

# **The Moccasins of Silence**

**Favenc, Ernest (1845-1908)**  
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## **The Moccasins of Silence**

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## Preface.

To the following story a preface is an actual necessity. I say this by way of apology, for as a rule a preface is seldom read. I am going to touch on an aboriginal custom not generally known, in fact it is only of late years that it has been brought to light. In the heart of Australia, namely in the neighbourhood of Barrow Creek and to the north of that locality, dwell tribes whose distinctive rites and ceremonies seem to set them apart from their brethren of other portions of the great Austral continent. These natives are exceedingly cunning in the construction of their weapons, and signs, much resembling hieroglyphic writing, have been found on them. But the most singular fact is that they are the only natives of Australia known to wear a foot-covering. Only a few pairs of these shoes have been brought into civilization. Mr. Norman Hardy has one pair, and there is a pair in the Australian Museum, on which Mr. R. Etheridge has written a paper, published in the records of the Linnean Society of N.S. Wales, from which I extract the following description:—

“It is now known that certain tribes of the aborigines, towards the centre of the continent, manufacture a very beautiful shoe composed of emu feathers. Two entirely different uses have been ascribed to these. On the one hand, the late Mr. E. M. Curr stated that the blacks of the Musgrove Ranges wear these shoes, when they attack their enemies by stealth at night; on the other hand, Mr. C. French, Government Entomologist, Melbourne, has more recently referred them to a portion of the stock-in-trade of the rain-maker of the McDonnell ranges.”

For the rest of this most interesting and instructive article, I must refer my readers to the records of the society above-mentioned.

The shoes are about 8 to 10 inches in length and 4 in breadth. The upper part is woven of human hair, the opening to admit the foot being in the centre. The soles are very thick and made of dry grass, mixed with gum and human blood. On the sole is then stuck a dressing of emu feathers which renders them as noiseless as the list slippers of the burglar. The shoes are exactly the same at each end, there being neither heel nor toe. In giving them the name of “Moccasins” I am aware that I am taking somewhat of a liberty, but the picturesqueness of the title was too alluring to be resisted.

ERNEST FAVENC.

# **The Moccasins Of Silence.**

## Chapter I. Madame da Lucca, nee Jones.

A group of New Guinea boys busily engaged in cleaning pearl-shell, chattering the while, as they wield their knives, and show their strong, even teeth in frequent laughter. Fine, strapping, copper-coloured fellows, with great mops of hair dyed yellow. A white man leans against the door post, dreamily smoking; trying hard to think of nothing and succeeding tolerably well. Beyond—is as fair a view as could be seen anywhere in the thousands of miles of the long Australian coast-line.

It is the glorious winter weather of the southern tropic, and the deep blue waters of the almost land-locked strait are rippling merrily under the breath of the steady south-east monsoon. The grey hills of Prince of Wales Island stand out in striking contrast to the white sands at their feet, and the entrance to the narrow passage separating it from Friday Island is just visible, looking like the mouth of a picturesque inlet. White sails on the sea, white houses clustering here and there on the shore, make a scene gay with color and sparkling with sunshine.

“The flag's up, Tom,” says a voice; “she's just rounding Goode Island,” and the speaker, approaching, lays his hand on the smoker's shoulder.

“Heaps of time,” returns Tom, knocking his pipe out; “but I suppose I may as well get ready.”

“Take a turn on the beach first,” replies the new-comer, “I have something more to tell you.”

They stroll on until they stand close to the lapping wavelets kissing the shell-strewn strand, then Annett, a man some five or six years older than his partner, Tom Duckworth, speaks: “The main thing, of course, as you know, is to find out the whereabouts of Ras Mahad.” Tom nodded. “Hillsden knows, but, if he won't tell, I don't exactly see how you are to make him; that is, without letting him into our confidence, and he's too big a scamp for that. But we discussed all this before. What I have to tell you is this. You remember the boy Djuran we picked up adrift on that proa, half-starved. He knows quite as much about what we want to find out as Ras Mahad himself. Comes from the same place, probably a relation of some sort. I heard last night that he was on the nor'-west coast, and it's my belief that Ras Mahad is there too, so, if you can make nothing out of Hillsden when you're down, we'll go round there and see.”

“I don't see why Hillsden should refuse to tell me what he knows.”

“Simply because he is one of those suspicious, grasping rogues who would immediately suspect that you had some ulterior motive in asking the question.”—

“Which I have,” interrupted Tom.

“True; but whether you had or not he would presume that you had, and tell you a lie on principle. It's one satisfaction to know that, if you get nothing out of him, he'll get nothing out of you.”

Tom smiled grimly; the reticence of his nature was well known in Torres' Strait.

“Here she comes round the point,” went on Annett, “You'll go and see Ruth as soon as ever you get down;” and the two men turned back to the hotel.

The E. and A. steamer slowed down and picked up the water-police boat with the resident and customs-officer on board, then, after a brief interval, went alongside the hulk, made fast, and immediately a furious blast on the whistle proclaimed the fact that she had no time to waste at Thursday Island.

The agent's boat, with its smart-looking coloured crew, had just returned from the steamer and was waiting at the boat jetty when the partners came down, both now dressed in immaculate white, the luggage was put in and the two men were soon alongside the China boat. From the greetings Tom received as he stepped on board, it was evident that he was both well-known and well-liked. The cargo was rapidly transhipped to the hulk, the third whistle blew, and with a warm handshake the two men parted. “Who is your lady passenger?” asked Duckworth of the purser, as he regarded a feminine object in a cane chair on the poop.

“From Hong Kong. By the way, she came up with us over two years ago, the last time that you did.”

“What, that sallow girl with the big eyes? Let's see, what was she going to do—join her relations at Singapore or somewhere?”

“Yes, I think so. At any rate she's married now, so you're safe.”

“Whom did she marry?”

“Say—*What* did she marry? Some sort of a half-bred Portuguese. Plenty of money, seemingly, for she's a walking jeweller's shop. She gave us to understand that when she got married she stipulated to have a trip to Australia once a year for her health.”

“O hang it!” said Tom wearily, “she'll expect me to remember her and play pretty, and all that sort of thing. Come on, like a good fellow, and let's have some whisky first.”

The refreshment concluded, Duckworth went to his cabin and saw his traps stowed. The purser was sitting at the table with a lot of papers before him when he again stepped into the saloon, and the purser made a slight gesture towards the main-deck.

“She's waiting for you,” he said, with a grin.

“What was her maiden name, do you remember?” asked Duckworth. “I must address her by that. I'm not supposed to know that she is married.”

“Blessed if I know. She calls herself Madame da Lucca now, but I can't remember what she was as a Miss. Something grand I believe, Montagu, Montmorency, or a name of that sort. Here's Rawlins”—as the third officer entered—“he'll know, he was awfully gone on her. What was Madame's maiden name before she was married?”

“Miss Jones,” returned Rawlins shortly.

“So it was,” said the purser.

“Go ahead, old man, you're right now. Go and get it over.”

Tom stepped out of the saloon. It may be supposed that the lady had also been making enquiries about his identity, for she flashed a radiant glance of recognition at him.

“So we are to be fellow-passengers once more, Miss Jones,” he said, as they shook hands.

“Yes, only you're not a fellow-passenger with Miss Jones, but with Madame da Lucca.”

“Then I have to congratulate somebody unknown to me?”

“You have”—she smiled—“and, without wishing to flatter you, I may say I am glad to see you on board, for we have only two other passengers and they are both invalids.”

Duckworth had been eyeing her curiously. The scraggy girl with the sallow face and big eyes that he now recalled, had been improved out of existence. The big eyes still remained, but the sallow complexion had developed into a warm olive tint which she had the good sense to leave alone, and the angularities of her form had rounded themselves into curves. “She must have been a good deal younger than we supposed,” thought Tom. “I have heard that these ‘legs-and-wings’ girls have a knack of suddenly surprising people this way.”

“Certainly your remark is not flattering,” he said aloud, “as you infer that if there had been some more passengers you would not have cared whether I came on board or not.” Madame da Lucca laughed. “You're changed, Mr. Duckworth. I remember you as a very frigid person indeed, whom one could scarcely get two words from.”

“You are changed, too,” he said unthinkingly.

“I suppose I am,” she said, after a pause. “I was the grub then; I am the butterfly now.”

“I never meant anything so rude,” he said, hastily coloring as much as such a sun-tanned man could.

“Well, I forgive you if you did; you may sit opposite to me at dinner,” and, with a flash of the big eyes, she left Tom and entered the saloon.

“Well I'm blessed,” thought Duckworth, pushing his hat back and leaning against the side. “What a transformation! I suppose in the lot she has got amongst she has been queening it, and that has given her such confounded assurance.”

“Well!” said the purser as he approached and offered Duckworth a cigar, “how did you get on with Madame?”

“Look here!” returned Tom, “there's no humbug about this, is there? That's the same gawk that came up with us that time—not an elder sister?”

“It's the very same, that I'll vouch for. I don't believe she's got any sisters. I thought she'd astonish you.”

“Why hang it, man, she told me I could sit opposite to her at dinner! I suppose all you fellows would laugh if I had my chow sent into my cabin and said I was sea-sick?”

“We would so, and suggest that Madame should nurse you.”

## **Chapter II. How Surveyor Lestrell got The Moccasins of Silence.**

From the glad dancing waters of the Straits to the aridity of Central Australia is a quick and sudden change. It is night-time, and a young and sinking moon throws but a sickly light around—a light that is more confusing than starlight. There is no cheery camp-fire blaze here; for, down in a pit, dug deep in the earth to hide its glow, is a heap of glowing charcoal, and round it the members of the surveyor's camp warm their frosty hands and discuss the day's work.

Two men are standing somewhat apart from this subterranean furnace, and suddenly one stops and holds up his hand, and the other ceases speaking.

“There, Jim,” says Lestrell, the surveyor in charge, to his cadet, “I heard it again, I am sure. Let's get away from the camp and listen. Those confounded camels make as much noise as a blacksmith's bellows.”

The two go a few paces away from the camp and stand—listening. Patiently they remain, and are rewarded for their trouble.

From the far distance, seemingly right under the dying moon, rises a chant of men's voices, wild, rhythmic, and solemn.

“I never heard niggers make such a noise as that before,” says Jim, after the distant voices had died into silence.

“Nor I,” returns Lestrell, “But I tell you, man, they're a queer lot about these M'Donnell Ranges; quite different from the ordinary run of blacks. Their weapons have got strange minute carvings on them, like a language of signs.”

Again the far-away chant rises and sinks. Lestrell has taken out his compass, and, by the aid of a match, got the bearing. “Look here, Jim, there's something special on now that no white man has yet seen. What do you say to going and having a look? They can't be more than a couple of miles away, at the outside.”

“Risky,” returned Jim, “but we'll go. Let's wake up that boy Dando, he came from about here, and can explain what's going on.”

“Wake him if you can, but I'd rather you undertook the contract than I did. I know what waking a nigger up at this time of night is like.”

Jim however went away and by some means, best known to himself, succeeded, for he presently returned with a very sleepy-looking black boy of about twenty years of age

“Now Dando,” said Lestrell, “you keep quiet.”

Almost as the surveyor spoke the weird chant commenced again. If ever

there was a wide-awake nigger in one instant, that nigger was Dando. He caught Lestrell's arm with both hands, and the white man could feel him trembling as though the ague had suddenly attacked him.

"Now, what does it mean?" asked the surveyor when there was silence once more.

"Debbil!" said the boy in his broken English—"big fellow debbil!"

"We are going to look at him," said Jim, "and you must come too, Dando."

All Dando's prayers and supplications were of no avail, and the three started off in the direction of the strange sound. In less than two miles they were close to the reflection of a fire which they had seen as soon as they had got fairly away from the camp; apparently it was in a ravine running down from an outlying spur of the range, and, approaching cautiously, they found shelter behind some boulders, and looked down at the scene.

They were closer than they imagined, for the wavering light and the shadows had deceived them. There were but six blacks in all, five of them being fully armed and painted, but the sixth was unarmed and hideous to look upon. His face was whitened all over, so that his eyes seemed looking out of a mask, and every bone in his lean, naked body was picked out with white pigment, on which were stuck tufts of white feathers, cemented with human blood. At sight of this gruesome figure Dando crouched down beside Lestrell, shuddering convulsively.

This man seemed to be the leader of whatever diabolical rites were going on. He had before him what appeared to be a pair of shoes, and these appeared to be the especial objects of attention to all of them. He was busy with them when the whites first looked down, but, having finished whatever it was he was doing, he suddenly arose, holding them aloft, one in each hand, repeating some formula as he did so. At the words he uttered the blacks crouched down as if in terror, and Lestrell made sure that they would be discovered, Dando's quaking was so violent.

Three times the awful thing repeated the words, whatever they were—standing there in the red firelight, with skinny arms upraised, and a background of blackness behind. Presently he ceased, the other blacks raised their heads, and the weird chant arose once more. Uncanny as it had sounded at a distance, it was even more so when looking down upon the singers.

When silence succeeded, the necromancer rose up again and was about to proceed with some more of his mummery, when his gaze suddenly became fixed on the rock behind which the two white men were hiding. In their interest in what was going on, they had allowed too much of their heads to be seen, and the fire blazing up, had illumined their white faces. Yelling

and stamping with rage, the magician pointed towards them, and the other blacks, echoing his cries, shipped their spears and prepared to throw them.

Lestrell and Jim ducked, unhurt, as the weapons hurled against the rocks, and the former said to his companion: "No help for it now, Jim. I hate to have to do it, but it's our only chance. I'll take the medicine-man; you take the big fellow in the lead."

The blacks were advancing, the hideous white-and-black figure dancing in demoniac rage around the fire.

The two fired together. Jim's man went down in a heap and never moved; the medicine-man fell on his back; the others hesitated, looked around and fled.

"Get up!" said Lestrell, kicking Dando, who was still crouching on the ground.

"We're going to the camp. Come and tell us what all this debbil-debbil stuff has been about,"

Dando got up and gazed fearfully on all sides, but, seeing the camp apparently deserted, followed Lestrell and Jim down.

"I want to see what those things are that he was blessing, or cursing, or something," said Lestrell, and going forward he picked up the two objects lying near the body of the medicine-man.

They were a pair of beautifully woven slippers, or rather, moccasins, made the same at both ends, and strangely small, considering the size of a black-fellow's foot. So far as Lestrell could judge by the firelight, they were woven out of human hair.

"What are these for, Dando," he asked.

"Blackfellow go alonga 'nother fellow's camp, sun tumble down, kill him: that fellow no makum noise."

Lestrell looked at Jim, who was examining one of them. "Never heard of them before," he said, "but that must be their use, evidently. To sneak on an enemy at night and kill him."

"What was that old man saying, Dando?" asked Lestrell. "One time blood sit down. Two fellow blood sit down. Three fellow blood belonga man bin carry shoe."

Lestrell put the moccasins down, and as he did so said:— "We'll have a good look round and then get back to camp." A shriek from Dando stopped him.

Up rose the awful spectre of the medicine-man. He had been shot through the chest, and the blood had made hideous streaks of crimson across the white paint with which he was bedaubed. Swaying before the fire he stood, and, scooping up a handful of half congealed blood from his body, shook and sprinkled it over the moccasins. Then, with his

bloodstained hand uplifted to the stars, his sightless eyes staring out of the white mask that covered his face, he strove to utter once more the imprecation he had formerly repeated. With blood and froth oozing at every word from his half-dead lips, he called down his final curse and dropped dead at the end.

No man's nerve is proof against such a scene. It was some time before Lestrell mustered his, sufficiently to stoop and pick up the awful shoes of death.

“Once have they been wet with blood,” he said. “I will take them away and see that the curse is of no avail.”

The two men and the still quaking black boy returned to their camp, and in due time the survey was finished and Lestrell returned to Adelaide, taking with him the silent moccasins, the first of the kind that had ever been brought in from the interior.

### Chapter III. Ruth.

“You will call and see me,” said Madame da Lucca to Duckworth, as they said goodbye when the steamer reached Sydney. Tom, of course, replied that he would, and the cab drove away.

“Which shall I do first?” he thought, after he had settled himself at his own hotel; “go and see how Ruth is getting on, or have it out with Hillsden. I'll toss up.” He did so, and it turned out to be Hillsden.

Hillsden was an ex pearl-sheller, and an ex good many other things. He had relinquished pearl-shelling, or it had relinquished him, and had started an “Agency” in Sydney—a term which covers all the iniquities in life, from bailing out a drunken man to negotiating a loan for a few thousands. Hillsden, however, was supposed to keep to the Northern trade, and by the appearance of his office he seemed to flourish on it.

“Captain Duckworth, by Jove!” he cried, when Tom was ushered in. “Delighted to see you, old man,” he went on, wringing his hand as though they were the dearest friends who had been parted for years. “How are they all, up north.” “First-rate, when I left. Shell was getting scarce, but we've struck a fresh patch,” returned Tom.

“Glad to hear it.”

“How are you doing?”

“Fairly; can't grumble.”

For about half an hour the two talked “shop,” and Duckworth gradually led round to the opening he was looking for.

“By the way, talking of Darnley Island, what's become of that Malay diver you had out there—Ras Mahad?”

“I don't know; lost sight of him altogether. Why? Do you want him?”

“We want another diver, and he was a good man.”

“Yes, a steady sort of fellow; but I am under the impression, in fact, almost sure, that he went home.”

“That's a lie” thought Tom, and Hillsden, had just made the same mental remark concerning Tom's observation. “I should like to have got hold of him,” said Duckworth; “but, if you don't know where he is, I don't suppose anybody does, as you were the last man he was working for.”

“I've lost sight of him altogether, my dear fellow, but it struck me he was a bit homesick, and when those fellows get that way they generally depart, as you know.”

“I've got to go a short distance out of town this afternoon,” said Tom, rising, “so must be going.”

“Look me up to-morrow, old fellow, and we'll go and have some lunch

together. By the way, I forgot to ask after Annett?"

"He's first-rate, thanks."

"Ever heard the truth about his brother; whether he is alive or dead?"

"No; we are still in doubt."

"Nor the diamonds, either?" went on Hillsden, laughing. Tom laughed too, and had opened the door, when Hillsden suddenly said:—"Doesn't Ras Mahad know something about the site of the wreck?"

"We are all in the dark, and I don't suppose shall ever know more than we do now. See you to-morrow," and Duckworth closed the door.

"Seems to me I did more harm than good," he thought, as he gained the street. "Did'nt know that I was such a talkative fool before. Now I suppose I had better go out and see Ruth; wonder what she's grown like? Prim sort of name; reminds me of Priscilla, the Puritan maiden, and all that kind of thing."

Duckworth hailed a cab, for the ubiquitous trams had not then quite extended all over the Sydney suburbs, and after about a quarter of an hour's drive stopped at a pretty cottage, standing in fair-sized grounds. Everything about the place had a quiet, peaceful, old-world look, pleasant and refreshing. It was just the sort of place where you would expect to see the local curate a favoured and daily visitor.

"Miss Annett," said Tom, as he gave his card to the girl and was shown into a bright little drawing-room. Duckworth smiled as he looked round at the curios of all kinds about the room, every one telling of the torrid zone. He was gazing out of the window at the trim garden, in the indolent fashion peculiar to him, thinking, somehow, of Madame da Lucca's big eyes, when two hands were placed round his neck by someone who had stolen up softly behind him; his head was pulled back and a kiss bestowed on his cheek.

"There uncle Tom," said a girl's voice, "that's for you, and"—giving him another—"that's for uncle Dick."

Duckworth turned; caught her hands, and looked at her. Priscilla, the Puritan maiden, indeed!

The girl was about eighteen, but, beyond the impression she at once gave you that she was pretty, it would be almost impossible to describe her. She had a straight nose and a good mouth, but, except that her eyes were honest and merry, you could not have portrayed their colour, and her hair was the same—of a very indeterminate hue. Youth, health and sweetness seemed to be part and parcel of her being, and the fitting word for her would have been "bonnie."

Duckworth took her face between his hands and kissed her affectionately. Ever since the long absence of her father and his mysterious

fate, she had been as their child to both the partners. Once, when a boat capsized almost half-way between Thursday and Friday Islands, Tom swam ashore with her, and ever afterwards he had been her uncle by love, as Annett, his partner, was by blood.

"I've been looking out for you so long, uncle Tom," she said, "I thought that steamer was never coming in. You're going to stop a long while and give me a good time, aren't you?"

"You shall have the best of times while I'm here," returned Tom, laughing. "So, that's all you wanted me for, to give you a good time?"

"Not at all, you know I wanted *you*; but poor auntie can't get out, now. Here she comes," and she ran to the door, opened it, and lovingly assisted a lady of over middle age, who walked with the aid of a stick. Tom, too, went to meet her, and her face, which was a remarkably kindly one, brightened at sight of him. Together they put her in an invalid chair, and Duckworth sat beside her, while the girl took possession of a low stool on the other side.

"My brother is well, I know from your letter," said Miss Annett. "How is he looking?" "Just the same as ever; not a bit older."

"No news of Reggy?" she asked, putting her hand as if unconsciously on the girl's head

"Nothing definite. One of us would have gone to look for him long ago had we any clue, but we might cruise all round New Guinea, and to every island between Thursday Island and the Malay Peninsula without avail, as it is."

"True," she replied.

"I have one thing to tell you," went on Duckworth. "But for this silly story that he had a big parcel of diamonds from Borneo with him, I believe we should have found out the truth long ago. We know that although the proa was wrecked right enough; the probabilities are that every one got ashore safely; but unfortunately we did not find this out until too late. Ras Mahad, one of the men on board, was diving for a man named Hillsden, and he must have let something drop, for we cannot find him, and I am certain Hillsden knows where he is and can put his hand on him. We did not know that this Ras Mahad was one of the crew of the proa until after his disappearance. We would tell this Hillsden what we wanted the man for, simply to find out where the proa was wrecked, but he is a bit of a rogue and would play us false, for he has got this story of the diamonds on the brain. However, there is a young fellow named Djuran who was also on board the proa, and Annett has heard that he is engaged at the pearl-fishery on the north-west coast; so we may probably take the schooner and go round there. We picked up this boy alone on a deserted proa, half-starved,

but he could not talk English at the time, so, again we were in ignorance that we had a chance.”

“It is over two years now,” said Miss Annett.

“Yes, but I'm of the opinion that he will turn up at any time, there are a dozen causes that might have delayed him.” “I am glad to hear you say that, for I have the same hope myself. You know as well as I do what an erratic fellow Reggy was and how his love for adventure and discovery would make him go anywhere and forget everything.”

“Don't I? If the proa was wrecked on the New Guinea coast for instance, I have not the slightest doubt but what he would at once start off to see what the interior was like.” Miss Annett smiled, but her face wore a more hopeful look since she had been talking to Tom. “Will you stay with us Mr. Duckworth, or have you taken a room in town?”

“Ruth says she has got to have a good time while I am down,” replied Tom. “Is there anything worth seeing at any of the theatres?”

“Yes;” struck in Ruth, “there is an opera company playing ‘Faust’ to night, I want to see that.”

“Very well then, Miss Annett, if Ruth will be content with the humble stalls, I will stay here and take her in, if not I must go back and dress.”

“Oh, I prefer the humble stalls, Uncle Tom.”

“At that rate, I'll send my cabman away and tell him to come back to take us in tonight.”

“Uncle Tom,” whispered Ruth that night, during one of the intervals, “There's a lady in the dress-circle keeps staring either at you or me through her opera-glass. I think it's at me. I wish she would'nt.” “What's she like?” asked Duckworth.

“Dark, with a lot of diamonds” “Is she looking now?” asked Tom, still without turning his head.

Ruth stole a glance. “No; she has turned round to speak to some one.”

Duckworth looked round hastily. “Yes, I know her, Ruth; she was a passenger on board the steamer; comes from Hongkong.”

“A walking jeweller's shop,” he thought—“a bazaar, rather; still, she's is a fine-looking woman.”

But, in spite of her being a fine-looking woman, Tom kept his attention riveted on the stage for the remainder of the performance. Somehow Madame da Lucca and his niece by adoption did not seem to harmonise, so he avoided a recognition in the most cowardly and ungrateful manner.

## Chapter IV. Madame da Lucca asserts Herself.

“Madame da Lucca,” said Hillsden's clerk, as he ushered that lady into the presence of his principal. The big eyes, the perfect get-up, and the gracious manner, had all done their work. When that clerk went home that evening to his suburban cottage, he thought how common and dowdy his poor little wife looked, and wondered how he could have thrown himself away in such a hasty and careless fashion, instead of waiting until he came across a countess.

The greeting between Hillsden and the lady from the Straits was cordial enough in its way, but it was not until some time had elapsed that anything of any interest to this story was entered on.

“I've taken a fancy to Tom Duckworth,” said Madame, at last, leaning back in her chair. “Sorry for Duckworth!” replied Hillsden.

“So am I, if he doesn't do as I want him to do.”

“What's that?”

“Never mind; I have a plan of my own.”

Hillsden considered a moment.

“I should advise you to leave Duckworth alone; he's too old and wary a bird, and not the style of fool you are accustomed to.”

The big eyes flashed wrath.

“Mr. Hillsden, the fact that you—a man—once took advantage of an unprotected girl, does not now entitle you to tell me that I am only fit to deal with fools. Let me remind you that our positions have changed since those days, and that I fancy I know better than you do what I can or cannot do.”

The man addressed looked down, as much abashed as a man like him could be, and trifled with the papers on his desk. The woman was magnanimous, and passed on to another subject at once.

“Where is Ras Mahad?”

“I believe, on the north-west coast.”

“And you have implicit faith in this story of his that Annett had these diamonds in his possession when the proa was wrecked?”

“I have, for I have heard from other sources that he obtained them from the Rajah of Bamilok.”

“And the proa was wrecked?”— “Somewhere on the coast of Timor.”

“And Annett is there still? But I can't understand that—these are not the days of Robinson Crusoe and desert islands.”

“That's exactly the puzzle. Annett knows his way about as well as any one, so I am beginning to think he must be dead.”

“And that was all you found out from Ras Mahad?”

“Yes; he spoke bad English, and was very pig-headed; and when you get hold of a pig-headed Mahomedan you might as well try to get information from a Chinaman.”

“I have come down prepared to supply you with money to prosecute the search for the whereabouts of that diamond-field in Borneo which Annett, dead or alive, got those diamonds from. The people at my back can obtain full concessions from the Dutch Government. All we want is the locality, and *that* Annett knows. If he is dead, he has left it behind in his papers for the benefit of his daughter. By the way, I saw Duckworth at the theatre, the other night, and he had a young girl with him; I suppose that was Annett's daughter?”

“Probably; a pretty girl, I understand.”

Madame da Lucca's lip curled. “Well, I suppose some people might call her pretty, in a bread-and-butter sort of way; but that has nothing to do with us. What is the first move to be made?”

“Find Ras Mahad, and bribe him to tell us where the proa was wrecked.”

“And you think you know of his whereabouts, I suppose? It means you having to go to Cossack!”

“And giving up my business here?”

“Now, Mr. Hillsden, do you imagine I am so ignorant as to think that the business of a general agent in Sydney, just now, means much more than a living?”

Hillsden laughed, but he was not a man who liked a joke against himself, and his laugh was forced. “Of course I am not making a princely fortune, but still, things are improving.”

“Then let it be understood that you go after this Malay, and soon, or Duckworth will be before you. We can come to definite arrangements tomorrow or the next day.”

Hillsden bowed; all trace of levity had long since vanished. “I will try and detain Duckworth, somehow; for, from what he let drop, I know he is hot on this quest after Annett. By the way, what's the girl's name; do you know?”

“Yes, she was up at Thursday Island as a child; her name is Ruth.”

At this moment Hillsden's clerk entered with a card. “Lestrell,” said Hillsden, musingly; “yes, I remember. Ask him to wait a few minutes, will you?”

Madame da Lucca rose as the clerk closed the door. “Goodbye for the present; to-morrow or the next day we will make definite arrangements; you have my address.” Hillsden opened the door and she passed out. In the outer office sat a deeply sun-tanned man. He was goodly to look on, and

Madame bestowed an appreciative glance upon him as the enthralled clerk showed her out.

“Mr. Lestrell, I suppose,” she thought, as she descended the stairs. “Now, who is Mr. Lestrell?”

“Well, Mr. Lestrell,” said Hillsden, as the latter entered, “how have you been faring since we met in Port Darwin?” “Hard graft, mostly; away in the centre of Australia. You got my letter?”

“Yes, and have made the enquiries you asked me to make. There has been no time as yet for a reply from head-quarters; but, from what I can learn locally, it is all O.K.

“I suppose we shall hear soon. I don't expect it will be a particularly pleasant billet; but at any rate it means change and experience.”

“As I understand it, your prospective contract is to assist at the coming definition of the exact boundary between the Dutch and Portuguese in Timor?”

“Yes! I go as a neutral to see fair play all around. As the place is a hot-bed of fever, and the Dutch survey-party and the Portuguese party are sure to quarrel, why, I don't think it will turn out much of a picnic.” Hillsden laughed; “Whereabouts do you begin?” he said, leading his visitor up to one of the maps on the wall.

“Here,” returned Lestrell, indicating a position on the West Coast. Hillsden looked hard at it, and an interested look came in his eyes. “Well,” he said, “I don't envy you the job, but I suppose the pay is good.”

“Yes, but what I want to make sure of is that it will be paid—that's why I wrote from Adelaide to ask you to make enquiries. I heard that you had commenced business here.” “I am just about to retire, though. Meanwhile I will do all I can to get you the information wanted. When do you start?”

“Not for some weeks. Can you give me Duckworth's address? I heard that he was in Sydney.”

“Yes, the E—— Hotel; we had lunch together, the other day.”

“Good-bye,” said Lestrell, rising to go. “I have got to see about rooms. I have some work to complete, and want a couple, one to work in and one to sleep in, as I work late at night, and I hate a boarding-house. Which is the best building?” “Oh! there are whips of them now in Sydney; here, I'll write down a few names.” He did so, handed it to Lestrell, and the latter left the office.

Hillsden went over to the map and regarded it intently; then he sat down and wrote a note. “Take this to Madame da Lucca,” he said to his clerk.

The note ran: “Never mind Duckworth—Lestrell is your man. I will undertake that you shall meet him. He is going near to the very spot, in a few weeks, with two parties of Portuguese and Dutch surveyors, to help to

define the exact boundary in Timor between the two nations.”

## Chapter V. Ruth makes a Conquest.

Duckworth and Lestrell had often met and become rather attracted to each other, their greeting then was cordial in the extreme.

“Are you engaged this evening?” asked Tom.

“No, nothing of any importance.”

“Then come out with me. You know my partner Annett, I am going out to see his sister, who is a great invalid. We will have dinner there, and can discuss this trip of yours. I am greatly interested in it, for private reasons.”

“Thanks!” I’ll come; I’ll call for you about 5.”

“Aunt!” said Ruth that afternoon, “here’s a telegram from Uncle Tom; he is coming out to dinner, and is going to bring a real, live man with him.”

“I don’t suppose he would bring a dead one,” returned her aunt.

“I’ll have to get something extra of course, and luckily my new dress came home yesterday.”

Lestrell stood in the little drawing room strewn with tropical curios. Duckworth had gone out of the room on some errand, for he was of course free of the house. The door opened and Lestrell looked up expecting to see him return, but instead of his weather-beaten face there appeared a perfect Hebe of health and spirits who advanced to greet him by name with a smile of welcome.

Lestrell had plenty of self-possession, but for once he was disconcerted. “This is a nice trick of master Tom’s,” he thought, “I’ll pay him for it some day.”

“Miss Annett?” he asked enquiringly, as he took the hand she extended to him.

“I am Ruth Annett; Miss Annett is my aunt.” This explained matters, and when Duckworth returned he found that the ice had been broken in the most satisfactory manner.

Lestrell thought it was the best dinner he had eaten for a long time. The sweet-mannered old lady at the head of the table; the brilliant little beauty opposite to him, and his old friend at the foot.

“Have you seen that lady again, uncle?” asked Ruth; “the one that stared at me so at the theatre.”

“I called as I promised, but she was out, and I am not sorry; she is certainly handsome enough, and her eyes cannot be beaten; but I have no desire to keep up the acquaintance.”

“Who is the lady under discussion?” asked Miss Annett.

“A Madame da Lucca, from Singapore,” answered Tom shortly, evidently wanting to drop the subject.

“Tennyson's words fit her exactly,” went on Ruth unheeding: “A queen with swarthy cheeks and bold black eyes.”

Lestrell looked up quickly. “Strange, when I was at Hillsden's office a lady came out who honoured me with a very decided stare; and the same quotation came into my head.” “Hillsden's office?” mused Tom, “then ten chances to one it was the same woman. I hope Hillsden's not a friend of yours, for I have no opinion of him.”

“Scarcely an acquaintance, but I heard he was in business here and wrote to him asking him to make certain enquiries for me.”

“Concerning this trip?”

“Yes, I wanted to find out who were the responsible parties here, to guarantee the money.”

“We must have a yarn about this presently, but Ruth won't let us talk shop now.”

The dinner finished successfully; and then Tom and the guest adjourned to the little den; formerly sacred to Ruth's father, and lit their cigars.

“Now,” commenced Duckworth, “I have strong reasons for asking these questions, so don't think me curious or impertinent. You told Hillsden the spot in Timor you were about to visit?”

“I did, showed it to him on the map.”

“Did he appear interested?”

“Come to think of it—he did.”

“Ruth's father was wrecked somewhere on that part of the coast we have reason to believe. He was in a native proa at the time, but our information is of the vaguest. One of the Malays was afterwards in Hillsden's employ at Darnley Island, and we believe that Hillsden found out something about it, for a foolish yarn that at the time, Annett had a valuable parcel of diamonds with him, began to float about the Straits. Mind you I do not credit one word of it, but unfortunately it was sufficient to make Hillsden keep back from us the information he had received—more or less—as to the locality of the wreck. This man Ras Mahad has since gone away; I believe Hillsden has an idea where he is, but no money to follow the thing up.”

“But if your partner's brother is in Timor why does he not communicate with you? Timor is not such an outlandish place.”

“That is the mystery, and I am afraid points to his death. Now, if it is to be a duel between us, why we have a card up our sleeve that Hillsden knows nothing of. Annett and I picked up an abandoned proa once when we were out with the schooner off Cape Wessel. On board was a young Malay, half or nearly quite starved. We rescued him and took him to our station on Friday Island, and from there he went to the nor' west. After he

had gone we found out that he was another of the survivors of the wrecked proa. He was a bright boy when he pulled round, and the other fellow was sullen and morose, and above all Hillsden knows nothing about this boy. I intend to take the schooner and go round to try and find him before long, so we may yet meet in Timor. Now, will you help us to find Ruth's father?" "Will I!" cried Lestrell, jumping up in his emphasis, "with my last drop of blood! Perhaps, had he not met Ruth the reply would have been somewhat more moderate and less romantic."

The two shook hands, and Duckworth took up the tale again, "I am almost certain that it was this Madame da Lucca you saw in Hillsden's office, if so, it means mischief. They have been in communication before, and she has brought down the needful money."

"Hillsden told me he was about to give up his business."

"That's it!" shouted Tom.

"It can't be only a coincidence. We must act at once. Thank Heaven I met you, for you will help us and not them."

"I will do anything and everything I can."

"I know that; I must go north again, but we will have a long talk before I leave. Now let us go back, if you've finished your cigar. Miss Annett, I know, wants to have a quiet talk with you. She was very fond of her brother. He was a rambling fellow, quite unlike my steady-going self, so of course all the women of the family worshipped him."

While Lestrell was telling Miss Annett of the purpose of his coming trip, Ruth put her uncle Tom through a severe cross-examination as to Lestrell and all about him. It was late for that quiet household before he left, and it was with many promises of more visits before starting that he said farewell to his hostess, who, now that she knew he was to be associated in the search for her brother, wished to show him that she did not regard him as an ordinary visitor. Tom left his friend at his temporary lodgings at the hotel, and Lestrell went to the smoking room to consume a last cigar and meditate on the first girl's face that had ever dwelt long in his memory. Passing the letter rack he looked there and found a letter that had come during his absence. It ran:

"DEAR LESTRELL,—Will you come to my office at 11.30 tomorrow? I have some special business to see you about in connection with your visit to Timor, which has cropped up since we met. Trusting I am not interfering with any prior engagement by this request, I am, &c., yours truly, J. F. HILLSDEN."

"Lestrell read the note deliberately, then he smiled somewhat cynically. Duckworth was right after all, he thought. Fortunately I have the run of the cards. Fancy having to take sides against that girl! But I'll keep the

appointment! Needless to say that 'that girl' was Ruth Annett. Hillsden's note brought Madame da Lucca back that afternoon.

"Is that the man I saw in the front office?" she asked eagerly.

"It is," he replied, "and we must have him on our side, and if necessary, take him partly into our confidence."

"How am I to get to know him?"

"That's it; let me think it out. Have your people no interests in Dilli that you can ask him to enquire about coffee plantations, or anything; say you heard from me that he was going on an important mission."

"That will do capitally. I only want to know him, and I will win him to our interests. Does he know Duckworth?"

"Yes, well; he has gone to see him this afternoon."

"Did you give him the address?"

"Certainly."

"Hills-den!" cried the woman rising in a rage from her chair.

"You are a fool! Why, he will learn all from him, meet and see that namby-pamby niece, learn that it is her father who is missing. We are too late."

"I should have been a fool not to give it when someone would probably have run against Duckworth in the street and learnt from him what I knew all the time," returned Hillsden hotly. Madame da Lucca paced up and down the room in intense anger. At last she stopped, having evidently put some constraint on herself.

"She has got the start," she muttered to herself, "but there will perhaps be more pleasure in the chase, after all. Hillsden, I apologise; carry out the idea you proposed just now. Write and ask this man Lestrell here at, say, half past 11 to-morrow morning. I will be here and have a good yarn ready."

She left the room without waiting for him to open the door.

"Phew! she's a terror," muttered the ex-pearl sheller. "Wonder why she is so madly jealous of this little girl? Lestrell is going to have stormy weather of it, whether he will or whether he won't, but it's no business of mine, that part of it;" and he sat down and wrote the note.

## Chapter VI. The Game Commences.

Tom Duckworth had just finished his breakfast and was meditating on the day's work before him, when Lestrell came in to the smoking-room where he was enjoying his first cigar.

"You were a true prophet, old man," Lestrell said, drawing a chair beside him, and handing him Hillsden's note. "That does not require much reading between the lines."

Duckworth glanced over it. "This means fight," he said. "I must go back by the first boat, and Annett and I will take the schooner round to the nor' west at once and secure that boy I told you of. They are welcome to Ras Mahad. I'll be there first, or my name is not Tom Duckworth."

"But how am I to act?" asked Lestrell. "I intend to keep the appointment this morning, but what to do or say I have not determined."

"Now you get into questions of diplomacy beyond my humble capacity. I know what would be the best thing to do, but it's the kind of work that neither of us are cut out for."

"You mean, *prétend* to fall in with her views and get her to confide them to you under—false pretences, shall we say?"

"That's it. That's what Hillsden would do, and that's what she intends to do with you, if she can, but I know very well, it's what you can't do."

"I think I'll keep clear altogether; send an excuse this morning."

"No. This is quite open and honest on your part, you simply go there to find out what they want to see you about. I see nothing underhand about that, so far."

"Very well, I'll face the enemy, and you—you old poltroon, are going to run away."

"To fight another day," laughed Tom. "Now, look here,—I think you can take care of yourself, but, Madame da Lucca is marked *dangerous*."

"If she makes eyes at me again, like she did the other day in Hillsden's office, I should most decidedly think so."

"Well, well, old man, I don't suppose, at your age, you object to a little mild flirtation with a pretty woman?"

"Perhaps not, once, at present I do." (He did not even own to himself that it was since he met Ruth.) "Mild flirtation, indeed! there would be nothing mild with her, if I'm a judge of character. However, I'll bell the cat, and report progress; you can't leave for a day or two."

A couple of hours later, Lestrell was seated in Hillsden's office. My client, Madame da Lucca, is interested, through her husband, in some extensive coffee-plantations in Timor; there has been some difficulty out

there, lately, and hearing of your intended trip, she wishes to see you before you leave; in fact, she might come in at any moment.”

“What can I do in the matter? I fail to see.”

“Just oblige her by making enquiries when you are at Dilli, on one or two points which she will supply you with.”

“Madame da Lucca!” said the doubly enthralled clerk, opening the door. Hillsden and Lestrell rose.

“You are Mr. Lestrell,” she said, approaching him without waiting for Hillsden to mention his name, and she held out a hand of welcome, while Hillsden placed a chair for her.

Lestrell could not fail to be struck by her beauty, and a magnetic charm in her manner; but the thought that flashed through his brain was: “I am glad I met Ruth Annett first.”

“So you are going to Timor, Mr. Lestrell. Have you been there before?”

“No, New Guinea has been my limit.”

“There is lovely scenery in Timor. I was there once, but it is very unhealthy; are you fever-proof?”

“Well, I ought to be, but no one can say for certain. Hillsden said there was some little service I might be able to render you out there. If so, believe me I shall be most happy to do anything in my power.”

“When do you think of starting, Mr. Lestrell?”

“Not for some weeks.”

“I am expecting some letters down shortly, giving me fuller details on the subject; probably to-morrow morning. Would you find it too much trouble to call and see me tomorrow afternoon?” and she turned a full broadside on him.

“Mr. Hillsden has my address,” she said, as she gave him her hand again, and a distinct pressure with it; then the misguided clerk showed her out.

“Who is Madame da Lucca?”

Lestrell said suddenly to Hillsden.

“Her husband is a very wealthy Portuguese merchant in Singapore.”

“Considerably older than herself, I should imagine?”

“A natural guess, and a true one. Those kind of gorgeous women always do marry old men, and very sensible they are to do it, for they get their own way, then; and I need scarcely tell you that Madame da Lucca *will* have her own way. What do you think of her?”

“Physically, she is a most beautiful creature; spiritually, I think, when, as you say, she could not get her own way, she could be a devil. Now give me the address, for although I shall be pretty busy, I will call and see her.”

“Have you got rooms yet?” asked Hillsden as he left.

“Yes, I have taken two in Sonaro Chambers. One is a large, well-lighted

room, just suited for my work. I shall shift my traps in probably this afternoon. Good-bye."

Hillsden commenced arranging his papers. "It strikes me," he thought, "that Madame will run against a snag this time, and—I'm d——d glad of it." He snapped this out viciously; then he called in the clerk and told him that in a week's time he would be leaving the office and throwing up the business—ruthlessly thus dragging down that youth from visions of lovely women with flashing dark eyes, to the prosaic reality that in a week he would be out of a billet.

Lestrell had promised to lunch with Duckworth, and he went straight to Tom's hotel, but Tom was out, and did not turn up until nearly one o'clock.

"I have had a wire from my partner," he said; "sent to Cooktown by the steamer following mine. He was taken very ill immediately after I left, and the doctor has ordered him south at once. I can't stop to meet him; we shall probably cross each other on the way, for I must not miss the fine weather and get caught in one of those nor'-west hurricanes. However, you will be here. You know Annett, and he knows you, so you will be able to confer together as well as you and I. Now, how did you get on this morning?"

"I'm blessed if I know. Between ourselves, I believe she has no more interest in coffee-plantations in Timor than I have. She expects letters down, and wants me to call to-morrow afternoon. Nothing definite."

Tom pushed his plate away with a jerk. "Have you finished? Come into the smoking-room. I can't talk amongst all this clatter. There'll be nobody in there, now."

Duckworth lit his cigar.

"Madame wants to get you alone for some purpose, and it's my opinion that she'll tell you some garbled story about Annett. She does not want information about coffee-plantations; she wants to make a fool of you, so that, if you hear anything of Annett and these precious diamonds—rot them!—you will tell her. Did she make eyes at you again?"

Lestrell laughed. "Yes, I think she makes eyes at everybody; it's second nature."

"First nature, my boy. But you won't lose your head, will you?"

"Not to Madame da Lucca, at any rate. I can't answer for another woman when my time comes."

"It hasn't come yet, at any rate," said unsuspecting Tom.

"Mine came many, many years ago. Who do you think was the woman, Lestrell?"

"I cannot guess, old fellow." Duckworth took his cigar from his mouth, and his eyes grew dreary; a new light illumined his rugged features. "You would scarcely think that Miss Annett was once as pretty as Ruth is now?"

“I can; she has a good face, a kind face, like one whom some great sorrow has once stricken.”

“You are right,” and Tom laid his hand on his friend's knee. “She is not old in years, although she looks it. I was too late, too late! You understand her love had been given already.”

“And he proved unworthy and broke her heart?”

“No, Lestrell, no! She could never love an unworthy man; her instincts are too pure and true. You remember the wreck of the Barcelona?” “I do; an awful wreck it was.” “He was chief officer, and went down doing his duty to the last. It was a terrible shock; it aged her prematurely, and she has been an invalid ever since. But we are true friends, I am proud to say, and, if trouble came, which God forbid, she knows that I am at her service with all I have.” Tom leaned back in his chair and smoked vigorously for a while.

“Enough of this,” he said suddenly. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

“I was thinking of fixing up my rooms. I must buy some trestles for my work, &c., and a few things for my bedroom.”

“I'll come and help you. It will do me good, and, between us, we'll soon straighten the place out. Then, come out with me to dinner. I go out there every evening when I am in town. They lead a very quiet, retired life.”

“I will come with the greatest pleasure,” returned Lestrell. He did not ask where?—but there was no need, although Tom had not mentioned a name. When Lestrell and Tom returned together that night, Duckworth thought him the most unsociable companion he had had for a long time. When he did speak, he answered at random.

## Chapter VII. Measuring Swords.

Lestrell guessed that his visit was reckoned upon as a certainty when he went, the next afternoon, to the hotel Madame patronised, for he was at once ushered up to her sitting-room. She was dressed in a loose gown, plain, but evidently expensive, and had just enough jewellery on for effect. The sleeves were short enough and loose enough to show the rounded arm, tapering to the wrist, set off by a single plain bracelet. Her eyes had lost the hard look that often marred their radiance, and were as soft and shy as a timid girl's. The resemblance was heightened when a slight flush came to her face as she greeted her guest with a smile.

"Dangerous, indeed," thought Lestrell as he sat down. One glance round had shewn him that the conventional furniture of the hotel sitting-room had been entirely changed in appearance by the addition of rare and curious knickknacks, evidently the property of Madame da Lucca, and making an appropriate background to her warm beauty.

"Fancy, Mr. Lestrell! Those bothering letters have never turned up, after all, and I have brought you here for nothing." Lestrell told the conventional lie that she evidently expected, and she went on.

"However, I'll try and make some amends. Do you drink tea?"

"Of course. I am a bushman, and tea is the national beverage in the bush."

"Is it? I only know Australian cities; I have never been in the bush. As you are a tea-drinker I will give you a treat; some very special tea I brought down myself, and which you could not buy in Sydney."

She touched the knob of the bell close to her, and a maid-servant shortly entered—evidently also Madame's private property. She received a few instructions and left.

"Now, Mr. Lestrell, when the tea comes we will have a chat about Timor. I have a story to tell you, but I always feel more eloquent when I have a cup of tea before me; it seems to do away with a lot of formality."

"I quite agree with you," returned Lestrell. "We are only savages, after all, and eating and drinking together are our signs of amity, as it is with them."

"When one man meets another after a long separation it is the invariable formula to go and have a drink together, is it not?"

"I verily believe it is," he replied.

"Then I shall regard this cup of tea as a sign of amity between us for the future."

As she spoke, the maid came in with the beverage, and, after placing it

on a small table convenient to her mistress, left the room.

Lestrell rose and went over to take his cup from her, and he noticed that the set was of the most delicate Japanese ware, that, even in that country of cheap commodities, must have cost money. There was some wafer bread-and-butter, and he took a slice.

“Ah!” said Madame, when he had resumed his seat; “they put salt in butter, don't they.”

“I believe it is an essential.”

“Then, we have eaten salt together, and now I will tell you the story I promised to. Some years ago, a nephew of my husband's, who did a good deal of his business, travelling amongst the Islands of the Straits, disappeared. We could gain no tidings of him anywhere, although my husband used every means he could think of. Latterly we heard that he was last heard of on board of a proa, which proa was, we have reason to believe, wrecked on the coast of Timor. Now, Mr. Lestrell, comes in the strange part. On that same proa was Mr. Reginald Annett, the brother of Mr. Duckworth's partner. You see I am perfectly plain with you, for I know that Mr. Duckworth has been cold to me lately, and the only reason I can think of is that he supposes I have information about Annett which I have kept from him. Truly, Mr. Lestrell, I know no more than he does. You are the man who will probably solve the mystery of the disappearance of both men. And I want you to promise me this: if you hear any tidings of my husband's nephew, or of Annett—for the chances are that the two are together—nay! you might say it is a certainty—will you let me know at the earliest opportunity. I will give you a certain address which will speedily find me. My husband is very fond of this nephew, and I am anxious on his account.

During this communication Lestrell felt as though he should like to get up and run for it, as it dawned upon him, what an artful trap he was caught in. He no more believed in the mythical nephew than he did in the coffee-plantations. He was being led on to promise to let her know about Annett, if he came across him. She was looking at him somewhat anxiously.

“If I hear of anybody on Timor who is likely to be your husband's nephew, you may be sure, Madame da Lucca, that I will let you know as soon as ever I can.”

“But I am sure that he and Annett will be together,” she said; “if you hear of one, it will mean the other. Will you not also let me know if you have tidings of Annett?”

She rose from her seat; Lestrell rose too, and they stood close to each other.

“We have eaten bread and salt together,” she went on in a voice, every

word of which sounded like a caress. She held out her hand, which he took in his, and she let it remain there. "What reason can there be for you to refuse me this?"

The soft, luminous eyes looked up into his, and the rounded form seemed swaying towards him, as if to meet the expected embrace, while the hand he held—a warm, soft, but firm hand, one that is good to hold—sent a magnetic thrill through him. One short week ago, and he would have taken her in his arms and promised everything, but now—he raised her hand and kissed it.

"Rest assured, Madame da Lucca, that anything I can do for you in this matter, I will do."

"You will come and see me to-morrow afternoon, will you not? I may have my letters by then," she almost whispered.

"I will come," he said hastily, and the next moment the door closed behind him.

The woman he had left paced up and down the room.

"Nine men out of ten would have been at my feet," she murmured to herself. "He is the tenth, and I will take him away from that baby-faced doll, I swear." She lifted her hand and kissed the place which Lestrell's lips had touched, as if to seal her oath.

"How on earth did I get out of that fix?" thought Lestrell, as he walked away quickly.

"I didn't promise anything definite, and I only kissed her hand—that doesn't count for much."

The hotel where Duckworth was staying was on his road, and he met Tom coming out.

"Come into the bar," he said, "I want some whisky."

They went in together.

"That's a good stiff nip for you, Lestrell," said Duckworth, looking at his companion's glass. "What's the matter?"

"I've been having afternoon tea with Madame da Lucca, and she nearly got the best of me."

"What's the game, now?"

"O, there's a nephew adrift—a nephew of her husband's—adrift somewhere in the Straits, and she thinks I may hear of him. Madame is quite convinced that he is with Annett, and that he was wrecked on the same proa, so, if I hear of either of them, she wants me to promise faithfully that I will at once communicate with her."

"Rather transparent. I wonder such a clever woman could not have invented something more plausible."

"So do I; but that was the tale she told."

“How did you get out of the fix?”

“I kissed her hand, and vowed that anything I could do to assist her to find this non-existent nephew, I would do. Then I bolted.”

Tom Duckworth laughed heartily. “She had you in a tight place, old man; I suppose the eyes were well to the fore?”

“Here, you go and see her yourself, and you'll find it no laughing matter.”

“No thanks; I'm out of it. Annett ought to be down here in a few days, but I expect my steamer will leave before he arrives. Now I've got my hands more than full for the whole time, before I leave.”

“I must go to work, too, for my appointment might arrive at any moment.”

“Will you come out with me, to-night?”

“Don't you think that it looks rather too much like trespassing on Miss Annett's good nature?” asked Lestrell, hypocritically.

“Not at all! You are one of us—bound on the same quest. Besides, I know she likes you.”

“At that rate, I'll come,” and Lestrell wondered if the niece shared her aunt's sentiments.

Poor Madame da Lucca, if she could have but guessed how utterly and completely she was forgotten when Ruth was present, she would have had a bad night; but, as it was, she flattered herself that she had had the best of the skirmish, and her dreams were dreams of victory.

Far away on a northern island, the man whose whereabouts was so urgently sought for by two conflicting parties—one inspired by love, the other by avarice—was living in a native village, struck down, first by sun and fever, then by a brain attack that left him almost a mental wreck, with but dim memories of the past floating through his confused brain.

In the little village nestling at the foot of a jagged peak one of the highest in the range that may be said to form the island of Timor, he spent his time mostly in wandering about, talking to himself. The little brown children were not afraid of him; the women, in their white kabayas and gay sarongs, spoke kindly to him. The men, as they came home from their work amongst the bread-fruit and cocoa-nut patches, did the same. He was quiet and harmless, and the villagers were rather proud of the mad white man who lived amongst them in one of the thatched houses with long roofs reaching nearly to the ground.

The feathery-foliaged bamboos were everywhere; the cocoa-nut palms and bread-fruit trees lent their aid to the vivid color of the jungle which flourished to the foot of the peak, and then, changing to low scrub, climbed up the lofty sides to the top.

A tiny, semi-circular bay, protected by a reef, lay in front of the little

village; inside, the sands were yellow and the water blue and still. Outside, long rollers that looked as though they must have travelled all the way from distant Flores, shattered themselves in clouds of white spray. Here, on one wild night of storm, the proa containing Annett and four Malays, was hurled ruthlessly to destruction. Fortunately all, with one exception, were carried over the reef into the quiet bay, and swam ashore. When the storm lulled and the tide was low, Annett was able to recover most of his things from the wreck, which had lodged on the highest part of the reef.

The Malays made their way to the nearest Portuguese settlement, but the Englishman, with his rambling spirit strong in him, determined to investigate the range at the back.

The friendly villagers tried hard to dissuade him, telling him of the wild hill-men who lived there and who would have his head. He went, and three weeks afterwards came back, gaunt, haggard, and in the incipient delirium of fever. Of what he had gone through he was never able to tell. The women nursed him through his long illness, and, when he recovered, his mind was unhinged. He had no desire to leave the place, no wish for anything. In a way he was contented. Thus was living Ruth's father.

## Chapter VIII. The Rivals Meet.

Tom Duckworth was a man who hated anything approaching humbug. The conventional 'seeing a man off' was especially abhorrent to him. Therefore, when he stepped off the gangway on to the deck of the steamer, he was not worried by having to say good-bye to half a dozen acquaintances, nor had any cause to trouble his head as to whether it was the first, second, or third bell that was ringing. Having seen everything ship-shape in his cabin, he went on deck and took possession of a canvas-chair in a retired spot on the poop whence he could amuse himself watching the bustle below.

The first person to attract his attention was Hillsden, and it was evident from the luggage a porter carried on board after him, that he was a passenger. "Things are growing interesting," thought Tom; "there's no handicapping in this race." He was of too even a temperament to disturb himself much, and he also consoled himself with the thought that his schooner would be ready to start at a moment's notice, whereas Hillsden would have to hire and fit out a boat. "Whether or no," he concluded in his own mind, "they know nothing about Djuran, and he is the one I want."

The second bell rang, and Hillsden was plainly in a state of impatience about something—walking up and down the deck, and casting impatient glances on the wharf. Presently a cab drove up, and a lady got out and walked up the gangway-plank. She was plainly dressed, but Tom knew her at a glance—Madame da Lucca! She took a turn or two up and down the deck with Hillsden, and then she said good-bye and went ashore. It was not until the steamer was well down the harbour that Tom made his presence known to Hillsden.

"You didn't stop long in Sydney;" remarked Hillsden somewhat viciously, for Tom's presence annoyed him.

"No; Annett is ill and is coming south, so I must get back."

"Oh, well; I'm glad to have an old friend on board. I think we are going to have a fine trip."

They *had* a fine trip, but when they reached Thursday Island Tom was chagrined to find that Hillsden was as ready to start as he was, having wired up and made the necessary arrangements for a schooner. The two boats left nearly at the same time, and, with the steady wind that was blowing, kept company all the way across the mouth of the Gulf. Nearly five days after Duckworth's departure, Annett arrived, much to Lestrell's satisfaction, for during those few days he had had no excuse for calling at the cottage. Annett was really ill, and took up his residence there, and

Lestrell found it necessary to go out and consult him often. He had determined to ask the important question at the first favourable opportunity, and as, in the absence of her father, Annett was her natural guardian, he had every hope he would at once gain his consent.

Meanwhile, his acquaintanceship with Madame da Lucca was maintained, more by her than by him, for Lestrell skilfully evaded all tender scenes, and thereby increased the passion of the self-willed woman, who justly ascribed her failure to win him to the influence of Ruth, and her hatred of the girl, whom she only knew by sight, grew in intensity.

The time for Lestrell's departure was drawing nigh, and he had received his commission from the two governments."

"Auntie," said Ruth one day coming into her room, kneeling beside her, and half hiding her face in her lap; "Mr. Lestrell has asked me to marry him." Her aunt put her hand down and tried to turn the girl's flushed face up to the light, but Ruth resisted.

"I knew it was bound to come, sooner or later. What did you say to him in reply?"

"I believe I said 'Yes.' "

"Where is Mr. Lestrell now?"

"He is talking to Uncle, and I suppose its about me." "I think everybody will agree that it is suitable;" said Miss Annett. "But you have trouble and anxiety before you, he is going on a dangerous mission, and women can only stay at home and wait," and her voice trembled as her thoughts went back to the gallant young lover of her youth, who went down at his post on the sinking ship. The tears sprang into Ruth's eyes as her aunt laid her hand caressingly on her head; but, before they could indulge in the luxury of much sentiment, there was a knock at the door and Annett's voice was heard asking if he could enter.

"So, this girl has told you I suppose, that Lestrell wants to run away with her?" he said, as he advanced.

"Not for a long time," cried Ruth indignantly.

"Long or short, I have given my consent; what do you say?" and he put his hand on his sister's shoulder.

"I like Lestrell, and think he will make our girl a good husband."

"Then that settles it. Lestrell is not a poor man now, and this trip will put him almost at the top of his profession. He's not gone yet, so perhaps you might run down and tell him that your aunt approves. I want to speak to her alone."

Ruth got up, went up to her uncle and kissed him, then seemed to vanish from the room in some mysterious way other than walking.

"It will be a long and trying engagement for Ruth," said Miss Annett.

“All the better. They have not known each other very long, and it will show what stuff they are made of.”

“I can answer for Ruth, but you men have no sentiment.” Lestrell, waiting in the room used as a sort of writing-room or office, heard the door open, and, turning, saw Ruth enter shyly, with the answer he wanted written on her face. Annett allowed them a reasonable time before he followed her.

“I feel better, Lestrell,” he said, “and intend to take Ruth into town tomorrow. Perhaps we might drop in on you.”

“What time do you think you will be in?” asked Lestrell, eagerly.

“Oh, any time; we intend to catch you unawares. Now you had better stop to dinner.” Lestrell was hard at work the next day finishing up his plans, spread over the deal boards on the trestles, when a knock came to the door, and, in answer to his invitation to enter, Annett and Ruth came in. After the greeting was over she looked curiously round her lover's work-room, and asked questions about the instruments he was using. An hour soon slipped by, then Annett, looking at his watch, said, “how far is it from here to the steamer-office?”

“Not very far. By the way, I ought to go there, myself, and see about my passage.”

“Well, walk down with me. We'll leave Ruth in charge.”

“You won't mind stopping here, will you?” asked Lestrell. “Of course not; run away you two!”

Left to herself, Ruth leaned back in her chair, and was soon lost in a girls' happy daydream. A sharp, imperative knock at the door aroused her, but whoever it was opened the door and came in, without waiting for an invitation. It was a woman—the dark-eyed woman Ruth had seen at the theatre.

She gave a decided start of surprise at seeing Ruth there, alone; then she advanced into the room. “I wish to see Mr. Lestrell,” she said, “I have some business with him.” She spoke in a strangely constrained voice, as though some emotion was rampant within her breast.

“Mr. Lestrell is out, but he will be back very shortly.”

The woman came a little nearer, and her eyes gleamed vindictively as she noticed the undeniable charm of Ruth's fresh young face.

“You are Miss Annett, are you not?”

“Ruth inclined her head.”

“Is it usual for young ladies to visit men in their private rooms?”

Ruth sprang up with a crimson face. “You must be a wicked woman,” she said, indignantly.

“I came here with my uncle, and Mr. Lestrell and he are out together and

will return together.”

Madame da Lucca allowed a sneer to be visible on her face.

“It looks very much like hunting the poor man down.”

Ruth was quite calm now; she was not going to let this woman gain any advantage through loss of temper. “Mr. Lestrell and I are engaged to be married,” she said simply.

Madame da Lucca sprang forward, and Ruth thought she was about to strike her. Madame turned white to the lips and her dark eyes shot fire.

“You lie,” she cried.

Ruth sat down again without deigning to answer.

“When did this take place?”

“I cannot recognise your right to ask such a question. You are a perfect stranger to me. May I ask, since you have such a nice regard for appearances, how it is that you come up here to Lawrence's room, alone?”

The two shots went home, especially the use of the familiar christian name. Ruth was one of the best-natured of girls, but she possessed all a woman's perception of how to sting another woman.

Madame glared with anger, and, if a weapon had been handy, there is no knowing what the furious woman might have done in her rage and disappointment. By an astonishing effort she regained her calmness. “Kindly tell Mr. Lestrell,” she said, haughtily, “that Madame da Lucca called to see him on the business he knows of.” She stopped at the door. Ruth sat without a word. “Miss Annett, let me tell you one thing. You will never marry Lawrence Lestrell;” and the door closed on her.

“That's a sweet — tempered woman,” thought Ruth, “but I don't think she got the best of it.”

Soon afterwards her uncle and Lestrell returned.

“A lady called to see you, Lawrence,” she said. “A Madame da Lucca; said she called on the business you know of.” Lestrell frowned.

“Confound the woman,” he said, “It's this person who is backing-up Hillsden,” he went on to Annett. “She gives me no peace in her endeavours to make me promise that I will inform her of your brother's whereabouts, if I hear of it, but I didn't know that she knew where I lived. I suppose Hillsden must have told her.”

“It's this stupid yarn about the diamonds, that's making all the mischief. They're welcome to any my brother's got.”

“How did you get on together, Ruth?” asked Lestrell.

“She was excessively rude; but don't trouble—she only came off second best; and, Lawrence, I'm not jealous at such a handsome woman coming to your room, although I know I ought to be,” and she slipped her hand affectionately through her lover's arm. Annett turned round and coughed,

and Lestrell stooped down and kissed her.

“Now,” said Annett, “I feel like going home; are you coming out to dinner, Lestrell?”

“Yes, if you let me come away directly afterwards. I must get through with this work.”

“Ruth!” he said, jokingly, as they were preparing to leave, “Have you taken my keys?”

“No, Lawrence.”

“I am sure I left them on the table; but I won't keep you; I must chance it, and leave my door unlocked.”

## Chapter IX. The Last Appeal.

It was about 9 o'clock that evening when Lestrell returned to his room. He found the door on the latch, as he had left it, went in, turned up the gas and lit it. The light illumined the room with a sudden glare, and he started with surprise.

In the chair occupied that day by Ruth, sate a woman, who threw her veil back and rose up. Madame da Lucca again!

"How did you come here, Madame, and why have you come?" he almost stammered. "I took your keys when I was here this afternoon and you were out, in case the door was locked." She threw the bunch ringing on the table,

"I heard you were here this afternoon; what was the important business, Madame da Lucca?"

"To see you. Did that girl tell you what I said to her?" "*That girl* is Miss Ruth Annett, my promised wife, and she said nothing of what passed, beyond that your were somewhat outspoken." Lestrell's face hardened like flint as he said this.

"It is true, then, that you are engaged to be married?"

"It is quite true."

"Listen, Lawrence," she said, advancing to him and putting both hands on his arm. "What can this school-child be to a man like you? What can she have in common with you? Leave her! I—I—God help me, who have always been used to men begging love from me, now beg it from you." "This is madness, Lena," answered Lestrell. "A man has many fancies in his life, but only one real and unswerving love, and mine is given beyond recall to——"

"Ruth Annett," she interrupted.

He did not answer, but turned and looked out of the window. The street was deserted and silent. In the distance some poor woman, with a voice that had seen better days, was singing for alms. "Carissima!"—the sad refrain seemed to weave itself in his brain with the memory of the distant chant of the blacks, the night he obtained the Moccasins of Silence. Lena da Lucca was standing silent beside him, her hand in his. Suddenly she felt a convulsive clutch.

"What is it, Lawrence?" she asked.

"Blood," he answered, as if speaking in a dream. "Blood, everywhere; do you not see it staining everything?" "See it?" she answered; "yes, I see it, and—Oh, God! it is mine—my blood!" and she shuddered and drew back. He put his arm round her, thinking she was about to faint, but she repulsed and held him off. "Mine! mine!" she wailed, "and it is you—you—who

will shed it! The one man I ever loved will slay me. I see it all!”

“Lena! Lena!” he said, recovering himself and trying to soothe her; and now she yielded herself to him, and hid her face in his breast as though to shut out some vision of overwhelming horror.

“It is gone,” she said at last, looking up at him with eyes soft and lustrous as the star of eve. “I do not believe it. Although your love is given to another, your hand, dearest, could never deal death to me.”

For a moment he forgot himself. He took the pleading, beautiful face in both his hands and passionately kissed the eager lips.

Ruth never heard of that one kiss.

“Come!” she whispered to him with a voice full of love's fascination; “let us go together, far away from this hateful city to the lovely seas of the East. Give up your appointment; give up that girl; I am rich enough for both. I have just heard of my husband's death, and he has left me all. What love can *she* give you, compared to mine? Lawrence, I! the proudest woman up there, will be your servant and your slave.”

In the agony of her supplication and the utter abandonment of pride, she had dropped on her knees at his feet. He caught her by the hands and raised her up

“It is impossible—impossible, Lena!”

“Impossible?” she asked, and her eyes had the pleading look of a wounded bird.

“Impossible,” he answered.

“Hold me in your arms, then, just for a moment, that I may fancy, even for those few seconds, that it is my rightful place.”

She was silent as she nestled in his embrace, and through the open window came the mournful refrain of the street-singer—“Carissima!”

“Now, Mr. Lestrell,” she said, suddenly disengaging herself, “we will leave off this fooling. Richard's himself again!” She laughed lightly, and with that laugh the shadows of blood and terror that had gathered round the pair, seemed to draw off somewhat, but still they lurked ominously near.

“I will go, and, in the future, although we may be on opposite sides, we are—friends!” She held out her firm, warm hand, and he took it as he would that of a fellow-man.

“I should like something of your's, in case we never meet again,” she went on. “Can I have anything I take a fancy to?”

“Certainly; but there is little here to take a lady's fancy.”

She glanced around. There were a few aboriginal weapons and other things hung around on the walls.

“What are these?” she asked stepping towards them and taking down the Moccasins of Silence.

He sprang forward excitedly. "No, Lena—not those; for God's sake, not those!"

She held them behind her.

"That, of course, determines me. What is the reason of this, Mr. Lestrell?"

He saw the mistake he had made, but could do nothing but tell her of the death of the rain-maker, and the ominous curse pronounced on the objects she held.

"What was the formula, in English?" she asked.

*"Once shall these be wet with blood,  
Twice shall they be wet with blood,  
The third time it will be the blood of the wearer."*

"Once, then, they have been wet with blood?"

"Twice," he replied. "The stuff that binds the sole of emu feathers together is mixed with human blood."

"And the third time it is to be the blood of the wearer? Mr. Lestrell, I intend to keep these queer slippers, and, as no one but myself shall ever wear them, I am afraid the old medicine-man's prophecy will prove untrue. And now, good-bye."

"I will see you home, or to a cab. It is late."

He put on his hat, and they went down-stairs, and into the quiet street.

"Let us walk," said Madame. It was a silent enough walk, for neither felt that they could touch on ordinary topics, and when they reached the hotel, they parted, also in silence; and the next time Lestrell saw those passionate eyes that looked so long and lovingly into his, it was in strange company in a strange land!

"I hope that chapter in my life is turned down for good," thought Lestrell, as he strolled back to his chambers. He had little trouble to guess at Madame da Lucca's past career; but, for all that, he felt kindly disposed towards her. What man would not, to a beautiful woman who had fallen in love with him and told him so?

Lestrell worked late that night, or rather far into the next morning; then he threw himself down on his bed for a few hour's sleep. After a bath and breakfast he went steadily to work again, and in the evening paid his now accustomed visit to the cottage.

The time for his departure was rapidly drawing near, and poor Ruth, transformed from a happy, careless girl to a loving woman, began to feel some of the pain of the approaching separation.

"My dear Ruth," said her uncle, one day after she had been talking of the dangers attendant on her lover's mission, "that is the very reason that he

will come back safely. It's not on dangerous expeditions that men lose their lives, because they take precious good care to look after themselves. It's when you're thinking yourself quite safe that your time comes unexpectedly. If you persuaded Lestrell to give it up and stay here, he would probably be mixed up in the first railway accident that occurred, or run over by a runaway cab, or something of that sort.”

Ruth, however, had not sufficient practical logic to be comforted by such reasoning, and it was with forebodings of evil that she said good-bye to Lestrell when the hour of departure arrived. Of Madame da Lucca Lestrell saw no more during the few remaining days of his stay in Sydney.

## **Chapter X. The Hurricane in the Nor' - West.**

The two schooners, favoured by fine weather and a constant wind, reached the pearling fleet off Cossack, in Western Australia, at about the same time. Both men were wellknown, for most of the shellers were old Thursday Island men, and Tom Duckworth was one of the most popular men in the Straits. Of course it was useless now for the two men to hide from each other any longer that they were on the same quest, but Duckworth had Hillsden at a disadvantage. In the first place, Duckworth's search for Ras Mahad was simply a blind, as he wanted really to find the young man Djuran; but it served his purpose well enough to worry and annoy Hillsden.

Djuran was found without much difficulty, and Tom's luck stood him in good stead, for he was in the employ of an old friend of Duckworth's, and his transfer to the schooner was effected quietly, without coming to Hillsden's knowledge. The Malay had learnt fairly good English since Tom saw him last, moreover he remembered his rescuer well, and had a strong liking for him. Duckworth's errand was now virtually accomplished, but he had heard of Ras Mahad, and, finding him almost at the same time as Hillsden, feigned to enter into an agreement with him to go back to Queensland. Hillsden being on the same game, this so excited the avarice of the Malay that, finally, Hillsden had to pay a pretty price for the transfer of his service. However, the latter comforted himself with the thought that it was not his own money he was spending.

Tom, awaking at daylight one morning, suddenly became aware that in delaying thus he was playing the fool. With Djuran on board, he should have sailed away at once and got many days' start of Hillsden. He jumped out of his bunk and went on deck. The southeaster that had stood them so well had died down soon after their arrival at the shelling grounds. It was the change of the seasons, and they might be wind-bound at any time. The mate was on deck, gazing around with a somewhat anxious look.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom, noticing it, for the man was an old hand on the coast. "We're going to have a devil of a blow, or my name's not Holdsworth" the man returned. Tom looked around. The sea was glassily calm, but ever and anon a long swell came rolling in, and, early in the morning as it was, there was a threatening haze on the northern horizon.

"I believe you're right, Holdsworth. If we can get a breath of wind to help us, we'll get out to sea."

"Yes, and stop there until it's over," answered the mate.

"We must get away as far and as fast as we can—it doesn't matter much

in what direction, so that we have plenty of sea-room to ride it out.”

About 9 o'clock a light wind from the land began to blow, and Holdsworth drew Tom's attention to it.

“It always begins this way,” he said. “I was in one of these willy. willys, as they call them, before. We had better take advantage of this, sir, and get off this coast.”

It was now evident that the boats of the shelling fleet were making preparations for rough weather, and very soon the schooner was under weigh and heading out to sea. She passed close to Hillsden's boat, the “Saucy Sarah,” and Hillsden hailed her.

“Are you off?”

“Off to sea,” shouted Duckworth, “and I advise you to do the same.”

“No, I've good holding ground, and two anchors out.”

The schooner had shot on out of hearing, and Tom waved his hand, and that was the last he ever saw of Hillsden.

The wind carried them to the north-west, well out of sight of land, before it dropped; then once more a calm set in, but the haze had increased in density and become a threatening cloud, with constant flashes of lightning illumining it. The afternoon drew on, and the mate's anxiety increased.

“If we could get a breath of wind to keep her head to it,” he said impatiently, “we would be pretty right, but the cussed thing comes down like a cannon shot, and if it catches us broadside, even without canvas on, we shall have a bad show.”

Everything had been made as snug as possible, and only a rag of a storm try-sail was set. Presently a rain-sqall was seen coming swiftly towards them.

“Now's our chance, Holdsworth,” said Tom, and they went to the helm and sent the man there forward. The squall, the precursor of the hurricane, swept over them, and the schooner once more answered to the helm and rode head to wind. The mate heaved a sigh of relief, and almost as he did so the vessel reeled as though struck by a blow. Through the rigging and bare masts raged and tore a wind that seemed to combine within itself all the storms that ever blew. As yet there was no sea worth speaking of, and the schooner, showing but a small surface, gallantly met the enemy.

The sea soon began to rise, and its boiling surface, in the premature darkness that set in, was glowing with phosphorescent light. All the night long Duckworth and his trusty mate stuck to their posts, and the brave little fore-and-after rode safely over the threatening waves that seemed about to engulf her. Staggering under the successive buffets that she received, with the decks constantly swimming with water, the weary night dragged through, until a wretched, rain-drenched morning broke at last. So violent

had been the gale, and the sea such a turmoil, that it had been impossible to serve out anything, but the wet and hungry men were quite content to know that the worst of the hurricane was over, and they were safe. Gradually the wind and sea went down somewhat, and the cook was able to light a fire and get some food and coffee ready.

Tom and Holdsworth had relinquished their places to two of the men when daylight tardily came, and they now stood hanging on to the stays and talking of the late storm. "There will be an awful smash amongst the fleet," said the latter. "Some will be high and dry in the mangroves, and some will go down where they are anchored."

"We will go back as soon as the weather clears, and see how they have fared. I wonder how the 'Saucy Sarah' got on!"

"He ought to have followed our example," said the mate.

It was not until the next day that Duckworth deemed it safe to run back to Cossack. When they reached it, a scene of devastation and wreck met their gaze, for the hurricane had been one of the severest ever experienced.

The loss amongst the shipping had been heavy, and the "Saucy Sarah" had gone down at her moorings with all hands. Duckworth was engaged for some weeks helping in the search for any survivors, and, retarded by the baffling winds that now set in, three months elapsed before he returned to Thursday Island.

He found letters and a lengthy telegram awaiting him. He had wired from Cossack to Annett in Sydney, telling him of his safety and the loss of Hillsden's schooner with every soul on board. He opened the telegram first. "Bad news from Timor, probably exaggerated. Surveying parties attacked by hill-tribes. Ruth insists on going in the schooner. Am quite well again and leave here in a day or two to join you."

Tom read the telegram twice. "No sooner has Fate decided one trouble than another crops up," he thought; "but a gunboat will be sent from Batavia, and get there before we shall."

He went up the township after reading his letters, to see if he could get hold of a newspaper with an account of the Timor episode. He was partially successful; in one of the late ones he found a small paragraph, stating that the survey parties employed by the Governments of Portugal and Holland to define the boundary in Timor, had been attacked by the hill-tribes, and, although no definite news was to hand, it was rumoured that the principal surveyors employed had fallen victims.

Duckworth was not a man to indulge in useless regrets. He was deeply grieved at the thought that Lestrell might have fallen, but that did not prevent him from setting to work to refit the schooner, so that she would be ready for sea by the time his partner arrived.

## Chapter XI. Madame da Lucca Takes Charge.

DESTRUCTIVE HURRICANE ON THE NORTH-WEST COAST.

GREAT LOSS OF LIFE.

PEARL-SHELLING LUGGERS DRIVEN ASHORE.

A QUEENSLAND SCHOONER SUNK AT HER MOORINGS.

ALL HANDS LOST.

These were the cross headlines that greeted Annett when he opened his newspaper one morning.

“Why the devil couldn't they have given the name of the schooner?” was his naturally impatient remark after reading the account, “Damn it! it it can't be the ‘Booby,’ Tom's too careful—but still, I know what these north-west hurricanes are.”

“The Booby,” was the prosaic name of Annett and Duckworth's schooner. She had been christened after Booby Island, at one time the most solitary and romantic post-office in the world; for, in the days before the house-flags of half-a-dozen steamer-lines flaunted in the breezes of the Straits, there was a post-office on Booby Island. In a cave on that little islet every passing ship deposited her newspapers and a letter containing the name of the ship, the date, and any other information of value. The next ship took the papers, left others, if she had any, and left also the record of *her* visit.

A stock of provisions was stored in the cave for the relief of any castaways, and the warships that patrolled those seas called at intervals to replenish it, if necessary.

Annett was still fuming over the news when steps were audible outside the door, and he thrust the paper into his pocket, just as Ruth entered.

“Why, Uncle Dick,” she said, drawing back after giving him her morning kiss. “What's the matter? I never saw you look so put out before.”

“I am a bit worried, and must get into town directly after breakfast; hurry it up, Ruth, like a good girl.”

Wondering much what could have so upset the usually even temper of her uncle, Ruth went on her errand.

Miss Annett enjoyed an invalid's privilege of breakfasting in her room, and the *tete-a-tete* breakfast of Ruth and her uncle was generally the merriest meal of the day. This morning he was silent and absent, and, as soon as it was over, left without his usual good-bye.

The tears sprang into the girl's eyes, for all the love of her young heart was given to her little circle, and a slight from one of them was like a blow. There must have been bad news in the paper, for the post was not due for

some time She looked around for it but could not see it. She rang the bell.

“Did the paper come this morning?” she asked the servant.

“Yes, Miss; I put it on the table in Mr. Annett's place, as usual”

“He must have taken it away by mistake,” Ruth said; and the girl left the room,

There was no mistake—of that she felt certain. There was bad news in the paper, and he had taken it with him to keep it away from them, for a time. There could be only one form of bad news for Ruth. Lestrell! His steamer must have been wrecked, that was it!

Ruth put on her hat and went out. There was a newspaper shop, she knew, a short distance away, and she was soon there, and bought a newspaper. She opened it, and read as she walked homeward. The headlines attracted her attention, but they bore no meaning to her for she did not know of her uncle Tom's intended trip to Cossack, it having been purposely kept from her. She divined, however, that it must have been this item that had so disturbed her uncle; and, after rapidly running up and down the columns, she heaved a sigh of relief, The paper she had purchased was a different one from the paper daily taken at the cottage, and in the one she held the name of the lost schooner was given—the “Saucy Sarah.”

There was a footstep behind her, and a hand was laid gently on her shoulder.

“So, Miss Curiosity, you had to come and pry into matters, had you?” It was her uncle, and the cloud had cleared from his face.

“I couldn't rest, uncle Dick, until I found out what was troubling you so.” And she slipped her hand through his arm.

“You thought it was something about Lestrell, eh?”

Ruth turned somewhat red, but she only pinched her uncle's arm, and remarked— “It didn't take you long to go into town and back?”

“I didn't go. I bought another paper, and found the name of the schooner in it. You didn't know that uncle Tom was round at Cossack in the ‘Booby?’ ”

“No. So it was that that worried you! Did you know anything about this other schooner?”

“I did; and about the man who has been drowned in her. He was an obstacle in the way of our finding out your father's fate, but I never wished him removed by death. Tom must be on his homeward way, so I hope he escaped the hurricane, and we shall soon hear from him from Thursday Island.”

The two strolled back together.

Madame da Lucca, now a wealthy widow—for there really had been a da

Lucca husband—had the papers brought to her every morning by her maid, and she was confronted by the same startling intelligence.

“So Hillsden has gone under,” she mused; “and Duckworth, I suppose, has escaped. But Ras Mahad must have been drowned, too; for Hillsden wired me that he had been on board the schooner. As for Hillsden”—and her eyes flashed at the memory of a shameful wrong of the past— “I am not sorry. It leaves me free; for I never really believed in this diamond story, and now—I can follow my own course.”

She thought for a moment, and then, getting out of bed, went and looked in the glass. Madame da Lucca's beauty was as natural as Ruth's; she did not require to make-up in the morning. Now, as she stood there in her white nightdress, scrutinising the reflection the glass showed her, the beauty she saw might have been that of the devil—but it was there, as radiant in that simple garb as in full array of dress and jewels. Some strong emotion agitated her as she continued to gaze, and her face assumed a look of confidence and anticipated victory.

“It will do,” she said, “I am my own mistress now, and will have what I want, or—” she looked in the glass again—“no, I'll admit of no failure.”

She rang the bell for her maid, and some two hours afterwards was on her way to one of the steam-shipping offices.

Ill news travels apace. The quiet people living at the little cottage had got over their alarm for the safety of the “Booby.” Tom had wired to them, and life was running smoothly as of yore. Ruth came down early one morning, picked up the paper, and opened it.

Annett was descending the stairs, when he was charged into by an affrighted maid, who gasped out, “Oh, Miss Ruth is dead!—dead!”

Annett hurried to the breakfast room. The girl was sitting at the table—her face down on it, and her arms thrown forward. For a moment his heart stood still, then he raised her gently, and found that she had fainted. They put her on the couch, and in a few minutes she recovered. Leaving the servant with her, Annett picked up the paper. There were no head-lines that told of anything that could have caused his niece to faint, and it was not until after some search that he found the paragraph that had wrought the trouble. It was, in effect, the same that Duckworth had read at Thursday Island. Ruth was herself again, now, and her uncle did his best to reassure her, pointing out that it was only a rumour, and that these things were always exaggerated in the first reports; but he was not very successful.

The days passed sadly at the cottage. Ruth, who had made the sunshine of the place, went about with clouded brow, silent and sad. What made it worse was the impossibility of obtaining further information.

Annett wired to the Dutch authorities in Batavia, but they knew no more

than what had appeared in the newspapers, save that the Portuguese governor at Dilli had sent some soldiers down to the spot.

The first Dutch man-of-war that came into port would be also sent there to make enquiries, but at present there was not one on the station.

This was all, and Ruth pined, until, one day, she went to her uncle, and said: "When are you going north again?"

"I was thinking of going up to Thursday Island when Tom returns—"

"And going to Timor with him in the 'Booby?' "

"Yes."

"Take me with you, Uncle Dick?"

Annett looked at her. The girl was fretting sadly, and perhaps it would be the best thing, after all.

"I will speak to your aunt. If she agrees, you shall go."

She kissed him gratefully. "I shall feel so much better if we are doing something; but, oh, this dreary, weary waiting!"

On one of the monthly British-India boats, running north from Brisbane, was a lady-passenger for Batavia who attracted a good deal of attention from the male passengers and a good deal of envy, hatred, and malice from the female side. Budding young damsels who were on a visit to Europe, which was henceforth to be the quotation point of their lives, and who had been full of anticipations as to the joys of being the belle of the ship, had their noses ruthlessly put out of joint by the dark-eyed widow. What was the good of their protesting in secret conclave against the whole proceeding? From time immemorial the young widow can give the maid twenty-five in a hundred and beat her easily!

At Thursday Island, Madame da Lucca first heard of the misfortune that was rumoured to have befallen the survey party. She landed at Batavia, and, through the agents of her deceased husband, had no difficulty in chartering a schooner for the run to Timor. In a few days she was enabled to start on her wild freak, and the coast of Java was soon left behind.

## Chapter XII. An Angel's Visit.

The schooner, with Madame da Lucca on board, and two sturdy Javanese she had engaged as servants, arrived safely at Dilli, after a smart run across. She had taken the precaution to furnish herself with credentials from the Batavian authorities, although, wherever a man was concerned, she had entire confidence in her own powers of fascination. The courteous Governor gave her full details. The account of the affair was greatly exaggerated. No one had been killed amongst the survey party, the hill-men being repulsed with loss. He regretted to say that the English surveyor was amongst the wounded, and badly wounded too. This was more to be deplored as he had displayed great gallantry during the short conflict. Senor Lestrell was now lying sick at a little village, not far from the boundary; he would have been brought to Dilli, but the doctor had forbidden it. Was Madame da Lucca a relative of his?

She said she was, and asked him the name of the village and its position. He pointed it out to her on the map. "Was there any shelter? Could she take the schooner there?"

There was excellent shelter for small craft like the schooner. Was Madame aware that there was another Englishman down there—had been there for a year or two. He was queer in his head, but quite harmless, so he had been left there undisturbed?

Madame was not aware of it, but it was most interesting. Then she took her leave and went on board her schooner, where she had a conference with the Dutch captain she had engaged.

Lestrell had received a bad cut on the head, and was lying in a native house in the same village that had so long harboured Annett. The survey parties had visited it on their outward way, and Lestrell had thus at once come upon the missing man. He had failed, however, to awaken in him any recognition or remembrance, so he could but leave him for the time being amongst the people who had so long been friendly to him.. By the first messenger sent back with despatches to Dilli, he forwarded a letter to Duckworth, which Tom was fated not to receive until after it had become of no consequence. Strange to say, when Lestrell was brought back sick and wounded—for he had been more seriously hurt than any of the others—Annett's mind seemed to recover somewhat, and he scarcely ever left the sick man's side, waiting on him so deftly that the doctor was able to leave him and return to the survey encampment.

Lestrell was tossing restlessly on the sleeping-mat stretched on a camp bedstead, for the Portuguese authorities had made him as comfortable as

they could, under the circumstances. He was muttering in delirium; his face was flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright. By his side sat Reginald Annett, white-haired and prematurely aged, busily engaged in fanning the sufferer to keep the swarming flies away, and every now and then wetting the bandages round the patient's head.

Presently the mat hung before the open doorway was lifted; a native woman looked in and beckoned to Annett. He went to the door. Several natives were standing about, gazing seaward. A schooner was making for the entrance. She came on with a fair wind, shortened sail as she rounded the point of the reef, and dropped anchor under its safe shelter. Annett's listless mind, however, took but little interest in things; he turned back into the house and resumed his seat by Lestrell.

Outside there was some excitement amongst the villagers, who began to think that their primal quiet was about to be upset for ever. A boat came ashore with the captain of the schooner, who, after some talk with the head men of the place, returned to his ship.

Towards evening Lestrell fell into a kind of stupor. Annett, still patiently sitting at his post, was disturbed by the mat being raised, and, glancing round, saw a figure that startled even his benumbed brain into action.

It was a woman, arrayed in native dress, but yet no native of the island. She wore the kabaya and sarong, but both were made of costly material. Her rounded arms were bare nearly to the elbow, and a few bangles on her wrist set off the tapering slope of that limb. The sarong, draped all around her, fell in graceful folds from her hips to above her ankles, showing her bare and shapely feet thrust into Chinese sandals. The curves of her shoulders and bust were outlined under the loose drapery of the kabaya, and her luminous eyes, soft as a fawn's, looked kindly at Annett. To his crazed brain came the thought that she was a super-natural visitant—some radiant being from another sphere. He rose from his seat as she dropped the mat and advanced. Silently, with her hands clasped, she stood looking at the sleeper, and Annett, whose gaze was riveted on her face, saw her eyes become suffused with tears. Noiselessly she bent over Lestrell and kissed him on the forehead. The kiss was as light as if a thistle-down had rested there, but Lestrell moved and murmured a name. It was "Ruth!"

Madame da Lucca rose, with unchanged face. She had schooled herself to expect this. She beckoned to Annett and they passed outside.

"You are Reginald Annett?" she said.

He drew his hand wearily across his brow. "Yes," he replied, "I think that is my name."

"I am a dear friend of Mr. Lestrell's, and hope to be something more. I have come to help you to nurse him. Do you understand me?"

He signified that he did; even on his dull wits the woman's magnetic force was making an impression. She noted the interest growing in his vacant face, and pursued her victory. "I have obtained the use of a house, here, and have two servants with me from Java. I shall stay here until Mr. Lestrell is well enough to go on board the schooner, and then, if you like to come with us, you can."

"Go away with him and you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I will come," he replied.

She held out her hand, he took it, and, as if some dim memory awoke, raised it to his lips.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From Java," she returned; but the name bore no significance to him.

"I am glad you have come," was all he said.

They re-entered the house, and found Lestrell awake; and muttering and tossing once more.

He looked at Madame da Lucca with eyes that bore no recognition in their depths; and so it went on from day to day.

She shared Annett's labours, and awoke in his breast a kind of dog-like devotion. As for her, it was a time of fierce and tumultuous joy. She had the man she loved to herself; unconscious of her presence, it was true, but still hers—hers only—to tend, to nurse, to caress! In the chaotic remembrances of that time, Lestrell seemed, afterwards, to recall how a firm, warm arm was often passed beneath his head, which was pressed to the yielding softness of a woman's breast, while passionate kisses were rained upon his lips and face.

One morning, when Madame da Lucca left the house she lived in, to go to that where Lestrell lay sick, she saw one of the little albino ponies common to the Island, being held by a native, outside the doorway. Returning to her own temporary residence, she sent one of her boys down to find out who the visitor was; then she retired to the inner room and quickly changed her dress to a plain serge. She had no intention of masquerading for the benefit of strangers. The boy returned, and said that the doctor had ridden in from the survey camp to see how Lestrell was faring.

The Portuguese doctor was astonished at the apparition that greeted him as he lifted the mat and stepped out. In a few words, she introduced herself as a near relative of Lestrell's, and begged the doctor to let her know when he could be safely taken on board the schooner.

"I cannot say, to-day," he replied. "He is better!— thanks, no doubt, Madame, to the attention you have devoted to him—but I cannot assert that

he is fit to be removed.”

“He is strong, now,” murmured the woman.

“He is, and will soon recover his reason; but, you see, the season is uncertain. You may run into a typhoon, and Senor Lestrell is not in a condition to stand any rough knocking about.”

“And how long, doctor, do you think it will be before he can leave?” and she turned the full battery of her eyes upon him.

But the doctor was proof, where his profession was concerned, and he assured her that it would not be under a week, but that he would come in again in a day or two.

“It is such an unhealthy climate, here,” she said. “I do so want to get him to a better one.”

“You shall, as soon as it is safe to do so. Believe me, Madame, I am advising you for the best.” He mounted his diminutive steed and rode off, leaving Madame da Lucca in no pleasant frame of mind. Her musings were disturbed—the doctor was returning.

“I forgot to tell you,” he said, “that the hillmen are again giving trouble, and I would advise you to sleep on board your schooner every night. I do not imagine that they will attack this village, for they are devoting their attention to avenge the loss we inflicted on them before. If they knew that Senor Lestrell, who was particularly active and forward in the skirmish, is lying here wounded, they might make a dash; but the villagers have been warned, and will keep a look-out.” He rode off.

Madame da Lucca had now a burning desire to get Lestrell on board the schooner and away, while he was still unconscious of his surroundings. She had, in fact, determined to kidnap him, and put an impassable gulf between him and Ruth. Although she believed that Ras Mahad, who, as she thought, was the only possessor of the knowledge of Annett's whereabouts, was drowned, still, on hearing of Lestrell's danger, Tom might come to Dilli, and there learn everything. Any morning a white sail might gleam in the distance, and those arrive who would baulk her plans. Her passion for Lestrell and her hatred of Ruth were now a mania with her. If Lestrell regained his reason, he might object to go with her—probably would; but, once on board, and out of sight of land, he would come to his senses only to find a return impossible. She would wait until after the doctor's next visit, and then—act, in any case.

## Chapter XIII. The Fight in the Village.

Djuran, the young Malay, was intelligent, and could now speak fairly good English. He explained to Tom the whereabouts of the village, and described the little bay and reef whereon the proa had been wrecked, and Duckworth had no difficulty in locating it on the chart. He noticed that it was within a short distance of the boundary line, and determined, therefore, to sail straight there, instead of going north to Dilli, and then returning. In all probability the village would be the headquarters of the survey party. Annett and Ruth arrived by the steamer. The girl already looked much better for the change, and the feeling that, at least, they were doing something. It was not long before the "Booby" was once more speeding across the mouth of the great gulf that bites deep into the north coast of Australia.

The volcanic peaks of the mountain range of Timor at last came in sight, but not till after some baffling winds had been experienced, and Ruth feasted her eyes on the tropical loveliness of the island, wherein she dreaded to find only her lover's grave; for no more details had found their way into any of the papers.

The doctor had again ridden in to see Lestrell, and, in spite of all Madame da Lucca's blandishments, had distinctly refused to allow his patient to be taken on board the schooner.

"Besides," he reminded her, "Senor Lestrell is under engagement to both Governments, and I have reported that in a short time he will be able to resume duty. He cannot leave the island without their sanction."

The headstrong woman felt inclined to throw these warnings to the wind and pursue her own wild course; and she sat beside Lestrell's bedside in a fit of moody musing. The evening drew on, and Annett, who had been silently watching her in his dog-like fashion, approached, and motioned to her that he would take her place. Lestrell was sleeping quietly, and she stooped and kissed him. It was evident that the fever was rapidly abating; and it seemed as though he would soon awake and be himself again. She passed out of the house and went up to her own quarters. One of her boys had been waiting, and followed her at a short distance. Since the warning given by the doctor, she had armed both of them, and always carried a revolver herself. Apart from the one o'er-mastering passion that now had possession of her, she was a woman with plenty of common sense.

They reached home, and she went into her room and assumed her loose, comfortable native garments. Meanwhile, the boys laid the table in the outer room, and put the evening meal on. Madame da Lucca ate with her

usual healthy appetite, and pondered over her future movements. She was as determined as ever to carry out her plans, but the doctor had somewhat disconcerted her by his statement that Lestrell was still under his engagement to the two Governments.

“Madame,” said one of the boys, lifting the mat, “there is a light at sea.”

She started to her feet and went out. The boy pointed the light out to her, and, after a little, she discovered it, for, at first, it was confused amongst the stars lying low on the horizon. But, once caught, it was easily distinguishable, for it slowly rose and fell.

A ship's riding-light—and the ship was lying off the land, waiting for daylight. A gentle land breeze was blowing, and instinct told her that in the morning she would see Duckworth's schooner at anchor in the bay. Then she became conscious that a strange murmur of excitement was to be heard in the village. It rose and swelled until——“broke forth from one and all a cry as if the Volscians were coming o'er the wall.”

The hillmen had attacked the place!

Madame da Lucca was an exceptional woman; she scarcely knew what fear was, and the prospect of a fight gave her a fierce kind of pleasure. Her boys were prepared; she threw a cartridge-belt over her shoulder, picked up a light rifle she had, and the three hastened to the house where Lestrell lay, for she guessed that that was the main point of attack.

The fighting had commenced outside the village, but the tide of battle was evidently being rolled back in the direction of Lestrell's house, which, however they reached in safety. Annett had been roused to life by the noise of the fray, and Lestrell was sitting up in bed with a new light in his eyes—the light of reason! He had attempted to rise, but found himself too weak. He was telling Annett, who needed no urging, and seemed almost himself again, to hurry to the front. Annett had Lestrell's rifle and cartridge-belt, and hastened by the others as they entered, without a word; then he rushed into the thick of it, and the quick reports of his rifle showed that a vigorous ally had arrived in the nick of time. Lestrell gazed curiously at the three natives, as he thought, for he did not recognise Madame da Lucca. Then he motioned them hastily to leave, telling them to go and join the fight. Madame da Lucca spoke sharply to the two in their own language, and, nothing loth, for they were good, picked men, they hastened out.

“Lawrence! Lawrence!” she cried. “Do you not know me?”

“Lena!” he said, incredulously. “You here—and in this dress? What does it mean.”

“Mean, my love? That you have been ill—delirious—and I have nursed you, and now we are attacked by the hillmen—the same who wounded you—and I have come to protect you.”

Even as she spoke, the uproar swept towards them. In spite of the loss they were suffering from the rifles of Annett and the two Javanese, the hillmen pressed recklessly on towards the house, where, somehow, they had learned that the surveyor who had been foremost in repulsing their first attack, was lying wounded.

“Give me my revolver,” said Lestrell. The belt was hanging on the low roof, and she reached it down and handed it to him. Then the two waited; she with her rifle in her hand, and a mad joy in her heart. At the worst, they would die together.

The fight surged past the house, and then the expected rush came. The mat hanging in the doorway was rudely torn down, and a crowd of fierce figures were pressing in; but, one after the other, they went down on the threshold. The delirium of battle had given Lestrell temporary strength, and no hand was ever firmer on the trigger than was Madame da Lucca's on the the light magazine-rifle she was using. Repulsed, they drew back, and the defenders, making another onslaught on them, drove them out again. Once more there was a rally, and another attack was made, but this time it was more easily defeated. Suddenly, shots from the jungle to seaward told of help. The captain and mate of the Dutch schooner had just arrived on the scene of conflict, and their coming turned the tide of victory. The “jaw-hunters” broke and fled.

The “Booby” was lying outside the reef, and Tom and Annett were impatiently pacing the deck.

“Listen!” said Duckworth, and they halted in their walk. Borne to them on the land breeze, came the first sounds of the conflict.

“Fighting, by jingo!” said Tom. “We must take a hand in that, somehow.”

“Djuran!” he called out, as the shots rang out clearer and louder. The Malay hastened up.

“Do you think you can take us in, to-night, in the whale-boat?” The man listened for a moment.

“Yes. There's no surf worth speaking of, now, and I know the opening as well as possible.”

“Mr. Holdsworth,” said Duckworth, “get the whaleboat out as soon as ever you can. Mr. Annett and I will go ashore and see what the fun is about. You must keep the schooner on and off, just as she is, but put a mast-head light up as well. Now, Dick, we had better go and load up.”

With the smart crew they had on board, it did not take long before the whaleboat was in the water and the boat's crew in their places. Djuran, as he went aft, was startled to see a woman's figure there before him, but the taciturn Malay said nothing. Duckworth and Annett handed down their

rifles and followed themselves.

“Why, Ruth, what are you doing here?” asked Annett, when he found his niece seated in the boat.

“I am going ashore with you,” she replied; “and you'll have to put me overboard to get rid of me, Uncle Dick.”

Annett turned to his partner, but Tom merely sang out— “Give way now, smartly!” and the regular thud of the oars in the rowlocks was the only sound heard on board.

Djuran stood up on the afterthwart as they swiftly neared the entrance. The Malay was right; there was very little surf on, and, after a couple of rollers had been negotiated, they were in the still water of the bay, and in a few minutes the boat was beached.

“You had better stop here, Ruth,” said Annett, as she put her foot on the side and jumped down after them.

“I am going with you,” was all the reply she vouchsafed, as she resolutely passed her hand under his arm.

The sounds of conflict had ceased—save for voices audible in the village.

“They must have been beaten off, whoever they were,” said Tom, “or the village would be in flames.”

They pressed through the jungle with some difficulty, and arrived at the end of the village where Lestrell's house was situated. From the open doorway streamed a bright bar of light, and, attracted by it, the three made for the place.

“Seems to have been pretty hard fighting here,” said Tom, gazing at the dead bodies lying about. They advanced and looked in.

A haggard man, dressed in pyjamas, with bandages round his head, was half-sitting, half-lying on the bed; an old white man (old to all appearance) was standing near, and one whom they at first took for a handsome boy in native dress was also present.

“Lawrence!” cried Ruth, and, springing past the others, was in her lover's wasted arms.

## Chapter XIV. At Bay.

It was lucky that slow-going Tom Duckworth could be a man of observation when he liked. He noted the change that transformed the supposed boy's face into that of a demon; he saw the uncontrollable hand about to raise the rifle it still held, and, springing forward, he seized the weapon in time.

"No, Madame da Lucca!" said the sturdy pearl-sheller, as she made a desperate effort to wrench it from him. "I don't want to twist your pretty wrists; better give it up quietly."

She yielded with a contemptuous laugh, and drew back, watching her opportunity.

Dick Annett approached his brother, whom he hardly recognised. "Reggy?" the former said, holding out his hand, but the other shook his head. The gleam of reason that had been awakened in him by the excitement of the attack had died down once more.

"What's the matter with you, Reggy? Do you not know Ruth, your daughter?"

Ruth came forward and held out her hands to her father, but he turned and looked at Madame da Lucca, and, stepping beside her, took *her* hand. She laughed mockingly.

"He is out of his mind," said Duckworth to Annett, in a low tone. "We're in a devil of a coil, here."

"Mr. Annett," said Madame da Lucca in a firm voice, "Mr. Lestrell is still very weak, and the excitement of your visit, on the top of the little fighting we have had, will not do him much good. I should suggest that you retire and let the invalid have some necessary rest."

Duckworth, who had not yet spoken to Lestrell, went over to him and shook hands. "What's been the matter, old man?" he said, ignoring Madame's speech.

"I got a nasty clip on the head, and I suppose my mind's been wandering ever since. I don't know how long I have been lying here, but I came to myself just as the fighting began. I'm right now, though."

Dick Annett had drawn near and greeted him while he spoke, and Ruth came with him. Madame da Lucca, with the old man still holding and patting her hand fondly, was left standing alone. They seemed to have drawn around the sick man as if to protect him from her; she saw this, and it cut her proud heart to the core.

"Miss Annett," she said, "I have been nursing Mr. Lestrell through his sickness. While you stopped safely at home, I came alone and found him

lying here. To-night I came here and stood by his bedside, and fought in his defence." She pointed to the dead bodies outside the door, and her passion rose with her words. "Could—you!—you! —you puny doll, have done that?"

None answered. The men recognised the uselessness of it, and Ruth, who had put her hand on Lestrell's knee, with a woman's instinct, that that action galled the enraged woman more than any words could have done.

"Lawrence," she went on, "ask this man, Ruth's father, if I am not speaking truth!" She looked at Reginald Annett and seemed to possess some strange power to make him understand when others failed.

"She came, and has watched you day and night!" he said, looking at Lestrell.

"You hear," she continued, "Lawrence Lestrell, you are bound to me by every tie of honour and gratitude. If you have one spark of true manhood in you, abjure your promise to that girl! You are mine! But for me, you would now be lying on that bed, hacked to death!"

"Oh, Lawrence, Lawrence!" sobbed Ruth, "she has taken my father from me—do not let her take you as well!"

"Hush, Ruth!" he said, gently. "Have no fear!" and the flashing eyes of the watching woman noted the hard look come over his thin face, that she had seen once before.

"Madame da Lucca, for what you have done, you shall have my lifelong gratitude; but I cannot give you what I have already given to another. I acknowledge that I owe you much, but I have a debt of love, of honour and duty, to pay here, too. What you have done, she—my promised wife, would have done, could she have got here in time. Witness her accompanying her uncle here, now."

Tom Duckworth stood ready. From the look on Madame da Lucca's face, he thought she was about to spring on Ruth and wreak her vengeance then and there. "Ten chances to one she has a knife, and a sharp one, too, about her, somewhere," he thought.

But Madame drew herself haughtily together. "Am I to leave the room—or your friends?" she asked, with a scornful lip.

"I have much to say to my friends," returned Lestrell.

She looked at him with a mixed glance of love and contempt, and moved to the door—a magnificent creature in her barbaric dress.

"Stay, I will go with you," said Reginald Annett.

"Father," said Ruth, advancing, and laying her hand on his arm, "do try and remember me."

He shook her off. "No, no," he replied, "you have been unkind to her."

Madame da Lucca had paused at the open doorway. It was a poor

triumph, but still, it *was* a triumph. Reggy Annett joined her, and she and the white-haired castaway passed out into the night together.

“D—d glad I never got married,” said Tom Duckworth, at last. “See what a mess women make of everything, with their sentiment and emotions. Take my advice, Lestrell, and think better of it. I'm going outside for some fresh air; coming, Dick?” He left the house, and Annett followed him.

“Better leave those two together for a bit,” said Tom, when Annett joined him. “But that devilish woman means mischief. Lord! how could she have developed into what she is now? If you had only seen the length and angularity of the creature when I first saw her as a girl!” “She's a dangerous woman,” replied Annett, “and I shall be glad to get away from here, for she'd stop at nothing, and as soon put a knife in Ruth as not. But what are we to do about my brother? It's a terrible thing to find him like this.”

“We must wait on events. I suppose we had better kill the time on shore here, to-night. I'll go down and send the whaleboat back, and tell Holdsworth to bring the schooner in in the morning. You stop here, on guard.”

Tom went off in the darkness, and Annett, after a short interval, re-entered the hut.

“Well, Lestrell, how are you feeling now?” he asked.

“Wonderfully well. As soon as I have had a real good feed I shall be fit for anything.”

“Do you remember nothing of the time since you were wounded?”

“Very little. I have a confused sort of idea of having been brought in here, and I suppose must have had lucid intervals; for when I woke up to-night I was not surprised at finding myself here.”

“And you remember nothing of Madame da Lucca's appearance?”

“Not a thing, I assure you. To-night, just as the row commenced, was the first time I was conscious of her presence.”

“Do you think the doctor will come in to-morrow?” asked Annett.

“I can't say. I have no recollection of his visits, but I should imagine some of the survey men will be in, the first thing this morning. They must have learnt something of the movements of the hilltribes.”

Presently, Tom's heavy step was heard outside, and he entered.

“Well, what's to be done?” he asked.

“That's just what I want to know;” returned Annett.

“It's Reggy who is the trouble. Impossible to leave him here.”

“We'll have to kidnap him, and, perhaps, when he gets away from this his wits may come back.”

“And about you, Lestrell; will you come back with us in the schooner?”

“If I can get leave from the authorities; but I ought to stop and finish my engagement.”

“And in your present state a good bout of fever will finish you! You're lucky to get off as you've done.”

They talked for some time longer, but could think of no feasible plan of dealing with Reggy Annett in his present state, especially with Madame da Lucca exercising an adverse influence over him.

At last the partners insisted on Lestrell being left to rest, and the three wandered out on the beach and watched the sky turn from grey to pink behind the mountains, until daylight was on the shore once more.

Ruth looked at the lovely surroundings developing with the growing light, and a great peace came over the girl's spirit. Her lover was restored to her, and she felt that the dark-eyed woman, who seemed to hate her with such strange intensity, would not succeed in her efforts to alienate him from her.

“Here comes the ‘Booby!’ ” said Duckworth, whose first glance had, of course, been seaward. The pretty little schooner, whose appearance did not justify her ridiculous name, was coming in with a light wind and all sails set. They watched her as she rounded the point of the reef, and, running up nearer in shore than the Dutch craft, let go her anchor.

“They'll send a boat, when they see us on the beach,” said Tom, and he waved his hat. In a few minutes the whaleboat, which had been towing astern, was seen coming off.

“But, Uncle Dick,” said Ruth, “I don't like going away and leaving Lawrence alone. There's no knowing what that awful woman might do.”

“There's something in what Ruth says,” said Annett to Tom. “She's quite unscrupulous.”

“She is—she's a scorcher! You take Ruth on board and get your breakfast, then come back and relieve me, and I'll come off. But, mind you, Ruth, you're not wanted on shore this morning. You go straight to your cabin and lie down when you've had your chow.”

Ruth pouted, but she knew when Uncle Tom said a thing he meant it.

Duckworth waited until the boat came in; then, saying that he would go up to the house and see how things were getting on, he turned towards the jungle.

“Well, were you in time for any fighting?” asked Holdsworth.

“No; all over by the time we got there. It must have been pretty warm, though, while it lasted.”

“Have any luck, otherwise?” asked the mate, who was acquainted with object of the trip.

“Yes. My brother and Mr. Lestrell are both on shore, but I am sorry to

say that my brother's mind seems affected, and he either will not, or cannot, recognise any of us. As for Lestrell, he's had a cut on the head and been pretty bad, but he's nearly well now. We must hold a council of war presently about how to get my brother to come with us."

"Is he so bad as that? I'm sorry to hear it. I suppose," went on Holdsworth, with a somewhat sly look at Ruth, "there will be no trouble in inducing Mr. Lestrell to come away?"

Annett smiled, and Ruth went into the cabin.

"Hurry up the cook, will you?" said Annett, as he followed her.

## Chapter XV. The Moccasins of Silence and—Death.

Tom walked slowly back through the jungle. When he arrived within sight of the village he saw a group of ponies held by two or three natives. Evidently a party from the survey-camp had come in. Men in uniform, with cigarettes in their mouths, were directing the removal of the bodies of the hill-men; the villagers had taken away their own dead immediately after the defeat of their enemies. Duckworth made his way to the house where Lestrell lived; the mat had been re-hung, and he lifted it and entered.

Two men were seated conversing with Lestrell, who looked well and bright, and was dressed in a white suit. He greeted Tom with a friendly smile, and said something in Portuguese to his two visitors, who rose and bowed to the new-comer. Tom returned the salutation, and, hauling out a box, sat down on it.

“This is the doctor, Tom,” said Lestrell, and the other gentleman is the chief surveyor of the Portuguese staff. They don't understand English, and you don't understand Portuguese, I know, so, if there is anything important, I'll act as interpreter.” Tom grunted an assent, and Lestrell resumed his conversation, principally with the doctor. Suddenly he burst out laughing, then he said a few words to the doctor, and turned to Duckworth.

“What do you think, old man?—Madame da Lucca was bent on taking me on board her schooner. If it hadn't been for the Doctor, here, I should have come to my senses half-way between here and Singapore, or wherever she intended going.”

“Clear case of attempted Shanghai-ing,” growled Tom.

“Ask the doctor if you can come on board to-day.”

The doctor made some remark in reply to Lestrell's question; and the latter got off the bed and walked up and down the room, somewhat feebly, it is true.

The doctor shook his head and said something in comment, then he felt Lestrell's pulse.

“He says I can go on board to-morrow.”

An animated conversation then ensued between the two surveyors; at its conclusion the visitors got up, and, after shaking Lestrell warmly by the hand, departed. Tom went to the doorway and watched them gather their party together, mount their ponies, and ride off. The dead had been put out of sight.

“It's all settled,” said Lestrell, when Tom turned round. The Portuguese surveyor will write a letter which the Dutchman will also sign, and it will be sent in this afternoon. When we leave here we can go up to Dilli, where

I must report myself.”

“Now our trouble is about Annett's brother. You are fixed up all right.”

“Yes. That's a hard nut to crack, and Madame da Lucca will use all her influence with the poor fellow, to thwart us.” The mat at the doorway was suddenly lifted, and Madame herself stood there, no longer in her picturesque native dress, but in a severely plain serge. She inclined her head slightly to Duckworth—who got up—and then advanced to Lestrell. “I am going away, Lawrence. My luggage has been sent on board, and the boat is waiting for me. I have come to say good-bye.” He, too, had risen, and took the hand she held out to him.

“Good-bye, Lena. I can never hope to repay you all the gratitude I owe you, but I shall remember it all my life.” “It is not gratitude I want,” she whispered, regardless of Tom's presence. Lestrell was silent.

“It is good-bye, then?” she went on

“Good-bye, with all good wishes,” he returned.

She gazed longingly into his eyes, and then released her hand, and turned to Duckworth.

“Good-bye, Mr. Duckworth. You've been too much for that ‘scraggy gawk of a girl,’ after all.” Tom turned crimson, and Madame da Lucca laughed almost gaily. “You see, I heard of the complimentary way you spoke of me on board the steamer.”

“But, where is Annett?” stammered Tom.

“Oh, Mr. Annett goes with me in the schooner; and I think that, once away, he may recover. If so, he will probably return to Australia of his own accord. Believe me, you would never get him to leave here except by *force*”

It seemed an easy solution of the difficulty, and Duckworth and Lestrell exchanged glances. The idea occurred to both that Madame da Lucca was scoring a point against Ruth in thus taking charge of her father, which would rankle in the girl's mind always. But they could not well protest; the facts were incontestable.

Madame da Lucca gave one glance round, as if to fix the interior of the room in her memory; then, as Duckworth lifted the mat for her, she bestowed on him a gracious smile of thanks, and went out.

“Give me your arm, Tom,” said Lestrell, after a pause; “I must practise walking a little; let's go outside for a stroll.”

“Good Lord!” said Duckworth. “Supposing she means to marry Reggy Annett, and then come the step-mother over Ruth!” Both men laughed; Tom's flight of imagination was too bold. As Annett came ashore, the boat containing Madame da Lucca, his brother, and the two Javanese, left the beach, lower down, and he did not notice the occupants. He looked

troubled when they told him of the turn of affairs, but there seemed no help for it.

Duckworth went off to the schooner, and Annett remained with Lestrell, and assisted him in his preparations for departure. In the afternoon, Tom yielded to Ruth's solicitations and came ashore with her.

Lestrell picked up strength rapidly during the day, but he resisted all their persuasions to go on board the schooner that night, and disobey the doctor. The Dutch schooner still lay at anchor, and no preparations for departure appeared to be under way as yet, as far as could be seen from the deck of the "Booby." Evening drew on, and a farewell dinner was prepared in Lestrell's house; Tom having brought ashore some extra estates from the schooner. It was fairly successful as a banquet, but the affliction that had befallen Ruth's father, and their inability to do anything, somewhat saddened them; Lestrell, too, seemed anxious to see them off to the schooner in a way that somewhat puzzled Ruth, and slightly annoyed her.

"I'm not easy in my mind about those men; they might try it on again to-night. They're very revengeful," Lestrell confided to Tom. "I want Ruth to go on board as soon as you can get her to go."

Ruth objected; she would have enough of the schooner before they got back to Thursday Island. At last Duckworth unwisely told her the reason of their anxiety to go on board.

"What!" exclaimed the girl. "Leave Lawrence here, after what that woman said? No, Uncle Tom, I stop ashore tonight."

"Here, Dick!" called out Duckworth. "Come and use your authority. There's mutiny in the camp."

But remonstrances were useless. Ruth was stubborn; the taunt had stung deeply. There was nothing for it but to make the best of it. There was a thatched shelter near Lestrell's house, and the men made up their minds to pass the night there and let Ruth have the house.

The night was moonless, but clear. The men had spread their mats down and made arrangements for watching in turns. It was about midnight, and Duckworth was yawning and thinking how, but for Ruth's folly, as he termed it, they might all be comfortably asleep on board the schooner, when it seemed to him that a dark and noiseless figure was coming towards Lestrell's house. The background of jungle was black, and the fire-flies flitting through it seemed to increase the gloom. He advanced a few steps, and peered intently in the direction he thought he had noticed the figure. He challenged, but there was no answer. Broad awake now, he resumed his station under the shelter, and watched for another hour, but there was no sign of anything, and he began to think that he must have been deceived.

Lestrell awoke presently, and offered to take his place for a bit. Tom told

him that he thought he had seen a dark figure moving about, but he was not sure about it; then he lay down on the mat and went off into a sailor's sleep.

Lestrell seated himself against one of the bamboos supporting the shelter they were under. A riding-lantern had been left burning in Ruth's room, and it gleamed brightly under the mat hung in the doorway. He turned his eyes to the jungle, and his heart gave a jump. Like a spectre, a figure emerged from the darkness with noiseless footsteps. Lestrell's nerves were shaken by his long illness, and he could not resist a thrill of terror as this silent shape advanced, apparently making straight for his late residence. He thought of Ruth sleeping there in fancied security; before he could get up and reach the house the mysterious figure would be before him. Without rising, he put his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

There was a wail of pain, and the dark form seemed to sink into the earth.

"What's up!" cried Duckworth, as he and Annett started up at the report.

"I don't know; something was coming towards the house, and I fired at it. It's lying out there!" and he pointed in the direction, leaning back against the bamboo, and feeling weak and faint.

"Stay here; I will go and see what it is," returned Tom. "Annett, you had better go and see if Ruth is safe."

Tom started off in the direction Lestrell had pointed, and his keen eyes soon detected a human form on the ground. He advanced and stooped over it, then dropped on one knee and raised the head.

Annett lifted the mat and looked into the room. Ruth was sleeping soundly—the report had not aroused her. He dropped the mat again, and, as he did so, heard Tom's voice call to him.

"Bring the light!" he said. Annett went softly into the room, untied the lantern, and went with it to where Tom was kneeling, supporting the head of the unknown. Annett swung the lantern in front of the face.

"My God!" was all he said.

In a native dress of dark stuff, with the blood welling from a wound in her breast, her eyes closed, and a face of death, lay Madame da Lucca.

"Is she dead?" asked Annett, in a whisper.

"No," returned Tom, in the same low tone; "her heart still beats."

"Look there," said Annett.

The unconscious hand still held a *parang*, or heavy knife, used by the Malays.

"For Ruth?" said Tom; and Annett nodded a silent assent. Steps were heard approaching. Lestrell had recovered from the feeling of faintness that had attacked him, and was coming towards them. "Is that you, Lestrell?" called out Tom.

"Go back and wait for us— you are not wanted here."

“Why not? What has happened?” he returned, still advancing.

“Damn it!—keep away, can't you,” cried Duckworth in a harsh voice—more as though he were speaking to a Kanaka than to a friend.

“Rubbish,” said the other, walking into the light.

For one horrified moment he looked at the face upturned to the gleam of the lantern, then Annett passed his arm round him, for he reeled as though he would have fallen. By a great effort he recovered himself.

“Get up, Tom,” he said, hoarsely; “this is my place.” He took the woman's head on his arm, and Duckworth rose.

As if the touch had brought her spirit back from beyond the grave, the dark eyes opened, and recognised the agonized face bending down.

“It will not be so hard to die, now,” she whispered.

“You did not mean to murder Ruth, surely?”

Her slackened hand tried vainly to lift the heavy knife. “Not to murder her,” she said distinctly, and Tom and Annett, standing silently there heard every word. “But I would have slashed her twice across the face with this, and spoilt her baby beauty for ever.”

Neither of them spoke. The savage vindictiveness in the voice made them feel cold.

“Look, Lawrence,” she said, and pointed to her feet.

Annett held the lantern up. On her feet—wet with the blood that had gushed from the the wound and bespattered the lower part of her sarong and her bare ancles—she wore the Moccasins of Silence.

“Do you remember, Lawrence, I vainly vowed that the prophecy would never come true.” She put up her failing hand, as if to bestow on his face the caress a woman only gives to the *one man* she loves. He bent his head and pressed his lips to hers. Like a tired child, she nestled her head in his arm, and, with a sigh, almost of content, the headstrong, untamed spirit fled into the unknown.

*“Once shall these be wet with blood.*

*Twice shall they be wet with blood.*

*The third time it will be the blood of the wearer.”*

In the grave, where lies the wearer whose blood bedewed them a third time, the fatal Moccasins of Silence moulder into dust.

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