

Boothby Guy

The Marriage of Esther



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	15
CHAPTER III	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

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CHAPTER I

TWO MEN – A FIGHT – AND A SERIES OF CALAMITOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

Scene. – The bar of the Hotel of All Nations, Thursday Island. Time, 9.35, one hot evening towards the end of summer. The room contains about twenty men, in various stages of undress; an atmosphere like the furnace doors of Sheol; two tatterdemalions lolling, apart from the rest, at the end of a long counter; a babel of voices, with the thunder of the surf, on the beach outside, over all.

There was surely complete evidence before the house that the two ragamuffins particularised above were unpopular. So far the silent but contemptuous superiority of the taller, and the drunken and consequently more outspoken insolence of his companion, had failed to prepossess one single soul in their favour. Even the barman, upon whose professional affability the most detested might, during moments of the world's disaffection, rely with some degree of certainty, had not been able to bring himself to treat them otherwise than with the most studied coldness. This fact was in itself significant, not only because it showed the state of his own feelings regarding them, but inasmuch as it served to give the customers of the Hotel of All Nations their cue, upon which they were not slow to model their own behaviour. Men are peculiarly imitative animals at times.

But, however much his manners might fall short of the ideal, the taller of the twain was certainly not ill-looking. In stature he might have been described as distinctly tall; his inches would have totalled considerably over six feet. His frame was large, his limbs plainly muscular; his head was not only well set upon his shoulders, but admirably shaped; while his features, with the exception of a somewhat pronounced nose, were clearly cut, and, if one may be permitted the expression, exceedingly harmonious. His eyes were of an almost greeny shade of blue, and his hair, brown like his moustache, fell back off his forehead in graceful curls, as if the better to accentuate the fact that his ears were small and flat, and, what is uncommon in those organs, packed in close to his head. On the other hand, however, his costume, judged even by Thursday Island standards, was not so satisfactory. It consisted of a pair of much worn moleskin trousers, a patched shirt of doubtful texture and more than doubtful hue, open at the neck and revealing to the world's gaze a waste of sunburnt chest, and a cabbage-tree hat that had long since ceased to be either new or waterproof. His extremities were bare, and, at the moment of our introduction, for want of something better to do he was engaged in idly tracing Euclid's *Pons Asinorum* in the sand of the floor with the big toe of his right foot. So much for Cuthbert Ellison, the principal figure in our story.

Silas Murkard, his companion, was fashioned on totally different lines. His height was as much below the average as his companion's was above it; his back was broad, but ill-shaped; while his legs, which were altogether too long for his body, had a peculiar habit of knocking themselves together at the knees as he walked. It was for this reason that he wore the two leather patches inside, and halfway up, his trouser legs, that had been the subject of so much ironical comment earlier in the day. But, since the patches had been put in, the garment had shrunk almost out of recognition, and consequently they were no longer of use in checking the friction. As a result, two ominous holes were assisting still further in the business of disintegration going on all over his raiment. It was peculiar also, that in spite of the workmanship once bestowed upon his threadbare coat,

the hump between his abnormally broad shoulder-blades gave his head an appearance of being always craned forward in search of something, which notion of inquisitiveness was not lessened by the pinched sharpness of his face. Indeed, it might almost be said that his features backed up the impression thus given, and hinted that he was one of that peculiar class of persons who, having much to conceal in their own lives, are never really happy unless they are engaged in discovering something of an equally detrimental character in those of their neighbours. But in this respect Dame Nature had maligned him. He had many faults – few men more – but whatever else he might have been, he certainly was not inquisitive. Doubtless, had he been questioned on the subject, he would have replied with the Apocrypha, "The curiosity of knowing things has been given to man for a scourge." And even if he had not anything else to boast of, he had, at least, his own ideas of the use and properties of scourges!

The two men had appeared in the settlement that morning for the first time. Up to the moment of their debarkation from the trading schooner *Merry Mermaid*, not one of the inhabitants had, to his knowledge, ever set eyes on them before. Who they were, and what the reason of their destitution, were problems presenting equal difficulties of solution. But Thursday Island has not the reputation of being a fastidious place, and it is probable that, had their behaviour not been such as to excite remark, their presence would have passed unnoticed. But, as I have already said, the smaller of the pair was unfortunately under the influence of liquor; and, as if to be in harmony with his own distorted outline, it was a curious form that his inebriation took. Had the observer chanced upon him casually, he would, in nine cases out of ten, have taken it for his normal condition. He stood leaning against the counter, his head craned forward, slowly and deliberately talking to himself, criticising the appearance and manners of those about him. And though every word he uttered could be plainly heard all over the bar, his companion did not seek to check him. Indeed, it was very possible, being buried in his own thoughts, that he did not hear him.

"The depth of a man's fall," Murkard was saying, with drunken deliberation, "can be best gauged by an investigation of the company he keeps. To think that I should fall as low as this spawn!" Here he looked round the room, and having spat in disgust upon the floor, said in conclusion, "How long, my God, how long?"

A big pearler, known in the settlement by reason of his fighting powers as Paddy the Lasher, rolled heavily along the counter and confronted him.

"Look here, my duck," he said warningly, "I don't want to interfere with you, but if our company aint good enough for the likes of you and your mate there, I don't know as how it wouldn't be best for us to part."

But the little man only sighed, and then remarked somewhat inconsequently to the moths fluttering round the lamp above his head:

"The honest heart that's free from a'
Intended fraud or guile,
However Fortune kick the ba',
Has aye some cause to smile."

Paddy the Lasher's reply was a blow direct from the shoulder. It caught the other half an inch above the left eyebrow, and felled him to the ground like a log. In an instant the whole bar was alive; men rose from their seats inside, and more poured into the room from the benches outside. There was every prospect of a fight, and as the company had stood in need of some sort of excitement for a considerable time past, they did not attempt to stop it.

Murkard lay just as he had fallen, but his companion was not so comatose. He picked the inanimate figure up and placed him in a corner. Then, without the slightest sign of emotion, rolling

up his tattered shirt-sleeves as he went, he stepped across to where the hitter waited the course of events.

"I believe I shall be obliged to have your blood for that blow," he said, as calmly as if it were a matter of personal indifference.

"You mean to say you think you'll have a try. Well, all things considered, I don't know as how I'm not willing to oblige you! Come outside."

Without another word they passed from the reeking, stifling barroom into the fragrant summer night. Overhead the Southern Cross and myriads of other stars shone lustrous and wonderful, their effulgence being reflected in the coal-black waters of the bay until it had all the appearance of an ebony floor powdered with finest gold-dust. Not a voice was to be heard, only the roll of the surf upon the beach, the faint music of a concertina from somewhere on the hillside, and the rustling of the night wind among the palms.

Having made a ring, the combatants faced each other. They were both powerful men, and, though temporarily the worse for the liquor they had absorbed, in perfect condition. The fight promised to be a more than usually exciting one; and, realising this, two little Kanaka boys shoved their way in through the circle to obtain a better view.

Half an hour later Ellison had sent his adversary home with a broken jaw. As for himself, he had for the time being lost the use of one eye and a thumb, and was mopping a cut on his left ear with a handkerchief borrowed from his old enemy the barman. Everybody admitted that never before, in the history of the island, had a more truly gorgeous and satisfactory fight been seen.

And it was curious what a difference the contest made in the attitude of the public towards him. Before it had occurred openly despised, Ellison now found himself the most courted in the saloon; there could be no doubt that the fair and open manner in which he had taken upon himself the insult to his friend, the promptness with which he had set about avenging it, and the final satisfactory result had worked wonders with the on-lookers. He could have been drunk twice over without cost to himself, had he complied with the flattering requests made to him. Even the barman invited him to name his favourite beverage. But he would accept nothing. Hardly replying to the congratulations showered upon him, he reentered the bar and hastened towards his now recovering companion. Passing his arm round him, he raised him to his feet, and then drew him from the house. Together they picked their way through the circle of benches outside, and making towards the east, disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Without talking, on and on they walked, slowing down now and again to enable Ellison to mop the blood that trickled down his neck. The path was difficult to find, and very hard to keep when found; but almost without attention, certainly without interest, they plodded on. Only when they had left the last house behind them and had entered the light scrub timber on the hillside did they call a halt. Then Murkard seized the opportunity, and threw himself upon the ground with a sigh of relief.

At first Ellison did not seem to notice his action; he stood for some moments looking down upon the star-spangled sea in a brown study. Presently, however, he returned to consciousness, and then, also with a sigh, sat down a few yards away from his companion. Still neither spoke, and after a little while Murkard fell asleep. In the same posture, his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, the other sat on and on, gazing with eyes that saw nothing of the Present into the tangled wilderness of his Past.

The waves broke on the shingle among the mangroves with continuous rhythm – a night-bird hooted dolefully in the branches above his head – the wind moaned round the hillside; but still he sat oblivious of everything – thinking, thinking, thinking. He seemed unconscious of the passage of time, unconscious of what was going on around him, of everything but the acute and lasting pain and horror of his degradation. The effect of the liquor he had drunk was fast clearing off his brain, showing him his present position in colours of double-dyed distinctness. He had once been what

the world calls "a gentleman," and it was part of his punishment that every further fall from grace should cut deeper and deeper into his over-sensitive soul.

The question he was asking himself was one of paramount importance: Was he past pulling up? And if he did manage to stop himself before it was too late, would his stand against Fate be of any avail? Would he ever be able to rid his mind of the remembrance of these days of shame? He very much doubted it! If that were so, then where would be the advantage of pulling up? Like a good many men in a similar position, he had discovered that it was one thing to commit acts which he knew to be degrading, and quite another to be saddled with the continual remembrance of them. Jean Paul argues that "remembrance is the only Paradise from which we cannot be driven"; Ellison would have described it as "the only hell from which there is no escape." Moreover, he was the possessor of one besetting sin, of which he had good reason to be aware, and the existence of that peccability was the chief terror of his existence. It crowded his waking hours, spoilt his dreams, operated on all his thoughts and utterances, was a source of continual danger and self-humiliation, alienated his friends, reduced the value of his assertions to a minimum; and yet with it all he considered himself an honourable man.

His had been a gradual fall. Coming to Australia with a considerable sum of money and valuable introductions, he had quickly set to work to dissipate the one and to forfeit any claim upon the other. His poverty forced uncongenial employment upon him when the first departed; and his pride prevented him from deriving any benefit from the second, when his hunger and destitution called upon him to make use of them. In sheer despair he drifted into the bush, and, by reason of his very incompetence, had been obliged to herd with the lowest there. At the end of six months, more of a beast than a human, he had drifted back into the towns, to become that most hopeless of all the hopeless – a Remittance man. At first he had earnestly desired employment, but try how he would he could discover none; when he did find it the desire to work had left him. His few friends, tried past endurance, having lost what little faith they had ever had in him, now turned their backs upon him in despair. So, from being an ordinary decayed gentleman, he had degenerated into a dead-beat beach-comber of the most despised description. And the difference is even greater than the lay mind would at first suppose. By the time he had come down to sleeping in tanks on wharves, and thinking himself lucky to get one to himself; to existing on cabmen's broken victuals, and prowling round dust-bins for a meal, he had brought himself to understand many and curious things. It was at this juncture that he met Silas Murkard, a man whose fall had been, if possible, even greater than his own. After a period of mutual distrust they had become friends, migrated together into Queensland, tried their hands at a variety of employments, and at last found their way as far north as Torres Straits, and its capital, Thursday Island. What their next move was going to be they could not have told. Most probably they had not given the matter a thought. Blind Fate had a good deal to do with their lives and actions. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," had become their motto, and for that reason they had no desire to be made aware of what further misery the morrow had in store for them.

After a while Ellison rose and went across to where his companion lay asleep, his arms stretched out and his head several inches lower than his body. He looked down at him with a feeling that would be difficult to analyse. There was something gruesomely pathetic about the man's posture – it betokened a total loss of self-respect, an absence of care for the future, and a general moral abandonment that was not describable in words. Once while Ellison watched he rolled his head over and moaned softly. That was too much for the other; he thought for a moment, and then went across to where he could just discern some tall reeds growing against the sky. Pulling an armful he returned to the spot, and, having made them into a pillow, placed them beneath the sleeper's head. Then, leaving the little plateau, he descended to the shore and commenced a vigorous sentry-go that lasted until dawn. The effect of the liquor he had drunk that evening had now quite departed from him, leaving his brain, so it seemed to him, clearer than it had been for months past. As a result

of that clearness, the argument upon which he had been engaging himself before wheeled back upon him. That same mysterious monitor was urging him to bestir himself before it was too late, to emerge from the life of shameful degradation that held him before its toils closed upon him forever. Surely he could do it! It only needed the rousing of that pride he had once boasted he possessed. Then friendless, powerless, backed only by the strength of his complete despair, he would show the world that he had still a little pluck left in him. Yes, with the rising sun he would begin a new life, and having made this last desperate stand, it should go hard with him if he did not succeed in it.

As he made his resolution he espied the first signs of breaking day. The stars were paling in the east; a strange weird light was slowly creeping over the hill from the gateway of the dawn; the waves seemed to break upon the shingle with a sound that was almost a moan; the night-bird fled her tree with a mocking farewell; even the wind sighed through the long grass with a note of sadness he had not before discerned in it. Distant though he was from it, some eighty yards, he could make out Murkard's recumbent figure, huddled up exactly as he had left it. There was even a sort of reproach in that. Yes; he would uprouse himself, he would prove himself still a fighter. The world should not be able to say that he was beaten. There must surely be chances of employment if only he could find them. He could set about the search at once.

Every moment the light was widening, and with it a thick mist was rising on the lower lands. To escape this he ascended the hill and approached his companion. He was still wrapped in the same heavy sleep, so he did not wake him, but sat down and looked about him. The sea below was pearly in its smoothness, the neighbouring islands seemed to have come closer in this awesome light; a pearling lugger, astir with the day, was drawing slowly through the Pass, and, while he watched, the sun, with a majesty untranslatable, rose in his strength, and day was born.

About seven o'clock Murkard woke and stared about him. He regarded his companion steadily for half a minute, and then sat up. Their location seemed to puzzle him. He looked at Ellison for an explanation.

"What the deuce are we doing up here?"

"I don't know. We came, I'm sure I couldn't tell you why. You were most uncommonly drunk last night, if that could have had anything to do with it."

"I suppose I must have been; at any rate I feel most uncommonly bad this morning. Anything happen?"

"You insulted a man; he hit you, I hit him."

"Result – you?"

"This! And this!"

"He?"

"Broken jaw!"

"I'm obliged to you. This is not the first debt of the kind I owe you. At the same time I suppose I ought to apologise?"

"Pray spare yourself the trouble."

"Thank you, I think I will. I hate being under obligations to any man, particularly a friend. And now, *mon ami*, what are we going to do next? I have a sort of hazy idea that we did not make ourselves as popular as we might have done yesterday."

"I think you managed to openly insult nine-tenths of the population, if that's what you mean."

"Very likely. It's the effect of a public school education, you know. But to return to my question, what are we going to do next?"

"Directly civilization gets up I'm going into the township."

"In search of breakfast?"

"No; in search of employment."

"The deuce! I must indeed have been drunk yesterday not to have noticed this change coming over you. And pray what do you want to work for?"

"Because I have made up my mind to have done with this sort of life; because I want to save myself while there's time; because I want to be able to look the world in the face again. If you really are so anxious to know, that's why."

"You remind me of our old friend the village blacksmith. Hadn't he some ambition that way, eh?"

"He looked the whole world in the face,
For he owed not any man!"

Wasn't that it? I always did think him a bad business man. He didn't seem to realize that credit is the backbone of the commercial anatomy. Anyhow yours is a foolish reasoning – a very foolish reasoning. What possible desire can a man of your training have to look the world in the face? What will you see when you do look there? Only inquiries into your past, a distrust of your present, and a resolve to have no more to do with your future than is absolutely necessary. Personally, I find the world's back a good deal worthier of cultivation."

"All the same I intend to try to find something to do."

"Pray don't let me stop you. One more question, however: What does your Serene Mightiness intend for me? I doubt if I am a good worker, but I am at liberty to accept any remunerative post within your gift, Chancellorship of one of your Duchies, for instance; Mastership of your Imperial Majesty's Hounds; Keeper of the Privy Purse; Lord Cham – "

"You can scoff as much as you please; you won't alter my determination. I am going now. Good-morning!"

"Your majesty will find me still in waiting when you return unsuccessful."

"Good-morning!"

"If your Majesty has time to think about such mundane matters, your Majesty might endeavour to induce one of your confiding subjects to lend the Imperial kitchen a little flour. If I had it now I might be making a damper during your Majesty's absence."

"Good-morning!"

"Good-morning!"

Ellison turned his face in the direction of the settlement and strode off round the hill. He had not the slightest expectation of finding any lucrative employment when he got there, but he was full of the desire to work. If he failed this time it should not be imputed against him as his own fault. He at least was eager, and if society did not give him the wherewithal upon which to spend his energy, then it must be set against his score with society. In the devotion of the present it seemed to him that all his past was atoned for and blotted out. And under the influence of this sudden glow of virtuous resolution he left the hill and entered the township.

Already the sea-front was astir with the business of the new-born day. As he approached the principal store he descried the bulky figure of the proprietor upon the jetty, superintending the unloading of some cases from a boat lying alongside it. Pulling himself together he crossed the road and accosted him.

"Mr. Tugwell, I believe?" he began, raising his tattered cabbage-tree with a touch of his old politeness.

The merchant turned and looked him up and down.

"Yes, that is certainly my name. What can I do for you?"

"I am in search of employment. I thought perhaps you could help me."

"I don't seem to remember your face, somehow. You are a stranger in the island?"

"I only arrived yesterday. I am an Englishman. I don't want to whine, but I might add that I was once an English gentleman."

"Dear me! You look as if you had been making rough weather of it lately."

"Very. As a proof, I may tell you that I have not eaten a mouthful since I landed from my boat yesterday morning."

"What can you do? I am in want of an experienced hand to pack shell. Can you qualify?"

"I have never tried, but I dare say I could soon learn."

"Ah, that's a horse of a different colour. I have no time to waste teaching you. It's a pity, but that's the only way I can help you. Stay, here's something that will enable you to get a breakfast."

He balanced a shilling on the ends of his fingers. The morning sunlight sparkled on its milled edge. For a moment Ellison looked longingly at it, then he turned on his heel.

"I asked you for work, not for charity. Good-morning!"

"You are foolish. Good-morning!"

Leaving the jetty Ellison went on up the beach. But before he had gone a hundred yards a thought struck him. He turned again and hurried back. The merchant was just entering the store.

"I have come back to beg your pardon," he said hastily; "I acted like a cad. It will go hard with me if I lose my manners as well as my birthright. You will forgive me, I hope?"

"Willingly, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you will let me make the amount half a crown."

"You are very generous, but I cannot accept alms, thank you."

With an apology for having so long detained him, Ellison continued his walk down the beach. Hong Kong Joe was in his boat-building yard, laying the keel of a new lugger. Approaching him he came to the point straight away:

"I am in search of work. Have you any to give me?"

The boat-builder straightened himself up, looked his questioner in the face, ran his eye round the tattered shirt, and arrived at the moleskin trousers. When he got higher up the bruised eye seemed to decide him.

"Not with that eye, thank you," he said. "When I want one, I can get my pick of fighting-men in the settlement without employing a stranger."

"Then you don't want me?"

"No, thank you."

"You can't put me in the way of finding any employment, I suppose? God knows I want it pretty badly."

"Try Mah Poo's store on the Front. I heard him say yesterday he wanted a steady, respectable chap, so you should just about qualify. No harm in trying, anyway."

Thanking him for his advice, and ignoring the sarcasm contained in it, Ellison walked on to the Chinaman's shop. The Celestial was even less complimentary than the boat-builder, for without waiting to answer the applicant's inquiries, he went into his house and slammed the door. At any time it hurts to have a door banged in one's face, but when it is done by a Chinaman the insult is double-edged. Ellison, however, meekly pocketed the affront and continued his walk. He tried two or three other places, with the same result – nobody wanted him. Those who might have given him work were dissuaded by the bruises; while those who had no intention of doing so, advised him to desist from his endeavours until they had passed away. He groaned at the poverty of his luck, and walked down the hill to the end of the new jetty, to stare into the green water whose colour contrasted so well with the saffron sands and the white wings of the wheeling gulls.

A British India mail-boat was steaming down the bay to her anchorage alongside the hulk, and innumerable small craft were passing to and fro between the islands. He looked at the water, the birds, the steamer, and the islands, without being really conscious that he saw them. Somehow he was filled with a great wonderment at his position, at the obstinate contrariness of his luck. Over and over again in days gone by he had been offered positions of trust, beside which packing pearl shell and assisting boat-builders would have been as nothing. He had refused them because

he did not want to work. It was the revenge of Fate that now he had resolved to turn over a new leaf he could hear of nothing. As this thought entered his brain he looked down at the transparent green water rising and falling round the copper-sheathed piles of the pier, and a fit of desperation came over him. Was it any use living? Life had evidently nothing to offer him now in exchange for what his own folly had thrown away. Why should he not drop quietly over the side, disappear into that cool green water, and be done with it forever? The more he considered this way out of his troubles the more he liked it. But then the old doubt came back upon him, – the doubt that had been his undoing in so many previous struggles, – might not the future have something better in store for him? He resolved to test his luck for the last time. But how? After a moment's thought he decided on a plan.

There was not a soul within a couple of hundred yards of the jetty. He would arrange it thus: if anyone set foot on it before the mail-boat let go her anchor he would give life another chance; if not, well, then he would try and remember some sort of prayer and go quietly over the side, give in without a struggle, and be washed up by the next tide. From every appearance luck favoured the latter chance. So much the better omen, then, if the other came uppermost. He looked at the mail-boat and then at the shore. Not a soul was to be seen. Another five minutes would decide it all for him. Minute after minute went by; the boat steamed closer to the hulk. He could see the hands forrard on the fo'c'sle-head ready to let go the anchor, he could even make out the thin column of steam issuing from the escape-pipe in the cable range. Another minute, or at most two, would settle everything. And yet there was no sign of excitement in his tired face, only a certain grim and terrible earnestness in the lines about the mouth. The steamer was close enough now for him to hear the order from the bridge and the answer from the officer in charge of the cable. Another two or three seconds and he might reckon the question settled and the game played out. He turned for the last time to look along the jetty, but there was no hope there, not a living being was anywhere near it.

"Well, this settles it, once and forever," he said to himself, following his speech with a little sigh, for which he could not account. Then, as if to carry out his intention, he crossed to the steps leading down to the other side of the jetty. As he did so he almost shouted with surprise, for there, on the outer edge, hidden from his line of sight where he had stood before, lay a little Kanaka boy about ten years of age fast asleep. *He had been there all the time.* Ellison's luck had triumphed in a most unexpected manner! As he realised it he heard the cable on board the mail-boat go tearing through the hawsehole, and next moment the officer's cry, "Anchor gone, sir!" At the same instant the ship's bell struck eight (twelve o'clock).

With the change in his prospects, for he was resolved to consider it a change, he remembered that Murkard was on the hillside waiting for him. Instantly he wheeled about and started back on his tracks for the side of the island he had first come from. The sun was very warm, the path a rough one, and by the time he reached it his bare feet had had about enough of it. He found Murkard sitting in the same spot and almost in the same attitude as when he had left him nearly five hours before. The expression of amusement on the latter's face changed a little as he noticed that his friend carried nothing in his hand.

"And so, my dear fellow, you have come back. Well, do you know, I felt convinced you would. Nothing offered, I suppose?"

"Nothing. But stay, I'm wrong. I was offered a shilling to get myself a breakfast."

"Good for you? So you have eaten your fill."

"No; I refused it. I wanted work, not charity!"

"So it would appear. Well I *must* say I admire your fortitude. Perhaps in better days I might have done the same. Under present circumstances, however, I am inclined to fancy I should have taken the money."

"Possibly. I acted differently, you see."

"You're not angry with me for laughing at you this morning, are you, Ellison?"

"Angry? My dear old fellow, what on earth put that in your head? Why should I be angry? As it happens, you were quite right."

"That's the very reason I thought you might have been angry. We're never so easily put out of temper as when we're proved to be in the wrong. That's what is called the Refining Influence of Civilization."

"And what's to be done now? We can't live up here on this hillside forever. And, as far as I can see, we stand a very poor show of having anything given us down yonder."

"We must cut our tracks again, that's all. But how we're to get away, and where we're to go to is more than I can say. We've tried Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane; Rockhampton turned us out, Townsville and Cooktown proved as bad. Now Thursday Island turns its back on us. There's something rotten in the state of Denmark, my friend. Don't get cast-down over it, however; we've succeeded before, we'll do so again. As the proverb has it, '*Le desespoir redouble les forces*.'"

"What do you propose?"

"Something practicable! I've been thinking. Don't laugh. It's a habit of mine. As I think best when I'm hungry, I become a perfect Socrates when I'm starving. Do you see that island over there?"

"Yes – Prince of Wales. What about it?"

"There's a pearling station round the bay. You can just catch a glimpse of it from here – a white roof looking out from among the trees. You see it? Very good! It belongs to an old man, McCartney by name, who is at present away with his boat, somewhere on the other side of New Guinea."

"Well, then, that stops our business right off. If the boss is away, how can it help us?"

"What a chicken it is, to be sure. My boy, that station is run, in the old man's absence, by his daughter Esther – young, winsome, impulsive, and impressionable. A rare combination. We visit it in this way. As near as I can calculate it is half a mile across the strait, so we swim it. I am nearly drowned, you save my life. You leave me on the beach, and go up to the house for assistance. Arriving there you ask to see her, tell your story, touch her heart. She takes us in, nurses me; I sing your praises; we remain until the father returns – after that permanently."

"You don't mean to tell me you think all that humbug is likely to succeed?"

"If it's well enough done, certainly!"

"And hasn't it struck you that so much deception is playing it rather low down upon the girl?"

"It will be playing it still lower down upon us if it doesn't succeed. It's our last chance, remember. We must do it or starve. You've grown very squeamish all of a sudden."

"I don't like acting a lie."

"Since when? Look here, my dear fellow, you're getting altogether too good for this world. You almost take *me* in. Last night, before I grew too drunk to chronicle passing events, I heard you tell one of the most deliberate, cold-blooded lies any man ever gave utterance to – and, what was worse, for no rhyme or reason as far as I could see."

"You have no right to talk to me like this!"

"Very probably that's why I do it. Another of my habits. But forgive me; don't let us quarrel on the eve of an enterprise of such importance. Are you going into it with me or not?"

"Since you are bent on it, of course! You know that."

"Very good; then let us prepare for the swim. It will be a long one, and I am not in very great trim just now. I have also heard that sharks are numerous. I pity the shark that gets my legs; my upper half would not be so bad, but my lower would be calculated to give even a mummy dyspepsia."

While speaking, he had rolled his trousers up to his knees. Then, having discarded his jacket, he announced himself ready for the swim. All the time he had been making his preparations Ellison had been standing with his back to him, looking across the strait. He was still brooding on the accusation his companion had a moment before given utterance to. He was aware that he *had* told a lie on the previous night – wilfully and deliberately lied, without hope of gain to himself, or even

without any desire of helping himself. He had represented himself to be something he was not, for no earthly reason that he could account for save a craving for exciting interest and sympathy. It was his one sin, his one blemish, this fatal trick of lying, and he could not break himself of it, try how he would. And yet, as I have already insisted, weak as he was in this, in all other matters he was the very soul of honour. It rankled in his mind, as the after-knowledge always did, to think that this man, whom he had learned to fear as well as to despise, should have found him out. He nodded to show that he was ready, and together they set out for the beach. On the way, Murkard placed his hand upon Ellison's arm, and looked into his face with a queer expression that was almost one of pity.

"Ellison," he said, "you are thinking over what I said just now. I'm sorry I let it slip. But, believe me, I meant no harm by it. I suppose every man has his one little failing – God knows, I'm conscious enough of mine. Don't think any the worse of me for having been so candid, will you?"

"The subject is distasteful to me; let's drop it."

"By all means. Now we've got our swim before us. Talk of Hero and Leander! I don't suppose there can be much doubt as to which of us is destined to be Leander."

Side by side they waded out till the water reached their shoulders; then they began their swim. Both were past masters in the art; but it was a long struggle, and they soon discovered that there was a stiff current setting against them. It began to look as if they would be washed past their goal before they could reach it.

When they were three parts of the way across, Ellison was ahead, Murkard some half dozen yards behind him. Suddenly the former heard a cry; he turned his head in time to see Murkard throw up his arms and disappear. Without a moment's hesitation he swam back to the spot, reaching it just as the other was disappearing for the third and last time. With a strength born of despair he clutched him by the hair and raised his head above the surface. Then, holding him at a safe distance, he continued his swim for the shore. The piece of acting designed to carry out their plot looked as if it were likely to become downright earnest, after all.

It was a long swim, and, being saddled with this additional burden, it taxed Ellison's strength and endurance to the uttermost. When he touched the beach on the opposite side, it was as much as he could do to carry the unfortunate body up out of the reach of the water. This done, his strength gave way entirely, and he threw himself down exhausted on the sand.

CHAPTER II

A WOMAN – A RECOVERY – TRANSFORMATIONS AND TWO RESOLVES

When Ellison felt himself able to move again, he rose to his feet and looked about him. He discovered that they had landed on the shore of a little bay, bounded on one side by a miniature cliff and on the other by a dense tropical jungle; through this latter looked out the white roofs of the boat-sheds and houses of the pearling station of which they had come in search. Two columns of palest blue smoke rose above the palms, and after a glance at his still insensible companion he started towards them.

Leaving the white sandy foreshore of the bay, he entered the thicket by what was certainly a well-worn path. This circled round the headland, and eventually brought him out on the hill above the beach. Stepping clear of the undergrowth, he found himself confronted by a number of buildings of all sizes and descriptions. The nearest he settled in his own mind was a store-shed; that adjoining it, to the left, was the Kanakas' hut; that to the left, again, their kitchen; that to the right, rather higher on the hill, with its long low roof, the station house itself. As he approached it, two or three mongrel curs ran out and barked vociferous defiance, but he did not heed them. He passed the store, and made towards the veranda. As he came closer, a strange enough figure in his dripping rags, he saw that he was observed. A young woman, possibly not more than three-and-twenty, was standing on the steps awaiting him. She was, if one may judge by what the world usually denominates beauty, rather handsome than beautiful, but there was also something about her that was calculated to impress the mind far more than mere pink and white prettiness. Her figure was tall and shapely; her features pronounced, but regular; her eyes were the deepest shade of brown; and her wealth of nut-brown hair, upon which a struggling ray of sunlight fell, was carelessly rolled behind her head in a fashion that added to, rather than detracted from, her general appearance.

Ellison lifted his hat as he came towards her. She looked him up and down with the conscious air of a superior, and was the first to speak.

"Well, my man," she said, without embarrassment, "what do you want here?"

"In the first place, I want your help. I tried to swim the straits with a companion; he was nearly drowned, and is now lying unconscious on the shore down yonder."

He pointed in the direction he had come.

"Good gracious! and you're wasting time on words." She picked up a sun-bonnet lying on a chair beside her, and put it on, calling: "Mrs. Fenwick, Mrs. Fenwick!"

In answer, an elderly person wearing a widow's cap appeared from the house.

"Have blankets warmed and put in the hut over yonder. Don't lose a minute." Then turning to the astonished Ellison she said: "I'll be with you in one moment," and departed into the house.

Before he had time to speculate as to her errand, she reappeared with a bottle of brandy in her hand.

"Now, come along. If he's as bad as you say, there's not a moment to lose."

They set off down the path, and as they passed the Kanakas' hut, she cried:

"Jimmy Rhotoma!"

A big Kanaka rolled out of the kitchen.

"Man drowned along Alligator Bay. Look sharp!"

Then signing to her companion to follow, she set off at a run across the space between the huts and along the scrub-path towards the sea. Ellison followed close behind her, dimly conscious of the graceful figure twisting and turning through the undergrowth ahead of him. When she reached the open land on the other side of the headland, she paused and looked about her; then, making out the

figure stretched upon the sands, she ran towards it. With a swiftness that betokened considerable experience she placed her hand upon his heart. No, he was not dead; it was not too late to save him. As she came to this conclusion, Jimmy Rhotoma appeared, and the trio set to work to restore animation. It was some time before their efforts were rewarded. Then Murkard sighed wearily, half-opened his eyes, and rolled his head over to the other side.

"He'll do now, poor fellow," said the woman, still chafing his left hand. "But it was a very close thing. What on earth induced you to try and swim the straits?"

"Despair, I suppose. We're both of us as nearly done for as it is possible for men to be. We tried the settlement yesterday for work, but nothing offered. Then we heard of your station, and thought we'd swim across on chance."

"I don't know that I altogether like the look of either of you. Beach-combers, I fancy, aren't you?"

"We're Englishmen who have experienced the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, with a vengeance. I suppose *you* would call us beach-combers, now I come to think of it. However, if you can give us work, I can promise you we'll do it, and do it faithfully. If you can't – well, perhaps you'll give us a meal a piece, just to put strength into us for the swim back."

"Well, I'll think about it. In the meantime we must get your mate up to the station. Jimmy, you take his head, you – by the way, what's your name?"

"Ellison – Cuthbert Ellison."

"Very well then, Ellison, you take his heels. That's right, now bring him along."

Between them, and led by the woman, they carried Murkard up the path to the station. Arriving at a hut, near that from which the Kanaka had been summoned, she stopped, took a key from a bunch in her pocket, unlocked the door, and threw it open. It was small, but scrupulously clean. Two camp bedsteads were ranged beside the wall, furnished with coarse blue blankets; a tin wash-hand basin stood on a box at the far end, alongside it a small wooden table, with a six-inch looking-glass above that again.

"You can occupy this hut for the present. Put him down on that bed, so! Before I take it away give him a drop more brandy. That's right. I think he'll do now. If you don't want a spell yourself you'd better come with me."

Ellison arranged Murkard's head upon his pillow, glanced almost unconsciously at himself in the square of glass, and then followed her out of the hut, and across the yard to the veranda opposite. Arriving there she seated herself in a hammock, that swung across the corner, and once more looked him up and down.

"I don't think you need have told me you were an Englishman!" she said at length.

"Why not?" he asked, without any real curiosity. He was watching the shapely feet and ankles swinging beneath the hammock.

"Because I could see it for myself. Your voice is the voice of an Englishman, your face is the face of an Englishman, and, if I wanted any further proof, I should convince myself by your walk. Have you ever noticed that your countrymen" (she spoke as if Australians were not Englishmen), "Britishers, I mean, walk in quite a different fashion from our men? You haven't noticed it, I see. Well, I'm afraid, then, you haven't cultivated the faculty of observation."

"I have had things of more importance to think about lately."

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I had quite forgotten. Sit down for one moment."

She pointed to a long cane-chair. He seated himself, and she disappeared inside the house. In less than five minutes she returned with a bundle in her arms.

"Here you are – some clothes for you and your mate. You needn't thank me for them. They belonged to a man from your own country, who went to the bottom six months ago in one of our luggers, a degree east of the D'Entrecasteaux group. Take them over to the hut and change. When you've done that come back here, and I'll have some lunch ready for you."

As soon as she had given him the bundle she turned on her heel and vanished into the house, without giving him an opportunity of uttering an expression of his thanks. He looked after her as if he would like to have said something, but changed his mind and crossed to his hut. Murkard was still asleep, so he did not disturb him. Throwing the bundle on his own bed, he started to examine it. To the man who has lived in rags there is something that is apt to be almost discomposing in the sudden possession of a decent wardrobe. Ellison turned the dead man's effects over with a strange thrill. Ashamed as he was of his sordid rags, there was something to him indescribably beautiful about these neat tweeds, linen shirts, collars, socks, and white canvas shoes. Selecting those which looked nearest his own size, he prepared to make his toilet. A razor lay upon the dressing-table, a shaving brush stood on a tiny bracket above the tin wash-hand basin. A shave was a luxury he had not indulged in for some time. He lathered his face, stropped the razor on his belt, and fell to work. In three minutes the ugly stubble on his cheeks and chin had disappeared. Five minutes later he was dressed and a new man. With the help of water, a well-worn hair-brush, and his fingers, his matted locks were reduced to something like order, his luxuriant brown mustache received an extra twirl, and he was prepared to face the world once more, in outward appearance at least, a gentleman. Esther McCartney watched him cross the path from a window opposite, and noticed that he carried himself with a new swing. She allowed a smile, that was one of half pity, to flicker across her face as she saw it, and then went into the veranda to receive him.

"They fit you beautifully," said she, referring to the clothes. "You look like a new man."

"How can I thank you? I feel almost like my old self once more. I tremble to think what a figure I must have cut half an hour ago."

"Never mind that. Now come and have something to eat."

He followed her into the sitting room. It was a pretty place, and showed on all sides evidences of a woman's controlling hand. The weatherboard walls were nicely stained, a painted canvas cloth took the place of a plaster ceiling; numerous pictures, mostly water-colours, and many of them of considerable merit, hung on either hand, interspersed with curiosities of the deep, native weapons, and other odds and ends accumulated from among the thousand and one islands of the Southern seas. In the furthest corner Ellison noticed an open piano, with a piece of music on the rest. But the thing which fascinated him beyond all others was the meal spread upon the centre-table. Its profusion nearly took his breath away – beef, tomato salad, pickles, cheese, and a bottle of home-brewed beer. At her command he seated himself and ravenously set to work. All the time he was eating she sat in a deep chair by the window and watched him with an amused smile upon her face. When he had taken off the first raw edge, she spoke:

"Do you know, I don't think that black eye is exactly becoming to you."

Ellison made as if he would like to cover it up.

"Oh, you can't hide it now. I noticed it directly you showed yourself this morning. I wonder who gave it you? for of course you've been fighting. I don't like a quarrelsome man!"

"I'm sorry I should appear before you in such a bad light, for naturally I want to stand well with you."

"I understand. You mean about the billet. Well, will you tell me how you got it – the eye, I mean?"

"Willingly, if you think it will make my case any better."

"I'm not quite sure that it will, but you'd better go on."

She laid herself back in the great chair and folded her hands behind her head. Her face struck him in a new light. There was an expression on it he had not expected to find there; its presence harmonised with the pictures and the piano and made him pause before he spoke. In that moment he changed his mind and let the words he was about to speak die unuttered.

"The story is simple enough. I was drawn into a quarrel and obliged to fight a man. I broke his jaw, he gave me this and this."

He pointed first to his eye and then to his ear. She nodded her head and smiled.

"Do you know that you have come out of that test very well?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Well, then, let me tell you. I was trying you. I didn't really want to know how you got that bruise, because – well, because, you see, I knew beforehand. I've heard the whole story. You stood up for your deformed friend and thrashed the man who was coward enough to strike him. That is the correct version, I think, isn't it? Ah, I see it is. Well, Paddy the Lasher, the man you fought, is one of our hands. I had only just returned from making inquiries about him when you turned up this morning. I like your modesty, and if you'll let me, I think I'll shake hands with you on it!"

Without knowing exactly why he did it, Ellison rose and gravely shook hands with her. In these good clothes his old manner, in a measure, came back to him, and he felt able to do things with a grace that had long been foreign to his actions. He sat down again, drank off his beer, and turned once more to her.

"How can I thank you enough for your goodness to me? I have never enjoyed a meal so much in my life."

"I am glad of that. I think you look better than you did an hour ago. It must be awful to be so hungry."

"It is, and I am more than grateful to you for relieving it. I hope you will believe that."

"I think I do. And now about your friend. Don't you think you had better go and look after him? I have told the cook to send some food across to the hut. Will you see that he eats it?"

"Of course I will. I'll go at once."

He rose and went towards the door. She had risen too, and now stood with one hand upon the mantelpiece, the other toying with the keys hanging from her belt. The fresh breeze played through the palm fronds beyond the veranda, and whisked the dry sand on to the clean white boards. He wanted to set one matter right before he left.

"As I said just now, I'm afraid I don't appear to very great advantage in your eyes," he remarked.

"I'm not exactly sure that you do," she answered candidly. "But I'll see if I can't let by-gones be by-gones. Remember, however, if I do take you on you must both show me that my trust is not misplaced."

"For myself I will promise that."

"It may surprise you to hear that I am not so much afraid of your mate as of yourself. I have seen his face, and I think I like it."

"I'm certain you're right. I am a weak man; he is not. If either of us fails you, I don't think it will be Murkard."

"I like you better for sticking up for your friend."

"I am sorry for that, because you may think I do it for effect."

"I'll be better able to tell you about that later on. Now go."

He raised his hat and crossed from the veranda to the hut. Murkard was awake and was sitting up on the bed.

"Thank Heaven you've come back, old man. Where the deuce am I, and how did I get here? My memory's gone all to pieces, and, from the parched condition of my tongue, my interior must be following it. Have I been ill, or what?"

"You've been jolly near drowned, if that's any consolation to you. We were swimming the strait, don't you remember, when you suddenly collapsed. You gave me an awful fright."

"Then you saved my life?"

"I suppose folk would call it by that name."

"All right. That's another nick in the score. I'm obliged to you. You have a big reckoning against me for benefits conferred. Be sure, however, I'll not forget it if ever the opportunity occurs."

And now what does this pile of goodly raiment mean? By Jove! methinks I smell food, and it makes me ravenous."

The door opened and Rhotoma Jimmy appeared with a tray.

"Young missis send this longa you."

"All right, old man, put it down over there. I believe I'm famished enough to eat both the victuals and the tray."

"Go ahead, and while you're eating I'll talk. In the first place, your scheme has succeeded admirably. I have spoken to the girl, interested her in us, and I think she'll take us on."

"Good! You're a diplomatist after my own heart."

"But, old man, there must be no hanky-panky over this. If we get the billets we must play fair by her – we must justify her confidence."

"As bad as all that, and in this short time, eh? Well, I suppose it's all right. Yes, we'll play fair."

"Don't run away with any nonsense of that sort. The girl is a decent little thing, but nothing more. She has been very good to us, and I'd rather clear out at once than let any harm come to her from either of us – do you understand?"

"Perfectly." He finished his meal in silence, and then threw himself down upon the bed. "Now let me get to sleep again. I'm utterly played out. Drunk last night and nearly drowned to-day is a pretty fair record, in all conscience."

Ellison left the hut, and that he might not meet his benefactress again so soon, went for a stroll along the beach. The tide was out and the sand was firm walking. He had his own thoughts for company, and they were in the main pleasant ones. He had landed on his feet once more, just when he deemed he had reached the end of his tether. Whatever else it might be, this would probably be his last bid for respectability; it behooved him, therefore, to make the most of it. He seated himself on a rock just above high-water mark and proceeded to think it out.

Murkard slept for another hour, and then set to work to dress himself. Like Ellison, he found the change of raiment very acceptable. When he was ready he looked at himself in the glass with a new interest, which passed off his face in a sneer as his eyes fell upon the reflection of his ungainly, inartistic back.

"Certainly there's devilish little to recommend me in that," he said meditatively. "And yet there was a time when my society was sought after. I wonder what the end of it all will be?"

He borrowed a pair of scissors from the Kanaka cook, and with them trimmed his beard to a point. Then, selecting a blue silk scarf from among the things sent him, he tied it in a neat bow under his white collar, donned his coat, which accentuated rather than, diminished the angularity of his hump, and went out into the world. Esther McCartney was sitting in the veranda sewing. She looked up on hearing his step and motioned him towards her. He glanced at her with considerable curiosity, and he noticed that under his gaze she drooped her eyes. Her hands were not as white as certain hands he had aforetime seen, but they were well shaped – and one of the nails upon the left hand had a tiny white spot upon it that attracted his attention.

"You had a narrow escape this morning. Your friend only just got you ashore in time."

"So I believe. I am also in *your* debt for kindnesses received – this change of raiment, and possibly my life. It is a faculty of mine to be always in debt to somebody. I may probably repay you when I can; in the meantime it will be better for us both if I endeavour to forget all about it."

"Isn't that rather a strange way of talking?"

"Very possibly. But you see I am a strange man. Nature has ordained that I should not be like other men. I don't know altogether whether I'm the worse for it. I'm a little weak after my trouble this morning; have you any objection to my sitting down?"

"Take that seat, you'll find it more comfortable."

She pointed to a loose canvas-backed chair near the steps. He smiled as he had done in the hut when he had looked at his image in the glass. The other chairs were hard-backed, and it proved

that she had been thinking of his deformity when she chose this one. He seated himself and placed his hat on the floor beside him. She took in at a glance his pale, sensitive face, curious eyes, and long white fingers, and as she looked she came to a conclusion.

"Your friend, Mr. Ellison, wants me to give you employment. Until a minute ago I had not made up my mind. Now I think I shall do so."

"I knew you would."

"How did you know it?"

"By the way you dropped your hand on the back of that chair just now. Well, I'm very glad. It is good of you. You know nothing about us, however, remember that. Don't trust us too far until you are more certain of our honesty. Sir Walter Raleigh, I would have you not forget, says, 'No man is wise or safe but he that is honest.' It is for you to find our honesty out."

"You talk as if you were taking me into your employ, instead of its being the other way about."

"So you noticed it? I was just thinking the same thing myself. It's a habit of mine. Forgive it."

"Somehow I think I shall like you. You talk in a way I'm not quite used to, but I fancy we shall hit it off together."

"I make no promises. I have some big faults, but I'll do my best to amend them. You have heard of one of them."

"I have, but how did you know?"

"By your eyes and the way your lips curled when I used the word 'faults.' Yes, unhappily I am a drunkard. I need make no secret of it. I have fought against it, how hard you would never guess; but it beats me every time. It killed my first life, and I'm not quite sure it won't kill my second."

"Your first life! What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. I am a creature of two lives. You don't surely suppose I was always the beach-comber you see before you now?"

"I did not think about it."

"Forgive me! That is not quite true. It was one of the first thoughts in your mind when you saw me come out of the hut yonder."

"How is it you can read my thoughts like this?"

"Practice in the study of faces, that's all. Another bad habit."

"But if I take you on you will give up the liquor, won't you? It seems such a pity that a man should throw himself away like that when there's so much in the world worth living for."

"That's, of course, if there is. Suppose, for the sake of argument, there is nothing? Suppose that a man has forfeited all right to self-respect – suppose he has been kicked out of house and home, deprived of his honour, disowned even by those who once loved him best – would you think it foolish if he attempted to find a City of Refuge in the Land of Alcohol?"

"Are you that man?"

Her face grew very gentle and her voice soft, as she put the question.

"I simply instance an example to confute your argument. May I change the subject? What is my work to be? Much must of course depend on that. Like the elephant, my strength is in my head rather than my hands, certainly not in my legs."

"Our store-keeper and book-keeper left us a month ago. Since then I have been doing his work. Are you good at figures?"

"Fairly; that sort of work would suit me admirably, and would, I believe, enable me to give you satisfaction. And, my friend – But here he comes to ask for himself."

Ellison was sauntering slowly up the path. He looked a fine figure of a man in the evening sunlight. His borrowed plumes fitted and suited him admirably. He lifted his hat with the air of a court chamberlain when he came to the veranda steps.

"I am glad to see you about again," he said to Murkard, who was examining him critically, "you certainly look better."

"I am, as I have already said, a different man."

"You look happier, certainly."

"I have just received my appointment to a position of trust."

Ellison glanced at the woman. She laughed and nodded.

"Yes, I have put him on as book-keeper and store-man. It's a billet worth a pound a week and his keep."

"It is very generous of you."

"Oh, but that's not all. If you care to stay you can do so as general knockabout hand on the same terms. There will be a good deal that will want looking to now that you've disabled Paddy the Lasher. You can occupy the hut where you are now, and I'll tell Rhotoma Jimmy to serve your meals in the barracks across the way."

"I hope we shall show ourselves worthy of your trust."

"I hope you will; but no more black eyes, remember. The sooner you get rid of the one you're wearing the better I shall like you. You'll find my father, when he returns, will take to you sooner without it. And now you'd better go and get your teas."

She rose to go inside. They stepped from the veranda. Ellison happened to look round. Her head was half turned, and she was watching him. Their eyes met, and the next moment she had vanished into the house.

The two men walked across to their hut in silence. When they reached it, they sat themselves down on their respective beds and looked at each other. Murkard opened the conversation.

"You were going to say that you cannot imagine why she has done this? Isn't that so?"

"Yes. I *was* just going to do so. How on earth did you guess it?"

"Never mind that. But you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, my boy. She's not doing it for the reason you suppose. Would it surprise you very much to be told that in all probability it is done for *my* sake. No, don't laugh; and yet I really do think it is, and I'll tell you why. There was uncertainty written in her face and, well, if I must say it, a little bit of distrust of you, until I appeared upon the scene. Then you know my way with women. I told her the plain, unvarnished truth, without any compliments or guilt edging of any sort. Painted myself as a gentleman gone amucker, hopeless cripple, etc., etc. Then she dropped that infernal business air, and her womanly side came uppermost. That decided for us – I am appointed Paymaster-General; while you, if you play your cards well, may be anything from Grand Vizier downward. I think you have reason to congratulate yourself."

"Murkard, you are playing fair, aren't you?"

Murkard turned white as death.

"Playing fair! you are playing fair, aren't you? What the devil makes you use those infernal words to me again? My God, man! do you want to send me into hell a raving lunatic?"

He ran his fingers through his long hair and glared at his companion, who sat too astonished at this sudden outburst to speak. But after a few moments he cooled down and resumed his natural, half-cynical tone:

"I beg your pardon. Hope I didn't startle you very much. Habit of mine. What beastly things words are. How they bring up like a flash the very things one's been trying for years to forget. Yes, yes! I intend to do my duty by this girl. I promise you that. By the way, that's the second time you've asked me that question this afternoon."

"I wanted to make certain, that was all. What are you staring at? Are you mad?"

"No, I think not. I was only wondering."

Ellison rose and went to the door. Leaning against the post he had an uninterrupted view of the still waters of the bay. Hardly a ripple disturbed its surface. The sun was in the last act of sinking into his crimson bed, and as he went he threw a parting shaft of blood-red light across the deep. Everything stood out with an unusual distinctness. Across the straits, so full of importance to them

that day, he could see the settlement of Thursday – count the houses and even distinguish people walking upon the sea-front. The peaceful beauty of the evening soothed his soul like sweetest music. He was happier than he had been for months, nay, years past. It seemed to him that he was in a new world – a world as far removed from that of the morning as is heaven from hell. He almost found it difficult to believe that he, the well-dressed, well-fed man, leaning against the doorpost, was the same being who only that morning had contemplated suicide on the pier-head over yonder, in that abject and black despair engendered of starvation. With this feeling of wonderment still upon him he turned his head in the direction of the station house – a lamp was just lighted in the sitting room, and by moving a step further to the left he could discern the loosely rolled brown hair of a woman's head. Almost unconsciously he sighed. It was a long time since any woman had manifested so much interest in him. Had he got past the desire to be worthy of it? No, he hoped not! He had told himself repeatedly since midday this was certainly his last chance, and come what might, having obtained it, he would make a struggle to win back the respect he had begun to believe he had lost forever.

The evening drew on. The night wind rose and played through the palm fronds above the hut, rubbing against the thatch with soothing sweep. Murkard was lying on his bed inside, smoking. Esther had brought her work on to the veranda, but had discarded it when the light failed, and now sat looking out across the sea. Ellison made no attempt to speak to her, and she gave no sign to show that she saw him. Some time afterward he heard Murkard put down his pipe, and come out to stand beside him.

"A beautiful night. Look at that last gleam of crimson low down upon the horizon. What are you thinking of, old man?"

Ellison did not make any reply for a minute, and then he said quietly:

"Of a night like this eight years ago! That's all."

"You ought not to have let her tell you."

"I couldn't help myself. It was done before I knew it. And then I had her guilty secret to keep as well as my own. Bah! what a fool I was. But what am I saying! How did you come to know anything of her?"

"Another of my guesses, that's all."

"Murkard, there's something devilish uncanny about you."

"Because you don't understand me, eh? No, no; don't be afraid, old man, you will never have cause to fear me. I owe you too much ever to prove myself ungrateful. Bear with my crotchets – for as surely as I stand before you now, the day will come when you will regret any harsh word you have ever spoken to me. My destiny is before me written in letters of fire – I cannot escape it, and God knows I would not if I could."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Don't ask me, or try to find out. When I saw your face for the first time that wet night on the wharf in Sydney, I knew you to be the man for whom I was sent into the world. There is a year of grace before us, let us enjoy it – then – well *then I shall do my duty*."

Ellison put his hand on the small man's deformed shoulder.

"Silas, I don't grasp what you're driving at!"

"Then, as I say, don't seek to know. Believe that I'm a dreamer. Believe that I'm a little mad. I shall never speak of it to you again. But to-night I felt as if I must speak out – the hand of the Future was upon me. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

As Murkard went in the woman rose from her chair, advanced to the veranda rails, and once more stood looking out across the bay. A clock in the Kanakas' hut struck ten. Then she too turned to go in. But before doing so she looked across at Ellison, and said kindly, "Good-night!"

"Good-night!" he called in return.

And all the silence of the world seemed to echo that "Good-night!"

CHAPTER III

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

Long before the first month was ended both men had settled down comfortably to their work-a-day existence. They had arrived at a thorough understanding of their duties, had made friends with their fellow-workers, and found it difficult to believe that they could be the same two men who were the beach-combers of the previous month. As for Murkard he derived the keenest pleasure from the daily, almost monotonous, routine of his office. He discovered abundance of work to keep him busy, his keen instinct detected endless opportunities of creating additional business, and he hoped that, when the owner of the station should return from his pearling venture, he might not only be in a position to convince him that his daughter's appointment was fully justified, but to demonstrate to him that it was likely to prove the stepping-stone to a sound commercial future. To Esther the man himself was a complete and continual mystery. Try how she would, she could not understand him. On one occasion a combination of circumstances led her to attempt to set him right on a certain matter connected with his own department. Much to her surprise and discomfiture she found him not only firmly resolved to assert his own independence, and to resist to the utmost any attempt at interference, but even prepared to instruct if need be. Routed on every side she had fled the field ignominiously, but though mortified at her rebuff, still she could not find it in her heart to quarrel with the man. To tell the truth, she was more than a little afraid of him, as he intended she should be. His sharp tongue and peculiar faculty of quiet ridicule were particularly distasteful to her. She preferred venting her abuse upon his inoffensive companion – who, it would appear, absolutely failed to do anything to her complete satisfaction.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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