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I

THE SECOND-CLASS PASSENGER

The party from the big German mail-boat had nearly completed their inspection of Mozambique, they had walked up and down the main street, admired the palms, lunched at the costly table of Lazarus, and purchased "curios"—Indian silks, Javanese; knives, Birmingham metal-work, and what not—as mementoes of their explorations. In particular, Miss Paterson had invested in a heavy bronze image— apparently Japanese—concerning which she entertained the thrilling delusion that it was an object of local worship. It was a grotesque thing, massive and bulky, weighing not much less than ten or twelve pounds. Hence it was confided to the careful portorage of Dawson, an assiduous and favored courtier of Miss Paterson; and he, having lunched, was fated to leave it behind at Lazarus' Hotel.

Miss Paterson shook her fluffy curls at him. They were drawing towards dinner, and the afternoon was wearing stale.

"I did so want that idol," she said plaintively. She had the childish quality of voice, the insipidity of intonation, which is best appreciated in steamboat saloons. "Oh, Mr. Dawson, don't you think you could get it back for me?"

"I'm frightfully sorry," said the contrite Dawson. "I'll go back at once. You don't know when the ship goes, do you?"

Another of Miss Paterson's cavaliers assured him that he had some hours yet. "The steward told me so," he added authoritatively.

"Then I'll go at once," said Dawson, hating him.

"Mind, don't lose the boat," Miss Paterson called after him.

He went swiftly back up the wide main street in which they had spent the day. Lamps were beginning to shine everywhere, and the dull peace of the place was broken by a new life. Those that dwell in

darkness were going abroad now, and the small saloons were filling. Dawson noted casually that evening was evidently the lively time of Mozambique. He passed men of a type he had missed during the day, men of all nationalities, by their faces, and every shade of color. They were lounging on the sidewalk in knots of two or three, sitting at the little tables outside the saloons, or lurking at the entrances of narrow alleys that ran aside from the main street every few paces. All were clad in thin white suits, and some wore knives in full sight, while there was that about them that would lead even the most innocent and conventional second-class passenger to guess at a weapon concealed somewhere. Some of them looked keenly at Dawson as he passed along; and although he met their eyes impassively, he—even he—was conscious of an implied estimate in their glance, as though they classified him with a look. Once he stepped aside to let a woman pass. She was large, flamboyantly southern and calm. She lounged along, a cloak over her left arm, her head thrown back, a cigarette between her wide, red lips. She, too, looked at Dawson—looked down at him with a superb lazy nonchalance, laughed a little, and walked on. The loungers on the sidewalk laughed too, but rather with her than at Dawson.

"I seem rather out of it here," he told himself patiently, and was glad to enter the wide portals of Lazarus' Hotel. A grand, swarthy Greek, magnificent in a scarlet jacket and gold braid, pulled open the door for him, and heard his mission smilingly.

"A brass-a image," he repeated. "Sir, you wait-a in the bar, an' I tell-a the boy go look."

"You must be quick, then," said Dawson, "'cause I'm in a hurry to get back."

"Yais," smiled the Greek. "Bimeby he rain-a bad."

"Rain?" queried Dawson incredulously. The air was like balm.

"You see," the Greek nodded. "This-a way, sir. I go look-a quick."

Dawson waited in the bar, where a dark, sallow bar-man stared him out of countenance for twenty minutes. At the end of that time the image was forthcoming. The ugly thing had burst the paper in which it was wrapped, and its grinning bullet-head projected handily. The paper was wisped about its middle like a petticoat.

Dawson took it thankfully from the Greek, and made suitable remuneration in small silver.

"Bimeby rain," repeated the Greek, as he opened a door for him again.

"Well, I'm not made of sugar," replied Dawson, and set off.

It was night now, for in Mozambique evening is but a brief hiatus between darkness and day. It lasts only while the sun is dipping; once the upper limb is under the horizon it is night, full and absolute. As Dawson retraced his steps the sky over him was velvet-black, barely punctured by faint stars, and a breeze rustled faintly from the sea. He had not gone two hundred yards when a large, warm drop of rain splashed on his back. Another pattered on his hat, and it was raining, leisurely, ominously.

Dawson pulled up and took thought. At the end of the main street he would have to turn to the left to the sea-front, and then to the left again to reach the landing-stage. If, now, there were any nearer turning to the left—if any of the dark alleys that opened continually beside him were passable—he might get aboard the steamer to his dinner in the second-class saloon with a less emphatic drenching than if he went round by the way he had come. Mozambique, he reflected, could not have only one street—it was too big for that. From the steamer, as it came to anchor, he had seen acre upon acre of flat roofs, and one of the gloomy alleys beside him must surely debouch upon the sea-front. He elected to try one, anyhow, and accordingly turned aside into the next.

With ten paces he entered such a darkness as he had never known. The alley was barely ten feet wide: it lay like a crevasse between high, windowless walls of houses. The warm, leisurely rain dropped perpendicularly upon him from an invisible sky, and presently, hugging the wall, he butted against a corner, and found, or guessed, that his way was no longer straight. Underfoot there was mud and garbage that once gulfed him to the knee, and nowhere in all those terrible, silent walls on each side of him was there a light or a door, nor any sight of life near at hand. He might have been in a catacomb, companioned by the dead.

The stillness and the loneliness scared and disturbed him. He turned on a sudden impulse to make his way back to the lights of the street.

But this was to reckon without the map of Mozambique—which does not exist. Ten minutes sufficed to overwhelm him in an intricacy of blind ways. He groped by a wall to a turning, fared cautiously to pass it, found a blank wall opposite him, and was lost. His sense of direction left him, and he had no longer any idea of where the street lay and where the sea. He floundered in gross darkness, inept and persistent. It took some time, many turnings, and a tumble in the mud to convince him that he was lost. And then the rain came down in earnest.

It roared, it pelted, it stamped on him. It was not rain, as he knew it: it was a cascade, a vehement and malignant assault by all the wetness in heaven. It whipped, it stung, it thrashed; he was drenched in a moment as though by a trick. He could see nothing, but groped blind and frightened under it, feeling along the wall with one hand, still carrying the bronze image by the head with the other. Once he dropped it, and would have left it, but with an impulse like an effort of self-respect, he searched for it, groping elbow-deep in the slush and water, found it, and stumbled on. Another corner presented itself; he came round it, and almost at once a light showed itself.

It was a slit of brightness below a door, and without a question the drenched and bewildered Dawson lifted the image and hammered on the door with it. A hum of voices within abated as he knocked, and there was silence. He hammered again, and he heard bolts being withdrawn inside. The door opened slowly, and a man looked out.

"I've lost my way," flustered Dawson pitifully. "I'm wet through, and I don't know where I am." Even as he spoke the rain was cutting through his clothes like blades. "Please let me in;" he concluded. "Please let me in."

The man was backed by the light, and Dawson could see nothing of him save that he was tall and stoutly made. But he laughed, and opened the door a foot farther to let him pass in.

"Come in," he bade him. His voice was foreign and high. "Come in. All may come in to-night."

Dawson entered, leading a trail of water over a floor of bare boards. His face was running wet, and he was newly dazzled with the light. But when he had wiped his eyes, he drew a deep breath of relief and looked about him. The room was unfurnished save for a littered table and some chairs, and a gaudy picture of the Virgin that hung on the wall. On each side of it was a sconce, in which a slovenly candle guttered. A woman was perched on a corner of the table, a heavy shawl over her head. Under it the dark face, propped in the fork of her hand, glowed sullenly, and her bare, white arm was like a menacing thing. Dawson bowed to her with an instinct of politeness. In a chair near her a grossly fat man was huddled, scowling heavily under thick, fair brows, while the other man, he who had opened the door, stood smiling.

The woman laughed softly as Dawson ducked to her, scanning him with an amusement that he felt as ignominy. But she pointed to the image dangling in his hand.

"What is that?" she asked.

Dawson laid it on the floor carefully. "It's a curio," he explained. "I was fetching it for a lady. An idol, you know."

The fat man burst into a hoarse laugh, and the other man spoke to Dawson.

"An' you?" he queried. "What you doing 'ere, so late an' so wet?"

"I was trying to take a short cut to the landing-stage," Dawson replied. "Like a silly fool, I thought I could find my way through here. But I got lost somehow."

The fat man laughed again.

"You come off the German steamer?" suggested the woman.

Dawson nodded. "I came ashore with some friends," he answered, "from the second-class. But I left them to go back and fetch this idol, and here I am."

The tall man who had opened the door turned to the woman.

"So we must wait a leetle longer for your frien's," he said.

She tossed her head sharply.

"Friends!" she exclaimed. "Mother of God! Would you walk about with your knives for ever? When every day other men are taken, can you ask to go free? Am I the wife of the Intendente?"

"No, nod the vife!" barked the stout man violently. "But if you gan't tell us noding better than to stop for der police to dake us, vot's der good of you?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders, and the shawl slipped, and showed them bare and white above her bodice.

"I have done all that one could do," she answered sullenly, with defiant eyes. "Seven months you have done as you would, untouched. That was through me. Now, fools, you must take your turn—one month, three months, six months—who knows?—in prison. One carries a knife —one goes to prison! What would you have?"

"Gif der yong man a chair, Tonio," said the fat man, and his companion reached Dawson a seat. He sat on it in the middle of the floor, while they wrangled around him. He gathered that the two men anticipated a visit from the police very shortly, and that they blamed it on the woman, who might have averted it. Both the men accused her of their misfortune, and she faced them dauntlessly. She tried to bring them, it seemed, to accept it as inevitable, as a thing properly attendant on them; to show that she, after all, could not change the conditions of existence.

"You stabbed the Greek," she argued once, turning sharply on the tall man.

"Well," he began, and she flourished her hand as an ergo.

"Life is not spending money," she even philosophized. "One pays for living, my friend, with work, with pain, with jail. Here you have

to pay. I have paid for you, seven months nearly, with smiles and love. But the price is risen. It is your turn now."

Dawson gazed at her fascinated. She spoke and gesticulated with a captivating spirit. Life brimmed in her. As she spoke, her motions were arguments in themselves. She put a case and demolished it with a smile; presented the alternative, left a final word unspoken, and the thing was irresistible. Dawson, perched lonely on his chair, experienced a desire to enter the conversation.

The men were beyond conviction. "Why didn't you"—do this or that? the tall man kept asking, and his fat comrade exploded, "Yea, vy?" They seemed to demand of her that she should accept blame without question; and to her answers, clear and ready, the fat man retorted with a gross oath.

"Excuse me, sir," began Dawson, shocked. He was aching to be on the woman's side.

"Vott" demanded the fat man.

"That's hardly the way to speak to a lady," said Dawson gravely.

The tall man burst into a clear laugh, and the fat man glared at Dawson. He flinched somewhat, but caught the woman's eye and found comfort and reinforcement there. She, too, was smiling, but gratefully, and she gave him a courteous little nod of thanks.

"I don't like to hear such language used to a lady," he said, speaking manfully enough, and giving the fat man eyes as steady as his own. "No gentleman would do it, I'm sure."

"Vot der hell you got to do mit it?" demanded the other ferociously, while his companion laughed.

The woman held up a hand. "Do not quarrel," she said. "There is trouble enough already. Besides, they may be here any moment. Is there anything to get ready?"

"But vot der hell," cried the fat man again. She turned on him.

"Fool! fool! Will you shout and curse all night, till the algemas are on you?"

"Yes; an' you put dem on us," the tall man interrupted.

She turned swiftly on him, poising her small head over her bare breasts with a superb scorn.

"Why do you lie?" she demanded hotly. "Why do you lie? Must you hide even from your own blame behind my skirts? Mother of God!" — an outstretched hand called the tawdry Virgin on the wall to witness — "you are neither man nor good beast — just — —"

The tall man interrupted. "Don' go, on!" he said quietly. "Don' go on!" His eyes were shining, and he carried one hand beneath his coat. "Don' dare to go on!"

"Dare!" The woman lifted her face insolently, brought up her bare arm with a slow sweep, and puffed once at an imaginary cigarette. There was so much of defiance in the action that Dawson, watching her, breathless, started to his feet with something hard and heavy in his hand. It was the image.

"Thief!" said the woman slowly, gazing under languorous eyelids at the white, venomous face of the tall man. "Thief and — —" she leaned forward and said the word, the ultimate and supreme insult of the coast.

It was barely said when there flashed something in the man's hand. He was poised on his toes, leaning forward a little, his arm swinging beside him. The woman flung both arms before her face and cried out; then leaned rapidly aside as a pointed knife whizzed past her head and struck twanging in the wall behind her. The man sprang forward, and the next instant the room was chaos, for Dawson, tingling to his extremities, stepped in and spread him out with a crashing blow on the head. The "idol" was his weapon.

The stout German thundered an oath and heaved to his feet, fumbling at his hip and babbling broken profanity.

Dawson swung the image and stepped towards him.

"Keep still," he cried, "or I'll brain you!"

"Der hell!" vociferated the German, and fired swiftly at him. The room filled with smoke, and Dawson, staggering unhurt, but with his face stung with powder, did not see the man fall. As the German drew the revolver clear, the woman knifed him in the neck, and he collapsed on his face, belching blood upon the boards of the floor.

The woman stood over him, the knife still in her hand, looking at Dawson with a smile.

"My God!" he said as he glanced about him. The tall man was lying at his feet, huddled hideously on the floor. The room stank of violence and passion. "My God!" and he stooped to the body.

The woman touched him on the shoulder. "Gome," she said. "It's no good. It was a grand blow, a king's blow. 'You cannot help him.'"

"But—but— —" he flustered as he rose. The emergency was beyond him. He had only half a strong man's equipment—the mere brawn. "Two men killed. I must get back to the ship."

He saw the woman smiling, and caught at his calmness. There was comprehension in her eyes, and to be understood is so often to be despised. "You must come too," he added, on an impulse, and stopped, appalled by the idea.

"To the ship?" she cried and laughed. "Oh, la la! But no! Still, we must go from here. The police will be here any minute, and if they find you — —" She left it unsaid, and the gap was ominous.

The police! To mention them was to touch all that was conventional, suburban, and second-class in Dawson. He itched to be gone. A picture of Vine Street police court and a curtly aloof magistrate flashed across his mind, and a reminiscence of evening paper headlines, and his mind fermented hysterically.

The woman put back her knife in some secret recess of her clothes, and opened the door cautiously. "Now!" she said, but paused, and came back. She went to the picture of the Virgin and turned its face to the wall. "One should not forget respect," she observed apologetically. "These things are remembered. Now come."

No sooner were they in the gloomy alley outside than the neighborhood of others was known to them. There was a sound of many feet ploughing in the mud, and a suppressed voice gave a short order. The woman stopped and caught Dawson's arm.

"Hush!" she whispered. "It is the police. They have come for the men.

They will be on both sides of us. Wait and listen."

Dawson stood rigid, his heart thumping. The darkness seemed to surge around him with menaces and dangers. The splashing feet were nearer, coming up on their right, and once some metal gear clinked as its wearer scraped against the wall. He could smell men, as he remembered afterwards. The woman beside him retained her hold on his arm, and remained motionless till it seemed that the advancing men must run into them.

"Come quietly," she whispered at length, putting warm lips to his ear. Her hand dropped along his arm till she grasped his fingers. She led him swiftly away from the place, having waited till the police should be so near that the noise they made would drown their own retreat.

On they went, then, as before, swishing through the foulness underfoot, and without speaking. Only at times the woman's hold on his hand would tighten, and, meeting with no response, would slacken again, and she would draw him on ever more quickly.

"Where are we going?" he ventured to ask.

"We are escaping," she answered, with a brief tinkle of laughter. "If you knew from what we are escaping, you would not care where. But hurry, always!"

Soon, however, she paused, still holding his hand. Again they heard footsteps, and this time the woman turned to him desperately.

"There is a door near by," she breathed. "We must find it, or— —" again the unspoken word. "Feel always along the wall there. Farther, go farther. It should be here."

They sprang on, with hands to the rough plaster on the wall, till Dawson encountered the door, set level with the wall, for which they sought.

"Push," panted the woman, heaving at it with futile hands. Even in the darkness he could see the gleam of her naked arms and shoulders. "Push it in."

Dawson laid his shoulder to it, his arms folded, and shoved desperately till his head buzzed. As he eased up he heard the near feet of the menacing police again.

"You must push it in!" cried the woman. "It is the only way. If not—"

"Here, catch hold of this," said Dawson, and she found the bronze image in her hands. "Let me come," he said, and standing back a little, he flung his twelve stone of bone and muscle heavily on the door. It creaked, and some fastening within broke and fell to the ground.

Once again he assaulted it, and it was open. They passed rapidly within, and closed it behind them, and with the woman's hand guiding, Dawson stumbled up a long, narrow, sloppy stair that gave on to the flat roof of the building. Above them was sky again. The rain had passed, and the frosty stars of Mozambique shone faintly. He took a deep breath as he received the image from the hands of the woman.

"You hear them?" she said, and he listened with a shudder to the passing of the men below.

"But we must go on," she said. "We are not safe yet. Over the wall to the next roof. Come!"

They clambered over a low parapet, and dropped six feet to another level. Dawson helped the woman up the opposite wall, and she sat reconnoitering on the top.

"Come quietly," she warned him, and he clambered up beside her and looked down at the roof before them. In a kind of tent persons appeared to be sleeping; their breath was plainly to be heard.

"You must walk like a rat," she whispered, smiling, and lowered herself. He followed. She was crouching in the shadow of the wall, and drew him down beside her. Somebody had ceased to sleep in the tent, and was gabbling drowsily, in a monotonous sing-song.

"If they see us," she whispered to him, "they will think you have come here after the women."

"But we could say — —" he began.

"There will be nothing to say," she interrupted. "Hush! There he comes."

Out of the tent crawled a man, lean and black and bearded, with a sheet wrapped around him. He stood up and looked around, yawning. The woman nestled closer to Dawson, who gripped instinctively on the bronze image. The man walked to the parapet on their left and looked over, and then walked back to the tent and stood irresolutely, muttering to himself. Squatted under the wall, Dawson found room amid the race of his disordered thoughts to wonder that he did not instantly see them.

He was coming towards them, and Dawson felt the bare shoulder that pressed against his arm shrug slightly. The man was ten paces away, walking right on to them, and looking to the sky, when, with throbbing temples and tense lips, Dawson rose, ran at him, and gripped him. He had the throat in the crutch of his right hand, and strangled the man's yell as it was conceived. They went down together, writhing and clutching, Dawson uppermost, the man under him scratching and slapping at him with open hands. He drew up a knee and found a lean chest under it, drove it in, and choked his man to silence and unconsciousness.

"Take this, take this," urged the woman, bending beside him. She pressed her slender-bladed knife on him. "Just a prick, and he is quite safe!"

Dawson rose. "No," he said. "He's still enough now. No need to kill him." He looked at the body and from it to the woman. "Didn't I get him to rights?" he asked exultantly.

She raised her face to his.

"It was splendid," she said. "With only the bare hands to take an armed man — —"

"Armed!" repeated Dawson.

"Surely," she answered. "That, at least, is always sure. See," she pulled the man's sheet wide. Girt into a loin-cloth below was an ugly, broad blade. "Yes, it was magnificent. You are a man, my friend."

"And you," he said, thrilled by her adulation and, the proximity of her bare, gleaming bosom, "are a woman."

"Then— —" she began spiritedly; but in a heat of cordial impulse he took her to him and kissed her hotly on the lips.

"I was wondering when it would come," she said slowly, as he released her. "When you spoke to the German about the bad word, I began to wonder. I knew it would come. Kiss me again, my friend, and we will go on."

"Are we getting towards the landing-stage?" he asked her, as the next roof was crossed. "I mustn't miss my boat, you know."

"Oh, that!" she answered. "You want to go back?"

"Well, of course," he replied, in some surprise. "That's what I was trying to do when I knocked at your door. I've missed my dinner as it is."

"Missed your dinner!" she repeated, with a bubble of mirth. "Ye-es; you have lost that, but," — she came to him and laid a hand on his shoulder, speaking softly — "but you have seen me. Is it nothing, friend, that you have saved me?"

He had stopped, and she was looking up to him, half-smiling, half-entreating, wholly alluring. He looked down into her dark face, with a sudden quickening about the heart.

"And all this fighting," she continued, as though he were to be convinced of something. "You conquer men as though you were bred on the roofs of Mozambique. You fight like — like a hero. It is a rush, a blow, a tumble, and you have them lying at your feet. And when you remember all this, will you not be glad, friend — will you not be glad that it was for me?"

He nodded, clearing his throat huskily. Her hand on his shoulder was a thing to charm him to fire.

"I'd fight — I'd fight for you," he replied uneasily, "as long as — as long as there was any one to fight."

He was feeling his way in speech, as best he could, past conventionalities. There had dawned on him, duskily and half-seen, the unfitness of little proprieties and verbose frills while he went to war across the roofs with this woman of passion.

"You would," she said fervently, with half-closed eyes. "I know you would."

She dropped her hand, and stood beside him in silence. There was a long pause. He guessed she was waiting for the next move from him, and he nerved himself to be adequate to her unspoken demand.

"You lead on," he said at last unsteadily.

"Where?" she asked breathlessly.

He did not speak, but waved an open hand that gave her the freedom of choice. It was his surrender to the wild spirit of the Coast, and he grasped the head of the brass image the tighter when he had done it. She and Fate must guide now; it rested with him only to break opposing heads.

She smiled and shivered. "Come on, then," she said, and started before him.

They traversed perhaps a score of roofs enclosed with high parapets, on to each of which he lifted her, hands in her armpits, swinging her cleanly to the level of his face and planting her easily and squarely on the coping. He welcomed each opportunity to take hold of her and put out the strength of his muscles, and she sat where he placed her, smiling and silent, while he clambered up and dropped down on the other side.

At length a creaking wooden stair that hung precariously on the sheer side of a house brought them again to the ground level. It was another gloomy alley into which they descended, and the darkness about him and the mud underfoot struck Dawson with a sense of being again in familiar surroundings. The woman's hand slid into his as he stood, and they started along again together.

The alley seemed to be better frequented than that of which he already had experience. More than once dark, sheeted figures passed them by, noiseless save for the underfoot swish in the mud, and presently the alley widened into a little square, at one side of which there was a fresh rustle of green things. At the side of it a dim light showed through a big open door, from which came a musical murmur of voices, and Dawson recognized a church.