THE SORCERER'S STONE

BEATRICE GRIMSHAW

Mo kept a close watch; it was evident that he valued his charm.

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BY

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

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ABOUT A MARQUIS AND A MAGICIAN

IT was dark in the "marea," yet not so dark but that the Marquis and I could see about us. We had been inside this New Guinea temple, or club-house, or Parliament building—you might call it a little of all three, and not go very far wrong—for over half an hour, and our eyes were getting accustomed to the gloom. There were thirty or forty men in it, squatting about the floor, or lying on the bamboo shelves they used as beds. In the brown dusk of the unwindowed building, they seemed to melt into their surroundings like ghosts, for they were brown too, and wore no clothes save a bark loincloth. You could see the whites of their eyes, and their bead necklaces, and the haloes of coloured feathers they wore in their hair : little more. They were smoking, chewing betel-nut, and spitting its blood-

red juice out on the floor—grunting, scratching, staring at us. They had heads like a soldier's fur busby: their bodies were on the small side, according to white men's standards, but they were notably well made and muscled, and evenly developed. Most of them had wooden spears and tall warbows lying on the ground within reach; and the walls of the marea were covered with clubs, shields, spears, and bunches of barbed arrows.

The scene was old to me—old to weariness. I had been in these temples, or others like them, more times than I could count, recruiting boys for some inland trip, trading, getting food. It was true that I had never been in this especial district of New Guinea, but I did not see much difference between the savages I knew and the savages I didn't. And, anyhow, I had long since lost interest in them, save as a means of making money.

But the Marquis, I think, felt it to be the moment of his life.

There he sat, on a pile of our baggage, as on a throne, holding his head erect, and swelling out from the chest even more than usual—which is to say something—for the

Marquis is six feet four, and weighs near eighteen stone. He had come the whole way from France to study—what do you think? Magic—of which he had heard there was plenty in New Guinea. So there is: it is the greatest nuisance in the country, and I for my part would as soon think of going out to look for red ants or for stinging-tree. But the Marquis took what he called a scientific interest in the occult—which meant that he was bored for want of a little honest hard work to do, and didn't know it—and I had had bad luck with my last prospecting trip into the interior: lost four carriers (clubbed and eaten) and two mates (blackwater fever) and found nothing. So I was rather glad to take on the Marquis, when he turned up in Port Moresby, wanting a resident of the country to find carriers for him and lead a trip through the country lying about the coast. I thought I might light on payable gold after all—I've always had an idea that there might be something in the Kata-Kata country, and I thought, too, that I could do with a quiet, peaceful, easy sort of trip for once, after the kind of thing I had been having.

Quiet! Peaceful! Just wait till I have done.

It looked peaceful enough that evening, at all events. We had had a fairly long tramp to get to the village—which is celebrated all over Kata-Kata as the head-quarters of local sorcery—and had not arrived till sundown. The Marquis, on hearing that the Kata-Kata people were not cannibals, had insisted on sleeping in the marea instead of in our tents. It would be better for his purpose of studying the natural man and his connection with the occult—so he said. I thought it might turn out in his seeing a little more natural man than he wanted, since the Kata-Kata folk were by reputation a nasty lot, and had been man-eaters ten years ago, though the Government had sent punitive expeditions in often enough to reform them, since then. But it was not worth making a fuss about.

Unless the Marquis was asleep, or eating, he never stopped talking. His English was not quite English, but you could understand it all right: at any rate, he did not talk like a Frenchman on the stage. He was talking now, and I was not listening very much: it

went in at one ear and out at the other. The village men, crouched on the ground, chewed, and spat red, and looked out at him from under their sullen brows. They did not like us very much, it struck me. They were not accustomed to white people up there, except with punitive expeditions, which do not exactly smooth the way for those who may happen to come after.

Our interpreter—who could not interpret very much of the Kata-Kata talk after all—had told us that Mo, the big sorcerer, was out in the forest making spells, but that he would be in at sundown, and then perhaps he might consent, if we gave him plenty of tobacco and a lot of salt, to show us something. We had been waiting for him a good while, but there was no sign of Mo. Still, the Marquis would not hear of turning in. He could always pass away the time—talking.

I was getting quite sleepy, as I sat on the ground, smoking and thinking. It had grown darker: the men had thrown some cocoanut shells on the pile of hot ashes in the centre of the floor, and a small, fierce blaze had sprung up, showing the white boar-tusk bracelets on the brown arms, and

the quiver of the long head-feathers. The Marquis, I knew without listening, was telling me about a " dear woman who loved him—a beautiful, a kind "—because he was twisting the ends of his moustache while he talked : he always did that when he began sentimental confidences : and the ends of his moustache, in consequence, were like nothing but long, sharp pins.

Of a sudden, he dropped his hands, sprang off the throne of sacks like a wallaby—he was wonderfully light on his feet, for his size—and went down the ladder leading from the door to the ground in two jumps. I had been sitting with my back to the doorway, and could not see what it was that had agitated him : however, I got up, without undue haste, which I do not believe in, undid the fastening of the revolver holster that was strapped to my belt, and went down the ladder after the Marquis.

The village street was wide and sandy ; reflecting back the light : there was a young moon coming up now above the cocoanut palms, and the sharp brown gables of the houses stood out clear among the stars. I could see the natives slipping like shadows

in and out among the platforms and supporting piles all down the street: I saw a wolf-like kangaroo dog sitting in the moon, and a small tame cassowary taking a running kick at it as it went past. But I could not see the Marquis.

This did not altogether please me, for Kata-Kata is a good way outside Government influence, and things might happen, though they are not likely to. I walked about in the soft sand for a minute or two, and stopped to look and listen. I could hear nothing of the Marquis, but I heard what located him for me just as well as a flood of French or English conversation—the coy, pleased, flattered giggle of a girl.

I made straight for the sound, and there in the growing moonlight, behind the white stems of a clump of betel palm, was the Marquis—dancing.

I have not mentioned it—being unaccustomed to writing, and apt to lose my way—but I ought to have said that the Marquis had two special fads—three, if you include the one that most men share with him more or less—and they were sorcery and dancing. He knew all about every dance that had

ever been danced in the history of the world, from David's fandango before the ark, down to the Genée's latest pirouette at the Empire. And, in spite of his height and weight, he could dance them all himself, more or less, but mostly more. You might have thought he would look ridiculous when he danced, but he did not: no man looks ridiculous doing that which he does supremely well. He did not look ridiculous even now—pink, fat, a bit dishevelled, stepping and springing, advancing and retreating, and wreathing his fat arms above his bullet head, here in the moonlight, behind a clump of betel, with a grass-kilted, giggling New Guinea girl looking on at the mad procedure. You see, it was so exceedingly well done.

"Hallo, Mark!" I said (I used to call him that, because, being only a plain Australian without much schooling, I never could remember or pronounce his own extraordinary name). "What are you dancing?"

"It is the Love Dance of the Red Men of Roraima," said the Marquis, doing something quite extraordinary, I think, with the

calves of his legs, but he was too quick for one to see.

"Why the Love Dance, and why Red Men?" I asked.

"Because," said the Marquis, beginning to walk with a cross-swaying motion that really was fine—like Indian corn blowing in the wind—"I desire to find the key to the heart of this little beautiful, since I saw her on the steps of the marea, and the dance talks, when even one does not know a blank word of their own blessed language." (He used to pick up Australianisms from me that didn't fit in with the rest of his talk: but it wasn't any fault of mine—I never picked up his lingo.) "And the Red Men—I chose their dance because they will, without doubt, be spiritually akin to the soul of this boshter little kid."

The girl drew up one leg under her grass crinoline like a hen, and giggled as if she understood. She was really pretty—if a New Guinea girl is ever pretty: I do not admire them myself, but it is all a matter of taste. She was lighter in colour than most, a sort of golden brown, and of course, being a young savage, and not a civilised person,

she had a perfect figure. She had the little aristocratic-looking hands these Papuans often have (their hands, I reckon, are like those of the old families among white people, because neither Papuans nor old families ever do a stroke of work that they can help), and she had big eyes and a bush of hair, and was a good deal dolled up with red and yellow flowers and pearl-shell necklaces and things. All the same, she was just a little nigger, and the Marquis never ought to to have flattered her by taking notice of her. It puts them out of their place.

Still, he went on dancing, and I really forgot about the girl for a little, watching him. It was so good, and the scene was so extraordinary—the open space of sandy soil, all lit up by the moon, and that great figure, dancing with incomparable lightness, against the background of long banana leaf and slender betel palm, like a very new sort of fairy in a very strange kind of fairy glade.

Then I happened to glance at the girl, and immediately all my amusement went out like a candle in the wind, and I fell to counting up what this especial freak of the Marquis's might be likely to cost us. For the

little Papuan, who had been standing some way off at first, chewing her necklace and giggling, had suddenly turned quite grave—solemn, even—and was advancing, step by step, like someone in a dream, towards the space where the Marquis danced. Her hands were spread out as if she were blind, and her eyes never looked at the ground, or the moonlight, or the village houses showing through the trees—only at the Marquis, dancing. And she stepped nearer and nearer.

I don't go about with cotton-wool in my ears, in the Papuan bush country, even when things are—or seem—as quiet as Sunday-evening church in Sydney, with the wrong girl alongside of you. I heard something moving in the scrub that wasn't a pig or a dog: the Marquis didn't hear it, for he was whistling softly to himself all the time he danced, and the girl didn't, for she was hypnotised, or something like it. But I thought it as well to stop the circus just there: so, without looking round, I went forward, grabbed the Marquis by the shoulder, and said, "Cut it out!"

He had been long enough in my company

by this time to know that I had generally very good reasons for anything I might say or do. He stopped—not without a turn or two to finish it off nicely—and, responding to a pinch on the arm, moved away with me quite amicably. When we got back to the marea—(the girl had vanished, somehow, as these natives can without one's even seeing how)—he asked me what the matter was.

I did not answer him at first, for I was annoyed at the whole proceeding. Of course, I knew that he was only bent on a little trifling amusement—the Marquis let off most of his feelings in talk, and never took anything what you might call seriously—but all the same, he ought to have remembered, I thought, that we were in a strange, possibly a hostile country, and not have started flirting with any "little beautiful," before we had been an hour in the town. So I sat down on the floor of the marea again, and lit my pipe before I would answer.

"Flint, my very good friend, I fear that you are in a blooming wax," said the Marquis. "Why should you wax with me? What have I done?"

I took out my pipe. "You don't seem to

remember," I said, " that we're in a hostile country. I'd be obliged if you would." I put back my pipe.

" What did you see ? " asked the Marquis, quite grave and sensible now.

" I saw nothing," I said. " I don't know that there was anything. But I think I heard—the little creak that some of these big blackwood bows make."

" When you take them to your bosom, and pull hard ? " asked the Marquis, who had been trying his strength on some of these weapons, and had been a good deal impressed by their power.

" Just that," I said. " I wouldn't dance the Love Dance of the Red Men of Roraima any more, if I were you. Or I wouldn't dance it at that particular girl. Or at any girl."

" She is a beautiful," said the Marquis. " She is what you Australians, in your touching symbolism, call a peach. I remember an Australian little girl, in——"

He had got hold of both sides of his moustache : the New Guinea girl had already faded out of his mind. I saw that I was in for the deluge, so I cut it short.

"I believe that's your sorcerer coming at last," I said. There was a noise of throbbing drums in the village, a tramping down the street, that evidently foretold the commencement of the evening dance. Now, it was hardly to be supposed that the village would begin its entertainment before the sorcerer came back from his spells in the forest, to join in the revels. I told the Marquis this, and suggested we should have some trade stuff taken out of the packs, in readiness. We got one of our boys to untie a sack or so, and selected some beads, knives, salt, and tobacco, taking care not to show the full contents of our baggage to the men assembled in the marea.

"That should do," I said, putting the goods in a little heap.

"And here is the sorcerer, back from his spelling," declared the Marquis, peering through the door at a tall, fine-looking man who was striding down the street with a general air of owning the whole place. He carried a big torch in his hand, and had a netted string bag over one shoulder. Slung on his breast was a large, hollow piece of bamboo, which he took some care to keep

in a perpendicular position. His face, rather a fine one for a New Guinea native, showed clearly in the light of his torch: it was painted in stripes of black and scarlet, with a very fiendish effect. On his head was a magnificent head-dress of paradise and parrot feathers, rising fully three or four feet above his mat of hair. He had no clothes except a bark belt, and did not wear the bead and shell necklaces affected by most of the other people. There was something slung round his throat like a locket: it swayed about so that I could not see what it was.

"Yes, that's the sorcerer, without a doubt," I said. "He's making right here."

He was, and our interpreter, a timid little lad from the coast, was so terrified at the sight that he ran and hid himself at the back of the marea, and had to be dragged out by force. By the time we had succeeded in quieting him down, and assuring him that our weapons would protect us all from any sorcerer, no matter how evilly disposed, the man was at the steps, and mounting them. In the light of the fire we saw at last what his locket was. I took it, at first, for a

monkey's paw, but remembering that there are no monkeys in New Guinea, I had another look, and then realised that it was a human hand, dead and dried.

The Marquis looked at the ugly ornament much as a collector of insects looks at a hideous and valuable beetle.

"Flint, this is what you call the real Mackay," he said. "This is the worth of my money." He rose, and was about to greet the sorcerer with all the grace of Versailles—in fact, he had already begun a courtly bow—when a small and very ugly man, with ears like a bat, came running out of the dark from nowhere, and grabbed the great man by the foot as he went up.

"Mo! Mo!" he cried: and then came a flood of native, intermingled with the wildest gestures. The ugly little man beat the air with his hands, thumped himself in the ribs, jumped up and down till the feathers on his head waved like cocoanut leaves in a hurricane, and all the time yelled, chattered, gasped, and choked. Mo, who had come down the ladder again at the first word, stood looking at the furious little creature with an absolutely inexpressive face.

"What's he saying?" I asked our interpreter, Koppi Koko.

The native's face grew purposely blank and dull.

"I no savvy," he said.

"You do savvy," I told him, beginning to unbuckle my belt.

"I savvy, I savvy," he cried nervously. "Savvy little bit. That fellow, man, him telling Mo someone make gammon along him, he no like. That fellow, he brother along Mo. 'Fore God, Taubada (master), I no more I savvy."

He seemed a good deal scared about something, and when a Papuan is thoroughly scared, you may leave him alone, for all you will get out of him. I said no more, and the furious little man, after a final jump and yell, shoved something into Mo's hand, and bolted away under the house like a rat. The sorcerer put his hand into his string bag for a moment, drew it out empty, and mounted the ladder once more. You could not tell what he thought, or if he thought anything, so complete was the veil of indifference he had drawn over his face. He had, of course, heard of our arrival in the village, and white

men were not absolutely unknown about Kata-Kata, though uncommon, so I was not surprised at his taking our visit as calmly as he did. But I did not—quite—like the way he had accepted the plaint of the battered little man. It seemed to me there was something behind it.

The rickety floor of sago-sheath creaked and dipped as Mo strode up the building. He came straight to where the Marquis and myself were standing, folded his arms over his breast, and uttered something in native that was evidently a greeting. The Marquis bowed, took his hand, and shook it. I nodded at him. Mo turned aside a minute to hang up the hollow bamboo he carried so carefully (we could see it was plugged at one end with wood) and then swept Koppi Koko to him with a gesture of one hand.

We were great chiefs, no doubt (he said): he was glad we had come to see his village. Did we belong to the Government?

We assured him we did not—knowing that Kata-Kata had probably been saving up a good long score to settle with His Majesty's representatives, since the last punitive ex-

pedition. This great chief, I said (through Koppi Koko), had come a very long way from his village, which was many, many moons away, to see Mo and hear about his wonderful doings. If Mo would show him any sorcery, he would give much tobacco and salt and beads, and other treasures. And (since sorcery is illegal) he would promise not to tell the Government anything about it.

While I talked, I could hear the dance getting ready in the village: feet were stamping, drums were throbbing with the intoxicating triple beat that all Papuan travellers know: loud brassy voices were rising and falling in a monotonous chorus. I was glad to hear them, for I know the difference between songs of peace and songs of war, and this was not one of the latter. Still—many years in New Guinea have given me an instinct for danger that has nothing at all to do with sight or hearing: and it was stirring, ever so slightly, now. I watched the sorcerer's face as I talked.

It was still a blank: you could no more have read it than you could read a stone wall. Mo replied to my address that he had

been making magic all day, and was tired. Another day, he said, he would show us some. To-night we could give him that tobacco and salt he saw, and he would think and prepare himself. Magic, he explained, took much preparation.

I did not care for the whole thing: a nigger is a nigger to me, and I can't stand seeing them put on airs. Besides, I do not believe in their nonsense. But the Marquis did, and he was very anxious to see something, so I swallowed my own feelings, and told Mo we should be glad to see his performance to-morrow, if that would suit him, and in the meantime, he might have the tobacco—not the salt: that would come when he had done something to earn it. Salt is precious in the interior of New Guinea, and I was not minded to throw any of it away.

The Marquis was almost ready to cry—he had been looking forward to an immediate satisfaction of his curiosity, and he was like a child, when disappointed of anything he fancied.

"Ask him something," he demanded. "Ask him at least what it is that he has in

his bamboo, and why he carries a human hand round his neck, and what is in that string bag of his. Not to hear anything to-night, my Flint, that would indeed be the long lane that breaks the camel's back. I'm not made of patience ! "

" That's right : you're not," said I. " Well, Koppi Koko, ask him."

But here our interpreter went on strike. He was " too much fright," he declared. He would not ask Mo what was in the bamboo, or about the hand, or anything else. It struck me that he already knew, since he came from the coast, only a few days away. But if he did, he would not tell.

" You needn't worry," I said to the Marquis. " I know all that's in his old bag without looking. I've seen other sorcerers' bags. There'll be a lot of trash like lizards' tails and bats' wings and frogs' feet, and there'll be queer-shaped stones he has picked up, and bits of carved wood, and dried leaves and plants, and there's sure to be some quartz crystals—that's great magic, with them—and there'll very likely be a dagger made of human bone, and a native fork or two, and a betel-chewing outfit—

poker-worked gourd, with a boar-tooth stopper, nuts, nice little spatula with carved head. That's about all."

"There could be nothing of more interest in the world," declared the Marquis. "Ethnologically—you can see without doubt, the connection between the Witches of Macbeth——"

"Cut it out, Mark," I said. "You ought to know by this time that this horse isn't yarded with that kind of corn. But if you don't feel you can lay your golden head on your little pillow to-night without seeing the curio shop, I'll work it all right. It only means a handful or two of salt."

As I said before, I hate spending my salt when I haven't got to: but I opened a tin, took a good handful, and offered it to Mo, pointing at the same time to his bag, and to our eyes. Koppi Koko had disappeared. I noted the fact, and decided to argue with him—helped by a bit of lawyer cane—later on.

The other natives had all cleared out by this time, and the sound of the dance was growing. Thud-thud went the feet: gallop-gallop the drum, like a horse's hoofs. The

fire was low in the marea, but it cast up a deep red glow towards the roof, giving light enough to see the contents of the wonderful bag, as Mo tumbled them out on the floor beside us. The salt had been too much for him : he accepted it eagerly, and was eating it like sugar, smearing his paint all to bits, and nearly choking himself as he sucked it down. These inland natives hardly ever see salt, and they are as keen for it as an alligator for fish, once they get the chance of a little.

Everything that was in the bag the Marquis handled, weighed, even smelt. I could tell him about most of the things : I did not know the Kata-Kata country, but quite a lot of the charms were familiar enough. This stone, I said, was meant to make the yam crops grow. This one was used for charming down rain. This carved monstrosity, like a pig that was half a beetle, or a beetle that was trying to look like a pig, would probably be a charm for making war.

All the time he was handling and exclaiming over the trash in the bag, I kept a lookout on the sorcerer's face. There was something I did not like in the air : the fact that

I could not define it made it none the less real. It had to do, maybe, with the wooden demeanour of Mo—or with the disappearance of all the other men from the marea—or with a certain strange pitiful whimpering that had been going on under the house for quite a good while—a dog, perhaps : perhaps not. Anyhow, I looked at Mo a good deal. If there was mischief in the village—no matter of what kind—the sorcerer was sure to be at the bottom of it.

The drums galloped outside : the dance went on. The moon climbed over the motionless tops of the cocoanut palms, and looked down into the open mouth of the marea. Half in the moonlight, half in the firelight, Mo's face grew suddenly dark : he made a snatch at something that the Marquis was examining and hid it away—where, I could not see. It was a trifling object, only a piece cut out of one of the plaited red and yellow belts that nearly everyone in the village wore, men, women, and older children. The Marquis had been handling it rather closely, to examine the pattern. A smile crept over the sorcerer's face when it was gone—a cunning, ugly smile, worse than the stony

inexpressiveness that had gone before. I saw he was bent on making us forget that scrap of plaited stuff. He pulled out a lot of other things from the bag—fossils, beaks, bats' wings, lumps of quartz crystal that glittered in the moon—and began showing them off. More, by the sound of a certain word I had heard Koppi Koko use, I understood him to say that he was ready to do some magic for us, if we liked. He took down a cocoanut shell from the wall, and intimated that it was to be filled with salt first of all. I filled it, and Mo got up from his crouching posture on the floor, and disappeared, making signs to show that he would return.

"How do you find that?" asked the Marquis.

"Lucky he had that rag in his collection," I said. "He evidently forgot it was there, didn't want us to see it, and is going to do some of his nonsense to put it out of our heads. It's a throw-in for us, Mark."

"If that signifies a bit of good luck, I am entirely of accord," said the Marquis. "Flint, I am joyous, I must dance."

And dance he did, lightly as a girl of sixteen, there in the huge dusk marea, in the

moonlight and the firelight, holding out his arms like wings, and whistling as he danced. Before he had done, Mo appeared again, with something in his hand: and for an instant the stony veil was lifted altogether from his face, and he shot such a look of hate at the Marquis, that I felt my hand slip involuntarily round to the holster on my hip.

"The old curio-dealer doesn't like your dancing, Mark," I warned. "Somehow, your accomplishments don't seem popular here."

"It was the dance of Marianne before Herod," said the Marquis, stopping at the end of a pirouette. "I dance that dance when I am glad. The second part of it, I mean—the part when Marianne has got the head of John the Baptist, and is satisfied of that."

"Old Ikey Mo isn't satisfied, about something or other," I said. "Let's get him to work: perhaps he'll forget his troubles then."

"What has he got in his hand?" asked the Marquis, with interest.

It was a lizard, about ten inches long, yellowish in colour, and quite dead. He

gave it to us to handle. We both saw that it was dead and beginning to grow stiff: it seemed to have died naturally as there were no marks upon it. Mo squatted down on the floor, and motioned us to keep quiet. He laid the lizard out upon a banana leaf, shut his eyes, and began to chant something in a low, monotonous voice. We could not hear very clearly, for the drums throbbed on and on in the village, and the distant dance had risen to a thundering chorus of feet and voices, like the beat of the trade-wind surf on the long, long beaches of Papua.

By and by he stopped, opened his eyes, and took something out of his bag. The dance still thundered on: through all its far-off roar, we could hear the dog that cried under the house—if it was a dog.

Mo had taken a crystal out of his bag—the biggest one—and unwrapped it from its covering of leaves. It was a pretty thing, like the end cut off a chandelier lustre, and just about the same size, only it was double ended, with two points. The lizard lay still and dead upon the ground. Mo pointed the crystal at it, and began stroking the air just above the little corpse, without actually

touching it. Over and over it he went with the crystal, making lines of light, as the dying fire caught the quartz, and drew violet and green and crimson colours out of it. He was breathing very hard all the time, and sweat was pouring off his naked body. One could see that he was making a tremendous effort, but where, or how, one could not understand.

At last he stopped, laid the crystal down on the banana leaf, and looked intently at the lizard. We looked too.

I know that no one will believe what happened next, but I must tell the thing as it occurred. The lizard moved.

We watched it, holding our breath. It moved again. It drew its legs under it.

The sorcerer took the crystal up, and drew more lines in the air, breathing hard and narrowing down his eyes till they were two black sparks beneath his beetling eyebrows.

The lizard got up, staggered, and walked away. It was alive.

I never wished I knew French until that minute. It would have been something to understand the expletives that the Marquis was pouring out, in a sharp, rattling,

musketry fire of amazed profanity and delight. I said a thing or two myself, but it sounded meek and mild by comparison. And he did not stop for a good three minutes. Then he got up—the sorcerer was standing now—and seized the greasy savage in his arms, rocking him about as if he were a child.

"I have found it—the true occult power—genuine article, all wool and a yard wide—my God, yes!" he exclaimed. In his excitement he was going to our stores to give the sorcerer I don't know what or how much of our invaluable food, but I stopped him in time.

"Don't do it, Marky," I said. "Never let these brutes know how much you have, or they'll loot you, first chance. You've given him quite enough. I allow it's wonderful, but there may be some very simple explanation after all."

"You do not understand," said the Marquis. "You have no faith. Let me look yet again at the crystal. It is, of course, but an instrument of the power—still——"

He took it in his hands, and began examining it. Mo kept a close watch on it,

hovering over us like a hen over her chicken when a hawk is about. It was plain that he valued his charm quite a good deal.

"The finest crystal I ever saw, with any one of these sorcerers," I declared, handling it. . . .

I don't know how the idea came into my head, but it did come, like a shock from a battery—just about as hard, and as quick. And what was queer, it came into the Marquis's head at exactly the same moment. For just as my hand made a sudden clutch at the crystal, his hand met it, and the two hands closed on each other. Our eyes met, and if mine were as glaring and excited as his——

I think they must have been. Mo had the thing out of our two hands before we knew where we were. It was gone, back in the bag like a conjuring trick, and the stony veil had fallen before the sorcerer's face again.

We were both breathing hard, like men who have run a race, but I think we kept pretty cool. It was the Marquis who begged then, by signs, to see the crystal again, and succeeded in getting Mo to show the end of it, shining out of the green wrapping of fresh

banana leaf, between the string meshes of the bag. But it was I who pulled my watch out, and got the face of it up against the point of the crystal—all of it that Mo would let us touch now. The sharp end of the thing scored into the glass of it as if it had been butter.

What the Marquis said that time I have always wanted to know: it sounded much livelier than the last. I cut him short with a kick.

"For God's sake, keep cool," I said. "Don't let him suspect anything: it's our only chance. You don't know how they value those charms of theirs—it's no question of buying. . . . Come away and leave him alone: go out and see the dance—anything. Don't let him think we care about it."

I almost dragged him away. It was deliciously cool and fresh in the moonlight outside: there was a smell of coming rain, and the wind brought whiffs of paw-paw blossom from somewhere in the forest, heavy and treacly sweet. The noise of the dance was dying down: it was almost quiet. Under the marea, in the space among the piles, that

dog-like whimper went on. But the Marquis and I were too excited to notice it. Afterwards, I remembered how we had heard it.

"It's bigger than the Koh-i-noor, but not near so big as the Cullinan," I said, when we were out of earshot.

"Nevertheless, it is a king's fortune," affirmed the Marquis. He was quite pale, and almost trembling. "And this sorcerer is using it to make charms!"

"If we can get it——" I began.

"Where shall there be any difficulty? It is only to buy."

"Is it? You don't know these sorcerers. Probably he thinks his whole power depends on it."

"Flint, my Flint, it would be hard to say what it depends on. He has power—we know it. He has power of life and death. My God, what a man!"

"Oh, he's only a greasy nigger, after all, whatever conjuring tricks he can play," I said irritably. "They claim a lot, these sorcerers. They say they can kill anyone by wishing, and bring him to life again by making spells. If you listened to what they say——"

"But the lizard, he was dead," said the Marquis, in a solemn voice.

"Hang the lizard: it's the diamond we are after now. First to get it, and then to find out where it came from—if that's possible."

"Flint, my friend, I am not rich—you know that," said the Marquis, with something like tears in his fat voice. "I have strained myself—have, what is it you say? bust—have bust my resources, to make this voyage in New Guinea. But if we can get that diamond—see, the glories of my house are restored: I am once more the proper kind of a Marquis, you bet! And you, you are rich. You are a gentle and a spiritual, Flint: I shall be glad to think of you rich."

All this time we had been making away from the marea, but the cry under the house never ceased to follow us. I could not stand it at last. There are many things in a New Guinea inland town which you had better not enquire into, unless you are prepared to put up a fight, which means a lot of killing before you are through, and possibly a row with the Government afterwards. But some-

how I felt I wanted to look into this, and I told the Marquis so.

"Is it not a dog?" he asked, surprised.

"I don't think it is," I said. "Anyhow, give me your box of matches, and we'll go back and see. It gets me, somehow or other."

The marea was dark and empty when we returned: the sorcerer was gone. The dance was taking new life: it roared like a forest fire, down there at the end of the village. There was not a soul in sight as we got under the marea and struck our matches to look.

It was not a dog. It was the girl who had been so fascinated with the Marquis's dancing, a few hours earlier. She was crouching on the ground like a sick monkey, her head on her knees, moaning in a cold, frightened sort of way, as if she did not expect that anyone would hear, or heed.

"Hold! the little beautiful!" cried the Marquis. I got him by the slack of his trousers, just in time. He was springing forward to catch her in his arms and console her—a kind and a manly impulse, no doubt, but one that, I judged, might cost the little creature dear.

She did not even notice him. She went on softly wailing, like a thing that was doomed to die, and knew and feared it. In one slight brown hand she held something that was half wrapped round her waist, half torn loose. I struck another match, and looked at it. It was a red and yellow waistbelt, with a piece cut out. The gap was just about the size of the piece of stuff we had seen in the sorcerer's bag.

She would not listen when we spoke to her: she only drew away and shivered. I judged it best to leave her, for the present at all events. We crept along under the piles, walking half doubled up, till we were out in the moonlight once more. The street was still quiet, but the ugly little man with the bat-like ears, who had been so angry earlier in the evening, was coming up towards the house. He seemed to hear the crying: he turned half round as he passed, and shook his spear at the marea, glaring at the little crouching shadow below. Then he looked at us, and deliberately spat towards the Marquis; turned, went on, and entered another house.

"That throws some light," I said. "Mark,

I reckon that the girl has been too much struck with that beautiful performance of yours, and that the ugly little man is her lover, and doesn't like it. I rather think he has complained to his brother, Mo, and got him to puri-puri her, and she's half mad with fright."

"What is puri-puri?" asked the Marquis, looking grave.

"They've another word here. All over Papua, mostly, it means the same—sorcery. He's got a bit of her waistbelt to make a spell of, and she thinks she's going to die in consequence. Of course, she won't, but she's badly scared."

"Flint, he has the power of life and death —that man," said the Marquis. "What can we do?"

"Rats, he hasn't power of life and death," I said. "We can give him a talking to, and keep him from scaring the poor little soul any more, or she might really die of fright. Don't go talking to her: it would only make things worse."

"The first thing in the morning, we must talk to him, isn't it?"

"First thing. We might as well have our

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tent, Marky: I think it would be a little more healthy than the marea, somehow."

We had, and slept in it—part of the night. About the small chill hour that comes near dawn, we were roused out by a wild crying from one of the houses near at hand—a house into which we had seen the little maiden creep, still sobbing, before we turned in ourselves; for, needless to say, the Marquis and I had been keeping as much of a look-out over her as we could. But this was not the girl's crying, it was horrified yells from the other inmates of the house—yells of such dismay that we wasted no time in catching up our arms and running in.

The house was nothing but a brown thatch roof, set on a sago-palm floor. It was dimly lighted by a fire; in the short interval before I could get my hurricane lantern alight, I saw a dozen or two brown naked forms, men and women, moving about distractedly, and howling. Something was visible on the floor among their feet.

I got the lantern alight, and held it up. There lay the pretty little girl, dead and stiff. She had not a wound or a mark on her, but she seemed to have been cold for hours.

No doubt the growing chill of her small body was what had attracted the attention of her companions.

"Flint, my friend, she is dead, the little beautiful, and I have been her murderer, by Gum!" said the Marquis, in a low, shocked whisper.

"You haven't anything of the kind, Mark. Don't be morbid. . . . Poor little girl!" I said, looking at her again, as the women, howling loudly, picked her up, and carried her away.

"Life and death—life and death!" said the Marquis. "Flint, we are in deep water."

"If it's only water, we're lucky," I said, leading the way out of the house again. "Sentries after this, Mark, I take no chances."

The Marquis was looking at the marea, where the sorcerer, no doubt, was coolly sleeping.

"Blood—blood!" he said. "Always, where there is a great diamond, there shall be blood. The stone is blooded now, my Flint. When will be the next?"

HOW THERE WAS DEATH IN THE POT

II

HOW THERE WAS DEATH IN THE POT

TO enter an unknown, hostile town in the heart of New Guinea—to have trouble over a village beauty, see a sorcerer restore the dead to life, discover a huge diamond, and be involved in a sudden death —all within twenty-four hours—is adventure enough for anyone. It is more than enough for me. I do not go out looking for adventures, any more than I suppose a confectioner's boy would go out looking for cakes, and for the same reason—I am sick of them. I go looking for gold, as a rule : sometimes I find it, and sometimes I don't. If I do, I can have a good time with it in Sydney or Melbourne : if I don't I can look again. But I never saw the adventure that you could pay in over the counter of a bar or at the box-office of a theatre. Adventures are a nuisance and a hindrance, so far as I have

experienced them, and as to going out actually hunting for them——

Well, that was very much what the Marquis was doing. I will say this much for him, he wasn't any sort of a coward. I have seen him cry like a girl, I have seen him shiver with excitement, but I never saw him frightened, and I never saw him give anything best. That would have kept me in his company, even if the big diamond had not.

But now we were inevitably linked by that double interest. It shows what a good sort the Marquis was, that we hadn't a word's dispute as to who found it first or whose was the right to claim it—if we ever got it. We just assumed that, being in the thing together, it was "halves." I was to stick to the Marquis, and he to me, till the business was through.

Good Lord! if we had had an idea of how much that meant! . . .

We were beginning to have an inkling, no more, the morning after the poor little pretty girl had been buried. They carried her away, wrapped in mats, to some burial-place in the forest as soon as the daylight broke, and we did not get a chance to examine the corpse,

as I had wished to do. That hurried look-over in her own house, when they found her dead, had shown me that there was no obvious trace of injury: but I thought her slightly swollen. I suspected poison—the sorcerers of New Guinea are clever poisoners, and very ready to use their powers. But nothing would ever tell us now. The "little beautiful," as the Marquis had called her, was dead.

Under any ordinary circumstances I would have cleared out of the town straightaway, for I knew well that some kind of trouble was sure to follow such an unlucky introduction. But with a diamond the size of a chandelier lustre knocking about in a sorcerer's bag, within a few yards of us, we were not likely to move on in a hurry. The Marquis and I, on the morning that followed that eventful night, held a council of war on the grassy space in front of our tent where we could see all that went on in the village street, and keep an eye on the whereabouts of Mo. So long as we saw him, we knew that he could not be doing much mischief.

The bat-eared little man was not to be seen that day. I had ascertained through

Koppi Koko that the dead girl was his promised wife, and that she had told him, after watching the Marquis dance, that she never would marry an ugly little thing like him. He was the sorcerer's youngest and favourite brother, so the useful Koppi Koko had found out: being very anxious to retrieve his character and save himself the hammering that he feared his desertion might bring down on him. I did not touch him, as it happened, not because I thought he didn't deserve it, but because I knew he would be more useful if he were kept in suspense.

I thought his information interesting, but by no means reassuring. It was too much to suppose that the matter would be allowed to end there. The little man must have developed a worse grudge against us than against his late unlucky fiancée, and if her fate was an example of what we had got to expect, things were looking lively.

So I told the Marquis. We were sitting on the ground outside our tent and watching the villagers moving about their daily tasks —water-carrying, net-making, wood-cutting, fetching sago from the forest, going out to

dig yams, or to hunt pig. They looked peaceable enough, and it was a peaceful, pretty scene, with the sun just rising over the tall green palms and the smoke curling thin and blue from under the deep thatch roofs. But the old hand in New Guinea knows well—too well—that the Papuan is most dangerous when, apparently, most friendly. The quiet aspect of the place meant nothing—or worse.

"There is a feeling of sadness upon me this morning: I have the blooming hump," said the Marquis, his fat chin resting upon his pink, fat hand. "If you offered me the —the big diamond itself in payment, I could not dance a step."

"That's right: I reckon you'd better keep on feeling that way as long as you can," I said. "We've trouble enough on our hands without making any more, and your accomplishments do seem to bring the thunder about one's ears, somehow. Mark, let's talk it all out."

"Perfectly," said the Marquis, turning his full-moon face round upon me.

"Look here. We've got to get that diamond. And we've got to avoid being

poisoned, like that girl was. And we've got to get our carriers out safe with ourselves, and be on our way to the coast inside of a day or so at the most: it isn't healthy to stop here too long."

"Perfectly: that's right."

"Well then. I reckon the sorcerer's not going to go on keeping the diamond where he did, because a blind baby could have seen that we wanted it. We must get some idea of likely hiding-places."

"Hold a minute: could we not buy it, quite simply?"

"No, Mark, I've tried."

"Already?"

"This morning, while you were choosing between your heliotrope shirt with the green tie and your pink one with the blue. I went and had a talk with the brute—I'd rather have pounded him to a jelly, but you can't always do the thing you ought to do, up-country in Papua. Told him we had a fancy for his magic crystal: said you were a bit of a sorcerer yourself, and would give a lot for it. Offered all it was safe to offer. No go: he didn't rise to it worth twopence. You see, if I had shown him all we had he

would simply have looted our stores and had us knocked on the head—or tried to—and anything I offered didn't tempt him in comparison with the stone. We have pretty short tucker, you know, Mark—I'm not blaming you, for I know you couldn't afford a big outfit, but there it is: we can't bid high even if it was safe to show everything."

"But see then!" exclaimed the Marquis, "could we not promise him?"

"Oh, you could promise him anything, but he wouldn't believe you. They never keep promises themselves, and can't understand anyone else doing it. And I put it to you—would even a white man part with something he valued quite a lot to a couple of doubtful strangers just on a promise?"

"No," said the Marquis thoughtfully. "Assuredly he would say that a bird in the bush blows nobody good, and laugh in his nose at you."

"Well, what I promise to do is just to take the diamond any way we can get it—steal it, if you like to say so—and when we get back to Port Moresby send him a big equivalent for it—a case of valuable goods of some kind or other. That would be treat-

ing him as fairly as we can. Anyhow, there is one thing we aren't going to do, Marky, and that is leave a chunk of a rough diamond you could break a man's head with knocking loose about Kata-Kata in a sorcerer's bag."

"I am all of accord with you: no blooming fear!" said the Marquis. "But, Flint, there is one thing that I must not forget—even on account of the diamond—my seek for the occult. Can we not get this Mo to show us more things of his magic?"

"If Mo doesn't intend to show you more of his 'magic' without being asked or wanted you may call me a yellow Chow," I said. "Don't you worry about that: you'll get all you want, I reckon."

We had left the tent now, as it was growing very hot in the village, and we were walking along the bank of the river that ran close beside the street. It was a pretty river, shallow and foamy and full of big rocks covered with moss and fern. Here and there you could see a pink or purple orchid, and the cocoanuts cast wonderful shadows on the pools.

Just where the shadow was deepest and

coolest something stirred in the brown of the water : something that was brown itself, and that glittered with wet. It was Mo, bathing. I pulled the Marquis back into the shade.

"This is luck!" I whispered. "The village is quiet : we can very likely get into Mo's own house and have a look round. Come on, as quick as you can."

. . . How still the wide brown street was under the terrible midday sun ! Noon is the lonely hour in Papua : when the heat is at its worst no man stirs about who is not compelled to do so. The women were in the yam fields taking their midday rest from toil beneath the shelter of the bush. The men were loafing about somewhere in the depths of the forest pretending to hunt. In the town itself there were only a few old people, and children, all asleep. The main street was a river of white fire : the shadows beneath the long-legged houses were like pools of tar. Not a dog stirred out from shelter. Not a footstep rustled or a palm-sheath floor gave forth a creak. It was undoubtedly the moment.

We knew where Mo's house was—a fine

building with a high-gabled roof and an extraordinary amount of ornament in the way of carved birds and crocodiles and fringes of waving fibre. We scuttled up the ladder silently and swiftly, like two thieves, and dodged in under the low door. Inside, the house was high and cool and empty : a pleasant amber light filtered down from somewhere in the lofty roof, but there were no windows, and the door was buried in the overhanging thatch. Straining our eyes, we looked about us. . . . Mats; wooden sleeping-pillows shaped like alligators; lime gourds carved and poker-worked; tall shields, with devilish faces carved upon them; a string of human skulls, extending from the gable to the floor; a dagger carved from a thigh-bone; dancing masks, made in the semblance of sharks and birds and kangaroos; arrows; pineapple-shaped stone clubs; long, barbed, ebony spears. . . . In one corner hung the sorcerer's great feather bonnet, taken off for bathing; his ugly human-hand locket was tidily laid away on a rafter. The thick bamboo that we had seen him carrying like a wand lay on the floor, tightly corked up. But what interested

us more than anything was the big charm-bag, hung on the wall, and bursting full.

We had it down in a moment and tumbled the things out on the floor, tossing them recklessly here and there in the search for our wonderful stone. I took the opportunity of looking at all the quartz crystals it contained—there were a good many—and opening all the little banana-leaf parcels, hoping to find another diamond, in the absence of our first discovery, which (I saw almost at once) was not there. But there was nothing.

This did not surprise me much, for Koppi Koko had told me (under pressure of certain threats) that the crystal, which was well known to all the natives, had been the property of innumerable sorcerers from time to time, and had, in all probability, passed about over half Papua. Nothing could be more impossible, in that country of Babel dialects, than to find out where the stone had originally come from. However, if we could only get hold of it, I was not bothering much about anything else.

"It seems to me," said the Marquis, drawing himself erect and kicking aside the

bag with his foot, "that our friend, Monsieur Mo, is not such a fool as he glitters."

"That's right," I answered, looking round again. Rolled-up mats? gourds? clay water-pots? Impossible to say. At all events, we might——

"My God, Flint!" said the Marquis in a low, horrified voice. "My God of gods, look at that." The flimsy flooring shook as he bounded back towards the door. I jumped back with him, just in case—and then looked.

The bamboo was rolling about on the floor, and trying to stand on its end!

We stood with our backs against the thatch by the door, breathing very hard, and staring still harder. The thing kept on jumping and rolling. It was rolling towards us.

I have never been called a nervous man, but I was down the ladder and out in the street almost before the Marquis. It has always seemed to me a special Providence that we did not meet, and stick, in the door.

We were scarcely out, and beginning to feel a little foolish—I, for one, had made up my mind already to go back, and investigate the thing, sorcery, trick, or whatever it was

—when we saw the tall, wet figure of Mo coming up through the trees from the river. It did not seem a happy time to continue our investigations, so we made for the tent, trying to look as if we had only been out for a stroll, and (I dare say) succeeding just about as well as a couple of small boys caught coming away from the fruit garden.

"No go," I said, flinging myself down on the pile of sacks inside our tent. "Mark, we'll have a smoke and a game of cards, and then we'll go to sleep."

"What for to sleep?" asked the Marquis.

"Because I don't propose to sleep much to-night—nor will you. It seems to me that things are given to happening here at night, and I intend to keep a look-out instead."

"We will sleep then," agreed my companion. And we did, after our smoke and our game, all through the burning afternoon, until the sun began to drop behind the cocoanuts, and the leather-necks commenced their evening squawking and squabbling, and the smoke of supper fires stole out, smelling pleasant and peaceful and homy, and everything that it particularly was not—here in

the heart of cannibal Papua, in the sorcerer's town.

. . . . . .

When we woke up, we were thoroughly rested, for we had slept long and deep, after our broken rest the night before. I called up Koppi Koko, and bid him get the supper ready. The Marquis yawned, stretched, and sat up on his mat.

"Hallo!" I said. "There's another of your singlets going: you won't have enough clothes to carry you back to Port Moresby, at this rate." For the Marquis, being big and fat, stretched his clothes terribly, and, in consequence, they were wearing very fast.

"I do feel like a cool window in my back: have a look, kindly," he said, trying to see over his own shoulder.

I looked at his back.

"Mark," I said, "take off your singlet and look at it: I don't like this."

I had to peel him out of it, for it had shrunk and was tight. When he was clear, and had the garment on his knee, he gave it one glance, and then looked at me.

"My friend, as I said yesterday, we are in deep waters," he remarked. "This, while I

lay asleep, has been cut. This cut, it has taken out a piece, and the piece is the same size as——"

"As the piece out of the girl's belt," I finished.

We looked at each other: the leather-necks squawked outside: the dogs of the village began that peculiarly mournful, wolf-like howling that native dogs always do set up about sunset.

"And the girl, the little beautiful, that night she died," observed the Marquis. He whistled softly to himself: an air I did not know, a crying, sobbing sort of tune it was, and not calculated to raise anyone's spirits if they had needed it—which I should have thought the Marquis's might.

"See, I will dance her requiem," he said. "Perhaps my own, good Flint. One never knows."

Singing the air gently to himself—I cannot describe how mournful and calling-you-to-come-back it sounded, or how the horrid wailing of the native dogs chimed in and became a part—he danced in the twelve-by-fourteen space of the tent. . . . I have seen something like it in the Islands, when the

warriors were dancing for the funeral of a great dead chief—something, but not so good. It was grief, and death, and despair put into motion and translated by the Marquis's huge limbs into a language that even the Papuans themselves would have understood. All, too, as lightly as—as—well, as the feathers waving in the wind upon a hearse.

When he had done, he sat down, and smiles broke out all over his pink, fat face.

"Good, eh?" he said. "That was a funeral dance of prehistoric Crete that I found among the buried carvings of the palace of Minos which they have lately——"

"Come back," I said, "this isn't ancient Crete, it's modern New Guinea, and we're in a hole. Mark, I propose for to-night that we let on to go to sleep, but don't—and then we'll see what happens. As for supper, I'm going out to cook that myself. I'm not taking any chances just now."

"As you wish," said the Marquis. "But you cannot deny that it is all most interesting."

"Oh, very—blank—interesting," I said. "I hope it doesn't get any more so. I'd like

a little boredom for a change, if you ask me." And I went to cook the supper—not that I thought it really necessary, but just—in case. One does a lot of things for that reason in the queer places of Papua.

We had a little coffee in our stores, and I brewed a billy-can full, for I did not want any mistakes made about going to sleep. At the usual hour we put out our light, and lay down on the rough sack beds I had fixed up. The Marquis and I were near enough together to touch one another if we wished. We turned in all standing, even to our boots. The carriers were camped in a little hut close by; our stores were mostly piled up in the tent; and we had our revolvers strapped round our waists.

It was arranged that we were to take watch and watch about, for two hours each, and that the man on watch should sit on his bed, not lie. I could guess the time easily enough, and the Marquis thought he could also. In any case, there could be no striking of matches.

The night wore on, but slowly. At first there were constant stirrings in the village, talking, squabbling, moving here and there:

then the dogs began to fight: then some of the roosters waked up and crowed, and roused out the rest a good many hours too soon. But by degrees the town settled to rest. I had taken the first watch; had lain down—not to sleep—through the Marquis's; and now my second watch was well on its way.

After a time it grew so still that the silence seemed to tingle, in the way it does when you are awake at night, and listening. There was not a breath of wind, no moon, and few stars: the weather had been heavy and thunderous all day, and the sky was clouded. In the triangle made by the opening of the tent I could see—when I had been straining my eyes into the dark for quite a long time—the dim greyness of the village street and the black bank of palms beyond.

I say, there was not a sound, nor anything to see. Seated there on my rough bed, every sense alert, I might have been alone at the end of the world, with the last man dead beside me.

But it came to me, not suddenly, quietly and surely, that we were not alone. I do not know whence the first warning conveyed

itself : it came, however, and I found myself listening and looking expectantly, with a certainty in my mind that something was going to happen.

Sight and hearing are not the only senses that a bushman can use to good effect. I smelt, cautiously and without noise.

There was the marshy odour of the river behind the palms. There was the indescribable smell of a native village—dry, sun-baked earth, insanitary whiffs of decaying stuff, the hay-like odour of old thatch. And something more. The smell of cocoanut oil, warm and fresh, and very near.

I remembered that the Papuan always oils himself after bathing. I recollected having seen Mo in the river.

Very cautiously I stretched out and touched the Marquis's hand. He was awake—he was not the kind of man to sleep when he ought to have been waking, for all his flummery—and his hand met mine with a squeeze. We listened hard. There was not the ghost of a sound, but the smell grew stronger, passed, and died away. And just after, the faintest possible shadow passed the grey of the road.

We listened again, and I for one did not

like it, for I knew that whatever Mo had meant to do was done. Then, suddenly, the Marquis's hand caught hold of mine in a grip that was painful.

"Flint, a light!" was all he said. I had my matches in my hand, and I struck one almost before he had done speaking. The Marquis was sitting up on his bed, looking white and drawn.

"It is the 'touch of death,'" he said. "I have felt it—cold as—as nothing but death is cold." He sat like a statue; his hand had let mine go, and was gripping tight to the edge of the bed. I was up in a moment and looking all round the tent. There was not a thing to be seen. Having searched, I put out the light again, and waited. It is not a good thing to make yourself a target for possible arrows shot in the dark. I could hear the Marquis breathing heavily. Then, in a moment, he gave a terrible cry, leaped right on to my bed, and brought it and me, and himself, down to the earth together in one tremendous crash.

There was no use trying to "lie low" after that. I struggled out somehow, lit the hurricane lamp, and asked the Marquis, who was

sitting half dazed in the midst of the ruins, what he supposed had happened.

He was still deadly pale.

"I don't know, my Flint," he answered, looking at me with the fixed expression of the man who has had a shock. "I know only that the hand of death itself was laid upon me, there in the dark—first it has touched my arm, and then my heart, where my clothes were open for the heat."

"How do you know it was the hand of death?" I asked, getting a bottle of whisky out of one of our swags. "How do you know you weren't asleep after all, and having a bad dream?"

"I was not asleep; you will remember I touched your hand. And that thing was death, I know, because in these plains where it is all the time hot there is nothing cold at all, and that which has touched me was the cold of death."

"Rats: you aren't dead: have some whisky," I said, pouring it out.

"Yes, I am escaped: that's what I don't comprehend," said the Marquis thoughtfully. "That is good whisky: that warms the muscles of the heart. Flint," with a sudden

revival, " you cannot but must allow this is the very devil interesting ! "

. . . . . .

We were rather sleepy in the morning, I remember—the effect of the coffee having worn off. I had an idea or two as to what course we had best follow for the capturing of the stone : but nothing could be done before midday. So I and the Marquis kept watch for each other to sleep, and we got in a good three hours apiece, before noon.

When the white blaze of twelve o'clock was searing the palms once more, and the village folk were away or asleep, and Mo had gone down to the river again to bathe, I beckoned the Marquis out. We wore the rubber-soled shoes that one uses for easy bush walking, and made not a sound as we passed along the street. The shadows of the palms were ink upon white paper : the dogs slept beneath the houses : the tame cockatoos and parrots drowsed upon the eaves. The heat was awful : it seemed as though the village, in its stillness, lay dead beneath a rain of white fire from the implacable sky.

We gained the sorcerer's house without

being seen, and slipped into the cool of the interior, gasping like creatures that find water after drought.

"What a day!" choked the Marquis in a whisper—we feared, somehow, to talk aloud. "You may have thankfulness that you are as lean as a herring, Flint. If you had my weight——"

He sat down on the floor to cool off—and it promptly gave way beneath him. I hauled him out, with some trouble, and set him in a safe place.

"I believe that's a trap-door," I said, looking at it. "Seems to be meant for a hurried get-away in case of trouble. Not a bad idea. I wonder how he came to leave it open."

We looked about us. The bamboo that had given us such an unpleasant start on the day before was nowhere to be seen. Otherwise, the house was the same. Still—whether it was the effect of the alarm in the night or simply the discouragement that always treads close on the heels of excited hope—I did not feel that we were nearer our goal. Rather, I felt farther away.

"We must look," said the Marquis, who evidently did not share my discouragement.

"You will look one side of the house, I will look the other, and before Mo will come back——"

He did not finish the sentence, for up the long ladder leading to the door (Mo's house was the highest in the village) came, at that moment, a slowly creaking step.

With one consent we dived through the trap-door, and pulled it flat after us. Then we halted under the house listening and looking eagerly.

"If he doesn't see us——" I whispered.

"I think he cannot," answered the Marquis cautiously. "But we can see him through these cracks—— What chance! What chance!"

. . . It is long ago now, but to this day I am vexed when I think how easily the greasy old villain took us in—how readily we dropped into his snare. That Mo had been perfectly aware of our visit the day before—that he guessed we would come again, had returned early in order to hurry us out, had left the trap-door open in order that we might go through it, and watch him from under the house—had indeed planned the whole thing from start to finish—never occurred to either

of us at the time, though, indeed, we might have guessed that the chief sorcerer of the chief town of sorcery-riddled Kata-Kata was not likely to be quite so simple as he seemed.

At any rate, there we stood in the dark under the house, looking breathlessly through the cracks in the floor, and watching Mo. And Mo knew it, little as we thought it.

First of all he took the long bamboo off his breast—it had accompanied him to the river to-day, seemingly—uncorked the top, and looked cautiously in. We could not see what was inside. He put his palm over the opening, and with the other hand drew towards him one of the large clay water-pots standing on the floor. These water-pots narrowed to a mouth about four inches across: some of them had baked clay lids on the top. He chose one that had a lid, uncovered it, and dropped in——

Where had he produced it from? The man was like a conjurer. I had not seen anything in his hand a moment before—but it was undoubtedly the great diamond that he dropped into the jar. I even heard it tinkle against the hard clay bottom as it fell. The Marquis, in his excitement, pinched my

arm so hard that it was black and blue afterwards. I knew he was simply boiling with corked-up speech, and wondered how long he could hold on.

Now the sorcerer, after a hurried look round the empty house (he really was a splendid actor), removed his palm from the top of the bamboo, and inverted it over the jar. We could see by his motions that he was pouring something from the one to the other : it seemed to come slowly, and take some time. When he had done, he put the clay cover on the jar, shook the empty bamboo, and threw it down.

After this he produced a small trade looking-glass, oiled his hair, put feathers in it, painted his face, took his bag of charms off the wall, slung a tall bow on his shoulder, and whistled to his dog. It was plain that he was going hunting—probably courting also, the two occupations often mixing and overlapping a good deal in the Papuan forests.

We waited. We waited till Mo and his dog and his bow and his bag had disappeared down the village street, pale and unsubstantial in the glaring overhead sun. We

waited another ten minutes after. Silence: the village slept beneath the fiery enchantment of noon: the birds were voiceless in the forest: the giant leaves hung still.

"Now!" I said, and we crept back through the trap-door.

For a moment we stood silent in the lonely house, the scene of Satan alone knew what devilries. The hideous dancing masks grinned at us from the walls: the skulls showed their teeth. The sorcerer's bamboo lay on the floor, empty, open, defying us to solve its mystery. And at our very feet stood the water-jar, its wide-splayed mouth covered only by the lid of baked clay.

Was the prize really in our grasp at last? I hesitated, stretched out a hand, and took it back—stopped, listened. . . .

There certainly was a sound somewhere. It was a familiar sound, and yet I could not say exactly what it was. It was near, and it was not near. It was—— What in the name of the devil was it?

"See, Flint, I tire of this!" shouted the Marquis suddenly and imprudently. (I judge that he had heard it too, and it, and other things, had "got on his nerves"—as

women say.) "Faint heart gathers no moss —here goes for France, my brave!" He made a dart at the jar, and snatched off the lid.

Do you know what is the swiftest thing in the animal kingdom? Did you ever see a brown flash of lightning get up from the ground and strike?

I know, and I had seen just such a thing before. So I didn't have to stop and think. . . . The Marquis got my punch fair in the chest: it doubled him up, and sent him half across the house. My right hand being thus occupied, I hadn't time to attend to my left, and it got in the way. It was on the first joint of the third finger that the snake got me. He held on like a bull-dog.

Now, I must have knocked the wind pretty well out of the Marquis in throwing him out of the way as I did: but you never saw a man recover quicker. He was up on his feet before one would have time to tell of it. He had got a great steel clearing-knife down from the wall (evidently Mo did a bit of coastal trading) in two seconds or thereabouts, and had slashed the snake clean through, before I got it shaken off. I pulled its head away then, and threw it on the floor.

I had had a look at it, and saw that there was only one thing to do.

"Give me the knife," I said. The Marquis gave it, and as I am alive, he was crying as he did.

There was nothing to make a fuss about. I had the top joint of the finger off in two clean chops. And there is no finger a man can spare better than the left hand third.

I tied it up, and put a sort of tourniquet on. Then I remembered the diamond—it was not so strange that I'd forgotten it for a minute or two, all things considered—and put my right hand into the jar that had lately held such an unpleasant occupant. I pulled out—not the diamond, but a bit of common stone tied up in a leaf. The sorcerer had had us again. No doubt he had palmed the jewel, somehow or other, when setting his trap.

I was feeling a bit sick, what with loss of blood and the small amount of poison that had got into circulation before I took the finger off. I was sure now that we had no chance of getting the stone—as things were. Mo was thoroughly awake, and there was nothing for it but to retreat—for the present.

"Wait till I come back with a R.M. and a score of armed native constabulary, you heathen beast," I said to myself. "Just wait. You've earned what you'll get—richly earned it. . . ."

. . . . . .

"We've got to go, Mark," I said aloud. "Get the carriers together for me as quick as you can: it's the best time, with all the people away. If we stay on, there'll be a row to-night, as sure as fate, and the Government don't like unofficial people to do its killing for it. We'll come back, and give them what for with the chill off. Oh Lord, don't do that!"

For the Marquis was hanging round my neck—a pretty solid weight—and had already kissed me loudly on both cheeks.

"My brave retainer!" he said, with tears in his voice. (I reckoned he meant preserver, but it was all one.) "What can I ever do to recompense you of my life that you have saved?"

"I told you what to do just now," I said. "Get the carriers under way, and sharp. I want to drink some ammonia."

I did, and it did me good: I was able to

walk almost as well as usual, in half an hour. I slung my arm up in a long leaf of grass, and we set off from the village as hard as we could, keeping a look-out for ambushes all the way. But the noonday hush lay on all the forest and the track, and there was not a sign of life.

When we were an hour or two away, I halted for a rest: the bite was getting at me a little, and I felt slightly giddy, though I knew by now that there was no danger.

"Tell me, what was all this things that has happened?" demanded the Marquis, dropping on a log at my side, and fanning himself with his hat. "I am bursting of curiosity, but I would not disturb you."

"Well," I said, "if I had known Kata-Kata as I know other districts in New Guinea, none of them would have happened at all. The whole thing might have been foreseen. It's true, I had heard silly yarns about this part of the country, but I didn't believe them, they seemed so exaggerated—and they quite went out of my head, anyhow, for I was hardly more than a kid when I did hear them. But I've remembered them to-day."

"What were they, then?"

"People—natives, I mean—said that the Kata-Kata sorcerers knew how to tame snakes and make them like dogs, and that the brutes would bite anyone their masters told them to. The sorcerers would get a bit of a man's clothing, taken next his skin, where it had the scent of his body, and worry and tease the snake with it, so that it would know the smell, and hate it. And then, they said, the sorcerer would let loose his snake at night in the house of the man he wanted to kill, and the brute would bite him, and the sorcerer would get it, and take it home again, before he was seen."

"Taubada, true you talk," broke in Koppi Koko, who was squatting on the ground close to us, chewing betel-nut most contentedly. "That puri-puri man, he take him snake all the time 'long one bamboo, carry him along him chest."

"That accounts for the milk of the cocoa-nut," I said. "What a pair of babies, to be scared by a stick with a snake in it, hopping about! Of course, the thing heard people, and was trying to get loose."

"Yes, and the snake—the cold snake—

that was the touch of death last night, not ? "

" Very nearly," I said. " The general smash you made saved your life, Marky."

" And the little beautiful, and the piece cut out of her belt—yes, now one sees all," said the Marquis musingly. " Flint, this is a devil of a country of yours, but, on my soul, it is interesting. What adventures ! "

" I take no stock in adventures," I said. " I'd rather keep out of them. But I reckon, somehow, there's more ahead before we get that stone."

HOW THEY TOOK AN AXE TO THE GREEK

III

HOW THEY TOOK AN AXE TO THE GREEK

NIGHT in Samarai Island town. Stars in the water all round about the houses: stars glinting and disappearing, high among the eighteen-foot leaves of Samarai's splendid palms. At the back of the island, where one walks for quiet, the sea lying like a witch's mirror of black glass, between the scarcely visible white of the coral pathway, and the dark, lurking hills of Sariba and Basilisk. Strolling there in the pleasant gloom, by the fresh, salt-smelling straits, the Marquis and I.

"I like this Samarai," observed the Marquis, treading with the lightness Nature had oddly linked to his enormous bulk, along the tinkling gravel of the path. "So small that you go round it all in the quarter of an hour—so beautiful that it resembles a dream of heaven. This place is Eden, my friend."

"So all the steamer passengers say," I answered. "If you'd seen some of the ladies of Samarai punching each others' heads with umbrellas in front of Bunn's Hotel, or watched half the people of the town going off in boats on Sunday afternoon, and all rowing away from each other, you'd maybe reckon the Eden part was wearing a little thin. You never lived on coral islands; I have."

"I shut my eyes for what I do not like, and look at the rest, in a strange novelty like this: I am not the new broom that never rejoices," replied the Marquis in a superior tone. "We are come here on a confounded dangerous and fragile mission: therefore, we need all the refreshness we can get for our minds."

"Well, admire the scenery all you like," I said, "though I don't see how it is going to help you to find out where Mo has got to with the diamond."

"I demand of you, don't we jolly well know he is here?" asked the Marquis. "Wasn't it on the cause of that, that we are come from Kata-Kata right off, as soon as we are found that he is taken fright, and

enlisted on a pearling vessel to get away before the magistrate and ourselves should come back ? "

" We don't know," I said. " We only guessed. You remember, when the police had burned the town, and killed the pigs, and all the people had run off into the bush, being well scared, as they deserved to be—that was when we heard from our boys that Mo wasn't there at all : but they only knew he'd gone down to the coast."

" But we ourselves, we knew that the pearler vessel had been recruiting along that veritable coast : that suffices, since the boys have said that Mo recruited once a long time ago to Thursday Island, and knows the diving."

" One can't tell he didn't merely go off into the bush," I said. " I'd rather he had. A man who goes among a lot of pearlers with a rough diamond about him that he doesn't know the value of, isn't likely to keep it long—if he keeps his life, he's fortunate."

" We shall know on to-morrow, when the fleet comes in for Sunday. It seems me that I haven't always been thankful enough for Sunday. Flint, tell me, it is surely unusual

that a great sorcerer like Mo should engage himself to work in a pearl fleet ? "

" Not so very," I said. " He bosses the other boys round a lot, as they're all afraid of him, and he generally manages to scoff the best part of their wages. But I don't think Mo would have come away, if he hadn't been scared. He certainly had a very good job where he was."

" The lizard that died and was alive again—I cannot understand it," said the Marquis musingly. " He is wonderful, that man. I shall be glad to see him again, although he has done so much bad."

" Don't go asking after him," I warned. " Best leave it to me. We're playing for a big stake—my word, Marky, it is a big one ! all the money for everything we want, all the rest of our lives—and we can't afford to excite suspicion. These pearler folk keep their eyes skinned, I can tell you : they live by that."

" A stitch in time is as good as a mile : I comprehend your warning, and leave it to you," said the Marquis, with what one must call (for the want of a better term) his most Marquisatorial air. " I have all confidence

in you. Do you think that they may perhaps have some excellent billiard tables in those hotels ? "

" I don't think, I know they haven't," I said. " But they have something we can knock balls about on, if that will do."

. . . . . .

The next day was Saturday, and on Saturday afternoon, according to the customs of the pearling fleet, all the luggers were due to come in for Sunday. It was not a large fleet, there at Samarai. New Guinea has never been much of a pearling centre : but they had temporarily fished out Thursday and Broome, and a few of the fleet had run over to Samarai, to try what they could do about China Strait. It is a nasty place for pearling : the shell is none too plentiful, the depths appalling, and the current in the Straits is at all times exceedingly dangerous. Still, it is better than nothing, when nothing better is to be had. The best class of pearler does not come to New Guinea, as a rule : I expected to see none but the riff-raff of Thursday, when the fleet came in. There were signs of

their presence already. Samarai had not been improved by the shelling. The hotels were prosperous, and, in consequence, rowdy: the Papuans, who had come over from various places in the Territory, to take service with the fleet in different ways, were a nasty-looking lot. There was a new store, kept by a Greek named George: it had divers' gear in it, also pearl-shell, curios, cards, dice, fire-arms, and knives. I had heard something of George himself, in my journeyings about the north coasts of Australia, and I didn't think him an addition to the society of Samarai, doubtful as the latter was.

However, I wanted a talk with him before the boats came in: so I disposed of the Marquis safely—it was not difficult: the police were having a dance on the green near the Government jetty, and he had only to hear of it, to be off like a bandicoot. Then I went down the curious little main street that is so like something in a theatre, with its primly built offices and stores on one side, and the palms, and the flaming blue sea, and the great carved canoes from Misima Island, on the other, to the tin

shanty where George the Greek was to be found.

I bought some of his rubbishing curios for a commencement, taking care to inform him that I had a French nobleman tourist in tow, as I knew well George wasn't likely to suppose I wanted the stuff for myself. And I made the transaction seem natural by demanding a percentage on the sale, and getting it, too. (Of course, I handed it over to the Marquis afterwards.) By this time, the little beast was quite pleasant and friendly, and disposed to talk, so I proposed an adjournment to the hotel, intending to pump him cautiously as to the natives employed in the fleet. He took his keys, and began shutting up shop: it was near closing time already, and they don't take much stock of hours in an island town. I had a good look at him while he locked up, and liked him not at all: I had never seen him so close before. He was good-looking, but unpleasantly so—black, shiny eyes, too large, with lashes too long: hooked Mephistopheles nose: jet-black curls like a spaniel's: boot-brush moustache—all cheap and gaudy and smart-looking, and all a bit

greasy, somehow. He had horrible little soft hands, with turn-back fingers, and his figure, though good, was as twisty and wriggly as a snake's. It came upon me right then, that if there was a man in New Guinea likely to give us trouble about that stone (should any breath of the secret creep out), there he stood, George the Greek.

We didn't get our talk in the hotel, after all. Before the Greek had done locking up, the natives raised a cry of "Sail-O!" and we ran out to see if by any chance it was the fleet. The hour was too early: I scarcely expected anything but some stray cutter up from Port Moresby or the East.

But it was the fleet—two hours before its time. We saw the thin masts pricking like black needles against the sky, a long way off, as we stood among the trails of pink beach convolvulus looking into the Straits. We saw the hulls rise up above the sea-line, and the shapes of the little vessels appear, and then——

"Ba God, dey're half-masted!" said the Greek.

"Half-masted!" repeated the Marquis,

who had just turned up, the dance being done. "But that signifies death!"

"That's right," I said. "Someone in the fleet's dead. That's why they are coming home early, and have their flags half-masted. Look, you can see now—every boat's got it."

"What was the name of the boat that came recruiting?" asked the Marquis.

"The *Gertrude*," I said, treading sharply on his toe. He took the hint angelically.

"Da *Gertrude*, she is coming first," contributed the Greek, watching. "There is a nigger on da *Gertrude*, he owe me three pound nineteen shillin'. I hope he is not dead."

"A Malay?" I asked.

"A New Guinea—Mo. He is bad man, dat Mo. He promise, he no pay. I go down to da jet', and look. If he is dead, I make da owner pay me."

We tramped down together through the burning sun, to the wooden jetty that stretched its stilty legs out into water of such a wonderful green that nobody could hope to describe it, or compare it to any-

thing save itself. We waited there for near half an hour, before the fleet came up—a dozen or so of poor-looking luggers, dirty and ill-manned. The *Gertrude* came in first, and George the Greek was into a dingy, and over her gunwale before she had time to drop anchor. In a minute he reappeared, with a face of demoniac fury : spat violently over the counter, cursed the ship and all in her, in at least four different languages, and jumped into his boat again.

"Lost your money?" I asked, as the dingy shot up to the steps.

George the Greek did not reply, otherwise than by stating, in gross and in detail, the things he would do to the owner of the *Gertrude*—should fortune favour him with a chance. The owner of the *Gertrude*, meantime, a fair, flushed, bloated man, who seemed to have been drinking, and to have arrived at the pathetic stage, leaned over the counter, and called out to George to "let the poor blighter rest in 'is blooming grave, and don't go bringin' bad luck on yourself by cursin' the dead."

"He got no grave!" shouted George, with much bad language. (He seemed to

think it a very mean circumstance, that Mo should have no grave.) "He lie dere at bottom of da sea, like one (blank) lobsta."

"Don't you make no mistake," rejoined the captain, with drunken gravity. "He's here in the cabin, wropped in his dress, as we took the poor blighter up, and he'll be buried proper, just as he is. No one can say I don't treat my niggers decent, dead or alive. Good Joe Gilbert: that's what I'm known as, and that's what I am." He took a bottle out of his pocket, and inverted it on his nose.

"Marky," I said quietly, "I'd be much obliged if you would go off and wait for me somewhere: I'll join you by and by. I want to see if Mo left any baggage that we could get hold of, and the fewer of us there are in it, the better. We don't want to attract notice."

"I go," said the Marquis, departing. "I wait near the shop of the Greek. He interest me, somehow, that beggar."

I waited until George had gone off, cursing, and then got aboard the lugger. The captain, on hearing that I was collecting curios for the Marquis, let me see all the

stuff that Mo had left behind. His sorcerer's bag, full of the odds and ends we had already seen, lay in a corner of the little forecastle. I scarcely expected to find what I was looking for there, and I did not. After purchasing one or two bits of carving at a price that put the captain in a good temper, I asked him if that was all the Papuan had had.

"All that I know of," he said, "unless it was the rubbish he used to put round his neck before he'd get into the diving dress."

My heart beat a little faster.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Couldn't tell you: some of their sorcerer's charms. Most like, a bone or a queer bit of coral. His brother would tie it on for him: most times he went down he'd have something of the sort, and he'd be praying to his devils before he started, to keep away the sharks. Seems to me he got the wrong sort of prayer under weigh: his devils kept away the sharks all right, but they didn't take no care about diving paralysis, and that's what got Mo. He was dead Lord knows how long when we pulled him up, and he must have lost his air, as he's

all jammed into the helmet and corselet, and we can't get it off."

"Thanks," I said, picking up my purchases. "I'll go and take these to the Marquis."

I found him waiting near the Greek's, looking at the things displayed in the window. Among them was a diving dress complete: great copper and gun-metal helmet joined to a wide breastplate or "corselet": leaden-soled boots: rubber cloth body.

"Did you see that dress?" I asked, as we walked on. "Mo's inside of one just like it, jammed in tight. I didn't see him, but I have seen that sort of thing before. Their face is all flattened out against the glasses of the helmet. . . ."

"Enough, enough!" cried the Marquis.

"It isn't enough," I said. "I've got to explain, for a reason. Well, being like that, there's no getting them out of the dress without cutting them to pieces, so it's the custom of the diving trade to bury them as they are. Mo will be buried this afternoon over at the cemetery island—you can't keep corpses overnight in the north-west

season. And—AND—anything he may have had on his person, when he died, will be buried with him. And, Marky, the captain told me he usually went down with a charm round his neck. And the diamond's not among his gear that he left behind."

"It is too horrible!" said the Marquis, his pink face paling.

"All right, if you think it is, I don't. I'll take over your share and welcome."

"No, I don't desire that." The colour was coming back to his face. "If it must be, it shall. Tell me all you think."

"Come for a walk round the island, and we'll talk," I said, leading off by the big calophyllum tree that bears such fine nuts. We didn't say much till we were away at the back of the island, where we had strolled the night before. It looked fine there: the view was like the back-cloth to the scene of "The Pirate's Island" in a melodrama, and the arcade of palms was cool and green, in the glare of the afternoon.

We talked, walking up and down: I did not want to go back to the town-side until we had finished our plan of campaign, for Samarai, like all tiny island towns, is full of

ears. The Marquis, I must say, came out rather well here: he had a good, clear head of his own, when it wasn't temporarily thrown out of business by one of his three fads, and as there was no dancing, no sorcery, and nothing with a petticoat, grass or silken, in this affair, he was quite sensible.

"First it is to discover," he said, "whether anyone has found out about the stone. What do you think?"

"No knowing," I said, "but I think not, on the whole. Mo had only been here a few days, and unless he was actually doing magic, he wouldn't have been opening up his bag. You know he was shy of that, anyhow."

"Point one: it was probably not discovered that he had the stone. Point two: Had he taken the stone with him when he dived?"

"Again, no knowing. But I reckon he did. There'd be room on his chest below the corselet—that's the breastplate thing, that extends over the diver's shoulders and chest, to keep off water pressure. And, if he didn't know what a diamond was, he certainly valued the thing a lot, for his

sorcery work. And the captain says he usually took some charm to keep him safe."

"Good. Point three: How shall we do this sacrilege, since it is convented that we do it?"

"We'll have to wait a few days, till the nights are dark all through—there's an hour or two of moonlight just now—go over to the cemetery island in a canoe by ourselves, and do what we have to do. Makes you creep, doesn't it?"

"I creep, but I think of my beautiful château in Indre-et-Loire, all ruined, and my mother, who is already very old, and who has but little money for the candles she will burn in church at my safety in travelling, and then, by Jove, old chap, I say to me that the proof of the pudding sweeps clean, as your excellent English proverbs make it, and I decide to act."

"Well, your proverbs are original, Marky, but I don't know that they haven't a queer sort of sense of their own. A pudding this size ought to sweep most things clean—if you will have it that way. And we're not breaking any law of God or man that I know of, in taking a diamond from a corpse

that didn't know what to do with it when he was alive, and doesn't need it now."

"Perfectly."

"There's only one thing. Don't get to asking any questions anywhere of any kind of person, about anything. I hope that's definite. Because you might, without meaning it in the least, get George or some other fellow thinking, and we don't want them to think."

"I comprehend perfectly. Let me say our points again. He has probably not showed the diamond to anyone. He has probably taken it down to dive. If he has taken it, it is surely on him. Flint, this is altogether so good that I feel myself exalted. I will——"

"No, Marky, don't," I begged. "Somebody might come. I like your dancing all right, and I think you'd knock spots off Pavlova and Mordkin, and the girl who served up collared prophet's head—but I don't want you to dance now. Anything that excites remark and draws attention to us two, is going to be bad policy at present. Swear off, Marky, if you're wise."

"It was but the dance of Marguerite with

the casket of jewels—that I desired to make—nothing more, my friend," said the Marquis, a little wistfully. "The dance, I mean, that she ought to make: it is never right done by the theatre."

"Wait till you get the jewel, before you start doing jewel dances," I said. "Did you ever hear of the cuckoo clock and the parson?"

"Never; tell me of it."

"Well, there was once a poor woman who had a cuckoo clock, and the clock stopped, and wouldn't go on. Now it happened just then that the parson came in to make a call on her, and he was rather a bit of an amateur clockmaker. (Did you ever notice that it's men like Louis the Sixteenth and the average raw curate, and other unbaked things, that go in for amateur clock-mending?) So he took the clock home with him to fix up, and the poor woman was overcome with gratitude. And, by and by, he sent it back, saying it was all right. A few days after, he called on the poor woman again, and said, in that high and mighty tone a lot of parsons have, 'Well, my good woman, how does your clock go now?' And

the poor creature said, trembling, 'Thank you, sir, it's only too kind of you, sir, and it goes very well indeed, sir. There's only just one little thing, sir—since you was so good as to mend it, it oos before it cucks!' Mark, don't you ever oo before you cuck. Lots of people do, and it's a mighty bad habit to get into."

"Certainly, I will remember, and I will not dance the dance of Marguerite and the jewels, or indeed any dance at all. You have much wisdom, Flint," said the Marquis, quite gravely. "I am afraid it shall be a good while that we have to wait and do nothing. Truly, hope deferred makes a long turning."

It certainly seemed a long time, though it was only a week, before I thought the nights were dark enough to carry out our plan. In the blazing moonlight of New Guinea, we should without doubt have been seen crossing the Straits to the cemetery island by some wandering native, even if no white man spied us. The moonless nights were our only chance. But it was irksome to wait, and wonder, and speculate whether anyone, by any possible chance, knew as much as we knew ourselves.

Well, the moonless nights came round, and the evening I had fixed upon arrived. It was Saturday, when I reckoned that the greater part of Samarai would be drunk, and not in a condition to notice anyone's movements very closely. I had not hired a canoe, as the Marquis suggested: I thought it better to take French leave to any one we might find on the beach. Neither had I adopted a disguise, which he was very anxious for me to do. I explained to him that one might as well hope to disguise the keeper of an elephant successfully—the elephant would be bound to give him away. And the elephant itself, I added, couldn't be made to look like anything but an elephant. The conclusion was obvious. We did not disguise.

With two spades and a pick in the bottom of a good, double-outrigged canoe, we set out quietly from the beach in the starlit dusk, not too early and not too late. There was not the least difficulty about it, which fact I am sure disappointed the Marquis terribly. I think he would have liked to black his face and wear a conspirator's cloak, and wriggle on his stomach from the

hotel to the beach, and have half a dozen Greeks and Malays chase him with revolvers. But, as a matter of fact, nobody saw us, and we got away without even a splash. A canoe is the most noiseless of conveyances on the water: you don't even need to muffle the paddle, if you use it right.

It was a glorious night: we floated in a hollow globe of stars—stars above, stars below: some flashing like the great diamond we had gone out to find, some glowing like little moons, and casting long spears of light into the sea. We had a mile or two to go to the cemetery island: I paddled all the way, and the Marquis, crouched rather uncomfortably on the rough perch that does duty for a seat in native canoes, sang softly to himself in I do not know how many languages. The more his emotions were stirred, the more polyglot he became, as a rule. He seemed to be a perfect Tower of Babel, that night.

We grounded on a white sand beach that shone faintly in the starlight, and made our way up to the cemetery, along a dank, overgrown track, with the weird night-birds of

New Guinea chipping and sawing, and clanking bells, and cracking whips, in the bush alongside. The intoxicating scent of the tropical forest came sweet and strong in our faces, on the fresh night-breeze—the smell that "makes your heart-strings crack," when you encounter it unexpectedly, in some warm, scented hothouse, far away from the burning Equatorial lands.

I do not think either of us thought more than we could help of the horrible task we had come to do. I, for one, rigidly kept my mind away from it, and thought only of the stone. . . . How many carats was it? I wondered. We were all familiar with the photographs of the great Cullinan in the rough, just then. I judged the sorcerer's stone, compared with that, to be small: but large compared with any other in the world. Say, three hundred in the rough. . . . What would it cut to? How much would it be worth? How many tens of thousands? And who would buy such a costly gem? Sometimes these very large diamonds were harder to dispose of than smaller stones, since purchasers were so few. There were the millionaires of America—

and the rajahs of India—and it would take the very biggest of either, to make bids for our treasure, when we got it. I didn't say if we got it. I was determined that we should.

We had no lantern with us: the light of the stars was enough for a good bushman, and I knew the cemetery track by heart. So do most men who have lived long in New Guinea.

I guessed where the diver must have been buried: there were not many suitable spots left. We stumbled along among the overgrown, neglected mounds, destitute of name or stone to mark them out one from another, and found what I was looking for—a new, bare grave. I think my heart was beating rather fast as I struck a match and looked, to make sure. . . .

I dropped the match, and stamped on it.

"Marquis," I said, "we're done," and my voice sounded strange in my own ears as I spoke.

"They are before us?" cried the Marquis, going down on his knees by the grave. "A match!"

"No good," I said, striking one, however,

for a moment. "You see how the ground's trampled—and the grave has certainly been dug up, and covered in very roughly afterwards. We'll open it, of course, but——"

"They would make a grave of a native roughly! They would trample about it!"

"Not on the top of it, Mark. When you're burying a man, black or white, you don't stamp over his head. No, you take my word for it, we've lost this trick. But even if we have, we've not lost the game. Remember, we're on an island, and there isn't a boat for another fortnight."

I was digging as I spoke, spading up the loose soil in big lumps, and throwing it out of the way. The Marquis, again with his Marquisatorial air, took up the other spade, and joined in. I told him not to worry, but he insisted.

"It would not be fitting a gentleman of France, if I should let you commit this sin for me, and not sin also," he said. I thought that if the measure of his iniquity were to be calculated by the amount of digging he got through, it needn't trouble his conscience much: but I said nothing, even when he caught a crab with his spade, and fell

almost on top of me. It pleased him, and did not harm anyone—least of all, in my opinion, the poor black wretch below.

In a very few minutes our spades struck something. I felt about in the soil, and touched a soft, indefinite mass. Exploring carefully, I found, to my astonishment, that, whatever else there might be in the grave, there was no heavy metal helmet and corselet. It was imperative to strike a light now, no matter what the risk : and I took out a little bit of candle I had brought with me.

There is no need to say exactly what I saw, or detail anything I may have done. It was a brief business. Almost at once, I understood that the grave had been opened, as I had feared ; that the body had been removed from the helmet and corselet with considerable violence ; and that, whatever else there might be in the violated tomb of Mo, ex-sorcerer of Kata-Kata town, diamond there was none.

You might think that the Marquis and I would have been knocked over by this. We weren't a bit. We were disappointed, but we had been disappointed about the

sorcerer's stone before, and the chances of getting it were not much worse now than they had been on our arrival. Samarai, a very small island, with everyone in sight of everyone else all the time, and no calling steamer due, was about as good a hunting ground as one could wish for. And, anyhow, I didn't mean to lose heart, if things looked twice as black. So I told the Marquis, and he agreed with me. He even offered to prove how little he was discouraged, by doing the war-dance of the priests in "Athalie" all the way back to the shore. I told him I had always reckoned it was a march, and he explained he would do the dance they ought to have done, and didn't. As I wanted to return as quickly as possible, I persuaded him to put off the performance until we had got back to the town. I thought he would have forgotten it by that time, but he hadn't. The spectacle of the Marquis, in a very dirty singlet and trousers, and bare, sandy feet, doing the war-dance of the priests by starlight all down the main street of Samarai at two o'clock in the morning, is one of the things that I expect to remember all the rest of my life.

Next morning, as might have been expected, we were both suffering from the sort of mental sore head that follows after great excitement, and in consequence were somewhat depressed. We walked round and round the island, chafing, as everyone in Samarai chafes, at its narrow confines, and discussing the affair of the diamond ceaselessly. I don't think I shall ever see green palms on a white shore again, or smell the dank, weedy smell of a coral reef, without thinking of diamonds and divers and graves. We talked it over inside and out, and upside down, and arrived at the following conclusion :

George the Greek was probably at the bottom of the matter.

But why George the Greek was at the bottom of the matter we did not understand.

If George the Greek had known of the diamond, he would have got it away from Mo by fraud or force, long before our arrival in Samarai, or Mo's unlucky death. He would have got it, if he had had to cut the sorcerer to pieces, alive.

But if George the Greek did not know

about the stone (and, indeed, his conduct on the jetty suggested that he did not), why should he dig the body up ?

These conclusions seemed to point to the fact that George the Greek had not been in the matter, after all. But neither the Marquis nor I would accept that explanation—I am sure I do not know why. We said we felt he had been in it : and the Marquis proposed a visit to his store, to find out what we could.

In the hot, sleepy hours of the afternoon, we went down to George's little shanty, feeling more dispirited, now, than either of us would have cared to admit. The Marquis, I think, wouldn't have danced the war-dance of the priests for an audience of a hundred pretty women. I wouldn't have laughed at one of his upside-down proverbs for a case of iced champagne. The street was steaming with the peculiarly unpleasant heat that follows after a heavy shower in a high temperature, and the sea, under the westering sun, dazzled like a mirror flashed in one's eyes by a mischievous boy. The Marquis said, as far as I gathered, that

"A feeling of sadness came o'er him,
That his heart could not resist,"

and I said that I felt like chewed string.

Then happened something that put starch into both of us, as quickly as if the thermometer had dropped twenty degrees. We heard a row beginning.

"By gum, my friend, they fight somewhere: let's go and see," said the Marquis.

"It's going to be the father of a row, I reckon," said I cheerfully. "Hurry up, or we'll miss the best." For the shouts and stamps that we had heard were rising into a chorus of yells, punctuated by crashes, and by shrill screams from one especial voice. It was not a woman's voice, but it wasn't exactly like the ordinary white man's, and it had a shrewish quality in it that I seemed to recognise.

"George, for a sovereign!" I cried. And I began to run, the Marquis coming after as quickly as he could—which was quicker than you would think, as he was light on his feet through constant dancing.

George's shanty, when we reached it, was invisible, except for the roof. The rest had disappeared under a sort of human wave.

At least twenty men, black, white, and yellow, were shoving and fighting in front of it, all apparently moved by one desire—to get inside. From within the store came the owner's frantic yells, mingled with language that really was astonishing, even for a Greek. And the crashing and smashing and banging went on and on, getting louder.

Helping each other as two strong men can, the Marquis and I shoved somehow through the press—which, we now observed, was composed entirely of divers. This was Sunday, and the fleet, of course, did not work, so a number of white men, and a few Papuans, Malays, and Japs, all employed on the luggers as a rule, were left free to spend the Sabbath as they liked. It seemed that this was what they liked: and it looked very much like burglary, battery, and murder.

"What's the row, Bob?" I yelled through the noise, to a diver whom I recognised. He had a tomahawk in his hand, and was smashing the window-frame of the store, the window-panes having long since gone. Inside, I could see the Greek literally tearing his hair—the first time I

had ever seen anyone do it: up till then, I thought only people in books did so—and trying to get away from Big Carl, a huge Swede, who had got both arms around George, and was holding on like the serpent in the statue whose name I can't remember. All the divers who could get into the store were inside, and they were very busy indeed wrecking it with tomahawks. The counter was gone, the shelves were firewood, the curios and shells were smashed, and there were some indistinguishable fragments of metal on the floor, which seemed to arouse the special hatred of the invaders. Bob, too, while I was trying to make him hear, got away from me, and into the store: and immediately he began hacking away at the metal on the floor. It looked, what was left of it, rather like a diver's corselet.

I wanted to know what it was all about, and as no one seemed disposed to stop long enough to tell me, I "cut out" another man I knew by main force and hauled him half across the street. He swore at me, and tried to fight, but I held him.

"You'll go when you've told me what the row is about," I said.

The man, swearing at intervals, told me.

"It's George the Greek," he said. "Will you let me go?" (Blank.) "It was the helmet and corselet—Parratt, of the *Dawn*, wanted to buy one, and George had a second-hand one in his window, cheap—— They're smashing the floor now—why didn't I think of that? Let me go." (Impolite expressions.) "Well, if you won't" (impoliteness continued)—"Parratt was looking at it, to decide if he'd go in and buy it to-morrow—it was only nine pounds, and a new one's fourteen, and Parratt thought he would, and he looked at it close, and he saw a rivet in the helmet, and he knew the rivet, because he put it there himself—— Oh!" (very impolite remarks) "they've got him frog's-marched, and they're going to throw him—— Don't hit me, I'll finish—and the corselet was the one they buried with Mo, the Papuan who got drowned the other day, and the beast had dug him up, and cut him out of it, to make the price of what Mo owed him. So when all the divers heard that (will you let me go? they're taking him to the jetty) they came and made a row. Damn!"

He bit a new litany off at the commencement, as I released him, and made for the jetty at a run. I saw them swing the yelling Greek out over the water, and let him go with a splash. He could swim all right, and a ducking was likely to do him good, so I didn't trouble to interfere, especially as I saw that the men had about satiated their anger. I went back to the Marquis, who was staring blankly at the whole proceeding, and told him what I had heard.

"Admirable, excellent!" he said. "What we tried to do, and have not done, they are wrecking the shop of the Greek on account of. My friend, I see that you and I are certainly black-watches."

"No, Marky, no fear. We'll keep what we know about ourselves to ourselves, but there's not a man in the fleet would call you or me blackguard for what we've tried to do."

"And for why?"

"Because," I said, "this is a pearling fleet. And in a pearling fleet you may do anything you like, sacrilege, robbery, piracy, or murder, for a pearl, if only it's big enough. No one would think any the

less of you really, though they might have to pretend they did, if there were too many authorities about. As for a diamond like old Mo's—why, you might dig up and eat the whole of the cemetery, without upsetting anyone's stomach or conscience. But divers don't like being hacked out of their dresses when they die in them, which they do pretty often, to gratify the meanness of a mean little cur like George. That's the case, Marky. Anyhow, you and I have no cause to quarrel with it, for it's shown us that we were on a wrong scent after all. If the Greek had found such a thing as a diamond under the corselet—and mind you, he made mincemeat of old Mo, getting him out of it—he'd never have taken the risk he did, in showing off the gear second-hand."

"Then," demanded the Marquis, "where is the diamond?"

"That's what we've got to find out yet," I said.

HOW SOMEONE TACKLED A TRIDACNA

IV

HOW SOMEONE TACKLED A TRIDACNA

IT was no use. I threw down my pen, tossed my unfinished letters on the floor, and went out with murder in my heart. The mail was due in a day or two, and I had neglected all my relations and friends for so long that they must have had every reason for thinking me dead. But not a word could I write.

There was a native singing on the beach below the hotel : the day was hot and windless, and one could hear every sound. No one who has ever lived in Papua will want to be told why I could not go on with my mail.

For the benefit of those who have not, I may explain that, of all maddening sounds ever invented by the malice or ingenuity of man, Papuan solo singing is a long way the worst. The choral singing is noisy and not very musical, but it lacks the brain-destroy-

ing texture of the solo. An idle Papuan native (and a Papuan is always idle, unless someone is making him work) seems able to pass away half a day, at any time, chanting his own autobiography, and the history of his immediate friends, in a long-drawn nasal howl that holds one note till you feel the very substance of your brain giving way under its hideous boring—and then takes a sudden gimlet twist. At this point you get up, saying things that in all likelihood do no credit to your education and upbringing, and throw the twelve-pound clam-shell that probably ornaments the verandah, right at the furry head of the singer. A clam-shell has a row of sharp points on its edge, and it is extremely solid. As a rule, it penetrates far enough to convey your wishes. If it does not, or if the singer takes it for an encore, and goes on again, you can generally find a tomahawk somewhere about the house.

But on this occasion the singer was visible, down on the beach, and out of clam-shot, also out of boot, stove-lifter, jug, and tomahawk shot. The only thing was to go and find him.

. . . Down the stairs, through the bar,

and out across the glaring sandy street; where the shadows of the palms were faint and feeble, in the cruel midday sun. . . . The scrap of bush that shaded the sea-beach concealed me as I stole along. I meant to catch him at it. . . .

"Yah-yah aaaaaaaaaah-yah, yah-yah aaaaaah, yah-ah, yah-ah!" burst forth another preliminary yell. I halted for a minute to locate the sound. The singer took breath, and went on in a tone that bored through one's ears exactly as a dentist's drill bores when it is coming down on the nerve of a tooth. The words were distinguishable now, in spite of the chanting manner. I caught a sentence as I drew near.

"Good Lord!" I said to myself, and straightened up, all idea of vengeance disappearing from my mind like the foam on the Straits when a south-easter flings it ashore. The man was singing in a dialect that I knew—the usual bald recitative about various native affairs. But there was something in this recitative that concerned me very nearly, or I was much mistaken. I stood and listened. At first I could only hear the word for "sorcerer" coming in

again and again, mingled with " Kata-Kata " —the name of the district where we had first met with the wonderful stone we were now pursuing. Then the chanting became clearer :

" Aaaaa-yah, Mo is dead, Mo is dead and buried, and his spirit walks about and bites men as they sleep. Aaaaaaah-yah !

" Aaaaa-yah, ah-yah-yah, Mo, the great sorcerer, did not take his charm. Ah-yah, ah-yah, he took it before, and he did not die. Aaaaaa ! when he did not take it he died."

" Aaah, aaaaah, ah-yah, the brother of Mo will not die : the brother of Mo will take it. Aaaaah ! Aaaah ! Aaaah ! "

The song, or chant, was repeated more than once while I listened. Evidently the singer had been running it off like a phonograph for some time. He was a Kiwai from the West, and he used the Kiwai tongue, which many white men understand, especially among the pearling crowd. I wondered whether anyone besides myself had heard him, and whether, if anyone had, the chant had conveyed any special meaning.

It did not seem likely. Most white men pay no more attention to native singing than they pay to a howling dog. If the singing

or the howling annoys you, you throw something at the disturber of your peace: that is all.

Further, if anyone did hear it, and take notice of it, there was nothing dangerous in the song—unless one had the clue. Had anyone the clue save myself and the Marquis? Had George the Greek? Impossible. Still, I might as well stop the singing: it was certainly irritating, and the Kiwai had no right to be annoying the town in the middle of the day, almost opposite the hotel.

I went down on to the beach and shouted to him to stop. He seemed to understand English well enough, and he did stop, though with an amazed and injured air. I noted that he was a boy I had not seen before: probably a diver, though he did not seem to be on duty. He was loafing on the sand, with a big opened cocoanut beside him, and he looked extremely comfortable and lazy.

"Why aren't you out with the boats?" I asked. I did not question him about his song: very few Papuans will tell you anything about their chants, no matter how well you may know them, and I was, as I say, a stranger to this boy.

"Me sick," he said, with a grin. I never saw a sturdier specimen of a malingerer.

"You no sick, you too much fright," I said.

"Yes, me fright," he agreed. "All a time too much fright, long that puri-puri man (sorcerer) he die. I no want I die finish all same. Me sick, more better."

"You rascal," I said, "what boat do you belong to?"

"*Gertrude*," he answered, turning the cocoanut up on his face, and drinking loudly.

"Brother belong Mo, Kata-Kata boy, stop along *Gertrude?* Man he go too much big ear?" I asked, making signs about my own ears.

"Yes, he stop."

"He puri-puri man?"

"What name that word? I no savvy," said the savage, looking at me cunningly. I saw it was no use trying to pump him, so I left. As I came out into the street I saw the Greek in front of me, walking rather aslant, as if he had just come up from the neighbourhood of the beach himself. He did not look behind, but walked quickly on, and disappeared inside the ruins of his store. I

thought there was nothing in it ; yet, somehow, I would rather not have seen him there.

I went back to the Marquis overjoyed with my discovery, but before telling him, I got him outside, and out of range of the hotel. In Papua, if you see two men out in the open talking confidentially together you may be sure that they are talking secrets. All Papua's important secrets are discussed under the sky. The iron house of New Guinea, with its low partitions and the projecting verandah roof that acts as a natural sounding-board, is, I suppose, about the worst place in the world for talking over private matters—apart from the fact that a native who understands English, or a curious white man, may be standing unseen under the floor at your very feet.

" This is good," said the Marquis. " I can take heart again : I was beginning to fear that we had lost that wonderful-wicked valuable. Still, the shorn lamb must not halloo till it is out of the window. What will we do ? "

" Well, it seems so simple," said I, " that I can hardly believe it. But from what I see, all we have to do is to catch Mo's brother

when he comes back to-night, get him in a quiet place, offer him a pound or two for the stone, and take it right off. A nigger who's been with the Thursday Island fleet, even if it was some years ago, will know the value of money. Mark, I reckon those two understood what we said fairly well at Kata-Kata —which explains a lot."

"That's ancient history," said the Marquis impatiently. "It is now that signifies. What will you offer?"

"Curio price," I said. "From ten shillings to a couple of pounds. If he seems very much attached to it, spring five pounds more. One must be careful not to give so much that the other white men would hear of it and get thinking. Otherwise, I see no trouble."

"It seems too good to be true," said the Marquis thoughtfully.

Unfortunately, it was.

When the *Gertrude* got in that evening, I was on the jetty looking out for her. So was the Marquis, so was George the Greek. He never looked at either of us, and seemed to be quite absorbed in cutting up some singularly villainous-looking tobacco. But when the lugger had run alongside the jetty

and the boys were coming off, he attached himself to the bat-eared man, and followed him down the street. We followed also, perplexed.

"Do you think he knows?" whispered the Marquis.

"He can't," I said. "I should guess that he thinks we're trying to do illicit pearl-buying. The result's the same, however. He'll probably stick to us."

He did. He loafed along in the rear of the bat-eared man until the two reached the temporary shed put up for the native divers to sleep in. Then he sat down on the ground outside the shed, stuffed his pipe full of ugly-looking tobacco, and coolly began to smoke.

"He's prepared for all night," I said. "Let's leave him. He knows nothing really, or he wouldn't tag round after us like this. For two pins I'd give him a hammering—only I can't appear to notice what he does. Come on and leave the beast."

We went, and left him still smoking.

I slept badly that night, on account of a touch of fever. In consequence, I was late up next morning, and the Marquis, who was

always an early riser, was dressed and out-of-doors when I awoke. I was just preparing to rise when he came into my room and sat down on the bed, his pink face curiously pale.

"Flint, my Flint!" he said. "Give me a brandy. I am shook."

I gave it to him and asked what was the matter. He drank quickly, and looked round the room before replying.

"It is too much, this," he whispered.

"It's not too much—I only gave you a couple of fingers," I said.

"Not that—the bat man, I mean. Flint, God of my Gods, he is walking up and down the main street on this minute with the stone slung round his neck, like a locket!"

"And nothing on it!" I exclaimed—if you can exclaim under your breath.

"There is but a small native case of weaved grass, and see you, he has left the end that it almost shows out—one can see the entire shape of it!"

"Why didn't you buy it right there!" I demanded, jumping out of bed, and beginning to fling on my clothes with all possible haste.

A New Guinea native walking down the main street of Samarai, in broad day, with the second largest diamond of modern times slung round his neck! "God of my Gods," as the Marquis said, it was indeed a nice situation.

"My Flint, it was impossible. The Greek, he was looking out of his window all the time."

"Oh, hang the Greek! it's better the news of the stone should get out—once we've got it—than that it should be knocking loose round Samarai like that," I declared. "It's true that if we let the folks here get wind of it, we shall have to sleep on it in turns, and keep sort of watch and watch all the time till the boat comes, and after that the real fun will only be beginning. But anything's better than losing it. Why, that confounded Greek may suspect already what we are after. Come on." I counted a handful of sovereigns out, put them in my pocket, and started off.

The bat-eared man was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone to breakfast before they start," I said, turning back towards the native quarters. Just as plainly as if he were before

my eyes I could see the little Papuan, with his woolly head and cramped, crooked figure, striding along with the price of a kingdom aswing about his greasy neck in a rude locket of grass—the treasure that would assuredly glitter in the crown of a queen, or shine upon the turban of some rich Indian rajah, within a few brief months. For whether the Marquis and I secured it, or whether we did not, the destiny of the Sorcerer's Stone was fixed by now. It had passed too near civilisation to escape. Its track of blood and terror—the track of every great diamond—was opening out before it. What had the Marquis said in Kata-Kata, 'First blood for the diamond: I wonder who shall be the next?' The next had been the sorcerer himself. And the next after that? . . .

The man was not in the quarters, none of the boys were there. The remains of their meal were scattered about the ground. It seemed that for some reason or other the boats were going early to-day.

"The jetty, and look sharp!" I said.

We looked as sharp as we could, but the *Gertrude* was off before we got half-way down

the street. Others of the fleet preceded her : one remained behind.

" Come on, Marky," I said. " We'll go with the fleet to-day. We're curious to see the pearling, you know."

" I have seen it, many confounded times, in other countries, and I am quite fatigued of it," declared the Marquis. " Always one gets some ugly shells, and one does not find no pearls, and they tell one foolish stories, and there is gin, and one goes home."

" Well, you're going to see it some more," I said.

The captain of the *Dawn* was willing to take us out for a consideration. He was a long time getting away from the jetty, and I grew more impatient every minute, for there was the *Gertrude* far ahead, and gradually drawing out of sight, while we still delayed. By the time the *Dawn* had spread her dirty sails to the breeze, the other lugger had diminished to a speck.

The Marquis and I sat side by side on the hatch, watching Sariba and the Basilisk open out into emerald and purple bays, and the tall blue D'Entrecasteaux show up on the far horizon. We did not talk : we were too

anxious. Only once the Marquis said, as we approached the pearling ground, "Have you seen the Greek to-day?" and I answered, "No."

We cast anchor in a wide plain of blue water, with the *Gertrude* not very far away. She was anchored also, and I saw by the ladder and the trailing air-tube that their diver was down. Looking closer, a second air-tube appeared.

"Why, she has two down," I said.

"She got a new diver this morning," remarked the captain of the *Dawn*. "George the Greek. He's broke, and has to work. I wish I'd got him myself: he's a rare fine diver."

The Marquis and I looked at each other, and there was uneasiness in our faces. The *Dawn* rolled steadily on a long windless swell like watered silk: the sappy, luscious green of the island forests rose up beyond the sea: in the near foreground the *Gertrude*, with stern pointed towards us, showed two grey spider-threads dropping down into the water. At the end of those two threads, far down among the coral and the sponges, and the beds of weed and shell, crept all alone at the

bottom of the sea two men, one with the ransom of a king hung round his neck, the other . . .

What was the other doing ?

I did not mean to be very long finding out.

" Run us up as close to the *Gertrude* as you can, without interfering," I said.

The captain worked a little nearer.

" That's about as far as I can go," he said. " And now I'm going to send my diver down. You and his lordship can see everything beautiful. It's not too deep here—since that Mo got finished off with diver's paralysis the other day we've shifted to shallower water : this isn't more than twelve fathom."

" Your diver isn't going down just yet," I said, bending down to unlace my boots. " I'm going. I want to have a look at things."

" It's a loss to me," said the captain sourly. " Are you prepared to make it good ? "

" Certainly," declared the Marquis, who seemed to understand the state of affairs. " We will pay you what is the value of the shell that your diver should bring up."

" And what about the pearls ? " demanded the captain.

"Oh, come off it!" I said. "How many pearls has the whole fleet got since it went to work here?"

"Uncommon few, and bad at that," allowed the captain gloomily. "And what there is, no doubt the Malays and Japs poach for the most part."

"Had any stealing?" I asked. I was getting myself into the diver's heavy suit of woollen underwear now as quickly as I could.

"You've been down before, haven't you?"

"Yes." (I did not think it necessary to say that my experiences had been confined to a single trip, made in shallow water, for two or three minutes, over at Thursday, and that I had not liked it a little bit.) "About that stealing now?"

"Well, I reckon the Greek has some idea of the kind, by the way he was keeping round after that Papuan diver, followin' him along the street, and watching him like a cat watches a mouse."

"And do you think the Papuan has been stealing?" I had got into the woollens now, and the tender, a Malay, came forward to help me into the dress itself.

"Naw! Papuans aren't no pearl stealers.

They'll steal food, or clothes, or tools; but pearls, they haven't no use for them, and they're not sharp enough to smuggle and sell them."

I had learned almost as much as I wanted now. The rest, though I did not hear it from Joe Gilbert till later, I will tell here. The Greek had "shadowed" the Papuan down to the boat, on which both were engaged. He had got close to him during the run out, and tried to examine the curio-bag that the Papuan carried round his neck. Most of the natives disliked and distrusted the Greek, and Mo's brother was not likely to feel any kindness towards the white man who had dug up and maltreated the body of his only relative. He drew away, and refused to let the Greek put a finger on his bag.

The Greek pretended that he had been only jesting, and let him alone till they arrived over the pearling grounds. Then the two descended together, from opposite sides of the vessel. When we came up, they had been alone in the depths of the sea for over an hour.

Our captain noted the length of time the divers had been under, and talked self-

righteously about the carelessness of Good Joe Gilbert.

"He had them down long before we was in sight," said the skipper. "Bring along that corselet, Tanjong. Give me a wrench. I see to things myself on my ship, I do." (He began screwing me into my dress by means of the wrench, talking all the time.) "And look at them tenders of Gilbert's—pretenders, I call them. Are they watching the air-tubes proper, or are they not?"

I really did not know enough to say. The captain went on—

"Now I'll tend you myself, and you'll be as safe as if you was in the hotel in Samarai, drinkin' a long beer. You know the signals?"

"I know one pull on the signal-line is 'pull me up,' and I know how to work the taps in the helmet. I reckon that's enough." They were putting on my lead-soled boots now, and hanging a huge locket of lead round my neck. I cannot express how I hated the idea of going down.

And the Marquis, sitting on the hatch, his large pink face standing out like a harvest moon against the heaving sea, was whistling —of all tunes on earth—the Dead March in

Saul. By this, I guessed that his thoughts were sombre.

"Marky," I said, "if you could choose some other tune, I'd be obliged to you."

"It was not on the cause of you that I whistled it," he replied gloomily. "It is on the cause of myself, who cannot make this journey, because I am too large that any diver dress can take me in."

"Well, one of us has got to go," I said, knotting the life-line round my waist. The captain had moved off to inspect the working of the pump.

"And of a truth!" cried the Marquis, "the pitcher that goes to the well is soonest mended!"

Tanjong now came with the front glass to screw up my helmet. I looked round at the *Gertrude* once more. Still the two spider threads dangled down her counter, and the littered, dangerous deck, with its careless tenders, and the empty, heaving swell of the silent sea.

"They've been down too long, if everyone ain't asleep on that mud-scow of Gilbert's," growled the captain. "Maybe something's got them. I near forgot to tell you; you

keep your eyes skinned for clams down below there."

"Clams?"

"Yes—you don't need to worry about sharks: we haven't seen one, not for days, and as for diamond fish, if they come along and get a hold of your air-tube, it's no use you or anyone worrying. But them clams, they are outrageous. There's some proper big ones, and if you put your foot in one——"

"I can guess," I said: for I knew something of the terrible giant Tridacna of these southern seas. "I'm ready: screw up."

The Marquis had, of course, waited for this moment to make a speech—hen I could not possibly hear him, being shut into my Muntz's metal shell like a lobster into its carapace—and he rushed forward to seize and press my hand, as I stepped over the side of the lugger to the ladder below. He spoke eloquently and I judged imprudently: and tears rose in his eyes. I cut short the scene by sliding my feet off the ladder, and letting myself go.

I feared the effect of such a depth as seventy feet of water on an inexperienced diver like

myself: but I need not have been uneasy. The skipper of the *Dawn* was not minded to have an accident, and he let me down very slowly. I saw the green water, full of silver air-bubbles, rushing up and past the window of my helmet for what seemed quite a long while—though it cannot have been more than a minute or two before my lead-soled boots came down as lightly as a dancer's sandal on the crumbling coral at the bottom.

This was the real thing, and not like my amateur experiment at Thursday: I began to feel interested, and to forget the shrinking fear that all new divers experience in leaving the light and life of the world above and trusting themselves, cased in benumbing metal and rubber, to the choking depths of the sea. My ears were very painful, and my lungs worked badly: my arms and legs seemed to move with a deliberation of their own, and the curious change in the conditions of gravity made me feel like a large cork doll. But I could make my way about, and it was almost as light as on the surface. I could see the tiny blue and emerald and violet buds on the coral, and the eyes of the painted parrot-fish, and every blade and

frond of the tall green seaweeds that waved about as I moved by. The whole scene was so wonderfully beautiful that I almost forgot the grim errand that had brought me down into the midst of it. Coral beds, when you see them from the surface on a calm day, are like a garden of flowers below the water. Seen from beneath the ocean itself, they take on the hues of actual jewels : the huge fans and mushrooms and ferns of the reef glow with lights of emerald, sapphire, and amethyst, the sun that falls through the water makes magical fires of gold and green. Fish come gently past the windows of your helmet hurrying not at all, and look in with their cold eyes as they go by : their bodies shine with all the colours of a painted butterfly, and they make broken little rainbows in the water as they move. You are walking on the coral : it crumbles away like over-baked biscuits under your boots, and keeps you slipping and staggering, and you must keep a sharp look-out over those ugly indigo-coloured gulfs that open in its surface here and there, for coral reefs shelter many a dangerous guest. . . .

. . . All this I saw, treading with the long,

soft pace of the diver at the bottom of the sea, breathing short with the weight of the seventy feet above me, and trying not to think about the invisible nails that kept boring into my ears. I had taken my bearings when I dropped down from the lugger, and I could see her now far above me, like a shadowy whale basking on the surface. A good way ahead I could dimly discern another shadow—that of the *Gertrude*. So far, not a sign of her divers. I trod on, balancing with my hands like an acrobat as I passed the edges of deep crevasses in the coral, and watching carefully for the serrated double edge that marks the presence of the formidable Tridacna Gigas—the huge shell that most people have seen in museums, from three to six or seven feet long, and as heavy as the great stone basin of a fountain in a park. Small ones I saw everywhere: bigger ones, a foot or two in length, now and then. But none of the giants were to be seen.

I must have been down fully ten minutes, and was beginning to feel the effects of my submersion in a certain giddiness of the head and numbness of the limbs, when I saw

something a good way in front of me, that was not rock, or coral, or fish. What it was I could not tell, for it was in rapid motion, and agitated the water so much that one could only see something waving and bending about. I took a good grip of my axe, and went on faster. Be it what it might, I had got to have a look at it.

The water seemed to clear as I drew nearer, and then I began to run—as one runs at the bottom of the sea, sprawling and waving and half swimming, working arms and legs together. For now I saw. There were two divers a little way ahead, attached spiderwise to their ship by long threads of life-line and air-tube, and they were fighting. I floundered up close to them, and they never saw me: hear me they could not, for we were all isolated in our metal shells one from the other. It was awful to see them struggling and reeling and gripping at one another —there at the bottom of the sea, where a tangled life-line or a nipped air-tube meant certain death. The silence—the muffled, stifled silence of the deep—made the horror more horrible yet. It was like a struggle of lost souls among the shades.

I made my way as close as I dared, keeping my life-line and air-tube well out of the way, and snatched at the arm of the nearest diver. But in the unfamiliar medium of the water, I missed : and the fight went on, the two dark monsters with their round metal heads and hideous huge glass eyes dodging, slipping, striking. . . . I saw now, with a thrill of horror, that both were using their knives, or trying to. They had an immense advantage over me, in being accustomed to the water : they moved easily, where I could hardly stir for fear of losing my balance. Something, however, had to be done. I flung myself forward anyhow, and made another snatch at the reeling figures. . . . Crunch went the coral under my feet, and I went down, right into the black crevasse.

I caught my signal-line, and hauled as I fell. They were doing their duty upon the *Dawn :* my tender answered with a sturdy haul that sent me swinging towards the surface again. I signalled "lower," and they let me down. But the swing had carried me a little way from the scene of the fight.

With a horrible fear thumping at my heart,

I flapped and stumbled forward through the wavering green. . . . I was too late.

The biggest diver had got one home at last. As I came up, he sheathed his knife in the dress of the other and ripped it up : out came a fearful rush of silvery air, and the wretched creature, drowning, kicked and struggled and snatched wildly at its signal-line, which I now saw had been cut. The other man drove his hand into the gap in the dress, tore out a small brown object dangling on a string, and jumped backwards out of the way of his grasping, struggling victim. In the jump he fell, and instantly the water vibrated to an iron clang that struck my helmet like a shot. . . . He was caught in something : he fought terribly to be loose ; from his imprisoned arm spread out a sudden cloud of brilliant red.

" Sharks ! Blood brings sharks ! " was the thought that beat upon my brain as I flapped forward to give him help. Dulled as my senses were by the pressure of the sea, what I saw near drove me out of my mind with horror. A Tridacna had got him.

It was set in a hole of the coral, its two fearful zigzag edges lying almost even with

the surrounding level. It had been gaping open until the diver fell back upon it, and the clang that had struck upon my helmet was the sound of its ponderous shells, each some quarter-ton in weight, slamming shut. The arm of the diver had been snapped and crushed between the edges : even as I looked he fell back, the last rag of flesh tearing away. The Tridacna had nipped off the limb like a carrot.

By this time I was so dazed and giddy with my submersion that I scarcely knew what I was about, and the horror of the two deaths before my eyes did not overcome me as it might have done had I been able to feel anything clearly. I knew the small man must be drowned : I guessed that the other was beyond help. I caught at the bigger man's signal-line, knotted it together, and tugged furiously. Up on the *Gertrude* they felt it, and began to haul. The two black monsters, with their gleaming eyes, went slowly up towards the shadow of the boat, dangling loose and limp as they rose.

" Sharks ! " my mind kept saying to me. I looked fearfully round and round. The green wavering water was clear of all large

shadows: no living torpedo, snout down, darted between me and the daylight. At my feet the serrated jaws of the terrible clam jutted slightly up from the coral cleft in which it lay: they were closed like a vice, and an end of shattered bone protruded from the middle.

I have always wondered that I was able to think as quickly and as clearly as I did, there at the bottom of the sea, with my mind dazed by unaccustomed pressure, and shaken by the horrible tragedy that had just passed before my eyes. But I was quite certain of what I had to do. It was the Greek's right arm that had been severed. The diamond, in its casing of grass, was in his hand as he fell. A thousand to one that diamond was inside the Tridacna. I had got to get it out, and quickly, for two reasons—first, I could not stay down much longer, and secondly, nothing but a miracle could have kept the sharks away so long, with the smell of blood in the water.

The Tridacna had been open when I came up. It would probably open again, as the morsel it had caught was scarcely in accordance with its ordinary food. When it opened,

I must be ready with my axe, and strike as deep as possible into the yielding flesh in the hope of hitting the great muscle that controlled the swinging of the valves. Should I miss that, I stood to lose the diamond, the axe, and not impossibly myself, for the inrush of the water into those giant shells as they closed might carry me along with it.

Well, I must hope not to miss. I poised the axe, and waited.

It must have been several minutes before any movement took place in the Tridacna, but at last I saw the least possible gaping between the rows of tight-clinched scallops. The shells moved apart, slowly, slowly. Something gleamed between their separating edges—something that shot out rays of blue and green.

Was it the diamond? No! it was the Tridacna itself.

Much as I had heard of these creatures, I had never heard anything of their beauty, and when I first saw it, it almost stunned me. From out the gates of those gigantic shells, as they opened more and more, came pouring forth the "mantle" of the fish, rising high above the marble edges of the shell,

and trembling away in a cloud of glory several feet beyond. All the colours of a peacock flaunting in the sun were there: purples, violets, gold and green and blue, and over all, the iridescent haze of the water, breaking into crumbled rainbows upon this miracle of unknown, unseen beauty.

I fairly gasped, it was so wonderful. Then, remembering myself, I bent as near the shell as I dared, and looked for the ghastly relic it had seized. There was nothing to be seen but the gorgeous mantle itself. The murderous hand and its booty had alike disappeared.

I waited for a moment to collect myself, felt the blade of the axe to see that it was keen, poised it, and swung.

"Now or never!" I thought: and as the blade went home I leaped back, and stiffened myself for the shock of the great valves slamming down on the handle.

It did not come.

I tried to draw the axe out, and could not. The Tridacna, in its dying agony, had gripped its muscles round the blade. But the closing muscle was severed: the valves could not shut. Or at least I thought so. I drew my

diver's knife, and took the risk of putting my hand inside the shells, slashing away at the huge mass of meat inside. By degrees the mechanical grip on the axe-blade lessened and I pulled it out.

Now it was possible to empty the clam, and I began tearing the meat away in lumps as big as butchers' joints, and flinging it down on the coral. The whiteness of the inner shell, pure as polished marble, began to shine through. I had thrown away the greater part of the contents when I came at last on what I sought.

There it was, the little brown parcel, lying loose beside the greedy hand that had clutched at it and at death together. It seemed to me, as I took the Sorcerer's Stone, and put it in the bag round my neck, as though a wave of cold passed through me that had nothing to do with the benumbing water in which I stood. The evil thing! the thing that had caused death before, that would assuredly cause it again. . . . There, at the bottom of the sea, it would have been safe: the trail of blood that marks the path of every great diamond would have been washed away in the safe, the secret waves,

to begin never more again. And I was taking it back.

I declare, I stood with the stone in my hand, and thought—I do not know what I thought: something mad, if madness it be to think as other men do not. Whether I should have gone beyond thinking or not, I cannot say. I did not get the chance. For, just as I had taken the diamond out of my bag, something happened that made me drop it back again in frantic haste and tug at my signal-cord as hard as I could. Not hurriedly, quite quietly, softly, and almost gracefully, a large, long, deep blue form came gliding through the water, and, with a sweep of its scythe-shaped tail, made straight for me.

I believe now that it was going simply for the remains of the Tridacna, and was not troubling about me at all: I could not have smelt so attractive, cased up in metal and rubber, as did the raw, scattered flesh. But nobody waits to try conclusions with a shark in its own element. I went up through the water as fast as the captain of the *Dawn* could drag me, alarmed as he was at my long stay, and I felt that shark at my toes every inch of the seventy feet.

Nothing touched me, however. The hull of the *Dawn* appeared above my head—a welcome sight, indeed—the ladder flashed before my eyes, and then two pairs of hands were pulling me over the bulwarks and screwing away at the glasses of my helmet. I am not of the fainting kind, but I will allow I had to sit down while they were doing it, and was not very clear as to my whereabouts for a moment or two after. Then, when they had got the helmet off, and my lungs were full of the good fresh air—the glorious air of free heaven itself—I saw that the Marquis was kneeling on the deck beside me, to get his head on a level with mine, and gazing so anxiously into my face that I could not help bursting out into laughter.

"Grace to God, you are well!" said the Marquis, his face lighting up like sunshine after rain. "You signalled 'all right' when we pulled: but, my friend, we was near bringing you up at force! Did we not see that the two divers of the *Gertrude* had come up sick?"

"Sick!" I yelled. "Dead!"

"Dead!" cried the Marquis and the captain together.

"Why!" the captain declared, "that *Gertrude*, she up sailed and off with her before they was well on board!"

So she had: there was no vestige of her to be seen. It appeared afterwards that Good Joe Gilbert had completely lost his head at the sight of his two divers, one obviously murdered, the other dead and mutilated, and had started off as hard as he could for the magistrate and the police on Samarai. This job was too much for him to handle, he said, and he didn't want to get his head into no murdering rows and have the Government jumping on a harmless man that only wanted to do well by everyone. It was to his panic haste that I owed my freedom to carry out my own plans, there at the bottom of the sea. Had the Marquis or the captain realised that Gilbert's divers were dead they would have pulled me up at once. But diver's paralysis had been common in the fleet, and they took the disturbance on the *Gertrude* to mean nothing worse, as her flag in the confusion had not been half-masted.

The Marquis and I discussed afterwards whether the Greek could have known, or not,

that Mo's brother had a diamond on his ugly little person. I inclined to think that he did not. In a pearling fleet the minds of men run exclusively on pearls, and nobody, that I knew, had said anything about diamonds at any time. The acute little Greek had somehow sensed the existence of a small and precious valuable, in which we were interested: he had shadowed the Papuan to try and find out what he could, and, being baffled, had taken service on the *Gertrude* for the sole purpose (or so I judged) of following Mo's brother beneath the water, and robbing him there where no man was likely to see or interfere. I do not think it ever entered his head that a stranger, not a diver by profession, would have risked the descent in twelve fathoms of dangerous water merely on the chance of seeing what he was up to. But then, he did not know the stake. Or so I thought. The Marquis had his own opinion.

He had his own opinion about the diamond too. That night we ventured, very cautiously, to take it out and examine it in a quiet corner. He handled its beauty—our own at last—with a touch that was almost reluctant.

"Flint, now that it is to us, I do not feel

as I have felt about it before," he said. "I hope these misfortunes are at an end."

"Well, you wanted it badly enough: you should be glad now we have it," I said.

"Distant fields are always green," quoted the Marquis gravely: and I was so amazed to hear him quote a proverb right side up for once that I almost dropped the diamond on the floor.

THE SECRET OF THE STONE OVEN COUNTRY

V

THE SECRET OF THE STONE OVEN COUNTRY

THE Marquis and I sat on the hot black sand of Kara Bay, and tried to realise that we were shipwrecked.

It was not easy. There was the calm, blue, burning sea in front of us, there was the ruffle of foam on the coral reef, a mile or two out from the beach. There were the sea-hawks, hovering and veering, just as they had been doing an hour or two ago, when we had left the little coastal steamer for a stroll on shore, while some small trouble in the engine-room was repaired. And there —was not—the *Waiwera.* With our own eyes we had seen her get under steam again, start to make a little closer inshore before putting out her boat to fetch us off: strike the ill-charted reef bow on, and go down in the deep water outside like a tin can that fills and sinks in a well.

It was so quick that they had not even time to sling the boat out. The reef, with its long knife edges, had ripped her open from end to end, she was overloaded with ore from a new mine near Samarai: she was a crank little boat at best, and as for water-tight compartments, you might as soon have expected electric light, or cold storage, or a satinwood grand piano made to turn into a high altar for Sunday services —such as they had on the Western Ocean liners. There were no frills of any kind about the *Waiwera*. When she hit, she went down, and made no fuss about it.

The Marquis and I saw the whole thing, there on the beach two miles away. We heard the rattle of the engines as they broke loose and plunged when she up-ended. We heard the piteous cry, thin and faint with distance, that rose to an unpitying heaven, as the decks went under water. After that there was nothing any more, just the blue sea, and the burning sky, and the circling and hovering bronze sea-hawks, busy with their fishing again. . . .

"Is it real?" asked the Marquis, his hands flat on the sand, supporting his huge

body, his eyes staring, like the fixed eyes of a doll, out to the empty sea. "Flint, what shall a man say, when he sees a thing like that? This is a devil of a country, where one may see twenty men encounter death out there at one's eyes, and sit and look as calm as this! My Flint, if I am mad, then you are it also, because you have no emotion no more than me."

"We're neither of us mad, or bad either," I said. "We'll be sorry enough when we've had time to realise that poor old Tommy Gregg is gone, and Jensen and the rest: but we're shipwrecked ourselves, and in a bit of a fix, Marky, and that's going to take all our thinking for some time."

"Where are we?" asked the Marquis, looking round. It was not a pretty bit of scenery. Kara Bay is the sort of place a man might go to die in, if he felt like it, but it is not the sort of place anyone would ever want to live in. As a matter of fact, no one ever has.

The bay is like a black-lip shell, in curve and in colour. The sand is like powdered cinder to look at, and as hot as the innocent-looking iron door of a furnace to feel.

Behind comes a belt of poisonous painty-green low bush: behind that again, forest, so dark and tangled that it looks black even at midday. The whole place has a deadly, fungoid sort of look, as if it had sprung up in a night out of the heat and rain and general decay, and never had been, or could be, natural and normal in its growth.

I knew where we were well enough, and did not like the knowledge. The *Waiwera*, on her voyage to join a North-German Lloyd boat at Wilhelmshafen, ran along a lonely and unfrequented coast: and the loneliest, most unfrequented, and most generally undesirable bit was this where the Marquis and I had been marooned—here, in Kara Bay, with a suit of clothes apiece, two revolvers, a few dozen cartridges, two tins of meat, and a paper bag of biscuits.

The Marquis, of course, did not quite understand how bad a fix we were in. I did, and I had no time to spare for anything but consideration of our case.

Kara Bay is a hundred miles or more from anywhere, along the coast. The sea-line is precipitous thereabouts: there is no easy

beach to follow, as in the Western country. A boat is your only chance. But when you have no boat ?

The Kara River runs into the sea, close at hand. It comes from the Kiloki Range, a rampart of rock and forest eleven thousand feet high. It is a succession of rapids and falls. I knew all about the Kara River : no help there.

Behind the Kiloki Range, you strike down towards country that is at least known, if not inhabited. There is a Government station there. I calculated it to be something like sixty miles away from us in a direct line. A fortnight's journey, over those mountains, if we were lucky. It seemed to be the Kiloki Range, or nothing. We wanted about forty carriers with food and tents and trade goods, and we wanted maps and field-glasses and compasses, and rifles and shot-guns and ammunition, to take the journey as most people in Papua take such trips. But as we were not likely to get any of these things on the black-sand beach of Kara Bay, it was up to us to try what we could do without them. Or else stop there and die.

That was what I told the Marquis, not exaggerating the seriousness of our situation, but not making little of it. He listened patiently, and sighed. I really do not think anyone, even a man who knew him as I did, could have anticipated what he would reply.

"Flint, my very good friend," he said, twisting both ends of his moustache at once, "that which I chiefly regret in the affair is that it shall now be so many weeks that we shall see no white woman. And look, on the Norddeutscher Lloyd, we should in three or four days have been sitting on the feet of many beautiful ladies, and they should have said politenesses—what do you say?—smooged us greatly, because of the horrors we have encountered. I regret to lose that. Also, I begin to feel that this sacred pig of a diamond has made us enough adventure already."

"You don't suppose it was the Sorcerer's Stone sunk the *Waiwera?*" I said.

"I don't know, but I think it's confoundably likely," said the Marquis, putting up his hand to the string that ran round his fat neck. "She brought us adventure, yes,

down with hardship and short commons, when we chanced upon the brute in a gully, and shot it with our revolvers. We cut it up, and set a leg to roast: the savoury smell spread far into the forest; and, as we soon had reason to know, ours were not the only nostrils that perceived it.

When the leg was done, we stuffed. No food could be carried far in that climate, and the more we ate, the less we lost. We were both greasy with the richness of the meat: our hands were slippery, our faces shining, and I think our hearts felt stouter than they had done for the last forty-eight hours.

"Another one, my Flint; make hay while the iron is hot," counselled the Marquis, filling his own mouth to speechlessness. He was sitting opposite me as he spoke, and I saw his face grow suddenly swelled; the eyes started out, the cheeks became puffy. . . . At first I thought he was choking: then I guessed that he was trying to say something: then I knew that he had seen something, and I turned round like a shot.

Behind us, looking, as savages in the bush

always do, just as if they had grown there, instead of arriving, were ten or a dozen ugly-looking heads, standing quite still in the underbrush. The tips of a number of spears showed up in the tangled green beside them. They were an unpleasant crew: their foreheads sloped enormously, making them look scarcely human: their hair was trained in greasy curls that fell far back, and increased the beast-like angle of the face. Their black and white eyes looked steadily at us out of their brown faces, and the look was that of savage men, near, yet ten thousand æons of evolution distant. Across the gulf, what thought could travel?

We got up on our feet at once, and I spoke to the men in half a dozen different languages—all the New Guinea tongues I knew anything of—hoping to find some means of communication. I was lucky enough to hit on one at last. When I got down to the Mambare tongue, one of the faces showed signs of intelligence: the others remained blank.

I explained that we were great chiefs who had lost our way: that our ship had sunk, and that we desired to go to the Government

station on the other side of the range. If the men would guide us there, I said, the Government would give them any amount of treasure—salt, tobacco, knives and tomahawks, calico cloth.

The interpreter spoke to the others. They seemed dissatisfied, but they came out of the brush into the clearing, and we were able to see them.

"Marky," I said, "we've got to keep our eyes skinned: these seem to be Koiroros, and they're among the worst cannibals in New Guinea. Probably they've never seen white men before, up here: it's all unexplored country."

"Do you suppose we shall be eat?" asked the Marquis.

"Not necessarily. Cannibals aren't always eating other people. We may be able to make friends, and get them to guide us."

With a view to this, I collected any little trifles we could spare—a tin match-box, a silk tie, a small penknife—and offered them to the tallest man, who seemed, by his demeanour, to be something of a chief.

He was a splendidly made fellow, quite naked save for a bark waist-cloth, and all

hung over with shell and dog's-tooth ornaments. I looked anxiously for any trade beads in his jewellery, but didn't see any, nor had any of the party steel knives or tomahawks. They were armed, besides the spears, with stone-headed clubs and long daggers made of human thigh-bones. It seemed plain that they had had no dealings with civilised men: and this was so much the worse for us.

The chief seemed pleased with the gifts, and said something to the man who could speak Mambare. It appeared that he wanted us to come to his village, which was only a little way off. He said that he would give us guides: but I noticed that he looked at the ground as he spoke, and did not face us.

"We had better go," I told the Marquis. "I don't like making friends with natives as a rule: nine times out of ten it's a mistake—but want of tucker gives us no choice. We'll try and get carriers there, and some yams to take us on."

The way proved to be very much longer than we expected; but, tired as we both were, the sight of the village aroused us

when it came into view. It was certainly one of the strangest things I had seen, even in strange New Guinea.

We were now in the midst of the high ranges, and there was no level anywhere—not so much as one could use to lay out a tennis ground. Every hill clasped hands with the next : torrents, foaming white and furious among the ferny green, cut up the ranges into a gigantic pattern of " rig and furrow." The mountains nudged and crowded one another : their shoulders, their hips, their elbows were massed like the shoulders, hips, and elbows of a human crowd. The peaks ran up into needle points like incredible pictures in geography books : they stuck out battlements, roofs, and buttresses into empty air : they sloped at every angle, into every shape. It was the world run through a chopping machine, and thrown out at random. And in this place, without a spot where you could set down the sole of your foot in comfort, men lived who had not wings !

The village crowned the impossibility of the scene. It was exactly like a clump of enormous brown toadstools, and it was

bracketed—one could not say set—on to the sides of a needle-point peak more like a church spire than anything else. The houses were mere semicircular roofs of thatch, placed upon bamboo floors that were stuck to the mountain by piles in some incomprehensible fashion. Up the peak of this amazing place we were guided by the Koiroros, who kept unpleasantly close about us, and seemed resolved that we should not get away from them. As nothing unprovided with wings could have got away from the mountain men in their own country, we did not think of trying, even though it began to be unpleasantly clear that we were in reality not employers of these people, but prisoners.

The Koiroros began to sing as they approached their homes, chanting loudly and triumphantly, with an indescribable undertone of something that—as we understand the word—was not human : something that harked back to ages very near to them, and very far from us.

The Marquis heard it too. Tired as he was, he managed to gasp out, as we toiled up the frightful slope—

"Flint, if you desire a proof that this Darwin of yours had reason, listen then—listen to the wild beast howling over its preys!"

"We aren't going to be any prey," I snapped, being a little cross with fatigue. "And, anyhow, the less you talk, the better. They can guess a lot from one's tone."

But I must say, when we got into the village itself, on to the slope that seemed to take the place of its Plaza, or Place Royale, or Unter den Linden, I began to feel that we were in a tighter place than I had thought. For I saw something that I had not quite expected to see.

Dug out in the side of the hill, and lined with neatly fitted stones, were certain long, coffin-like holes, that I knew at once for the stone ovens of the main-range people. They seemed to be nearly six feet in length. Now there is only one kind of game that needs a stone oven six feet long to bake it in—man.

Of course, the greater number of Papuan Island tribes are cannibals now and then: I was accustomed to that sort of thing, and had even seen human joints made ready for cooking—not, of course, the killing of the

game, which I shouldn't have allowed for a moment. But cannibalism, among most of the tribes, is not at all an everyday affair: it is the sequel of a big, victorious raid, or the end of some unusually bitter private quarrel.

There are tribes, however, who eat man whenever and wherever they get the chance: and it is those tribes who go to the trouble of building big stone ovens, specially designed for cooking human beings. That is why I was not too well pleased to find that we had got into the Stone Oven country, without expecting it. I wondered if we should ever get out again. I trusted a good deal to our revolvers: fire-arms will go far, among men who have never seen them—but the mountain tribes are good fighters, for Papuans, and I did not anticipate that it would be easy to get away, if we had occasion to try.

They led us into the largest house of the village, a ramshackle shanty of a place, with spears and shields hung up on the walls, and bamboo shelves to sleep on. It smelt of unwashed nigger, old hay, damp, and rain: and you could see the mountain

clouds, curling and wreathing, through the splits in the crazy floor: very much of the house projecting right out over nothing at all.

Down the hill, like ants coming out of the top of a tall ants'-nest, ran the people of the place, yelling with excitement at our arrival. They had not a stitch of clothes among the lot: even the women were dressed merely in a few small land-shells strung round the neck, and a handful of dogs' teeth fastened like tassels into the hair.

"When we shall leave this place," remarked the Marquis, "I will take with me a complete costume of one of these women, to carry in my purse all the time, so that I may show it to the delightful English misses when I go to London, and hear them say, 'Oooh, shoking!' That is what they love to say, my Flint."

He looked about the ugly crowd again.

"They are not natural, these people: I do not love them," he commented. "See, then, how they are every one bended back from the waist like a man who has a tetanus fit, because of the climbing they always do. When we go away from here——"

He looked about again.

"If we go away from here," he amended coolly, "you shall see that I will give a lecture to the scientifics in Paris, a most blooming learned lecture."

"I hope you will, Marky," I said. We were sitting on the bamboo bed-place now, smoking a little of our cherished tobacco, and wondering when or if the Koiroros would give us something to eat. One of the children—rather a pretty little chap of toddling age, who had been half walking, half crawling on the verge of an appalling precipice as we came up to the village—made its way over to us, and began touching our clothes, with childish curiosity. The older people watched it, but did not go near: they seemed shy of putting their hands on us.

The Marquis, who was fond of children, caressed the little thing, and tried to make friends with him (rather foolishly, I thought) by taking the diamond out of the case in which we carried it, and making it flash. The child looked at it, and then retreated, at a call from his mother, striking at the stone as he went. It dropped, and we both went after it with a hasty exclamation, as

the floor was full of holes. I recovered it, and fastened it up again in its case with a bit of string.

"I'll take my turn now, Marky," I said, hanging it round my neck. For we had been carrying it day and day about, under our clothes.

"Look!" said the Marquis, making a small motion with his hand. I looked, and saw a Koiroro, whom I had not previously noticed, literally glaring at me as I put the stone away. He was by a good deal the tallest man in the village, and he had a very fine crown of bird-of-paradise feathers on his head—among them the plumes of the rare blue species, that is worth almost what you like to ask for it in civilisation. It was evident that he was a man of some standing. I suspected him to be the village sorcerer, as he had an ugly necklace about his neck, made of locks of human hair, strung alternately with some of the small bones out of the ear, and supporting a kind of trophy made of double teeth.

"More trouble about the diamond," I said. "That oily brute has a mind to get it if he can. A sorcerer, I reckon."

There was some murmuring among the men, and they drew off into a corner of the house by themselves, talking, and looking at us, especially at me. The inevitable evening rain of the mountains was coming down now in a waterfall rush : the purple gorge beneath us, that we could see through the open door, was filling up with a stormy sea of white cloud. Without, precipices, tree-tops, clouds, and plunging steps, all drenched in roaring rain : within, a gloomy, damp-smelling house of rotten thatch, white skulls gleaming through the dusk from the place where they hung aswing upon the rafters : shadowy men-things, more than half brute, glowering at us from their corner. . . . And out upon the hill-side, just a few yards away, the long stone ovens . . . waiting.

No, it was not a pleasant prospect, take it all in all.

For the moment, however, I thought there was no actual danger. I have seen much of the Papuan tribes, and it did not seem to me that these Koiroros had the blood-seeking mood on, that night.

" I don't think they'll attack just yet,"

I told the Marquis. "But I'd be as glad they hadn't seen the stone. They're talking about it now."

"What do they say?" asked the Marquis eagerly.

"I can't tell you that, but I can guess they're telling each other all about it. I'd be willing to make a bet it's known to them. It must be one of the celebrated sorcerer's charms that go knocking about all over the country, passed from one to the other."

"And they will try to get it?"

"Yes, it, and us."

It grew darker in the chief-house, there as we sat on the bamboo sleeping-shelf, listening to the unvarying roar of the rain, and watching the excited waving of the head-plumes in the corner where the cannibals held their conference—the plumes were all we could see now, for a naked Papuan becomes rapidly and completely invisible, once it begins to grow dark. The Marquis was very much quieter than usual, but I do not think he was at all afraid. I think he reckoned on having a fight by and by, and liked the idea. As for myself, well, a man with any sense isn't afraid, in a tight place :

it would be idiotic, because you want all the nerve you have, to get out of it. And usually, you are much too busy thinking what to do, to worry over what may happen if you don't do it.

A woman brought a torch in by and by, and said something that caused great excitement. The men jumped about and clapped their hands, and made noises exactly like the noise a dog makes when it sees its food in front of it. The Marquis and I both had our hands ready upon our revolver butts, but we needn't have troubled—it was only the pig that had already had so much to do with our fortunes, coming in again. They had been heating it up, and were bringing it in for supper.

We all sat down on the floor then—and the meat was shared out, together with a lot of sweet potatoes, hot from the ashes. The cannibals gave us a liberal share, and offered us a bamboo full of water to drink out of. They tore and gnawed their food in a way that was not pleasant to watch —remembering those long ovens on the hill.

"Sacred name of a camel, what a lecture

I will give!" sighed the Marquis, with his mouth full of sweet potato. "Look at their chests all blowed out with the climbing, and their feet that have monkey toes, and the cords of the insteps, and the nostrils of the pig that they have! See how they jump, they flitter, they are all the time nervous and distracted! That comes of living on the edge of the cook-pot: if you hold your finger up at one, and say 'Hi!' he should jump to break the floor."

"I hope you won't," I said, looking down at the velvet-black gulf of vacancy that one could see between the slats of the flooring. "Don't you get too scientific, Marky: I warn you, that nervousness of theirs is a bad sign. Also, their friendliness is a bad sign. Shove back and finish your food with your shoulders against the wall, if you take my advice." I moved over as I spoke, and the Marquis followed me.

We ate as men eat who do not know where their next meal is to come from: we filled our pockets quietly, when we could swallow no more. The Koiroros were so busy chattering among themselves that they did not notice what we were doing. They

did not molest us, though I could feel there was trouble in the air.

I cannot say we passed a pleasant night. We kept watch in turns, and got some sleep, through sheer fatigue, lying just where we had eaten our meal, on the floor of the chief-house. The cannibals were sleeping all round us, snorting and snoring like walruses. One of them lay across the door, I noticed, and as it was hardly large enough to crawl through, he guarded it efficiently.

Towards four o'clock in the morning (I found the time by feeling the hands of my watch), the presentiment of coming trouble got hold of me so completely that I resolved to make an attempt at getting away, cost what it might. The more I thought about that liberal supper, the less I liked it. The more I considered those long stone ovens on the hill, the more likely I thought that they would be filled on the morrow—if we did not get away.

I felt for the Marquis in the dark : it was his turn to sleep, but he was not sleeping. I put my mouth to his ear, and whispered a little. Then I got out my knife, and began cutting away the flimsy bamboo flooring.

It was the time of the waning moon: I knew that we should have light enough to see by, once we got outside, and that it would last till dawn came up. By dawn, we might hope to be out of the way.

It was easy enough to cut the floor, without waking the Koiroros, since all natives are heavy sleepers, and these men had fed full before they slept. Getting through was more difficult: I gritted my teeth at the creaking noise made by the Marquis's weight, as he lowered himself after me. Where I had cut through, there was sloping soil underneath: we got hold of the supporting piles that were thrust into it, and holding on by them, made our way very cautiously down the precipice, to the place where the trees and lianas began once more. The angle here was awful, but we had plenty of hand-hold, and crept along securely enough in the watery moonlight. The rain was over now, and the river far below us at the bottom of the gorge roared full-fed along its way.

Not a sound came from the toadstool clump of houses above, as we crept down the precipice. We were out of earshot

before long, and able to speak as we mounted the next great wall of rock, keeping always in the direction of the far-off Government station, which I now began to hope we should reach. By the lie of the land, I guessed we had forty miles or more to go, and that might mean a week, in this country of precipices. Still, if we could find anything to eat on the way, and if the Koiroros did not recapture us, it was—just—possible to get through.

Dawn, rising red through the tableland of white cloud, like spilled blood spreading on snow, came up and caught us sooner than I liked. We were out of sight of the village, having crossed two ridges, but our position, climbing up the bare rock at the side of a waterfall, was dangerously exposed, should any of the Koiroros be within sight. I stopped where I was, on a ledge of stone overgrown with white butterfly orchids, and looked back over the tossing billows of tree-tops that lay behind. There was small satisfaction in that. An army might have been hidden in the bush, following us up. Still—considering the speed the Koiroros could keep up in this mountain country,

when they chose—it certainly did look as if they were not pursuing us. The Marquis was jubilant.

"They are not spiritual, those people," he declared, scrambling like a cockroach in my rear. "By Gum, I think their mentality is far back in the scale of evolution: they are blessed idiots. They lock the stable door when the milk is spilt: I can figure how they are saying injuries to one another about our invasion, now we are safe away."

I did not say anything, for the reason that I was not very sure we were safe away—yet. There was something I did not understand about this easy letting go. All the same, there was only one thing to do—get on as fast as possible—and we did.

Towards midday, as we were crawling painfully up a perpendicular forest hung out like a hearth-rug left to dry, over the side of a three-thousand-foot cliff, I fancied the light ahead was growing very clear. All the morning we had been working along as one generally does in the interior, right at the bottom of the forests, judging our direction by compass and by the rise of the land, and seeing no more of the country in

general than if we had been crawling along in the depths of the sea. But the light ahead and above looked as if there were a big break-off somewhere. I pointed it out to the Marquis, to encourage him.

"I believe that's the south-western face of the Kiloki Range we're coming to," I said. "If there's a big drop there, and if we can get down, it will give us a long lift on our way to the Government station."

The Marquis paused, to wipe his dripping face: it was atrociously hot, in there sheltered from all cooling breezes. He cast a glance at his khaki shirt and trousers, crumpled and stained, and torn in many places.

"Has he a wife or a daughter, and is she beautiful?" he asked.

"Who? the R.M.? Don't know who he is: but I should think it most unlikely he has any womenkind up there."

The Marquis sighed, and was silent.

We were coming up to the light now, and it grew clearer and clearer. There was evidently a big drop somewhere very near. And unless my ears were much mistaken, there was also a big waterfall.

"Hear that, Marky?" I said. "That roaring sound. You'll probably see a young Niagara somewhere, when we get to the top."

Well, it was not a Niagara, or a Victoria Falls, but it could have held its own very well with any other fall in the world you might like to mention. When we came out on the summit, we saw that the whole countryside was broken away under our feet, and that the nearest thing to us, as we stood up there on the verge of a mighty basalt wall, was the feathery top of a forest so far beneath as to be half blue with distance. And we saw that the whole of this immense rampart, greater than any straight-down drop I had ever seen in my life, was taken at one leap by a river that came down from a ridge above the one we had been climbing.

The Marquis stood quite still on the summit, looking for some minutes at the indescribably magnificent view spread out below.

"To think!" he said at last, "that it is ours alone—that no other eye shall——"

"Get your revolver out," I said. There

was no use making a fuss—I hate fusses—but there was also no use trying to deny that our unlucky fate had caught up with us again, and that the puzzle of the morning was fully explained at last. There, on the verge of the precipice, standing nonchalantly with their toes half over, as only a mountain native can, were a dozen or more Koiroros, who had slipped out of the bush like snakes as the Marquis was speaking. From what I could see, they must have taken a short cut, got to the precipice before us, and been comfortably waiting for our arrival.

This time, there could be no doubt whatever about their intention. They had surrounded us before you could say "knife" —not very close, but near enough to be dangerous—and were creeping closer and closer, poising their stone-headed clubs in an ominous manner. From the dense wall of greenery behind, a spear came whistling out, excellently aimed for the Marquis: it missed him by no more than an inch. Another went into my hat, and knocked it off.

We drew our revolvers, and fired. The Marquis got his man clean through the

temple, and dropped him as neatly as one could wish. Mine was hit in the ribs: he fell over the precipice, and his cry, as he went down, grew thin like the whistle of a train running away in the distance, until we ceased to hear it. We had not much leisure for listening, in any case. The Koiroros had bolted at the first shot, as natives usually do: but they were busy throwing spears from cover now, and the Marquis and I had to use more ammunition than we liked, firing at random into the green, before we succeeded in stopping them.

They did seem to be driven off at last, however, and we began walking along the edge of the precipice, to try and find a way down, for that was now a vital necessity.

There was none.

We tramped and climbed and looked for half the afternoon. The sun got down in the west: we ate a little of our food as we clambered about, seeking endlessly, and drank from the pools made by the spray of the waterfall. That waterfall! It blocked us like a wall of iron: we could not cross it, or swim it, or get down alongside it.

It was, in truth, an efficient gate-keeper to the country of the Stone Ovens.

"Marky, I'm of opinion that they knew this all along," I said. "They played with us like cats with a mouse. They let us go just this far, knowing we could get no further. As to what I think of the beasts——"

I said what I thought, without laying any restraint on myself. The Marquis listened for a moment, and then jumped up—he had been sitting on a stone—and gave a kind of howl.

"Look down!" he cried. I looked. Far, very far below, I saw the figure of one of the Koiroros, carrying a dead body on his shoulders, like an ant going home with a grain of corn.

We were a good way from the waterfall at that moment, but the wall was still unbroken, and I could not see any place where the man could have got down. Still, down he had evidently got, and the sight encouraged us more than I could say.

"The sun's failing us now, Marky," I said, "but to-morrow we'll find that track or die."

"I think you have reason: if we do not find it, we shall undoubtedly kick the bucket in this out-of-the-road wilderness," replied the Marquis. "And if we were to finish like that, how many women, of a great beauty and a great kindness, would pour tears for we two over all the world!"

The sun was going down.

"Your watch first to-night, Marky," I said. "And my turn for the diamond."

. . . . . .

I had the stone round my neck next morning, when it came daylight. We were both pretty tired, with short sleep, short food, and hard work, but neither of us was anything like done; and I, for one, felt almost brisk when the fresh wind of sunrise sprang up, blowing the ferns and orchids about on the edge of the precipice, and sending the spray of the great waterfall flying out into the sun. The Marquis was sleeping just then. I did not wake him, but got up to reconnoitre: this sunrise hour is the clearest of all the day, and one can see the distant peaks and ranges that are invisible, once the eight-o'clock clouds begin.

I did not particularly like what I saw. In all the wide expanse of close-furred green before me, there was not a break, not a suggestion of a clearing or a station : only the wave on wave of primeval sea of tree-tops that buries all New Guinea beneath its overwhelming flood. Far in front the green lapped into a fold that suggested a river : that was my only hope. As to these mountain torrents. . . .

Was that a cough ?

It sounded like one—the cough that a native gives when he wishes to attract attention. I turned round to face the wall of bush, but could see nothing, and I could not even be sure I had heard anything, for we were not far from the waterfall and its thundering noise.

Well, if there had not been anything to hear, there was certainly something to see—a green bough waving frantically, all by itself, as if shaken by an unseen hand. The hand itself appeared by and by, and now the bough was waved more violently than ever, while a voice cried out in the Mambare dialect, " Let us speak ! "

" Speak ! " I answered, waking the

Marquis with a push, and telling him to keep ready with his revolver.

"Is it peace?" continued the unseen native, whom I guessed to be the Koiroro who had interpreted before.

"What do you want?" I yelled.

"We want the sorcerer's great charm," came the reply.

"Come out," I said. "I will do no harm to you."

Out they came, two of them—the interpreter and (as I had rather expected) the big sorcerer man, who had worn the crown of paradise plumes. They motioned that we should lay down our arms, while they laid down their clubs and spears, and this being done, the interpreter and the sorcerer came forward.

"You have guns that bite badly in your belts," said the interpreter. "We thought you had none, because there were no long sticks such as the white men's guns usually have. But you have good guns: we shall not fight you any more."

"Very kind of you," I said.

"All the same," continued the interpreter, "we will not let you go unless we

like. There is a way down, but you will never find it if we do not tell you about it. If we do not tell, you will stay here till you die, and the wild pigs and dogs will come and tear your tongues out, and eat your throats."

"What do you want?" I asked, guessing the answer before it came.

"This sorcerer, who is a very great chief, wants your charm. If you give it you can go, and we will give you sweet potatoes to take with you."

"Get the sweet potatoes, and we will talk more," I answered, being willing to gain time. The men disappeared.

"What do you think of that, Marky?" I said, translating.

"I think it is dam presumptuous cheek," replied that nobleman, trying to smooth his hair with his pocket-handkerchief, and ruefully feeling his bristly beard. "What a species of an object I shall be, if we get to that station!"

"Well, it does seem as if the diamond landed us in a fix, everywhere we go," I remarked. "What on the living earth are we going to do?"

I took the stone out of its case, and looked at it. All in the rough as it was, it had some splendid rays when you got it into the sun. Just now it shot out crimson, blue, and green like a display of fireworks.

"Mark, it's a beauty," I said. "I don't see myself giving it up to a man-eating savage to make spells with: not much. But I don't see either——"

"The Aryan races——" began the Marquis.

"Oh, don't get scientific," I begged. "I don't feel as if I could stand it this morning, somehow. Besides, I was discussing what we were going to do."

"Also I, if you would permit. The Aryan races—or, if you will be impatient, and make grimace at me, I will jump some thousand years. You say you cannot think what we shall do: it is solely because you are of the Teutonic descent. It has courage, this branch, but nimbleness in the mind it has not. The Latin races, of whom I am one——"

"Oh, cut it, Marky," I begged. "I believe they're coming back: we've got to be serious."

"I am everything that there is of serious,

man with a head of a cabbage! I myself will show you what it is to belong to the Latin. Do you leave the negotiation to me."

"Oh, you can do the talking," I said. "You can do no harm, if you can't do good. I'll pass on anything you say, and at the same time keep a look-out for an ambush, which is just as likely as not."

The Koiroros, it appeared, had brought the sweet potatoes with them, and concealed them not far away, for there they were, back again, with a good load, before the Marquis and I had well finished our discussion.

"Now," said my companion, drawing himself up to his full height, "it is for you to see what it shall mean to be of the Latin, and not of the Teutonic race. Behold! Tell them they shall not have the diamond.

"Tell them that I am a greater sorcerer than this man is, and that I know many wonderful sorceries.

"Tell them I will sell this man a sorcery that will make him king of his tribe, you bet, if he will give us the secret of the path.

"Tell him to behold me and see!"

The two Koiroros, already much impressed with the lordly tones and gestures of the Marquis, watched narrowly, as he took a packet of cigarette papers out of his pocket, looked solemnly towards the rising sun, held up one paper to its rays, and then bent his head over it, muttering to himself. . . . I asked him afterwards what he had been saying that sounded so impressive, and he confessed that it was merely the French for "Twice one is two, twice two is four——" etc.

When he had finished his muttering—the Koiroros now drawing back a little, in obvious fear—he lit a match, and burned the paper, waving his hands over it as it burned. I cannot describe the extraordinary appearance he made, there on the mountain-top in the scarlet dawn, with the naked, feathered cannibals looking on while he performed his incantations—his dirty, huge, bedraggled figure carrying a dignity all its own.

At the end of these mummeries, he cast the ashes of the paper to the winds, raised a terrifying shout, and, taking hold of his (false) front teeth, pulled them down to the

level of the lower lip, and let them go again with a snap.

The two Koiroros turned tail, and fled into the bush, actually leaving their spears and clubs behind them in their panic. A long way off, we could hear them howling with fright. The Marquis and I had to call for quite a long time to get them to return. When they did come back, the sorcerer seemed to have recovered his nerve in some degree, but he still looked uneasily towards the Marquis, whom he now appeared to recognise as a superior in his own line.

"Tell them," said the Marquis, "to show us the way, and I will give them the papers."

"He says he wants one now, to do the trick," I reported.

Solemnly the Marquis pointed to the rising sun.

"It is above the horizon—did he not see that it was not yet clear of the earth, when I enchanted?" he said. "Say that he shall make the spell at to-morrow's sunrise, but never before again."

The sorcerer, his eyes staring out of his head, half walked, half crawled to the

Marquis's feet, and accepted the cigarette papers, trembling. He stowed them away in his charm bag, and then made signs to us to follow. We went after him along the rim of the precipice, to the very edge of the waterfall—and saw——

Well, after all!

Only a six-sided column of the black basalt—the sort of thing you see in photographs of the Irish Giant's Causeway—that lifted out of its place as neatly as a finger out of a glove, and left a hole through which a man might squeeze himself. And, once squeezed through, a man came out—behind the waterfall.

There it hung in front of us, as we passed, like a gigantic crystal curtain, magnificent beyond all telling. And in the hollow at the back, where the water had worn the hard basalt away, foot by foot, through countless æons of years, was the roughest of rough staircases, cut by native hands, and leading down the cliff. Slippery, wet with spray, perilous to the last degree, and scarce passable for a white man's foot, yet after all it was not quite impassable, or so we found. In an hour or less, we were down

at the bottom of the wall : the secret of the Stone Oven country was told.

More than that, the sorcerer had informed us, as we went down, that the Government station was a bare two days away, down the valley of the river that we had dimly discerned from the height. And we had potatoes enough to last us all the way. And the diamond was still ours.

" Heaven tempers the wind to the lame dog : we are well out," said the Marquis, looking up at the top of the ridge, as we paused in the river-bed below. The sorcerer, far away against the skyline, was faintly visible, feeling his jaw.

" I wager, on sunrise to-morrow morning, there shall be some sore teeth in the chief-house ! " said the Marquis, with a chuckle.

HOW THEY BURIED BOBBY-THE-CLOCK

VI

HOW THEY BURIED BOBBY-THE-CLOCK

"NAME of a name of a name of a name of a dog!" said the Marquis through his teeth. "What's this that we have arrived at?"

We stood in the bush, at the edge of the little clearing, and looked across a small space of muddy earth, planted with clothes-props, into a wide, doorless open door. It was night, and you could see little of the building itself—only a long, low outline against the stars, and that big oblong of orange light.

Inside, about a score of men were sitting on rough benches nailed to the wall. They all had glasses or tin pannikins in their hands, and they were drinking, slowly and quietly, and without any joviality or talk. Their eyes were fixed in one direction: it seemed

that they were looking at something beyond our range of view.

Inside the room, someone was singing : a rollicking, vulgar, music-hall song with a great deal of " beer " and " booze " in it, and not a little bad language, apparently thrown in by the singer. Some of the song was certainly funny, though with a coarse kind of fun : and all in all, it was not the sort of thing that most men would have listened to with faces like tombstones—especially the rough-looking crowd that was seated there on the benches round the wall. But there was never a smile on a face. They listened, and they drank—grave, unmoved, and gloomy.

The Marquis used some more curious expressions, apparently translated from the French.

" This is evidently not the Government station upon which we are fallen," he said. " Tell me then, is it by chance some lunatic asylum ? Or has the impossible things we have encountered in that Country of the Stone Ovens made me myself insane ? "

" I reckon we've hit on the Kilori goldfield," I said. " That comes of having no

compass, and being chased all over the shop, without a chance to see where you are going. We must be twenty miles further down towards the coast than I thought, and a good bit to the westward. It's as good as the Government station, Marky. There's a store here, and we're in known country now all the way."

"We are arrived somewhere, if it is store, or station, or asylum of lunatics—I don't care me," said the Marquis. His face was neither fat nor pink in these strenuous days: it was yellow with starvation and hardship, and there were lines from his ears to his neck. His clothes were a mass of rags, and exceedingly dirty: his boots nearly worn out. You would never have known him for the spruce, smart gentleman of France who had lounged about the coral walks of Samarai only a week or two ago. But in that week or two we had been through adventures before which all the troubles previously brought upon us by the Sorcerer's Stone seemed as nothing at all. We had been shipwrecked, and marooned on a foodless, uninhabited shore a hundred miles from anywhere, along an inaccessible coast. We had wandered, starving, house-

less, and guideless, about an unexplored tract of country only fit for birds or monkeys to travel. We had been captured by cannibals and nearly eaten by them: had been imprisoned on the edge of an apparently tractless gulf, and asked for the great diamond, no less, as the price of the secret that would show us the way down: had got away, and struggled through the trackless wilds below, racing desperately to find the Government station before we should succumb to hunger or exposure—and, at the last, had found, apparently, not the Government station, but the Kilori goldfield.

I would rather have found the station, in spite of the fact that the field was nearer to the coast, and had more supplies for us to draw upon. In an ordinary way, I would sooner have trusted myself on a New Guinea goldfield with a priceless diamond on my person than in a civilised city. The old hands among the miners of Papua are, I suppose, about the most honest people in the world. You can leave your "chamois" of gold knocking about the store for a week, if you choose to be so careless, and know that not a grain of its contents will be miss-

ing when you wake up to its existence again. You can leave your claim in charge of a mate, to be worked for you, and go off to Australia for six months, confident that when you return every weight that has been mined out of your property will be fairly handed over to you. The men who have stood the brunt of the fearful hardships, and taken the atrocious risks that were, and are, the price of finding gold in New Guinea, are not the kind to play a fellow-miner dishonest tricks.

But the Kilori was another affair. It was a field that had never produced very much, until a rich find was made a few months before our arrival. The find, of course, attracted the usual "rush" from Australia, a crowd made up of very mixed elements, as is the goldfields crowd, all the world over. In Papua, rich discoveries are very soon worked out, as a rule, and the riff-raff attracted by the gold, larrikins and sharps, parasites and wasters of every kind, sorts itself out from the men who are of any use, and drifts back to the continent of Australia, where there is more room for this kind. But the process takes some time, and I knew

that the backward stream from the Kilori field was hardly yet in flood.

It seemed to me, therefore, that we could hardly have struck upon a worse place to stay at. But stay we must, till we were fed, clothed, and sufficiently recruited in strength to go on again.

I said something of this to the Marquis, and he said that there was no use crying over a bridge till you came to it, and for his part, what he wanted was "some many tins of meat and a jeremiad of champagne."

"Well, the sooner we get into the store, the sooner you're likely to be gratified," I said. I broke through the last of the bush—there was no doubt a track somewhere in the neighbourhood, but in the growing dark we had somehow or other missed it—and led the way across the clearing. Meantime, inside the store, the ribald song went on, and the miners, seated round with solemn faces, listened as if at church.

"I am intrigued to find out the meaning of this, my Flint," breathed the Marquis down the back of my neck. "It is so blessed queer."

He had not long to wait. We were inside

the store in a few seconds, and there before us appeared what was surely the oddest scene that even Papua, the country of oddities, had produced for many a year.

There was a table at the far end of the room: on the table was a gramophone, muffled up in black, and surrounded with white flowers from the bush.

All the miners were looking at the instrument, and listening to it, as they slowly and seriously drank their whisky and their beer. And the gramophone was bellowing out the song that we had heard, not in the voice of a trained singer, such as one associates with mechanical records, but in the raucous, howling tones of a man who could sing very little, and had handicapped that little ability by getting drunk before he began to sing.

It was a dead-still night, here in the clearing on the river flat, with the trees shutting off every breath of wind all round us, and the Kilori, inky-black and quiet, running smooth as a canal behind the store. The lantern in the rafters did not waver, the white flowers thrown about the gramophone lay still as flowers about the body of someone dead. You could hear the men suck in

their drinks and swallow, in the pauses of the song, and the grinding of the worn-out needle sounded sharply.

Many of the men I knew, though some were strangers, and I was anxious to greet my mates—doubly so, after all the troubles that the Marquis and I had been through. So I stepped right in, walked up to Hubbard, who had shared a claim with me on the Yodda years before, and held out my hand, saying something in the way of a greeting.

It was received with an instantaneous and universal "Hish!" Hubbard himself said, "Wait—we must finish," and pulled me down on the bench beside him. The Marquis, his innate courtesy rising above his natural impatience and weariness, also took a seat. The song went on to its dreary end.

Then the storekeeper, an elderly man with a wooden face, who looked as if he had seen so many surprising things that nothing on earth could by any possibility surprise him again, took the black cloth off the gramophone, removed the flowers, and lifted the instrument to put it away on a shelf.

"Hold on!" said one of the miners, stretching out his glass of beer. "We'll give

the poor beggar a last drink." He poured his beer into the gramophone, the others looking on quite seriously.

"Are you all mad?" I enquired. "And can't you spare half a second to give a drink to men who haven't had any for three weeks, when you've done feeding a gramophone?"

"Where have you been?" asked the storekeeper. I told him briefly.

We had no cause to complain after that: old Burchell, the storekeeper, Hubbard, and all the men I knew, bestirred themselves to find us food, drink, tobacco, clothing, beds, and to make us warmly welcome to the Kilori. Our adventures didn't astonish anyone very much: most of the men had had experiences quite as startling in their time. Yarns and reminiscences, mostly coloured with gore, ran like a flood in the little slab-built bar of the storekeeper's house, and I saw the Marquis's eyes grow rounder and rounder as he listened.

I had really forgotten the gramophone incident, being pretty well used to the eccentricities of men who live for the most part alone in the bush, when the Marquis touched

me with his elbow, and asked me to " demand the signifying of that astounding event."

" Oh, by the way," I said, " what on earth were you playing at when we came up ? "

Most of the men fell silent again. Hubbard took up the word.

" Why," he said, " we'd just buried poor old Bobby-the-Clock, and when we came back from planting him, we thought we'd hear him sing again for the last time—he did love singing, poor old Bobby, though he never could do it : and Burchell here had a record he'd made one day, when Bobby was having an unusually good time. So when we came back, we put it on. And we gave poor old Bobby-the-Clock a last drink, and we put him away on the shelf. You needn't look shocked, you, whoever you are——" addressing the Marquis.

The Marquis rose, bowed, and introduced himself. I said I never could remember his name, so I won't try to write it down.

" Well, Mr. Marquis," went on Hubbard, totally unmoved, " as I say, you needn't look shocked, for we did the whole thing as reverent as if we'd been in church, and nobody could say we didn't. Now he's planted,

and we've done all we could for him, and we're going to forget about him and cheer up, so here's luck, Mr. Marquis."

He finished his beer.

We got away as soon as we could from Bobby-the-Clock's memorial service, for we were both suffering from the effects of the "perish" we had been through, and the Marquis declared he could not exist another hour without a new set of clothes. The store, rough as it was, provided sufficient for our needs: we took the plain shirts and trousers over to the men's sleeping-place, washed, dressed, and made ourselves decent again.

"Marky, you look like a miner now," I said.

"A cat may look like a king," said the Marquis, "but a king in gloves catches no mice. I fear I should not make myself much wealth, even in these uniforms of the field, with the pick and the plate of Mr. Bobby-the-Clock. And, by the road, Flint, what is the signifying of that singular name?"

"Oh, that," I said, laughing, as I struggled into my own new clothes—"that was only something Bobby did up on the Yodda, years and years ago. He was always a bit

of a crank, and he got it into his head that the storekeeper had cheated him out of seven-and-sixpence over a bag of rice. I don't believe poor old Whitworth ever thought of such a thing. But anyhow, Bobby believed he did : and it became what I suppose you'd call an ' obsession ' with him, to try and get it out of Whitworth somehow or other. And one day, when he was alone in the store, he nipped up a seven-and-sixpenny little alarm clock—Bobby wouldn't have stolen to save his life, but he reckoned that Whitworth owed him that—and put it away in his clothes. And just then a missionary turned up, visiting the goldfields, and nothing would do him—being Sunday—but he must hold a service, and pray for those terrible villains, the miners of the Yodda. Well, they started the service right away, in Whitworth's store, and poor old Bobby was let in for it, and couldn't get out. And they all heard the clock ticking, but they couldn't make out where it was, till right in the middle of the missionary's longest prayer off with a buzz and a rattle went the clock, from somewhere about Bobby's left trouser leg. The missionary reckoned they'd

done it on purpose, and he just shut up the book with a bang and walked out, and Bobby, who was terribly distressed, ran after him, shouting, 'Mr. Parson—Mr. Parson—I beg your pardon! I beg your pardon!' and all the time the clock yelling away down his leg. The miners were yelling too: some of them were almost rolling on the floor. We none of us meant to be rude to the missionary, but it broke him up altogether: he went right off that night, and we never had the finish of the meeting. Bobby-the-Clock kept the clock, and used it to waken himself in the mornings: he was always a sleepy beggar. And now he's gone where he won't want clocks to waken him any more."

I fastened my last button, and buckled my belt. It was not supper-time yet, and we had already fed, so we were not impatient. We sat down on the canvas beds that had been allotted to us, and looked about. The "dormitory" was a rudely built shed, used for storing goods, and open on one side: among the bags and boxes were scattered bush-made stretchers, covered with sacks. All round the little clearing on the flat, the great, menacing, unknown forest stretched

its hands: it made me think of people crowding and shouldering about an accident. And, to complete the parallel, the atmosphere was so still and confined that one longed to cry out, "Back—stand back, and give us air!"

The stars, that had been above our heads so many nights, were before us now all down the open side of the shed—the unforgettable stars of Papua, glowing like tiny moons in the velvet-violet dark. I sat and looked, and smoked, and thought the "long, long thoughts" of the man who lives in lonely places. . . . Many and many a year they had been my roof, those holding, haunting stars: they had me fast: they would not let me go. They were more faithful to me than wife or child could be: they had been my friends when friends had failed: they had told me things beyond the tongue of men and angels. To-night they looked down upon the grave of poor, harmless, mind-bewildered Bobby-the-Clock: how soon, I wondered, and where, would they look down upon mine. . . .

Diamond or no diamond, it came to me then that the stars and the bush, and cruel,

beautiful Papua had got me for good. A man may make a fortune ten times over: but if he is not made of the clay that sticks to gold when it touches it, he will come back where he belongs in the end.

. . . . . .

We slept that night as sound as Bobby-the-Clock himself, in his forest bed a dozen yards away. With the morning came reaction from our excitement of arriving: we were both dead tired, and could do nothing but saunter and lie about. It was a hard week's tramp to the coast, over ugly country: I foresaw that we should have to put in some days of resting before we could face it. Carriers, too, would have to be found somehow or other—if necessary, borrowed from among the boys employed by the various miners. The delay was unpleasant to me, knowing what risks we ran, but I did not see what else we could do.

There were many more men about the store to-day: a much rougher-looking lot than the friends of the late Bobby-the-Clock. A dozen or so of them—bad lots from odd corners of the Commonwealth, who had

failed in finding payable gold, seemed to be merely loafing about, living on the store-keeper, and waiting until the long-suffering Government of Papua should be driven into conveying them back to Australia at its own cost. They, and another score or two, who had found a little gold, were drunk together as long and as often as Burchell would let them : they hung about other men's camps after dark : they had been accused of shooting natives who were friendly to us, and thereby laying up trouble for the whole camp —they were, in fine, a danger and a nuisance to the field, and every one of the decent, quiet old hands would have been exceedingly glad to see them cleared out.

Neither the Marquis nor myself liked this company, so we kept away from the neighbourhood of the store, and spent the greater part of the morning bathing with my old mate Hubbard in a safe, shallow part of the Kiloki River. At least, the place was safe if you didn't go into it one by one, and if you kept a good look-out for alligators while you were in. That was as much as we wanted. You would not have thought that such a simple matter as a bathe in the Kiloki River

could seriously affect anyone's fortunes. But —as events afterwards turned out—the Sorcerer's Stone was never put into quite so much danger as it was by our lazy hour or two in the water that morning.

What brought us out at last was an incident not at all uncommon in the interior of Papua, but none the less unpleasant—the sudden plunging of a long blackwood spear, liberally barbed, into the sand right among us. We had none of us seen it coming, but there it was, quivering with the impetus of its flight, and showing plainly, by the depth to which it had buried itself, that it had been thrown with force sufficient to drive it right through anyone it might have hit. And as the opposite bank was not at all far away, and as none of us had brought a gun, we thought it best to clear out for the store as rapidly as we could. There was a regular scramble after our clothes, which had all fallen in a heap: but we were dressed before you could say "one, two, three, go!" and away after our arms in about two seconds more.

Of course, nothing showed up when we fired into the bush: but we sent a few bullets

smashing into the close-knit lianas and orchids, just as an expression of opinion. Hubbard wanted to go back and finish our bathe then, and I would not have cared: the Marquis, however, told us we were "ostentatious brigands," and that, for his faith, he had had enough. So we returned to the store.

I don't think I shall ever forget that afternoon. It was one of the awful black days that one experiences at times about the steaming river flats of Papua: the sky was a dark lead pencil sort of colour, and seemed to sit down on our heads like the lid of a hot saucepan. The enormous trees that had escaped the clearing, and stood about at its edges, lifted their endless run of naked trunk, and their weird, sky-pointing branches up into the heights of the sky, with never a motion or a tremor. Their leaves, far up beneath the iron lid of the clouds, were as still as photographs. Indeed, the whole clearing had the unnaturally dead appearance that one notices in a stereoscope: a thing that always seems to me like the ghosts of dead scenes and places.

As for the heat, it was just the next thing

to unendurable, and would have been quite unendurable, if one did not recollect that scores of men had stood it, off and on, for years. So that one reckoned, after all, one could stand it too.

And it was on an afternoon such as this that Burchell gave out his intention of holding an auction of Bobby-the-Clock's effects, according to the custom of the field. The money, of course, would be sent to any surviving relatives Bobby might be found to possess.

The Marquis wanted to go and see it, and I went with him, though I was not particularly anxious to do so. Burchell had arranged to lend me three or four of the carriers belonging to the store, and I wanted to get my packs ready, and prepare for a start tomorrow or the next day, as our condition might permit. I didn't fancy sleeping any longer than I could help in an open shed with the riff-raff of Australia, while the Sorcerer's Stone was on my person—or worse, on the Marquis's. There were several days of utter wilderness between us and the coast, along the worst of tracks, through pathless, unexplored forests, full of natives

who might at any time turn hostile. That sort of thing provided far too many ready-made occasions for accident, in my opinion—should anyone want an accident to happen.

I have said that Papua is not a lawless country on the whole, and it is not. But there are things that affect the value of laws and principles in their neighbourhood, as a mountain of ironstone affects the working of the compasses on ships that pass beneath it. A big diamond is one of these. In the Sorcerer's Stone we had, so to speak, a charge of moral dynamite that was ready at any moment to shatter friendship, honesty, safety, regard for human life, even regard for a man's own precious skin. . . . There was not a bulwark built up through æons of evolution, against the savage passions of mankind, that this lump of crystal in our possession could not send flying in a second.

Which meant, in brief, that if the rabble at present polluting the Kilori goldfield got the faintest inkling of the royal fortune we carried, our lives on that long track through the lonely primeval forests down to the solitary, unsettled coast might not be worth the smallest of the chips that the wheels of

busy Amsterdam one day would send flying from the surface of the stone.

I was thinking about this a good deal while the auction went on. The proceedings themselves did not interest me very much, though I dare say the Marquis found them amusing. Bobby-the-Clock's old clothes, his cooking-pots, his tin box, his blankets were put up and bid for : and most of them brought very little. No gold had been found in his camp : he had died of fever, and was quite alone when he passed out, so that the place had been left unguarded for a day or more before anyone found him. There were those of us who thought that some among the new chums might have told where Bobby's gold had gone : but nothing could be proved.

It seemed as if the auction, all in all, would scarce produce the worth of a couple of pounds to send to Bobby-the-Clock's relations.

Then the celebrated clock itself was put up, and the bidding brightened at once. Most of the old miners wanted it as a souvenir, and some of the new ones seemed determined to get it out of spite—for there was much

bad blood between the two different parties. The bidding went up and up till at last the clock was knocked down to my old mate, Hubbard, for no less than two ounces—which, at the price of the Kilori gold, was worth about seven pounds eight.

"I'll take it and pay for it now," said Hubbard, reaching out for his property. He put it on the counter before him (we were all sitting or standing about the bar, with the doors and windows open for air: the men who could not get places loafing round the wall) and looked at it.

"Poor old Bobby: I've got the last bit of him," he said. "Two ounces, Burchell? I've just about that on me, or a little more. Weigh it for yourself."

He thrust his hand into his trousers pocket and took out a packet.

"What's this?" he said. "This isn't my gold." He pulled the wrapper off, and flung down upon the table—the Sorcerer's Stone.

I felt my heart turn over and do a somersault inside my chest. I don't know what I looked like, but nobody was noticing me, so it did not matter. Everybody was looking at the great crystal, as it lay there on the

table, like a double-ended bit off a glass chandelier. Hubbard stared at it uncomprehendingly, and said, "Where's my gold gone to?" with several strong expressions.

I put my hand in my pocket, and felt a small, heavy parcel. . . . Of course!

It was all clear to me now. I had been carrying the diamond in my trousers pocket, because it was the best place to hide it in a country where one wore so few clothes as one did about the Kilori. Hubbard and I were wearing exactly the same pattern of rough store clothes: we had got them mixed when we dressed together in a hurry down on the river bank, with the spear that the natives had thrown at us sticking in the sand at our elbows to liven us up. And there was the gem that the Marquis and I had been concealing all these weeks, almost at the cost of our lives, lying out on the bar before the eyes of a crowd of sharps and scamps from all the odd corners of Australia!

One thinks quickly in moments of sudden emergency: at least, if one doesn't, one won't continue thinking, or living, long in a country like Papua. I saw that there was nothing for it but bluff to carry us through.

Giving the Marquis a kick under the table to warn him that the affair was best left to me (he had taken the incident with wonderful coolness), I stretched out my hand carelessly, and remarked—

"Why, that's my crystal: where did you get it?"

I would have given all I possessed for a quiet word with Hubbard, whom I knew I could trust, but there was no chance of that, so I had to do as best I could. The thing was so enormous for a diamond, and so glass-like in appearance, here in the dim light of the bar, that I thought it might pass as a mere curio, if only I could keep my nerve.

"I don't know where I got it, but I do know my gold isn't in my pocket," grumbled Hubbard, feeling all over himself.

I handed over the little bag of dust.

"Here it is: I reckon you and I must have got each other's clothes when we were bathing," I said. Hubbard took the gold and opened it.

"Weigh out two ounces: there's near three there," he said. The storekeeper took the bag, and poured out part of its contents into the scales.

"That's a fine crystal," he said, looking curiously at the great diamond as it lay on the rough, hacked counter of the bar. "Where did you get it?"

I did not altogether like the way in which the bloated, evil faces of the new-chum crowd turned towards me as I answered.

"Got it out of a sorcerer's charm-bag in Kata-Kata," was what I said, reaching out for the gem. "It's rather pretty, and they made a great puri-puri (charm) of it down there. Some of the museums down South will give quite a lot for good charms."

A dirty, hairy man in torn moleskins let out a sudden cackling laugh.

"Let's have a look," he said.

I handed it over at once, though my fingers felt as though they were glued to the stone. The day was so black, and the bar so ill-lighted, that I did not think the diamond, uncut as it was, would give out any of those sudden rays that had first attracted the attention of the Marquis and myself. And if you did not catch it when it was shooting green and violet and red, there was really nothing to distinguish it from a common bit of quartz. Unless by chance there happened

to be a gem expert among the crowd—one never knew.

I stole a cautious glance at the Marquis. He looked perfectly unconcerned: he was not even watching the diamond. He had lit a cigarette, and started smoking. His face, a little pinker and a little plumper to-day than yesterday, showed no emotion beyond a slight shade of boredom with the whole proceedings.

Meantime, the hairy man was handling the diamond, weighing, turning, and squinting at it. He abandoned it in a minute or two, at the request of another tough-looking customer at the other end of the bar, who called out, "Throw it over!" and the hairy man threw. After that, it was chucked about from hand to hand like a cricket-ball among the men, most of whom were half or more than half drunk by this time—pausing occasionally in its wild flight, as one or another kept it to take another look. . . . I bit a piece of the inner side of my lip right through, but I said nothing, and held out not so much as a finger to check the stone's career.

"Say! did this come from the Aikora by

any chance ? " suddenly yelled a grey, dilapidated creature with red eyes and ragged beard, who was sitting on a case of goods, being too far intoxicated to stand. " There's blue clay on the Ai—Aik—kora."

" I tell you," I said wearily, " I got it in Kata-Kata—black soil swamp country, if you want to know. What's that got to do with it ? "

The red-eyed man essayed to answer, but a wave of intoxication mounted to his brain, and he replied in words that were intelligible to himself alone. He would not let go the stone, however. The rest of the men seemed to have lost interest in it by this time, and the dusk, which was now darkening down in the stifling gloom of the bar, seemed to promise me a chance of slipping quietly away.

But the red-eyed man held on to the stone. His words remained unintelligible : he managed, however, to rise from his seat and stagger round to the back of the bar, helping himself to more liquor, and smashing about with his hands among the glasses for a considerable time. By the coolness with which Burchell received these proceedings I

judged the red-eyed man was better able to pay for his fun than appearances might suggest.

It was not long before the final stage arrived. He staggered against the wall, muttered, and sank in a heap on the floor, the Sorcerer's Stone dropping from his pulpy hand as he fell. The storekeeper, with a bored expression of face, came forward to carry him out into the air. I volunteered to help, and took care to slip the stone in my pocket again, as I lifted the drunkard's limply hanging knees. We took him on the verandah and dropped him on the earthen floor, his head on a sack.

"Drinking himself into the jumps, he is," observed the wooden-faced Burchell. "Now to-morrow like as not he won't remember a mortal thing about this afternoon. He'll forget where he's put his gold some of these days: he's drunk his mind half away. Have a whisky with me?"

"Not after that," I said, and walked away.

The Marquis escaped and followed me in a minute or two. In the dusk of the goods shed, where the beds were, he fell upon my neck—and it was no joke to have a man of

his size making a locket of himself about your jugular vein—and cried—

"Splendid! magnificent! I felicitate you, my friend! You have saved us both two. You have the ingenious soul, the spiritual mind—you are what they call a bully-boy! Look, if that heap of misfortunes had found out, we would have had a sudden death hanging on the end of every minute till we get back!"

"Not so bad as that, perhaps," I said. "Still, we're well out of it. I wasn't afraid of the old New Guinea lot: in the first place, they mostly wouldn't know a double-brilliant-cut Cullinan if they found it in their soup—they're gold diggers, and no more—and in the second place, they wouldn't have turned a dog on us, at least none of them that I know. But this 'rush' crowd gets me altogether: it's the worst lot we've ever had in New Guinea. Do you think you could travel to-morrow?"

"I don't know if I can, but assuredly I will," said the Marquis cheerfully. And so it was settled.

The next morning my companion woke me up very early, complaining of headache. He was, as I mentioned, extremely temper-

ate, and the small amount of bad whisky he had taken for politeness's sake while looking on at the auction the day before had been quite enough to upset him. I told him that he had better go across to the bar and get himself some soda-water: Burchell would not be up, but he could get the keys and help himself. Then I turned over for another sleep.

I had hardly dozed off when the Marquis came back, looking strangely pale in the yellow sunrise light.

"Flint, get up!" he said. "Come out to me."

He certainly looked unlike himself: I wondered if he were going to be ill. Slipping on some clothes, I followed him out into the clearing, where the black, oozy soil sank down under our feet after the night's fierce rain, and the pools were sending out unwholesome steam in the growing warmth of day.

"What's to pay now?" I said.

The Marquis looked round, and then replied in a curious half-whisper—

"Flint, God of my Gods, he has engraved all the glass!"

"Who has engraved what glass? Are you crazy?" I asked. "Did you get the soda-water? This place is fairly soaking in whisky: seems it's you now."

"You mistake yourself—I am not drunk. It is that red-eye man I talk of. Last night, when he walk about behind the bar with that stone, he has cut all the glass with it."

"Burchell says he never remembers anything next day," I said, not seeing the full force of what had happened.

"That may be, but when Burchell come into the bar by a little, he shall see it, and all the men who shall drink out of those glasses, they shall see, and, my word, the jig is up!"

"You're right, Marky, it will be," I said seriously. "Seems to me the best thing we can do is to clear off right away."

"No, that's a cabbage-head thing to do, my Flint. We are too near, if some of them begins to think. No, it is for you, or for me, to get very much drunk very quick and smash all that glass in one blow!"

"Let's go and have a look," I said.

It was only too true. The whisky, like Clara Vere de Vere, must have "put strange

memories in the head " of the red-eyed man, whom I now suspected to have had more experience of stones than the rest. He had scratched and cut two or three bottles and a number of glasses in a way that could not possibly have passed unnoticed, and that could not, either, have been mistaken for anything but the work of a diamond. There are some things that will scratch glass fairly well, but nothing on earth that will cut into it clear and deep and clean save the king of precious stones.

We stood there in the half-light of the ugly slab-built room, that was all stale with dregs of drink, and littered with rubbish, straw, and paper—looking at one another.

" There isn't much time to waste," I said. " Which of us is going to do it ? "

" My friend, it is I who make this sacrifice," said the Marquis solemnly. " I haven't no doubt that you could get intoxicated if I asked you in the name of friendship."

" Oh, yes, I think I could manage that much," I said. " Though I'm not a drinking man, Marky, and never have been."

" But I do not ask. Because, you see, Flint, you are brave, but you are not artist.

Now me, I am both the two. I can act—name of a little good man, but I can act! You have seen me, in the dance—if I had not been noble, I had been the most celebrate actor in Europe."

"That's right: I'll allow you can act," I said.

"And see, if you were to do this thing, you would not do it as an artist: you would quite simply get drunk, and perhaps, in the strong man's rage, you would kill someone, but you should not keep the head cool to destroy this evidence here. So I am drunk. In two minute, I sacrifice my character. You shall see."

I did see.

I do not think, while I still hold on to life, I shall ever forget the scene that took place in the bar of the Kilori goldfield, there, in the early sunrise, with the Papuan carriers coming in singing to their morning's work, and the giant gaura pigeons, in the bush outside, beginning to toll their golden bells. It was a quiet spot enough at six o'clock: at five minutes past it was pandemonium. The Marquis went outside to find a miner's pick, came back with it, looked about him,

spat deliberately on his hands "to envulgarise himself," as he explained, seized the pick, uttered a madman's yell, and went Berserk on the spot.

It was exactly like poking a stick into an ants' nest. You find a quiet little hill of baked clay, with nothing stirring round about: you smash into it with your boot-heel, or a bit of wattle, and instantly the earth is covered in every direction with a scrambling, scurrying—doubtless, if one could hear them, a screaming—crowd, all bent on knowing what has caused the disturbance.

That was what occurred at the Kilori goldfield store on that peaceful, beautiful south-east season morning, with the birds singing, and the river gently flowing just outside, and the sun coming up above the trees to look down on another day. The storekeeper jumped out of his bed, and ran into the bar, pyjama-clad: the cooky-boys scuttled in from the kitchen, and peered round the corner of the doorway, wonder-eyed: the miners and the new chums and the hangers-on of the camp all came running as fast as they could, some with blankets

still hanging round their necks, to see what was going on. They were used to rows in the neighbourhood of the store, but not to the sort of row that the Marquis kicked up—doing it, as he afterwards explained to me, "in artist."

If I had not known the truth, I should have thought him not only intoxicated, but mad. His gigantic figure, clad in pink and green pyjamas, seemed to fill the store: he had at least a dozen arms and legs, and every one of them smashed everything it touched. The canvas chairs were trampled as though by an elephant. The rickety bar, built up of whisky cases, went like a match-box. He leaped the remnants, and swung his pick along the shelf where the glasses stood. Not one of them survived. He seized a bottle of whisky in each hand, and slung the two half across the clearing.

"Oh, my Lord!—Oh, my Lord!" the storekeeper kept saying. "Who's to pay for this?"

"Stop him!" yelled the miners, as they saw the whisky begin to go. The Marquis shot me a glance as he swung his pick above a cask of beer, and I will swear there was a

wink in it. By this time all the incriminating glass was gone.

The murder of a man, I think, would have been looked upon more calmly than the murder of a cask of beer up here on the Kilori goldfield, a long week from the coast. But this last exploit was never carried through. With one accord the miners flung themselves upon the handle of the pick and dragged it down. They dragged the Marquis down next by sheer force of numbers, and sat upon him. One even counselled them to " sit upon his head ! " and flung his own body across the Marquis's fat cheek, as if he were a kicking horse.

He did not resist. I caught another lightning wink from underneath the surging pile, and I did my best to get the indignant miners off.

" He'll be all right now if you let him alone," I declared. " I've often known him like this, and when it's over, it's over. After all, he's only done for a couple of quarts of whisky and a few tumblers."

" Where's what he's drunk to make him like this ? " yelled the insulted storekeeper. " He's got to pay for all he took, and all he

done. Marquis! A nice sort of marquis he is, I don't think!"

"He took a bottle to his room with him last night," I said hastily. "It doesn't take much to make him like this: he has no head. You'll be paid all right, Burchell: he's got any amount of money."

"Let him up, boys," ordered the storekeeper. The diggers got off, reluctantly, and left the Marquis on the floor, breathing hard, and looking wild.

"Come and lie down somewhere," I said. "We've got to make a start to-day, and you won't be fit. Come on." I led him off, reeling and staggering realistically, and falling on my neck in a mimic drunken frenzy of affection. He kept it up till we reached the sleeping shed—empty now—and then drew himself erect and became more dignified and Marquisatorial than I should have thought any man could be, in bare feet and pink pyjamas, with his hair all over his face.

"I have sacrificed myself," he said. "My character, she is gone. But procrastination is the steed that is stolen: I have act at once, and we are saved."

"You stop here, and don't get well too quick, in case anyone comes back," I said. "I'm off to get our packs ready, and the carriers under way. The sooner we get out of this the better, Marky. I want the society of a few nice restful cannibals to quiet down my nerves."

CONCERNING A CASSOWARY AND A HYMN-BOOK

VII

CONCERNING A CASSOWARY AND A HYMN-BOOK

"IT'S a wise child that knows 'tis folly to be wise," said the Marquis.

He was sitting in the supper-room, enjoying trifle, floating-island, tipsy-cake, and the other items of a somewhat sticky and gassy supper. His partner, Mrs. Vandaleur, a very fascinating little widow in a demure black dress, and the most scarlet of scarlet silk stockings, had just been carried off by the fluffy and indignant young Government officer to whom she rightly owed the supper dances. The Marquis, who had danced without intermission from the first striking-up of the band (one piano, out of tune : one violin, much affected by the climate, and given to emitting rat-like squeaks) until the eighteenth item in the programme, was now resting and refreshing. I, who had given up dancing many years ago, and who wasn't

likely to begin again at a Port Moresby "shivoo," was watching—if the truth must be told, watching the Marquis.

I was already getting uneasy about him, though we had only returned to the comparative civilisation of Port Moresby the week before. We had a good ten days to wait for the next steamer to Sydney, and Port Moresby has nearly three hundred inhabitants, being a good deal the largest settlement in Papua. What were the chances of someone of the three hundred finding out in the course of those ten days that we possessed the second biggest diamond in the world, if the Marquis went on as he was doing now? It was his turn to wear the stone, and nothing would induce him to give it up to me for the night, even though it was much harder for him—being fat—to hide it about his person, than for me. There it was, perfectly visible to me, at all events, sticking out like a small tumour under the front of his shirt: and unless I was much more stupid than I supposed myself to be, it had already attracted some attention from little Mrs. Vandaleur.

Mrs. Vandaleur—Daisie Vandaleur, as most people called her: she signed herself "Daisie," in her numerous letters—was always referred to as "little": she was, as a matter of fact, about the average height of womenkind. But she had a small head, and very small hands and feet, and a way of looking little and forlorn. And she was fond of calling herself a "poor little widow." I needn't go on describing "Daisie"—everyone who has reached the age of thirty has met her, and knows her by heart. She had a puggy sort of little dog, and a catty sort of companion, and she was a little pious, and more than a little musical, and knew how to put on her clothes. (I said as much to a lady at the dance, and she replied that, in that case, it was a pity Mrs. Vandaleur didn't use her knowledge more liberally: also, that she at all events knew how to put on her hair. Which gives you the attitude of feminine New Guinea towards "Daisie," in a word.)

The little widow, of course, had set her cap at the Marquis from the moment of our return. That did not trouble me, or the Marquis either. "Many dear women, they

have done so, and I love them for it," he explained to me. "I find it altogether natural." Nor did it trouble me much from any ordinary point of view, that she should have sprained her ankle just a trifle—when they were coming back from a stroll on the grass outside the hall—because Daisie was given to spraining her ankle at appropriate times. But when the Marquis lifted her up the steps of the verandah, and carried her to a long chair to rest her foot for the next dance—why, then I saw Mrs. Daisie's little hand, as it slipped down from the Marquis's huge shoulder, pause for a moment at the odd lump under his shirt, and feel it with the dexterity of a pickpocket. The Marquis did not notice : he was gazing into her eyes, which were blue eyes, and went prettily with her Titian-red hair. I began to wonder, however. And when the supper-dances came, and I saw Mrs. Vandaleur walking in with the Marquis, as lightly as he walked himself, I concluded that it was time to offer him a hint. Which I did.

He answered with the mangled proverb I have already quoted, and filled himself another glass of ginger-ale, with the royster-

ing air of a gallant in a Christmas Number supplement. It really seemed to be going to his head. I had had several whiskies myself by this time: but my head is perhaps of a different quality.

It was the south-east season at its worst: in Port Moresby that means that you live in the midst of a roaring gale, day and night, for months. Up here on the hill where the dance-room was built, the verandah trembled like the hurricane deck of an Atlantic liner: the flags in the ballroom tore at their moorings on the walls: down the long tunnel of the supper-room the wind went yelling like a lost soul on its way to hell. The table-cloth flapped and slatted: the crackers flew about. Mrs. Daisie, dancing beyond the doorway with the fluffy boy, clutched at her woeful black skirts, and twinkled the scarlet stockings that so piquantly contradicted them. I could see she was keeping an eye on me. For some reason or other, Mrs. Daisie did not like me—much.

"Look, Marky," I said (the howling of the south-easter isolated us from the other guests, in our corner, as much as if we had

been in a room by ourselves), "I want you to think for a moment what it means, if people get on to the fact that we have a diamond worth the whole island of New Guinea in our possession. From that moment, any peace we have—and Lord knows we haven't had much—ceases. In a small place like this, one is safe enough from robbery; but once on a liner, or in Sydney, we'd want a corps of detectives to guard the stone—if we can't keep it dark. And of course, it doesn't matter where or how the news gets out—it'll run all over the world in a week, just the same."

"All over the world!" said the Marquis thoughtfully. "You have reason. We shall be famous, me and you. Flint, I love to be famous. It is the glory of our adventures that has already made that little flower of the tropic, Dai-see Vandaleur, love me as the poor little one loves. It is true, she also thinks me beautiful. But handsome is who tells no tales!"

"Will you let me keep the stone till the steamer comes in?" I asked, dropping the vexed subject. When a man of forty-odd begins to tell you about the women who

admire his beauty, you had better get off that line of rails as quick as you can.

"On my conscience, and my honour as a peer of the ancient regiment of France, I will—NOT," said the Marquis. "I have the heart of a child, as the little Dai-see tells me, but a child I am not. To-morrow you will guard our property: the day after, I, and so on to the end. To the end, my friend." He drank another bottle of ginger-ale, in two gulps, and waved his empty tumbler in the air. "And even if the end shall be Death, then, my friend, a dead man is out of the wood. I love your English axes."

"Saws, I suppose you mean," I said.

"I knew it had to do with tools: it is altogether the same. Now I will show this little beautiful some species of dancing that will make her ready to die of love, there on my feet."

I really think the amount of ginger-ale he had drunk must have gone to his head a little: or else it had so inflated him, mentally and physically, that he was a trifle above himself. At any rate, he volunteered to give the company an exhibition of solo

dancing: and the offer being promptly accepted, started to do—of all things—Queen Elizabeth dancing before the Scots ambassador, Melville.

"It is to please your English sentiment, and at the same time, to warm the heart of the little Dais-ee, by laughter," he explained to me. "This is comic: a frolic idea."

What a scene it was! The dancers, in their odd mixture of day and evening dress, gathered round the walls under the slatting, tearing flags: the wild south-easter yelling along the verandah so that the music, despairingly pitted against it, sounded starved and thin: in the midst of the cleared space, the Marquis, beneath a row of guttering hurricane lamps, dancing Queen Elizabeth. . . . He had a scarlet tablecloth about his waist, and a fan in his hand: he had rouged his cheeks with a scrap of red cracker paper dipped in water: he had borrowed a pair of high-heeled shoes (big man though he was, his foot was amazingly small), and, in spite of his bulk, and his pink, fat face, and his twinkling trouser-legs showing below the drapery, he was the ancient coquette of England to the life.

You could even see the sour face of Melville looking on, as the dancer stepped and pirouetted "high and disposedly," watching eagerly for the ambassador's approval. . . . At the end, he laughed a high-pitched, cackling, old woman's laugh: struck the imaginary Melville coquettishly on the shoulder with his fan, dropped the tablecloth, and became instantly a dignified nobleman of the ancient peerage of France.

Mrs. Vandaleur ran forward impulsively as he finished, and begged for more. The room applauded. The Marquis danced again.

"Let a Papuan with a drum be brought," he ordered. A boy was fetched from the grass slope outside the hall, where a number of natives had been looking on. He beat his iguana-skin drum, as if for a native dance, with the throbbing, intoxicating beat of the New Guinea drummer. The Marquis snatched a native feather crown off the wall, where it had been hung as an ornament, put it on his head, and danced "The Love Dance of the Sorcerer," looking at Mrs. Vandaleur all the time.

I must say he had used his Papuan

experiences well. The dance was New Guinea, yet something more. It had sorcery in it, mystery, magic, and sinister, wicked charm. You felt the sorcerer loved the lady, and meant to win her: but you were not quite sure he did not mean to roast her on the fire, and pick her pretty bones, by and by. . . . The lookers-on applauded violently, and Mrs. Daisie, whether truthfully or not, declared herself faint when he had done, and had to be supported to a chair.

"Oh, you terrible man—you dangerous sorcerer!" I heard her murmur as he gave her his arm. "How many trusting little women's hearts have you charmed away? Do you know the power you have? I think you must be very cruel."

"No, for I make my spelling gently: 'fair and softly is always to be blest,'" he answered, through the yelling of the wind. Mrs. Daisie put her hand anxiously among her curls, to see, I think, if nothing was breaking away from its moorings, and, being assured of this, fainted a little more, in the corner to which the Marquis had conducted her. Her head grazed his shirt-front, as she sank back in her chair.

"Ah! you have hurt my little face! Is it your heart that feels so hard and sharp?" she asked. The Marquis, instead of answering, lifted her on to her feet again as lightly as if she had been a baby, and swung her back into the dancing-room, where now the music was beginning again.

"What happened to the wife of Bluebeard, little wicked?" he said, as they dropped into the waltz.

I do not know that I have the best temper in the world. Some of my friends say I have the worst, when you rouse it: but that is an exaggeration. Anyhow, I could not stay in the ballroom, and see our fortune swinging over a gulf of disaster, on the frail thread of the Marquis's amorous folly, any longer. I went out, to smoke, and to swear.

. . . . . .

The next day it was my turn to wear the Sorcerer's Stone, and I was ready enough to claim it. We had cased it in a piece of silk, and sewn that up again in a piece of chamois leather, safely attached to a strong cord. No one wears waistcoats in Port Moresby, but

I took care to select a shirt some sizes too wide for me, when I wore the stone, and, with a coat on, the loose folds concealed it effectively.

I was feeling a little easier about the Marquis, since I had succeeded in extracting from him a solemn promise that he would not, on any account or for any reason, betray to any person the secret of the diamond. At the same time, I managed to persuade him into altering his clothing a little, so that the stone could not be noticed, unless anyone went actually feeling about after it. More than this I could not do.

There was very little in the capital of Papua to occupy the mind of any reasonable person. When you have been out to see the native village, gone for a walk to Koki, where the native servants employed in the town hold nightly dances, and taken a boat across to one or two of the islands, you have about exhausted the interests of the place. It is barren and rather ugly: the white people are more civilised, and therefore less interesting, than those of Samarai: the natives speak English, wear trade clothing, and cheat the tourist over curios. To any-

one recently returned, like the Marquis and myself, from the mysteries, horrors, and adventures of the unknown interior, nothing could be more flat and tiresome than the silly little capital town.

All the more was I uncomfortable over my companion's evident fascination by Mrs. Vandaleur, whom I frankly took for an adventuress. Her very name was against her: it savoured too much of stage posters to be natural. She was clever enough, I could see, to keep free of scandals: the dead or missing Vandaleur had not divorced her: cards were religiously left at her door by the ladies of the capital, who seemed to find a weird delight in playing at a strange imitation of the strange game called Society, here away in the wilderness of New Guinea.

("Like your Israelites of the Bible," said the Marquis, who always spoke of the Old Testament as if it were the exclusive property of the English race—"these dear ladies make brick in the desert without no straw: it is for that reason, I observe, that their bricks do not hold together the one with the other." And, indeed, the inhabit-

ants of Port Moresby love each other scarcely better than do those of Samarai.)

But, though Daisie Vandaleur was quite respectable, according to the canons of the card-tray, and though, in any case, there was no risk of the Marquis's historic coronet descending upon her well-dressed head, I thought her none the less dangerous : perhaps rather the more.

" That dear little one, she desires quite simply to marry herself with me. I find that very touching, though I cannot accord her her desire," he said sentimentally. " Flint, I can't tell you how much pity I have for all those beautiful women who so desire to marry with me. Of course, the day shall come at last when one of those lovely ones shall—what do you call it ?—yank me in. But the rest, my heart is bleeding for those ! "

He took out his embroidered silk handkerchief, and looked lovingly at the coronet. I knew he was minded to tell me the history of the lady who had worked it for him, so I got away before he had made a start. That was where I made my mistake. He went right off to Mrs. Vandaleur's, and told her.

They invited him to join the tennis-club after this. I never had time or inclination myself to learn how to throw balls at a man who doesn't want them, and work hard trying to get them back when I don't want them myself—so I didn't see very much of the Marquis at this period, although, for want of room, we were sharing our quarters at the hotel. After all, I had not been brought up at the Court of France; I did not know half the Kings of Europe; and I did not possess even a shanty in New Guinea, let alone a castle on the Loire. These things had not seemed to matter, when we were away in the wilds together, getting chased by cannibals, or being shipwrecked, or having snakes set on us by sorcerers—going ragged and hungry sometimes, and at all times not being quite as sure as we could have wished that we were ever going to get safely back again. But here, in the little tin-pot capital, the kings and castles and things began to crop up again. And—as they say in sentimental novels—the Marquis and I drifted apart.

The days passed very slowly, before the steamer's call. In the afternoons, when the

south-east was howling harder than ever, and almost laying flat the little eucalyptus trees that stand up all over the many hills on which Port Moresby stands, I used to climb the heights above the town, and wander idly about, holding on my hat, and thinking what I'd do with my share of the price of the diamond—if we ever got it safe away to civilisation. And down below on the flat, the Marquis would be playing tennis with Mrs. Vandaleur, or squiring her about on the beach.

I never felt inclined to watch him, on the days when it was my turn to guard the Sorcerer's Stone. But on his days, I don't mind admitting that I shadowed him like a detective. In a town that is all small hills, with every house overlooking all the others, there is not much difficulty about that. And I grew more and more uneasy, as the time went on, to see the increasing number of hours he spent with Daisie. Every second evening, when he handed over the chamois-leather case, in the privacy of our own room, and said, " All right, my Flint ! " I felt as though another barrier between our fortune and its realisation had been

painfully passed over: another cast of the dice fallen in our favour. For I knew now that Mrs. Vandaleur had her suspicions: and I trusted her—well, not half so far as I could have thrown her supple, eel-like little body.

Sometimes, from my eyrie among the rocks above, I saw amusing scenes on the tennis-ground and the flat. The most amusing was on the day when Daisie persuaded the Marquis to dance on the tennis-court with a cassowary, a pet of someone of the residents, that used to hang about the grounds, begging humbly for cake, and if refused, instantly turned vicious and jumped up into the air to kick with both feet at the person who had repulsed it. The players used to tease the creature a good deal, in order to see it fly into a rage: it was a young bird, and not half-grown, but it was very active, and went into the most amusing frenzies of stamping, whistling rage. Cassowaries, as most people know, are extremely fond of dancing: and Mrs. Vandaleur incited the Marquis, first, to dance with the bird, and afterwards to give an imitation of its style. I do not think I ever saw anything funnier

than the tall, thin bird, and the tall, fat Marquis, setting to partners on the green grass court, the cassowary taking its part quite seriously, and sidling, chasséeing, springing, like a girl in a theatre, the man craning his neck in imitation, stepping stiff-legged, as it stepped, and using his arms exactly as it used its wings. Afterwards, the Marquis improvised a "Dance of the Cassowary," and it was one of the very best things I had ever seen him do. I have heard, since then, that it has met with much approval in his castle on the Loire.

It was my day for the Sorcerer's Stone, so I looked on with an easy mind. After all, it seemed to me, I had been making too much fuss. The Marquis was not a fool, and even if the little widow succeeded in worming out of him the secret of the diamond, it was only what would probably happen sooner or later, somewhere. We had been through so many risks with the Sorcerer's Stone, that I had nearly come to believe there was something supernatural about it, for it always seemed to work out right in the end.

Next day I was suffering from a touch of

fever, as most New Guinea residents do at times, and I did not go out at all, but stayed in my room, and took quinine till the walls spun round me. The attack passed off towards evening, and I was lying on my bed, feeling weak, but better, when the Marquis came in.

"Had a pleasant day?" I asked. He did not answer, but went over to the washstand, and began washing his hands, with his back to me. I was feeling almost too tired to talk, so I lay silent for a while, watching the eastern skyline, through our little square window, turn pink with the reflected glow of the sunset in the unseen west, and the green-grey eucalyptus trees streaming before the ceaseless thrash of the "trade" that blew up strong and stronger, as the night came on.

. . . It occurred to me that the Marquis was a very long time washing his hands. The room was getting darker: the people of the hotel were clashing plates and clinking glasses down below. It was nearly dinner-time. . . . What could be the matter with my companion?

"Say, Mark!" I called out from my bed,

" have you been murdering anyone, like Lady Macbeth, and are you trying to wash the ' damned spot ' away, or what ? "

The Marquis turned round so suddenly that he flung the tin basin rattling on the floor, and the water rushed in a deluge across the room. He did not take the slightest notice of it. He came up to the bed, and even in the twilight I could see that his face was white.

I knew what had happened before he spoke.

" Flint," he said, beating his pink, soapy hands up and down in the air, " I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. My God, what have I done ! "

He sat down on the floor (we had no chair) right in the middle of the deluge of water, and began to cry.

" I have betrayed and ruined you, my friend," he said. " I would like to die, here where I am : what is the use that I should live ? I say that I cannot tell you what I have done." He wept again.

" Oh, get out of that water, and sit on the bed," I said. " You don't need to tell me : all I want to know is, how it happened, and

what Mrs. Vandaleur has to do with it." I was feeling pretty badly about the affair—for I saw in a moment that he had lost the diamond—but there is never any use, to my mind, in making a fuss.

The Marquis jumped up, and tore open his shirt, with the air of a man who was opening his very heart for your inspection. Round his neck was hanging a string, and on the string was a small silk bag—empty.

"Not one confoundable thing has that angel had to do with it," he said. "It is altogether me. I took it out of the chamois case this morning, because when I play tennis, that chamois sticks, and comes to go out of the front of my shirt. But the silk, it slips, and does not come out. So I take away the chamois, and I play tennis all the afternoon. And in the end, when it is time to go, and they have all gone, all but Mrs. Dai-see and me, I feel my hand into my shirt, and there is nothing there! I tear out the bag, and it is splitted——"

"Didn't you know that no silk will stand in the tropics? It was only a protection for the stone. You might as well trust

tissue-paper as silk, in New Guinea," I said wearily.

"I did not know, I swear. Well, when I see it is gone, I tell Dai-see that I have lost a something I have the greatest value for, a gem—I do not say a diamond. And she call many native boys. And they look, look, look, till it get dark. And I will swear, if it were that I was dying, we look every inch. But there is no stone."

"I reckon Mrs. Daisie could tell you——" I began.

"Halt!" cried the Marquis. "Dai-see is as innocent as the lamb unborn. When we see the stone is lost, she will not look herself. She sit on the seat, and watch. She weep for me, that little one, she is most blooming sorry. But she will not be suspect: she won't touch that searching herself. She cannot understand, and I cannot understand. It was all razed clean, that ground: there was no gulfs anywhere, and the weeds was not. It should have been finding all right. But, my God, it is not!"

He seemed so exceedingly distressed, that I could not find it in my heart to say what

I thought of him and his carelessness, and of Mrs. Vandaleur—whom I could not believe altogether innocent—and of the whole wretched affair altogether. After all, Marquis or no Marquis, the man was my "mate," and we had been through a lot together, and a nicer fighter than he was, when one got into a tight place, I never wished to find. And neither he nor I was worse off than either had been a month or two ago: we had lost nothing—except a dream. It was a splendid dream, no doubt, and one that I at least was never likely to have a chance of dreaming again. But I thought I could do without it, on the whole: and if I could, who hadn't done the mischief, so, I reckoned, could he.

I said something to this effect, and the Marquis wiped away his tears. It was with a red silk handkerchief this time, and the embroidery of the coronet, as he told me, had a story attached to it that was written in his heart's blood.

"Has Mrs. Daisie given you a handkerchief yet?" I asked.

"No," he said quite gravely, "she has but given me a hymn-book."

"A hymn-book!" I yelled, choking with laughter. "What in the name of everything inappropriate should Mrs. Vandaleur give you hymn-books for?"

"She is very devoted," said the Marquis reprovingly. "She thinks that she will make a Lutheran of me. Of course, there isn't any dashed chance that such a consummation could arrive, but it makes the little one happy. Me also. As for the hymns, she sings them to me: I hear her sing them when I come up the road past her little bird-nest of a house."

"What does she sing?" I asked.

"Something that is in the hymn-book, and that the great Clara Tun—no, Butt—Clara Butt sings also: it is altogether touching. 'Abide with me.'"

"Does she?" said I, sitting up. "I call it irreligious and bad manners both, if she does. Every man to his taste. Are you going to ask her to help us to look for the diamond to-morrow?"

"I won't do nothing you don't wish," said the Marquis, with sudden meekness. "I cannot forget that I have ruined you."

"No fear," I told him. "Are you going

down to dinner, or aren't you? Tell them to send me up a bit: I'm getting better. I rather think you and I are going to have a busy day to-morrow, Marky."

. . . . . .

We had. I got up a bit before daylight, and had a dozen natives helping me to search the tennis-ground, before the sun was well up. We hunted for a good hour, and I came to the conclusion that, if the diamond had ever been on the tennis-court, it certainly was not there now. I came back and reported the result of my labours to the Marquis. He was sitting in our room, and looked very gorgeous in a marvellous pink silk kimono embroidered with green and gold dragons: but his hair had not been brushed up into its usual fierce bristles; his moustache was as limp as a walrus's, and his general aspect suggested a pink cockatoo that had been out in the rain.

"Don't lose heart," I told him. "The stone is somewhere. It's been picked up, you take my word for it. It must be in Port Moresby, and you can leave me to find out where."

It was in my mind, and I could not get it out, that if I wanted to know where the Sorcerer's Stone had gone to, I had better keep as much in Mrs. Vandaleur's company as possible. So, without giving vent to any suspicions I had or guessed at, I allowed the Marquis to think that I had got the better of my prejudices against the little widow. I even accompanied him to tea with her, when he went there to call, a day or two after the loss of the stone.

It did not strike me that Daisie was overjoyed to see me, but she greeted me prettily, and made tea for both of us. I don't know whether it was by accident or design, that she made mine cold and weak, and left out the sugar: if so, she did a foolish thing, for it set me wondering just why the little lady disliked me as much as she did. In spite of the Marquis's accusation, I am not, and never have been, unhappy in women's society: nor have I had occasion to observe that they are unhappy in mine—to take a leaf out of my companion's books.

But Daisie didn't want me, didn't like me, was more or less afraid of me.

. . . Why?

I watched her, sitting on the sheltered verandah, with the south-easter roaring ceaselessly outside, slamming at the blinds, and lifting the long mats nailed on the floor. It was a wild day: a day to make anyone restless. Most Port Moresby folk find the south-east season trying to the nerves, by reason of the unending uproar of the persistent "trade," and I judged that the wind —or something—was affecting Mrs. Vandaleur's nerves. She dropped a cup. She snapped at the boy who was bringing the tray. She started when one spoke to her suddenly—as I confess I did. Her colour did not pale, but there may have been reasons for that. She looked pretty enough, with her floating black draperies, and her wicked little scarlet shoes, and her daintily dressed red-brown hair, to have turned almost any man's head, and I was not surprised to see the Marquis more devoted than ever. But as for me, I mistrusted her from the crown of her expensive curls to the sole of her little red shoe. I drank my ill-tasting tea in silence, listened to the roar of the wind, and watched the lady and her lover. And I thought.

She could not have picked up the stone on the court—by what the Marquis said, it was clear she had not known of the loss until he told her. It seemed that she had questioned him shrewdly then concerning what it was that he had lost, and had managed to extract from him a pretty accurate description of the gem. He had not actually said it was a diamond, but—from what he told me—he must have allowed her to guess that it was.

She knew, then, that he had had a diamond of remarkable size: that he had lost it in a small, easily searched area. She had not picked it up, and she had been careful—too careful, I thought—to avoid all possible suspicion of having done so.

Did she know where it was?

These were the thoughts that ran through my mind, while the Marquis flirted with the little lady, leaving me to talk to the uninteresting elderly companion in the background.

I think he began to feel sorry, before very long, that he had asked me to accompany him to Daisie's: for the little lady seemed in a fascinating mood, and looked

as though she would not have been sorry to have the drawing-room and the piano left to herself and her friend. Doubtless, even the Marquis's self-possession shrank from picking out sentimental-sounding bits of hymns, and reading or singing them in her company, before a couple of more or less unsympathetic observers. Mrs. Daisie gave me a look or two that were certainly meant to be taken as hints, but I was astonishingly stupid that afternoon, and could not understand her. Even when the Marquis proposed going out to the little back garden to look at Mrs. Vandaleur's plants, I was so stupid that I couldn't see they did not want me, and I got up to go too, protesting that there was nothing in the world interested me so much as the selection and care of roses in the tropics.

"I never knew you were an amateur of the garden," observed the Marquis somewhat ruefully. "You are then interested in culture? Don't put out yourself to please us, my friend, if you would rather love to stay in the house."

"It doesn't put me out worth twopence," I assured him. We went out through the

sun and the wind, to the back of the house, a rather gloomy party of four, all trying more or less to be cheerful. I fancy I succeeded the best. Mrs. Daisie, making great play with the care of her black draperies in the storm, yet found time to glance at me, I thought, unpleasantly, and the Marquis was pulling his moustache. But I was determinedly stupid.

The two got away in a corner of the garden before long, shamelessly deserting myself and the companion, and I could see that Mrs. Daisie was talking religion again: a thing that disgusted me, and inclined me to have no mercy on her, if ever she should need it at my hands. I can't say I am particularly religious myself, but any decent man hates to see piety used as a cloak. They had got out the hymn-book she had given him—a tiny, fancy little white leather thing, the size of a match-box—and were looking up something or other in it, their heads very close together. . . .

"Would you like to see the cassowary?" asked the companion suddenly. I had almost forgotten her existence: she was one of those grey, dusty women of no particular

age, whom, somehow or other, one always does overlook.

"What cassowary?" I asked.

"Ours. It's such a funny thing. It dances, and fights, and does lots of queer tricks of its own. We have it shut up in the fowl-house."

"What for?" I asked, yawning. The companion certainly did bore me.

"Because Mrs. Vandaleur says it's sick. She bought it the other day: the people who owned it wanted quite a lot for it."

The companion was opening the door of the fowl-house as she spoke. Mrs. Vandaleur, hearing the creak of the lock, turned round, and, if I did not mistake, her look was very black. It cleared at once, and a sunny smile overspread her face.

"So you are looking at my new pet," she said. "Poor thing, I think it is sick; but it is very amusing when it is well."

"Oh, this is my partner of the dance!" said the Marquis, as the great bird came solemnly out, turning its big brown eyes suspiciously about and about. He held out his hand to it, bowed, and began to dance towards it, flapping his coat-tails in imita-

tion of wings, and singing, to an absurd tune, the well-known nonsense rhyme :

> "I wish I was a cassowary
> On the plains of Timbuctoo,
> For then I'd eat a missionary,
> Arms, legs, and hymn-book too."

"Beautiful missionary!" he said, pausing in his dance, "do you think the savage animal would eat you?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Vandaleur pettishly. "I can't stand this wind: it makes Daisie's little foots too cold. Let's go in."

"If it will not eat the lovely missionary, will it eat the lovely hymn-book too?" asked the Marquis, teasing the bird with the little book he held in his hand. The answer came suddenly, and in a way that he hardly expected. I do not think the Marquis had ever heard that the cassowaries are much the same as ostriches in their appetite for strange and seemingly inappropriate food. If he had not, he was enlightened now. The bird stretched out its neck with the darting pounce of a snake, snatched at the gaudy little book, gulped, swallowed, and . . .

"By Gum!" cried the Marquis, "she has eat up the hymn-book too!"

"Daisie's little foots are so cold," complained Mrs. Vandaleur, shivering in the wind. "Daisie wants to go to her little own home again."

It seemed to me that she was anxious to pass over the incident without remark, which struck me as odd, considering that it was her own gift to the Marquis that the mischievous bird had destroyed. We all went back to the house, and before very long our hostess began to yawn in an elegant but obvious manner, that conveyed an unmistakable hint. The Marquis rose to leave, and I followed him.

He was looking worried and depressed, and I should have been glad enough to say something to comfort him a little, if I had thought it safe. But, in the light of past events, I certainly did not. Nevertheless, I was mentally skipping and dancing, all the way back to the hotel. For now I thought I saw my way.

When I had left the Marquis in his room, I waited for a little while, and then went straight back to Mrs. Vandaleur's. I found

her alone on the verandah : and this time, all her rouge could not conceal the sudden paleness that crept like a white mist over her pretty face, when she saw me return alone.

" I am flattered," she said. " To what do I owe the honour of this—very late—call ? "

I looked her straight in the eyes.

" What will you take for your cassowary ? " I said. " Your cassowary that is sick (though it doesn't look it) and that will probably die in a day or two, suddenly ? "

I always said the woman was an adventuress. She never turned a hair, or hesitated a moment.

" A thousand pounds," she said.

" You mean fifty," I told her.

" A thousand," she said, opening her eyes very wide, and trying to stare me down. The wind was working up for night : we had to shout at each other in order to be heard.

" Fifty," I said again. " It isn't worth a thousand to you to be driven out of the country by that story."

" Perhaps it is," said she insolently.

" You forget," I told her, " that this is going to be a world-famous stone. You

can't go to—Tahiti—or Noumea—or anywhere, and cut loose from a tale that links you up to a thing like the Koh-i-noor. You'll go with that story chained to you like the ball on a convict's leg, and a thousand pounds in your pocket—or we'll keep our own counsel, and you'll keep yours, and fifty pounds."

For a moment there was silence in the verandah—silence, but for the tearing of the wind. The reed curtain in the doorway slashed back and forth. The canvas awning rattled like a sail.

"Give me the money," said Mrs. Vandaleur, without the slightest change of countenance. But I could see that the gauzy, sable laces on the bosom of her dress were heaving like black seaweeds in a storm.

I had brought a cheque-book and a fountain-pen. I wrote a cheque, and gave it to her.

"You might tell me how it happened," I said, as I handed the paper.

"You know," she said. "He told me what he had lost. I'd seen the cassowary in the corner of the ground, gulping down something a moment before. They always

go for anything bright. So I guessed. And when he told me, I brought the bird over to the seat, while he was searching for the stone, and I saw the thing going down its neck inch by inch—as you can see, if you watch them swallow anything. Oh, I didn't take any chances. You've spoiled—you've spoiled—the best—— Did you ever think what it is to be a woman, and not so young as you were, and with no prospects—none? You never thought, or felt, or cared, about any woman in the world—and yet——"

Her eyes were very, very blue, and they were very soft to see, through the tears that were gathering in them.

She looked at me, and then looked away.

"And yet——"

I am never likely to know what she meant by that. Nor do I very much care. For there is a girl down in Sydney.

I never saw Mrs. Vandaleur again.

. . . . . .

The Marquis slept better that night than he had done for some nights past. I had a job to do before we slept: I did it—any man who has been on sheep and cattle

stations understands that sort of thing completely. I tidied up before I came into the Marquis's room with the recovered stone: but there was a stain that I had overlooked on one shirt-sleeve. The Marquis saw it.

"It began in dying and blood, and it ends in dying and blood," he said. "Flint, in one week we shall be in Melbourne, and we shall find a syndicate of Jews, and they will buy our stone for very many thousand pounds, and by Gum, my friend, I shall think we are blooming well rid of this so remarkable treasure trophy of the wilderness!"

"I'm with you there," I said: and I was.

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