. "And you too, Blee." He led the way to the table and helped them to whisky and cigars.

The popping of bottles attracted other wanderers,

and soon there was a lively group round the table. Then the straightened rainbow of ladies sitting on chairs had to be served with lemonade. The youth of Jallagar led by Harold hastened to perform this duty.

The table became almost deserted again and Mr. Pootle who had amused himself by looking at the decorations—the cream fronted house dressed with Chinese lanterns and garlands of flowers, the loyal mottoes, white on a Turkey red ground, the many coloured flags and strips of bunting with which the whole place was hung—helped himself to another whisky soda and cigar and, glass in hand, strolled off to watch the tennis. They were playing singles and playing hard, but nobody was looking on, nobody giving them any encouragement. Mr. Pootle scanned the long line of Eurasian ladies silently absorbing lemonade, and the solemn pair on the tennis court.

“What this place wants is cheering up,” he muttered. He took a pull at his whisky soda, and leaning negligently on the pole of the tennis net followed the game with interest.

Gladstone Mortimer was serving, and common-sense told Mr. Pootle, who knew nothing about tennis, that he was serving badly. The first ball always struck the net with immense force. The second lobbed gently over and was at once deposited by the Superintendent of

Museums in an inaccessible corner of the court. "Love—Forty," announced that gentleman in a satisfied voice. Gladstone, looking solemnly displeased, stalked across the court and with great ceremony served another ball into the net.

"Hard lines!" cried Mr. Pootle.

After a haughty stare at the intruder, a stare which the well-meaning Mr. Pootle answered by holding up his glass and nodding encouragingly, Gladstone served his second. It fell just over the net and took a lot of getting at.

"Run like a rabbit," shouted Mr. Pootle enthusiastically. "Well played."

"Out!" cried Gladstone. "Fifteen—Forty."

The next serve went over the net, much to everybody's astonishment.

"Trial ball," shouted Mr. Pootle. "Let 'im 'ave it again."

"I really wasn't ready," said the Superintendent of Museums.

"Thirty—Forty," said Gladstone obstinately, crossing the court.

"Let the chap 'ave it again," urged Mr. Pootle, waving his cigar. "Be a sportsman!" Gladstone, disdainingly reply, served once more. The ball lobbed over the net.

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"Very good. Very good indeed," said Mr. Pootle approvingly. "Old whiskers 'll wipe the floor with you yet if you don't look out."

But the Superintendent won the next stroke. Gladstone refused to play any longer and taking no notice of Mr. Pootle's offer to borrow shoes and a racket and beat him left-handed, strolled over to a small group of European ladies who were sitting under one of the trees. Mr. Pootle, who had noticed that these people also wanted brightening up, followed.

"Good day to you all," he said gaily, lifting his topee by its tender brim for what seemed to him the hundredth time. "We've brought the old man back"—he pointed to Gladstone—"absolutely bust up."

"What do you want?" asked Gladstone haughtily.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Mr. Pootle happily. "Very good! Very good indeed, whiskers! He asks me what I want, ladies. Well, what I want is to see you all bright and cheerful. Look jolly and make yourselves at 'ome. Don't take no notice of old whiskers 'ere. 'E's got gastroitis, that's what 'e's got. Now can I assist you ladies to a small tot of anything? A glass of port wine, now?"

Nobody accepted the offer. If looks could have slain, Mrs. Mortimer would have been a murderess. Mr. Pootle noticed her.

"I see you," he announced playfully. "But you don't get no port wine from me, old lady, so it's no use cocking your eye."

"I don't want your port wine, fellow," cried Mrs. Mortimer.

"You don't get no port wine from me, you with the red boko," reiterated Mr. Pootle, winking. "But I tell you what I will do. I'll take you along and we'll 'ave a nice little drop of gin together. That makes 'er smile, don't it?" He looked round at the horrified company. One or two Eurasians who had come to see what was the matter began to titter.

"What do I 'ear?" cried Mr. Pootle. "A larf! Don't tell me it was a larf! Beg pardon, sir, for larfing!" He went on his knees and clasped his hands in mock terror.

"Remove yourself from this locality," said Gladstone impatiently. "We want to be private."

"What do you think of that, boys?" asked Mr. Pootle, turning to his supporters, quite a crowd by this time. "Old Whiskers wants to keep all these 'ere young wimmen to himself and make 'em miserable. Now then, 'Eney the Eighth, don't spoil their day's outing. 'Ere we are, all ready to play Kiss-in-the-ring, Post-man's-knock, 'Unt-the-slipper, anything at all to make 'em feel bright and 'appy, and you sitting there like a

bally old bashaw, growlin' and grumpin'. Don't you worry about 'im, old lady, 'e's no good. You come along wiv me." He offered his arm to the indignant Mrs. Mortimer. "Now, then—all together——

For we dance and we sing,
And we fill up our glasses right up to the brim';
And we shout, and we shout,
For we are jolly good comp-an-ee-ee-ee-ee.

"Come on, old geezer!"

"All right, Mr. Pootle," said Harry McMucker, taking him by the shoulder. "Come along and play bowls." He led the donkeyman away.

"Do you know the brute?" asked Mrs. Mortimer.

"It is one of the crew of the *Sherrybung*," said Gladstone. "The man who took Mrs. De Souza home after her encounter."

"And you did not sack him? After what I said!"

"I'll discharge him to-morrow."

"There you are! That's the result of not doing what I tell you."

"I will make amends at once," promised Gladstone feebly.

Mrs. Mortimer looked round in triumph at the admiring circle of ladies, as to say, "See how I manage mine!" "Never mind," she said. "We have to put up with a great deal in coming to this place. But I think before

the evening is out you will get such a treat as you never had before."

"And what is it? Do tell us, Mrs. Mortimer," urged the ladies.

"Not a word," said Mrs. Mortimer mysteriously. "You will soon find out for yourselves. Some one you know quite well and don't like is going to be shown up in her proper colours this very evening. All you have to do is to keep an eye on me and Mrs. McMucker. You'll get a surprise, I promise you."

She relapsed into silence, a wonderful thing for her, and the ladies in despair conversed in whispers and looked askance at their hostess. It was dull work sitting there with nobody to talk to. Their esquires, Gladstone and the Superintendent of Museums, had gone off for a stroll but came back soon, looking very moody. They had been unable to obtain one, Mr. Pootle being in charge of the table.

Meanwhile the Commandant had caused the second best piano to be brought out, and the flower of the Eurasian community were busy forming sets for the Lancers. Harry McMucker began to play. And then (it was getting on towards sunset) the Mortimers' brougham came along the drive and drew up near the piano.

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CHAPTER XXIV

“WHAT was the Mortimers’ brougham doing there so early?” people asked themselves.

There were all sorts of events to happen yet. Sandwiches, and fireworks, and perhaps a speech from the Commandant. Surely the people at the Castle did not intend to withdraw their light at such an early hour. Mrs. Mortimer reassured her companions.

“No,” she said with a complacent smile, “Mr. Gladstone Mortimer and I have a little more to do before we go. We are not staying, needless to say, for the fireworks, but something else is going to happen which makes our presence here essential.”

“But why order your brougham so early?” asked the ladies. “The poor horses will get tired standing, and it might come on to rain.”

“Rain or sun, Mr. Gladstone Mortimer and I have always been accustomed to don our evening dress for dinner before six o’clock,” explained the leader of Jallagar society with a slight smile. “And nothing, not even the birthday of the King, can alter our habits.”

"We see. We see!" cried the admiring ladies.

"For myself, I come prepared," continued Mrs. Mortimer. "I unhook myself at the neck and along this tuck, and so—I am already in full evening costume." Suiting the action to the word she undid the top half of her bodice, and rolling it up in a piece of newspaper, put it in her pocket. Her ample bosom, ornamented by an emerald necklace, was revealed to the astonished ladies.

They uttered exclamations of admiration. "What ingenuity! What wonderful taste!" and so forth.

"With my husband it is different," Mrs. Mortimer went on. "Arrayed as he is in tennis flannels he cannot very well change into swallow tails in the open. His trousers, to speak plainly, present a difficulty." The ladies agreed unanimously.

"I shall not occupy more than fifteen minutes in changing," said Gladstone coming up. "Would you mind stationing yourself near to our conveyance, sweetheart, in order to be present, should I require some slight service at your dainty hands; a pin, for instance. Upon my word, you look charming."

"She does, Mr. Gladstone Mortimer," chorused the ladies.

He skipped across the lawn into the carriage. Mrs. Mortimer and her companion followed and stationed

themselves round the door. The Lancers which for the last five minutes had progressed but half-heartedly, now burst forth into full vigour again. Harold and Lily were partners, and their graceful evolutions drew appreciative criticism from the throng of onlookers. Mr. Pootle, armed with a brand new whisky soda and cigar, applauded loudly. A fever of gaiety possessed every one. Some of the younger European ladies were beginning to keep time with itching feet. The sun was setting and Chinese gardeners were lighting the lanterns on the façade of the Commandery. The feet of the dancers fell noiselessly on the turf and Harry McMucker, aided by Mr. Pootle, who kept time by banging his glass on the piano top, played as he had never played before. Time was Harry's weak point, but Mr. Pootle's glass descended with the regularity of a steam engine. The donkeyman was fairly in his element, completely at home. A step dancer himself, he seldom condescended to amateur antics, such as waltzes and polkas. But he had mis-spent many an evening in Antwerp and Hamburg, watching and criticizing other people, and knew every move of the game.

"Set to partners," he shouted, beating the air with his cigar. "Ladies chain." And occasionally he would run into the middle of them and put everybody right.

"Just what I like to see, sir," he said to the Commandant, who nodded approvingly. "Everybody bright and nobody tight: that's my motto. I've been trying my 'and with that 'ere kill joy, Gladstone Mortimer—couldn't get a move on 'im at all, but there are some likely bits of stuff along with 'im. They'll be all right a little later on in the evening."

"I think all seem to be enjoying themselves," said the Commandant.

"Now, then, you with the yellow gloves! Catch 'old of your partner's 'and and advance up centre," shouted Mr. Pootle, waving frantically with his cigar. "Enjoying themselves! I don't think! As I was saying, when it gets a bit later we'll rope in all old Mortimer's ladies for him. You and me, sir, together. There's one old geeser there, lively as a grasshopper. Sort of winked at me she did."

"Indeed," said the Commandant.

"There she is, over there," exclaimed Mr. Pootle, pointing enthusiastically. "The one with the red nose. There she is——" In astonishment he stopped beating time with his glass and gripped the Commandant's arm.

"What's the matter?" said the Commandant, rather stiffly.

"Look at 'er! Look at 'er!" whispered Mr. Pootle excitedly. "She's taken 'er topsails off herself. She's

going to dance, that's what she is. Didn't I say they'd be as lively as anyone after a bit?" He raised his glass and waved to Mrs. Mortimer. "Ping, ping," he yelled to attract her attention. "We've got our eye on you. Yes! You with the string of bottle stoppers round your neck. Does the dear little thing feel cold now?"

Mrs. Mortimer deliberately turned her back.

"What ho! Same rig fore and aft! Very nice! Take care of a chill! Borrow my coat until we meet in the next dance?" He took it off and held it up. "No? Not speaking in public? All right! See you alone later!"

"It's no good yet, sir," he explained to the Commandant confidentially. "Too much daylight. She's afraid the others will chaff her." He resumed the direction of the dancing.

"Gladstone, Gladstone," cried Mrs. Mortimer through the crack in the carriage door. "Come out at once, I insist."

"I can't, sweetheart," boomed Gladstone from within, solemnly.

"You must. That man, Pootle, is grossly insulting me."

"I can't," said Gladstone angrily. "I can't find my nether garments anywhere."

"Have you looked in the suit case?"

"Am I an utterly unintelligent personage?" exclaimed Gladstone. "Certainly I have looked in the suit case."

"They must have been left at the Castle. Put on the flannel ones and come out."

"I utterly decline. I should be the laughing-stock of Jallagar. Send somebody back for them."

"He's forgotten his trousers," announced Mrs. Mortimer to the ladies, withdrawing her ear from the crack.

"How shocking," chorused the ladies.

One of the younger of them volunteered to go up to the Castle.

"They'll be in the bottom drawer of our wardrobe," said Mrs. Mortimer. "And while you are there ask for Mrs. Varapetta and say that so far everything is going well enough." She turned again to the crack, and condoled with Gladstone.

The dance had now ended. The flushed ladies were seated, talking in whispers, while their gallant partners fanned them vigorously. Chinese boys in spotless white were handing round lemonade and sandwiches. It was almost night, and overhead the stars were beginning to show in the brilliant sky, their brightness dimmed by a myriad paper lanterns which hung in festoons

from the shadowy trees. The triumphal arch was at last illumined. The motto it bore, "Many happy returns of the day," was fervently echoed in the hearts of all.

Mr. Pootle even went the length of saying that he wished the King would have a birthday once a week. He was trying to get up a waltz, but so far nobody had seconded his efforts. Harold, an authority on dancing, had said that waltzing on turf was impossible, and Mr. Pootle with Mrs. De Souza as partner was now busy showing a small committee that the thing could be done if one lifted one's feet high enough. But nobody seemed taken with the idea. The merrymakers had for the moment lost their enthusiasm for dancing and were eating quietly. A lull had come over the festive throng.

Then suddenly, almost ominously, the big gate of the Commandery swung to with a bang, and two figures showed ghostlike in the semi-darkness, advancing slowly and inexorably towards the crowd of guests.

"Who are these late comers?" people asked each other. Nobody seemed to know. The ladies all rose from their seats to obtain a better view. Gallants ceased their fanning and craned their necks. An intense silence reigned, broken only by a low muttering from

the brougham where the ill-starred Gladstone lamented his missing apparel.

The strangers came nearer, and it was perceived that the shorter of them was a clean-shaven man, of solemn aspect, and wearing a frock coat. He seemed to be acting as a sort of walking-stick for his companion, who was large and stout with sandy whiskers, and who was plainly afflicted with a weakness of the legs.

"It's the Chief Engineer of the *Sherrybung*," the whisper went round. Nobody seemed to recognize the shorter of the pair. But Mrs. De Souza grasped Mr. Pootle's arm and put her finger to her lips, and Lily, after a quick glance, gazed steadily on the ground.

The ill-matched visitants made their way very slowly through the circle of hushed dancers, the tall man looking straight before him with wide, glazed, open eyes as one who walks in sleep, the short man peering and blinking round like some fateful raven. They passed on.

Lily raised her eyes and looked about for Harold. He was not to be seen. The arrival of her father in such a mysterious manner, and at so late an hour had roused her curiosity to an almost unbearable pitch. For the past few days Pansy Villa had been a wretched place to live in. The atmosphere there had been heavy with secrets, secrets in which she had been given but

little share. The sacrifice of her father's whiskers, the constant preoccupation of her lover, the irregular supply of chocolates, the whisperings, the visits to the chemist's shop, the knowing air of Mr. Pootle, had all told her that a conspiracy was going on about her. And now, her father arrived with the arm of the hated Mr. Blitters round his neck. Had it not been for her mother's warning finger she would have spoken severely to them, so great was her indignation at the sight. How could her father endure attentions like that from such a man? She never would, no, not for all the sewing of the whole Bung Line. Every one was staring at the pair, and as they went along the crowd closed in behind them and followed, leaving her seated alone. They seemed to stop by the Mortimers' brougham. Then somebody began to laugh. Near the Commandery three or four Sikh policemen were visible, and as she turned to join the crowd she noticed the Inspector in uniform standing quietly in the shadows behind her. Something terrible was about to occur, she felt certain. She joined the crowd and forced her way to the front.

Mr. Blitters, still leaning on her father's neck, was addressing Mrs. Mortimer. "So ye say ye're not the Miss Gomez I was acquaint with in Pelung, ma lassie?" he enquired kindly.

"Certainly not," replied Mrs. Mortimer fuming.

"How dare you suggest such a thing? You've made a mistake. It's the Commandant's wife you're looking for."

"I've made a mistake, have I?" asked Mr. Blitters, turning to his companion. The crowd perspired with excitement. The silence was intense.

"Certainly not!" asseverated Mr. De Souza, speaking in tones of unaccustomed deepness. "I remember this lady quite distinctly as Miss Gomez of Pelung."

"Never be ashamed o' your forbears," the Chief admonished Mrs. Mortimer in slow, biblical tones, holding up a finger. "Never be ashamed o' your forbears. No, not even should they go a-running to and fro, and hither and thither, naked, like the beasts o' the field. Rec'lect they gave ye life; they reared and suckled ye. The baboon has its uses. The orang-utang gathers up the fruits of the earth in their due seasons. Yon——"

"Come out!" hissed Mrs. Mortimer through the crack in agonized tones. "Come out! Come out, I insist!"

"Are you going to let me have my trousers or are you not?" cried Gladstone angrily.

"Never mind your trousers. Come out and save me. They say I'm an Eurasian! They say my mother was a monkey!"

"An' why be aggrieved or affrighted if your mither was a monkey, wumman?" enquired Mr. Blitters, wagging his finger solemnly. "Is there anything you could take shame of in that? What are you better than her, clad in your peetiful frills and vanities? Could you scale yonner tree like her? Could you tak' the luscious nut and crack it wi' your naked teeth? A'm ashamed of you."

"Are you coming out or are you not?" shrieked Mrs. Mortimer.

"I'm putting on the flannel ones. Be patient, sweetheart," roared Gladstone.

"Your mate within is caged, methinks," remarked Mr. Blitters. "He roars like a lion in his wrath. Do not let him out. He might do us an injury."

He staggered towards the carriage and set his back firmly against the door. "Is it a gorilla or an orang-utang?" he enquired of the crowd. They shouted with delight.

"Fetch the police," shrieked Mrs. Mortimer beside herself.

"But we're wanderin' awa' fra' the point," went on Mr. Blitters, "which is that you're a low class, no class Eurasian, and half bred at that, and my friend here will confirm——"

"Arrest that man," rang out a loud clear voice. Lily

looked round. It was Harold. He had burst through the crowd and was standing like a statue, his eyes flashing, his head erect, his outstretched arm pointing sternly at the Chief Engineer.

There was a glitter of arms at the back of the crowd.

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CHAPTER XXV

THEY brought the prisoner into the well-lighted office of the Commandery. A single Sikh guarded him, a needless precaution, for Mr. Alexander Blitters felt very faint and had to be provided with a chair.

The Commandant sat at a deal table facing him, Harold and Harry McMucker occupied a bench against the whitewashed wall, and opposite to them, still attired in flannel trousers, was Gladstone Mortimer, who was doing his best to look surprised and indignant without achieving any great success.

"I am sorry to have had to interfere with your evening's amusement," said the Commandant, dipping his pen into a large inkpot, and turning over the pages of an awesome looking volume, "but we need your assistance in dealing with this person. You know him, I believe?"

"I know of him," replied Gladstone Mortimer. His voice sounded as a deflated football does when kicked.

"The Captain of the *Sherrybung* made a bad report

about him lately did he not, and you threatened him with dismissal before several people ? ”

“ That is true,” admitted Gladstone reluctantly.

“ And yet a day or so after the robbery at the Post Office you wrote a letter recommending him for an immediate rise in salary. Why was this ? ”

“ I decline to answer. That matter is private to our Company.”

“ Very well. Then would you object to tell us why this man, Blitters, in your office the day after the robbery, spoke threateningly to you before other people, mentioning especially the words ‘ registered letters ’ ? ”

“ I must absolutely decline to give you any information whatever,” said Gladstone in loud, defiant tones. “ By what right, may I ask, do you summon me here and direct against me all these insolent questions ? By what right, sir ? ”

“ Of course I must admit that this is merely an informal enquiry,” replied the Commandant coldly. “ But I may tell you this much. If the Government do not satisfy themselves here this evening, they intend to take up matters publicly and prosecute the culprits with the utmost rigour. Now, will you reconsider and give us the information we desire ? ”

“ I will not. Most emphatically not,” said Gladstone

obstinately. "I must ask you to excuse my further presence here." He rose to go.

"Sit down at once," rapped out the Commandant with much sternness. Their eyes met. Gladstone sank back into his chair.

"You are wise," said the Commandant. He dipped his pen in the ink again, and wrote for a few moments in the ponderous book. "Now, Mr. Blee," he said, "tell us your story."

Harold at once rose and bowed to the Commandant, then to Harry McMucker, and then ever so slightly to Gladstone Mortimer. He advanced to the table, laid a small parcel on it, blew his nose coolly with a highly-scented handkerchief, and began.

"Gentlemen and Commandant, among the histories of the detective world two things stand out clearly before the observation of the man in the street who looks on, viz., the incompleteness of the so-called Scotland Yard detectives, and the impossibility of the criminals leaving no clue behind them.

"The consequence was that when our worthy Inspector, who, I am obliged to note is not present, stood looking at the hole in the post office floor, and alleged there was no clue, I felt inwardly a disagreement which, needless to say, I did not give vent to. I carefully examined the place with a magnifying glass. Certainly

there was no eye-hitting clue. But in the book of counterfoils, gentlemen, I found one." He opened the brown paper parcel and held up a small, limp book impressively. "Here, gentlemen and Commandant, is the book of counterfoils. Mark it. We will leave it for the present."

He put the book on the table and continued.

"Now, gentlemen and Commandant, may I ask you what is the first thing a detective of great ability does when intrusted with the *loco parentis* of a case. He looks for a motive. If you recollect me I was humbly present at your interview with your gentlemanly brother, and then I gathered sufficient of what I knew before, viz., that certain people of high rank whose name shall be unmentionable had an interest in abstracting these postal orders."

'Yes, I remember telling you all about that,' exclaimed Harry, with a smile.

"You only gave me my previous information back," said Harold smiling in return. "But to make a continuation. These things set my intelligence in rapid motion. I began to consider when I had seen these unmentionable people last and under what circumstances. I then recollected the night before, the night, gentlemen and Commandant, on which the robbery had taken place. On that occasion I had been seeing a worthy

gentleman friend of mine to his apartments on the good ship *Sherrybung*, and as I wended my way homeward by a lonely road I remembered that the carriage of these unmentionable people had passed me, and that perhaps a quarter of a furlong further on a sudden glare had come from it. The matter had not imprinted itself at the time owing to my preoccupation with affairs at my home at Pansy Villa. But, gentlemen and Commandant, I thought about the matter very strikingly next day, and the result of my cogitations and searchings along that lonely road whither I went to call your Mr. Harry McMucker, was this."

He slowly produced a match box from his breast pocket, and, leaning over, poured the contents on the white page of the ponderous book.

"It seems to be the ashes of some paper with a corner of the paper left," said the Commandant, looking closely.

"Do you notice anything on the paper?" asked Harold.

"There is a number : $\frac{P}{X}00415$."

"That is the number of one of the missing receipts," said Harold, looking at Gladstone sternly.

"Really, Commandant," exclaimed Gladstone, "I think it is most inconsiderate to detain me here. It is quite time I took my departure."

"I cannot allow you to leave the room," said the Commandant inflexibly.

"Now, gentlemen and Commandant, I trust my unwearied detailsomeness does not act as a sleepifier, but before I proceed further with my evidence it is necessary to refer to a remarkable discovery, which our Galling neighbours—needless to say I refer to the French—have just brought before the notice of the public. I mean the finger-print methods of M. Bertelion, commonly pronounced Berty Long, which in brief state that the marks left by greasy thumbs are different with every person. Now, Sir Commandant, would you oblige by asking Mr. Gladstone Mortimer to place his thumb on this piece of blacked paper?"

"Will you do so?" asked the Commandant coldly.

"I absolutely decline," cried Gladstone, but his voice was quavering.

"Now it is apparent to all that the Jallagar climate is peculiarly propitious for the propagation of thumb marks," went on Harold in an even voice. "We all of us sweat profusely, and we all of us leave thumb marks on our papers. I have now the honour to produce a brief letter found in the post office, written and signed by the unmentionable person in question which bears on its upper edge the distinct mark of a thumb. I produce from the other pocket a magnifying glass and I ask

you, Sir Commandant, to compare the thumb mark on the letter with the thumb mark on the piece of charred receipt I have just had the honour of handing to you."

He paused, looking grimly at Gladstone Mortimer, while the Commandant and his brother bent over the table.

"The marks are absolutely identical," said the Commandant at length.

"Absolutely identical," echoed Harry.

"And what conclusion do you draw from that, Sir Commandant?"

"What conclusion do you draw from it, Mr. Gladstone Mortimer?" asked the Commandant.

"How should I know," muttered Gladstone, his eyes on the ground.

"Well, go on, Mr. Blee," said the Commandant, turning impatiently.

"We have dispersed the second portion of the case," continued Harold. "We have discovered the unmentionable person who received and destroyed the registered letter receipts. We now come to the guilty and despicable individual who broke up the floor of the post office. But first I must ask you to bear up while I go into details naturally personal and delicate."

"Go on, Blee," said Harry encouragingly.

"Now, Mr. Blitters," said Harold. "Where were

you on the 31st of October, the night of the post office robbery, at 8.30 p.m. by the police station clock ? ”

“ Takkin’ a stroll round the town,” said the Chief in a weak voice.

“ Be very careful,” advised the Commandant.

“ You were not near the post office that night ? ” asked Harold.

“ Not within a mile.”

“ Have you ever seen this book before ? ” asked Harold. The particular Mr. Blitters looked at it closely.

“ I can’t say,” he said at length.

“ Yes or no,” shouted the Commandant.

“ No,” said Mr. Blitters.

“ The methods I used for the discovery of the receiver of the stolen property were not applicable in their entirety to the case of the actual burglarious individual,” continued Harold. “ It was highly impossible that the unmentionable person would have cracked his crib himself. And this being the case, who were the tools he used ? His confederates might have been any persons. Cast-offs from the gutter or what-nots. Our search might have been a needle in a bundle of hay had not a private episode placed in my possession a key to the solution. Gentlemen and Commandant, as you all know a short time ago I happened to be touring in Pelung.”

The Commandant nodded.

" I took passage with the *Sherrybung*, and while on this vessel I encountered the man, Blitters, who, I believe, occupies some insubordinate position on board. During our encounter he put his thumb in my mouth and I, in the most natural of manners, bit it as you, I venture to think, Sir Commandant, or any other gentleman would have done in self defence. I now produce from my pocket a small piece of dough—ordinary dough. I place it in my mouth and press it with my teeth. I hand the dough to you, Sir Commandant, and I ask you with the aid of the already produced magnifying glass to compare the marks of my teeth on the dough, especially that mark of the hollow tooth with the very peculiar thumb mark that you will find in the book of counterfoils, also already produced, on page 141, against the place from which the missing counterfoils were torn."

The Commandant and Harry again bent over the table, while Harold stood like a statue looking straight before him. Gladstone Mortimer sat with bowed head, an unconscious image of despair. Mr. Alexander Blitters was weeping softly.

" The marks are exactly similar," announced the Commandant, looking up at length. " Blitters, hold out your hands. I wish to examine the thumbs."

Mr. Blitters hesitated. He was now sobbing violently. "Don't sir, don't," he murmured.

"Hold them out at once or I shall use force," ordered the Commandant sternly. He signed to the Sikh constable.

"I confess, sir, I confess," cried Blitters shrinking away trembling from the Sikh. "Give me another chance! It was that woman that made me! I'll never do it again!"

"You confess that you broke into the post office and stole the receipts?" enquired the Commandant.

"I do, sir," said Mr. Blitters, wiping his eyes with his coat sleeve. He seemed quite relieved.

"And who was the woman?"

"Mrs. Varapetta. I——"

"That's all we want just now," said the Commandant promptly. He took a sheet of note paper and wrote. "Sign this," he said, "and you witness it please, Mr. Gladstone Mortimer. You will note," he continued impressively, "that the name of the person to whom the stolen receipts were handed has not been mentioned, nor will it be mentioned if that person comes forward at once with a full confession and apology. Blitters, you may go back to the *Sherrybung*. If we want you we can easily find you. Mr. Gladstone Mortimer, I wish you good-night. I trust we shall not have to trouble you

further over this matter. And to you, Mr. Blee," he said, holding out his hand, "I have to tender my very heartiest thanks both on behalf of the Government and on behalf of my family for your ability and conduct in this matter."

"Give me the other hand, Blee," said Harry.

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE are few pleasanter places west of Pelung than the lawn of the Jallagar Commandery in the late afternoon. Whatever the faults in the design of the building—and as any Government official will tell you they are many—the architect did well by it in one respect; he made it front towards the east.

At about three o'clock the sun is well behind its back: at half-past four more or less a protecting shadow has extended over the large garden table—how many generations of Commandants have sipped their tea there? At five o'clock the whole lawn stands well within the shade and the land breeze begins to blow, usually gently, but sometimes so strongly that you have to put the silver cake basket, teapot, and other Government property on the four corners of the tea cloth, and to keep a wary eye on the Government eggshell china.

“The place looks very different from yesterday,” remarked Harry McMucker. “May I have some more cake?”

“I thought you were going off your feed!” said the

Commandant. "Dieting yourself or some nonsense of that sort."

"He's beginning to sit up now and take notice," laughed Mrs. McMucker.

"Perhaps he thinks it's wedding cake," the Commandant jeered.

"Miss De Souza seems a nice quiet girl," observed the blushing Harry.

"We weren't thinking of Miss De Souza," said Mrs. McMucker.

"I know you weren't. But she is, isn't she?"

"Not nice enough for Harold Blee perhaps?"

"Where that fellow gets his knowledge from I cannot understand," said the Commandant thoughtfully. "I've never met an Eurasian like him. The way he conducted the prosecution last night was wonderful."

"And the idea of getting Mr. De Souza to bring that awful man Blitters up to Mrs. Mortimer instead of to me!" exclaimed Mrs. McMucker. "It was rich."

"Do you think Blitters had had too much to drink," asked Harry.

"So far as my information goes he always has, more or less," said the Commandant. "But to my mind yesterday it looked more like opium."

"I don't think any one else—er," said Mrs. McMucker.

"But I thought Mr. Pootle had at first," laughed Harry.

"Not he. There's not an ounce of harm in him. He was just trying all he knew—according to his lights—to make things go and set every one at their ease."

"He certainly worked hard," agreed Mrs. McMucker. "Poor Mrs. Mortimer!"

"It was the King's birthday: a day for the people," went on the Commandant. "Why should we expect them to spend about the only treat we give them in saying 'prunes and prisms'? The Mortimers can come here on any afternoon."

"Let me see," said Mrs. McMucker tapping her forehead vigorously. "Didn't you say something about Ethel and her uncle coming to-day, Harry?"

"I did," assented Harry. "At about half-past five."

"So you did," said Mrs. McMucker, hiding a smile. "How stupid of me. What did Ethel say in her letter?"

"Why, I've read it to you about six times already."

"Well, read it again."

"Yes, do. I haven't heard it you know," urged the Commandant.

Husband and wife smiled at each other over their tea-cups.

"She says," said Harry reading, "that she is long—"

very keen to see—er—us all, and to hear how the 'At Home' went off yesterday. Er—er—that her aunt came home very unwell last night and is going to Europe the day after to-morrow by doctor's orders. Er—er—that she cannot understand what has happened to her uncle—that he is so awfully good and kind to her—and has told her that he is very sorry for what has occurred—er—that he thinks me—I mean us—a very fine fellow. She says that he seems to be getting quite an old man."

"And they are to be here at six," interrupted Mrs. McMucker.

"Half-past five," said Harry. . . . "You wretch!"

"Think of Gladstone Mortimer saying he was sorry," remarked Mrs. McMucker. "He must indeed be greatly changed."

"Yes, poor old boy," said the Commandant. "Do you know I feel very sorry for him. After all we are more or less what our wives make us."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Mrs. McMucker mockingly.

"That is if we allow them to have anything to do with it, Harry," explained the Commandant with great solemnity. "If you find Ethel playing practical jokes on the wife of the chief civilian in your district, take a lesson from our experience here and stop her at once."

"I will," promised Harry fervently.

"I'll never, never do it any more," cried Mrs. McMucker, clasping her hands in mock humility.

"Another piece of cake, Harry," said the Commandant suddenly.

"Another cup of tea, Harry? Do!" said Mrs. McMucker. "Why, where are you going?"

But Ethel and her uncle had appeared at the gate, and Harry was already walking rapidly towards them.

THE END

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