The Door of Opportunity

W. Somerset Maugham

THEY got a first-class carriage to themselves. It was lucky, because they were taking a good deal in with them, Alban’s suit-case and a hold-all, Anne’s dressing-case and her hat-box. They had two trunks in the van, containing what they wanted immediately, but all the rest of their luggage Alban had put in the care of an agent who was to take it up to London and store it till they had made up their minds what to do. They had a lot, pictures and books, curios that Alban had collected in the East, his guns and saddles. They had left Sondurah for ever. Alban, as was his way, tipped the porter generously and then went to the bookstall and bought papers. He bought the New Statesman and the Nation, and the Tatler and the Sketch, and the last number of the London Mercury. He came back to the carriage and threw them on the seat.

“It’s only an hour’s journey,” said Anne.

“I know, but I wanted to buy them. I’ve been starved so long. Isn’t it grand to think that tomorrow morning we shall have tomorrow’s Times, and the Express and the Mail?”

She did not answer and he turned away, for he saw coming towards them two persons, a man and his wife, who had been fellow-passengers from Singapore.

“Get through the Customs all right?” he cried to them cheerily.

The man seemed not to hear, for he walked straight on, but the woman answered.

“Yes, they never found the cigarettes.”

She saw Anne, gave her a friendly little smile, and passed on. Anne flushed.

“I was afraid they’d want to come in here,” said Alban. “Let’s have the carriage to ourselves if we can.”

She looked at him curiously.

“I don’t think you need worry,” she answered. “I don’t think anyone will come in.”

He lit a cigarette and lingered at the carriage door. On his face was a happy smile. When they had passed through the Red Sea and found a sharp wind in the Canal, Anne had been surprised to see how much the men who had looked presentable enough in the white ducks in which she had been accustomed to see them, were changed when they left them off for warmer clothes. They looked like nothing on earth then. Their ties were awful and their shirts all wrong. They wore grubby flannel trousers and shabby old golf-coats that had too obviously been bought off the nail, or blue serge suits that betrayed the provincial tailor. Most of the passengers had got off at Marseilles, but a dozen or so, either because after a long period in the East they thought the trip through the Bay would do them good, or, like themselves, for economy’s sake, had gone all the way to Tilbury, and now several of them walked along the platform. They wore solar topees or double-brimmed terais, and heavy greatcoats, or else shapeless soft hats or bowlers, not too well brushed, that looked too small for them. It was a shock to see them. They looked suburban and a trifle second-rate. But Alban had already a London look. There was not a speck of dust on his smart greatcoat, and his black Homburg hat looked brand-new. You would never have guessed that he had not been home for three years. His collar fitted closely round his neck and his foulard tie was neatly tied. As Anne looked at him she could not but think how good-looking he was. He was just under six feet tall, and slim, and he wore his clothes well, and his clothes were well cut. He had fair hair, still thick, and blue eyes and the faintly yellow skin common to men of that complexion after they have lost the pink-and-white freshness of early youth. There was no colour in his cheeks. It was a fine head, well-set on rather a long neck, with a somewhat prominent Adam’s apple; but you were more impressed with the distinction than with the beauty of his face. It was because his features were so regular, his nose so straight, his brow so broad that he photographed so well. Indeed, from his photographs you would have thought him extremely handsome. He was not that, perhaps because his eyebrows and his eyelashes were pale, and his lips thin, but he looked very intellectual. There was refinement in his face and a spirituality that was oddly moving. That was how you thought a poet should look; and when Anne became engaged to him she told her girl friends who asked her about him that he looked like Shelley. He turned to her now with a little smile in his blue eyes. His smile was very attractive.

“What a perfect day to land in England!”

It was October. They had steamed up the Channel on a grey sea under a grey sky. There was not a breath of wind. The fishing boats seemed to rest on the placid water as though the elements had for ever forgotten their old hostility: The coast was incredibly green, but with a bright cosy greenness quite unlike the luxuriant, vehement verdure of Eastern jungles. The red towns they passed here and there were comfortable and homelike. They seemed to welcome the exiles with a smiling friendliness. And when they drew into the estuary of the Thames they saw the rich levels of Essex and in a little while Chalk Church on the Kentish shore, lonely in the midst of weather-beaten trees, and beyond it the woods of Cobham. The sun, red in a faint mist, set on the marshes, and night fell. In the station the arc-lamps shed a light that spotted the darkness with cold hard patches. It was good to see the porters lumbering about in their grubby uniforms and the station-master fat and important in his bowler hat. The station-master blew a whistle and waved his arm. Alban stepped into the carriage and seated himself in the corner opposite to Anne. The train started.

“We’re due in London at six-ten,” said Alban. “We ought to get to Jermyn Street by seven. That’ll give us an hour to bath and change and we can get to the Savoy for dinner by eight-thirty. A bottle of pop tonight, my pet, and a slap-up dinner.” He gave a chuckle. “I heard the Strouds and the Maundrys arranging to meet at the Trocadero Grill-Room.”

He took up the papers and asked if she wanted any of them. Anne shook her head.

“Tired?” he smiled.

“No.”

“Excited?”

In order not to answer she gave a little laugh. He began to look at the papers, starting with the publishers’ advertisements, and she was conscious of the intense satisfaction it was to him to feel himself through them once more in the middle of things. They had taken in those same papers in Sondurah, but they arrived six weeks old, and though they kept them abreast of what was going on in the world that interested them both, they emphasized their exile. But these were fresh from the press. They smelt different. They had a crispness that was almost voluptuous. He wanted to read them all at once. Anne looked out of the window. The country was dark, and she could see little but the lights of their carriage reflected on the glass, but very soon the town encroached upon it, and then she saw little sordid houses, mile upon mile of them, with a light in a window here and there, and the chimneys made a dreary pattern against the sky. They passed through Barking and East Ham and Bromley-it was silly that the name on the platform as they went through the station should give her such a tremor-and then Stepney. Alban put down his papers.

“We shall be there in five minutes now.”

He put on his hat and took down from the racks the things the porter had put in them. He looked at her with shining eyes and his lips twitched. She saw that he was only just able to control his emotion. He looked out of the window, too, and they passed over brightly lighted thoroughfares, close packed with tram-cars, buses, and motor-vans, and they saw the streets thick with people. What a mob! The shops were all lit up. They saw the hawkers with their barrows at the kerb.

“London,” he said.

He took her hand and gently pressed it. His smile was so sweet that she had to say something. She tried to be facetious.

“Does it make you feel all funny inside?”

“I don’t know if I want to cry or if I want to be sick.”

Fenchurch Street. He lowered the window and waved his arm for a porter. With a grinding of brakes the train came to a standstill. A porter opened the door and Alban handed him out one package after another. Then in his polite way, having jumped out, he gave his hand to Anne to help her down to the platform. The porter went to fetch a barrow and they stood by the pile of their luggage. Alban waved to two passengers from the ship who passed them. The man nodded stiffly.

“What a comfort it is that we shall never have to be civil to those awful people any more,” said Alban lightly.

Anne gave him a quick glance. He was really incomprehensible. The porter came back with his barrow, the luggage was put on, and they followed him to collect their trunks. Alban took his wife’s arm and pressed it.

“The smell of London. By God, it’s grand.”

He rejoiced in the noise and the bustle, and the crowd of people who jostled them; the radiance of the arc-lamps and the black shadows they cast, sharp but full-toned, gave him a sense of elation. They got out into the street and the porter went off to get them a taxi. Alban’s eyes glittered as he looked at the buses and the policemen trying to direct the confusion. His distinguished face bore a look of something like inspiration. The taxi came. Their luggage was stowed away and piled up beside the driver, Alban gave the porter half-a-crown, and they drove off. They turned down Gracechurch Street and in Cannon Street were held up by a block in the traffic. Alban laughed out loud.

“What’s the matter?” said Anne.

“I’m so excited.”

They went along the Embankment. It was relatively quiet there. Taxis and cars passed them. The bells of the trams were music in his ears. At Westminster Bridge they cut across Parliament Square and drove through the green silence of St James’s Park. They had engaged a room at a hotel just off Jermyn Street. The reception clerk took them upstairs and a porter brought up their luggage. It was a room with twin beds and a bathroom.

“This looks all right,” said Alban. “It’ll do us till we can find a flat or something.”

He looked at his watch.

“Look here, darling, we shall only fall over one another if we try to unpack together. We’ve got oodles of time and it’ll take you longer to get straight and dress than me. I’ll clear out. I want to go to the club and see if there’s any mail for me. I’ve got my dinner jacket in my suit-case and it’ll only take me twenty minutes to have a bath and dress. Does that suit you?”

“Yes. That’s all right.”

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Very well.”

He took out of his pocket the little comb he always carried and passed it through his long fair hair. Then he put on his hat. He gave himself a glance in the mirror.

“Shall I turn on the bath for you?”

“No, don’t bother.”

“All right. So long.”

He went out.

When he was gone Anne took her dressing-case and her hat-box and put them on the top of her trunk. Then she rang the bell. She did not take off her hat. She sat down and lit a cigarette. When a servant answered the bell she asked for the porter. He came. She pointed to the luggage.

“Will you take those things and leave them in the hall for the present. I’ll tell you what to do with them presently.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

She gave him a florin. He took the trunk out and the other packages and closed the door behind him. A few tears slid down Anne’s cheeks, but she shook herself; she dried her eyes and powdered her face. She needed all her calm. She was glad that Alban had conceived the idea of going to his club. It made things easier and gave her a little time to think them out.

Now that the moment had come to do what she had for weeks determined, now that she must say the terrible things she had to say, she quailed. Her heart sank. She knew exactly what she meant to say to Alban, she had made up her mind about that long ago, and had said the very words to herself a hundred times, three or four times a day every day of the long journey from Singapore, but she was afraid that she would grow confused. She dreaded an argument. The thought of a scene made her feel slightly sick. It was something at all events to have an hour in which to collect herself. He would say she was heartless and cruel and unreasonable. She could not help it.

“No, no, no,” she cried aloud.

She shuddered with horror. And all at once she saw herself again in the bungalow, sitting as she had been sitting when the whole thing started. It was getting on towards tiffin time and in a few minutes Alban would be back from the office. It gave her pleasure to reflect that it was an attractive room for him to come back to, the large veranda which was their parlour, and she knew that though they had been there eighteen months he was still alive to the success she had made of it. The jalousies were drawn now against the midday sun, and the mellowed light filtering through them gave an impression of cool silence. Anne was house-proud, and though they were moved from district to district according to the exigencies of the Service and seldom stayed anywhere very long, at each new post she started with new enthusiasm to make their house cosy and charming. She was very modern. Visitors were surprised because there were no knick-knacks. They were taken aback by the bold colour of her curtains and could not at all make out the tinted reproductions of pictures by Marie Laurencin and Gauguin in silvered frames which were placed on the walls with such cunning skill. She was conscious that few of them quite approved, and the good ladies of Port Wallace and Pemberton thought such arrangements odd, affected, and out of place; but this left her calm. They would learn. It did them good to get a bit of a jolt. And now she looked round the long, spacious veranda with the complacent sigh of the artist satisfied with his work. It was gay. It was bare. It was restful. It refreshed the spirit and gently excited the fancy. Three immense bowls of yellow cannas completed the colour scheme. Her eyes lingered for a moment on the book-shelves filled with books; that was another thing that disconcerted the colony, all the books they had, and strange books too, heavy they thought them for the most part and she gave them a little affectionate look as though they were living things. Then she gave the piano a glance. A piece of music was still open on the rack, it was something of Debussy, and Alban had been playing it before he went to the office.

Her friends in the colony had condoled with her when Alban was appointed D.O. at Daktar, for it was the most isolated district in Sondurah. It was connected with the town which was the headquarters of the Government neither by telegraph nor telephone. But she liked it. They had been there for some time and she hoped they would remain till Alban went home on leave in another twelve months. It was as large as an English county, with a long coastline, and the sea was dotted with little islands. A broad, winding river ran through it, and on each side of this stretched hills densely covered with virgin forest. The station, a good way up the river, consisted of a row of Chinese shops and a native village nestling amid coconut trees, the District Office, the D.O.“s bungalow, the clerk’s quarters, and the barracks. Their only neighbours were the manager of a rubber estate a few miles up the river, and the manager and his assistant, Dutchmen both, of a timber camp on one of the river’s tributaries. The rubber estate’s launch went up and down twice a month and was their only means of regular communication with the outside world. But though they were lonely they were not dull. Their days were full. Their ponies waited for them at dawn and they rose while the day was still fresh and in the bridle-paths through the jungle lingered the mystery of the tropical night. They came back, bathed, changed, and had breakfast, and Alban went to the office. Anne spent the morning writing letters and working. She had fallen in love with the country from the first day she arrived in it and had taken pains to master the common language spoken. Her imagination was inflamed by the stories she heard of love and jealousy and death. She was told romantic tales of a time that was only just past. She sought to steep herself in the lore of those strange people. Both she and Alban read a great deal. They had for the country a considerable library and new books came from London by nearly every mail. Little that was noteworthy escaped them. Alban was fond of playing the piano. For an amateur he played very well. He had studied rather seriously, and he had an agreeable touch and a good ear; he could read music with ease, and it was always a pleasure to Anne to sit by him and follow the score when he tried something new. But their great delight was to tour the district. Sometimes they would be away for a fortnight at a time. They would go down the river in a prahu and then sail from one little island to another, bathe in the sea, and fish, or else row upstream till it grew shallow and the trees on either bank were so close to one another that you only saw a slim strip of sky between. Here the boatmen had to pole and they would spend the night in a native house. They bathed in a river pool so clear that you could see the sand shining silver at the bottom; and the spot was so lovely, so peaceful and remote, that you felt you could stay there for ever. Sometimes, on the other hand, they would tramp for days along the jungle paths, sleeping under canvas, and notwithstanding the mosquitoes that tormented them and the leeches that sucked their blood, enjoy every moment. Whoever slept so well as on a camp bed? And then there was the gladness of getting back, the delight in the comfort of the well-ordered establishment, the mail that had arrived with letters from home and all the papers, and the piano.

Alban would sit down to it then, his fingers itching to feel the keys, and in what he played, Stravinsky, Ravel, Darius Milhaud, she seemed to feel that he put in something of his own, the sounds of the jungle at night, dawn over the estuary, the starry nights, and the crystal clearness of the forest pools.

Sometimes the rain fell in sheets for days at a time. Then Alban worked at Chinese. He was learning it so that he could communicate with the Chinese of the country in their own language, and Anne did the thousand-and-one things for which she had not had time before. Those days brought them even more closely together; they always had plenty to talk about, and when they were occupied with their separate affairs they were pleased to feel in their bones that they were near to one another. They were wonderfully united. The rainy days that shut them up within the walls of the bungalow made them feel as if they were one body in face of the world.

On occasion they went to Port Wallace. It was a change, but Anne was always glad to get home. She was never quite at her ease there. She was conscious that none of the people they met liked Alban. They were very ordinary people, middle-class and suburban and dull, without any of the intellectual interests that made life so full and varied to Alban and her, and many of them were narrow-minded and ill-natured; but since they had to pass the better part of their lives in contact with them, it was tiresome that they should feel so unkindly towards Alban. They said he was conceited. He was always very pleasant with them, but she was aware that they resented his cordiality. When he tried to be jovial they said he was putting on airs, and when he chaffed them they thought he was being funny at their expense.

Once they stayed at Government House, and Mrs Hannay, the Governor’s wife, who liked her, talked to her about it. Perhaps the Governor had suggested that she should give Anne a hint.

“You know, my dear, it’s a pity your husband doesn’t try to be more come-hither with people. He’s very intelligent; don’t you think it would be better if he didn’t let others see he knows it quite so clearly? My husband said to me only yesterday: Of course I know Alban Torel is the cleverest young man in the Service, but he does manage to put my back up more than anyone I know. I am the Governor, but when he talks to me he always gives me the impression that he looks upon me as a damned fool.”

The worst of it was that Anne knew how low an opinion Alban had of the Governor’s parts.

“He doesn’t mean to be superior,” Anne answered, smiling. “And he really isn’t in the least conceited. I think it’s only because he has a straight nose and high cheek-bones.”

“You know, they don’t like him at the club. They call him Powder-Puff Percy.”

Anne flushed. She had heard that before and it made her very angry. Her eyes filled with tears.

“I think it’s frightfully unfair.”

Mrs Hannay took her hand and gave it an affectionate little squeeze.

“My dear, you know I don’t want to hurt your feelings. Your husband can’t help rising very high in the Service. He’d make things so much easier for himself if he were a little more human. Why doesn’t he play football?”

“It’s not his game. He’s always only too glad to play tennis.”

“He doesn’t give that impression. He gives the impression that there’s no one here who’s worth his while to play with.”

“Well, there isn’t,” said Anne stung.

Alban happened to be an extremely good tennis-player. He had played a lot of tournaments in England and Anne knew that it gave him a grim satisfaction to knock those beefy, hearty men all over the court. He could make the best of them look foolish. He could be maddening on the tennis court and Anne was aware that sometimes he could not resist the temptation.

“He does play to the gallery, doesn’t he?” said Mrs Hannay.

“I don’t think so. Believe me, Alban has no idea he isn’t popular. As far as I can see he’s always pleasant and friendly with everybody.”

“It’s then he’s most offensive,” said Mrs Hannay dryly.

“I know people don’t like us very much,” said Anne, smiling a little. “I’m very sorry, but really I don’t know what we can do about it.”

“Not you, my dear,” cried Mrs Hannay. “Everybody adores you. That’s why they put up with your husband. My dear, who could help liking you?”

“I don’t know why they should adore me,” said Anne.

But she did not say it quite sincerely. She was deliberately playing the part of the dear little woman and within her she bubbled with amusement. They disliked Alban because he had such an air of distinction, and because he was interested in art and literature; they did not understand these things and so thought them unmanly; and they disliked him because his capacity was greater than theirs. They disliked him because he was better bred than they. They thought him superior; well, he was superior, but not in the sense they meant. They forgave her because she was an ugly little thing. That was what she called herself, but she wasn’t that, or if she was it was with an ugliness that was most attractive. She was like a little monkey, but a very sweet little monkey and very human. She had a neat figure. That was her best point. That and her eyes. They were very large, of a deep brown, liquid and shining; they were full of fun, but they could be tender on occasion with a charming sympathy. She was dark, her frizzy hair was almost black, and her skin was swarthy; she had a small fleshy nose, with large nostrils, and much too big a mouth. But she was alert and vivacious. She could talk with a show of real interest to the ladies of the colony about their husbands and their servants and their children in England, and she could listen appreciatively to the men who told her stories that she had often heard before. They thought her a jolly good sort. They did not know what clever fun she made of them in private. It never occurred to them that she thought them narrow, gross, and pretentious. They found no glamour in the East because they looked at it vulgarly with material eyes. Romance lingered at their threshold and they drove it away like an importunate beggar. She was aloof. She repeated to herself Landor’s line:

“Nature I loved, and next to nature, art.”

She reflected on her conversation with Mrs Hannay, but on the whole it left her unconcerned. She wondered whether she should say anything about it to Alban; it had always seemed a little odd to her that he should be so little aware of his unpopularity; but she was afraid that if she told him of it he would become self-conscious. He never noticed the coldness of the men at the club. He made them feel shy and therefore uncomfortable. His appearance then caused a sort of awkwardness, but he, happily insensible, was breezily cordial to all and sundry. The fact was that he was strangely unconscious of other people. She was in a class by herself, she and a little group of friends they had in London, but he could never quite realize that the people of the colony, the government officials and the planters and their wives, were human beings. They were to him like pawns in a game. He laughed with them, chaffed them, and was amiably tolerant of them; with a chuckle Anne told herself that he was rather like the master of a preparatory school taking little boys out on a picnic and anxious to give them a good time.

She was afraid it wasn’t much good telling Alban. He was incapable of the dissimulation which, she happily realized, came so easily to her. What was one to do with these people? The men had come out to the colony as lads from second-rate schools, and life had taught them nothing. At fifty they had the outlook of hobbledehoys. Most of them drank a great deal too much. They read nothing worth reading. Their ambition was to be like everybody else. Their highest praise was to say that a man was a damned good sort. If you were interested in the things of the spirit you were a prig. They were eaten up with envy of one another and devoured by petty jealousies. And the women, poor things, were obsessed by petty rivalries. They made a circle that was more provincial than any in the smallest town in England. They were prudish and spiteful. What did it matter if they did not like Alban? They would have to put up with him because his ability was so great. He was clever and energetic. They could not say that he did not do his work well. He had been successful in every post he had occupied. With his sensitiveness and his imagination he understood the native mind and he was able to get the natives to do things that no one in his position could. He had a gift for languages, and he spoke all the local dialects. He not only knew the common tongue that most of the government officials spoke, but was acquainted with the niceties of the language and on occasion could make use of a ceremonial speech that flattered and impressed the chiefs. He had a gift for organization. He was not afraid of responsibility. In due course he was bound to be made a Resident. Alban had some interest in England; his father was a brigadier-general killed in the war, and though he had no private means he had influential friends. He spoke of them with pleasant irony.

“The great advantage of democratic government,” he said, “is that merit, with influence to back it, can be pretty sure of receiving its due reward.”

Alban was so obviously the ablest man in the Service that there seemed no reason why he should not eventually be made Governor. Then, thought Anne, his air of superiority, of which they complained, would be in place. They would accept him as their master and he would know how to make himself respected and obeyed. The position she foresaw did not dazzle her. She accepted it as a right. It would be fun for Alban to be Governor and for her to be the Governor’s wife. And what an opportunity! They were sheep, the government servants and the planters; when Government House was the seat of culture they would soon fall into line. When the best way to the Governor’s favour was to be intelligent, intelligence would become the fashion. She and Alban would cherish the native arts and collect carefully the memorials of a vanished past. The country would make an advance it had never dreamed of. They would develop it, but along lines of order and beauty. They would instil into their subordinates a passion for that beautiful land and a loving interest in these romantic races. They would make them realize what music meant. They would cultivate literature. They would create beauty. It would be the golden age.

Suddenly she heard Alban’s footstep. Anne awoke from her day-dream. All that was far away in the future. Alban was only a District Officer yet and what was important was the life they were living now. She heard Alban go into the bath-house and splash water over himself. In a minute he came in. He had changed into a shirt and shorts. His fair hair was still wet.

“Tiffin ready?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He sat down at the piano and played the piece that he had played in the morning. The silvery notes cascaded coolly down the sultry air. You had an impression of a formal garden with great trees and elegant pieces of artificial water and of leisurely walks bordered with pseudo-classical statues. Alban played with a peculiar delicacy. Lunch was announced by the head boy. He rose from the piano. They walked into the dining-room hand in hand. A punkah lazily fanned the air. Anne gave the table a glance. With its bright-coloured tablecloth and the amusing plates it looked very gay.

“Anything exciting at the office this morning?” she asked.

“No, nothing much. A buffalo case. Oh, and Prynne has sent along to ask me to go up to the estate. Some coolies have been damaging the trees and he wants me to come along and look into it.”

Prynne was manager of the rubber estate up the river and now and then they spent a night with him. Sometimes when he wanted a change he came down to dinner and slept at the D.O.“s bungalow. They both liked him. He was a man of five-and-thirty, with a red face, with deep furrows in it, and very black hair. He was quite uneducated, but cheerful and easy, and being the only Englishman within two days’ journey they could not but be friendly with him. He had been a little shy of them at first. News spreads quickly in the East and long before they arrived in the district he heard that they were highbrows. He did not know what he would make of them. He probably did not know that he had charm, which makes up for many more commendable qualities, and Alban with his almost feminine sensibilities was peculiarly susceptible to this. He found Alban much more human than he expected, and of course Anne was stunning. Alban played ragtime for him, which he would not have done for the Governor, and played dominoes with him. When Alban was making his first tour of the district with Anne, and suggested that they would like to spend a couple of nights on the estate, he had thought it as well to warn him that he lived with a native woman and had two children by her. He would do his best to keep them out of Anne’s sight, but he could not send them away, there was nowhere to send them. Alban laughed.

“Anne isn’t that sort of woman at all. Don’t dream of hiding them. She loves children.”

Anne quickly made friends with the shy, pretty little native woman and soon was playing happily with the children. She and the girl had long confidential chats. The children took a fancy to her. She brought them lovely toys from Port Wallace. Prynne, comparing her smiling tolerance with the disapproving acidity of the other white women of the colony, described himself as knocked all of a heap. He could not do enough to show his delight and gratitude.

“If all highbrows are like you,” he said, “give me highbrows every time.”

He hated to think that in another year they would leave the district for good and the chances were that, if the next D.O. was married, his wife would think it dreadful that, rather than live alone, he had a native woman to live with him and, what was more, was much attached to her.

But there had been a good deal of discontent on the estate of late. The coolies were Chinese and infected with communist ideas. They were disorderly. Alban had been obliged to sentence several of them for various crimes to terms of imprisonment.

“Prynne tells me that as soon as their term is up he’s going to send them all back to China and get Javanese instead,” said Alban. “I’m sure he’s right. They’re much more amenable.”

“You don’t think there’s going to be any serious trouble?”

“Oh, no. Prynne knows his job and he’s a pretty determined fellow. He wouldn’t put up with any nonsense and with me and our policemen to back him up I don’t imagine they’ll try any monkey tricks.” He smiled. “The iron hand in the velvet glove.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when a sudden shouting arose. There was a commotion and the sound of steps. Loud voices and cries.

“Tuan, Tuan.”

“What the devil’s the matter?”

Alban sprang from his chair and went swiftly on to the veranda. Anne followed him. At the bottom of the steps was a group of natives. There was the sergeant, and three or four policemen, boatmen, and several men from the kampong.

“What is it?” called Alban.

Two or three shouted back in answer. The sergeant pushed others aside and Alban saw lying on the ground a man in a shirt and khaki shorts. He ran down the steps. He recognized the man as the assistant manager of Prynne’s estate. He was a half-caste. His shorts were covered with blood and there was clotted blood all over one side of his face and head. He was unconscious.

“Bring him up here,” called Anne.

Alban gave an order. The man was lifted up and carried on to the veranda. They laid him on the floor and Anne put a pillow under his head. She sent for water and for the medicine-chest in which they kept things for emergency.

“Is he dead?” asked Alban.

“No.”

“Better try to give him some brandy.”

The boatmen brought ghastly news. The Chinese coolies had risen suddenly and attacked the manager’s office. Prynne was killed, and the assistant manager, Oakley by name, had escaped only by the skin of his teeth. He had come upon the rioters when they were looting the office, he had seen Prynne’s body thrown out of the window, and had taken to his heels. Some of the Chinese saw him and gave chase. He ran for the river and was wounded as he jumped into the launch. The launch managed to put off before the Chinese could get on board and they had come down-stream for help as fast as they could go. As they went they saw flames rising from the office buildings. There was no doubt that the coolies had burned down everything that would burn.

Oakley gave a groan and opened his eyes. He was a little, dark-skinned man, with flattened features and thick coarse hair. His great native eyes were filled with terror.

“You’re all right,” said Anne. “You’re quite safe.”

He gave a sigh and smiled. Anne washed his face and swabbed it with antiseptics. The wound on his head was not serious.

“Can you speak yet?” said Alban.

“Wait a bit,” she said. “We must look at his leg.”

Alban ordered the sergeant to get the crowd out of the veranda. Anne ripped up one leg of the shorts. The material was clinging to the coagulated wound.

“I’ve been bleeding like a pig,” said Oakley.

It was only a flesh wound. Alban was clever with his fingers, and though the blood began to flow again they staunched it. Alban put on a dressing and a bandage. The sergeant and a policeman lifted Oakley on to a long chair. Alban gave him a brandy and soda, and soon he felt strong enough to speak. He knew no more than the boatmen had already told. Prynne was dead and the estate was in flames.

“And the girl and the children?” asked Anne.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, Alban.”

“I must turn out the police. Are you sure Prynne is dead?”

“Yes, sir. I saw him.”

“Have the rioters got fire-arms?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“How d’you mean, you don’t know?” Alban cried irritably. “Prynne had a gun, hadn’t he?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There must have been more on the estate. You had one, didn’t you? The head overseer had one.”

The half-caste was silent. Alban looked at him sternly.

“How many of those damned Chinese are there?”

“A hundred and fifty.”

Anne wondered that he asked so many questions. It seemed waste of time. The important thing was to collect coolies for the transport up-river, prepare the boats, and issue ammunition to the police.

“How many policemen have you got, sir?” asked Oakley.

“Eight and the sergeant.”

“Could I come too? That would make ten of us. I’m sure I shall be all right now I’m bandaged.”

“I’m not going,” said Alban.

“Alban, you must,” cried Anne. She could not believe her ears.

“Nonsense. It would be madness. Oakley’s obviously useless. He’s sure to have a temperature in a few hours. He’d only be in the way. That leaves nine guns. There are a hundred and fifty Chinese and they’ve got fire-arms and all the ammunition in the world.”

“How do’you know?”

“It stands to reason they wouldn’t have started a show like this unless they had. It would be idiotic to go.”

Anne stared at him with open mouth. Oakley’s eyes were puzzled.

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, fortunately we’ve got the launch. I’ll send it to Port Wallace with a request for reinforcements.”

“But they won’t be here for two days at least.”

“Well, what of it? Prynne’s dead and the estate burned to the ground. We couldn’t do any good by going up now. I shall send a native to reconnoitre so that we can find out exactly what the rioters are doing.” He gave Anne his charming smile. “Believe me, my pet, the rascals won’t lose anything by waiting a day or two for what’s coming to them.”

Oakley opened his mouth to speak, but perhaps he hadn’t the nerve. He was a half-caste assistant manager and Alban, the D.O., represented the power of the Government. But the man’s eyes sought Anne’s and she thought she read in them an earnest and personal appeal.

“But in two days they’re capable of committing the most frightful atrocities,” she cried. “It’s quite unspeakable what they may do.”

“Whatever damage they do they’ll pay for. I promise you that.”

“Oh, Alban, you can’t sit still and do nothing. I beseech you to go yourself at once.”

“Don’t be so silly. I can’t quell a riot with eight policemen and a sergeant. I haven’t got the right to take a risk of that sort. We’d have to go in boats. You don’t think we could get up unobserved. The lalang along the banks is perfect cover and they could just take pot shots at us as we came along. We shouldn’t have a chance.”

“I’m afraid they’ll only think it weakness if nothing is done for two days, sir,” said Oakley.

“When I want your opinion I’ll ask for it,” said Alban acidly. “So far as I can see when there was danger the only thing you did was to cut and run. I can’t persuade myself that your assistance in a crisis would be very valuable.”

The half-caste reddened. He said nothing more. He looked straight in front of him with troubled eyes.

“I’m going down to the office,” said Alban. “I’ll just write a short report and send it down the river by launch at once.”

He gave an order to the sergeant, who had been standing all this time stiffly at the top of the steps. He saluted and ran off. Alban went into a little hall they had to get his topee. Anne swiftly followed him.

“Alban, for God’s sake listen to me a minute,” she whispered.

“I don’t want to be rude to you, darling, but I am pressed for time. I think you’d much better mind your own business.”

“You can’t do nothing, Alban. You must go. Whatever the risk.”

“Don’t be such a fool,” he said angrily.

He had never been angry with her before. She seized his hand to hold him back.

“I tell you I can do no good by going.”

“You don’t know. There’s the woman and Prynne’s children. We must do something to save them. Let me come with you. They’ll kill them.”

“They’ve probably killed them already.”

“Oh, how can you be so callous! If there’s a chance of saving them it’s your duty to try.”

“It’s my duty to act like a reasonable human being. I’m not going to risk my life and my policemen’s for the sake of a native woman and her half-caste brats. What sort of a damned fool do you take me for?”

“They’ll say you were afraid.”

“Who?”

“Everyone in the colony.”

He smiled disdainfully.

“If you only knew what a complete contempt I have for the opinion of everyone in the colony.”

She gave him a long searching look. She had been married to him for eight years and she knew every expression of his face and every thought in his mind. She stared into his blue eyes as if they were open windows. She suddenly went quite pale. She dropped his hand and turned away. Without another word she went back on to the veranda. Her ugly little monkey face was a mask of horror.

Alban went to his office, wrote a brief account of the facts, and in a few minutes the motor launch was pounding down the river.

The next two days were endless. Escaped natives brought them news of happenings on the estate. But from their excited and terrified stories it was impossible to get an exact impression of the truth. There had been a good deal of bloodshed. The head overseer had been killed. They brought wild tales of cruelty and outrage. Anne could hear nothing of Prynne’s woman and the two children. She shuddered when she thought of what might have been their fate. Alban collected as many natives as he could. They were armed with spears and swords. He commandeered boats. The situation was serious, but he kept his head. He felt that he had done all that was possible and nothing remained but for him to carry on normally. He did his official work. He played the piano a great deal. He rode with Anne in the early morning. He appeared to have forgotten that they had had the first serious difference of opinion in the whole of their married life. He took it that Anne had accepted the wisdom of his decision. He was as amusing, cordial, and gay with her as he had always been. When he spoke of the rioters it was with grim irony: when the time came to settle matters a good many of them would wish they had never been born.

“What’ll happen to them?” asked Anne.

“Oh, they’ll hang.” He gave a shrug of distaste. “I hate having to be present at executions. It always makes me feel rather sick.”

He was very sympathetic to Oakley, whom they had put to bed and whom Anne was nursing. Perhaps he was sorry that in the exasperation of the moment he had spoken to him offensively, and he went out of his way to be nice to him.

Then on the afternoon of the third day, when they were drinking their coffee after luncheon, Alban’s quick ears caught the sound of a motor boat approaching. At the same moment a policeman ran up to say that the government launch was sighted.

“At last,” cried Alban.

He bolted out of the house. Anne raised one of the jalousies and looked out at the river. Now the sound was quite loud and in a moment she saw the boat come round the bend. She saw Alban on the landing-stage. He got into a prahu and as the launch dropped her anchor he went on board. She told Oakley that the reinforcements had come.

“Will the D.O. go up with them when they attack?” he asked her.

“Naturally,” said Anne coldly.

“I wondered.”

Anne felt a strange feeling in her heart. For the last two days she had had to exercise all her self-control not to cry. She did not answer. She went out of the room.

A quarter of an hour later Alban returned to the bungalow with the captain of constabulary who had been sent with twenty Sikhs to deal with the rioters. Captain Stratton was a little red-faced man with a red moustache and bow legs, very hearty and dashing, whom she had met often at Port Wallace.

“Well, Mrs Torel, this is a pretty kettle of fish,” he cried, as he shook hands with her, in a loud jolly voice. “Here I am, with my army all full of pep and ready for a scrap. Up, boys, and at “em. Have you got anything to drink in this benighted place?”

“Boy,” she cried, smiling.

“Something long and cool and faintly alcoholic, and then I’m ready to discuss the plan of campaign.”

His breeziness was very comforting. It blew away the sullen apprehension that had seemed ever since the disaster to brood over the lost peace of the bungalow. The boy came in with a tray and Stratton mixed himself a stengah. Alban put him in possession of the facts. He told them clearly, briefly, and with precision.

“I must say I admire you,” said Stratton. “In your place I should never have been able to resist the temptation to take my eight cops and have a whack at the blighters myself.”

“I thought it was a perfectly unjustifiable risk to take.”

“Safety first, old boy, eh, what?” said Stratton jovially. “I’m jolly glad you didn’t. It’s not often we get the chance of a scrap. It would have been a dirty trick to keep the whole show to yourself.”

Captain Stratton was all for steaming straight up the river and attacking at once, but Alban pointed out to him the inadvisability of such a course. The sound of the approaching launch would warn the rioters. The long grass at the river’s edge offered them cover and they had enough guns to make a landing difficult. It seemed useless to expose the attacking force to their fire. It was silly to forget that they had to face a hundred and fifty desperate men and it would be easy to fall into an ambush. Alban expounded his own plan. Stratton listened to it. He nodded now and then. The plan was evidently a good one. It would enable them to take the rioters in the rear, surprise them, and in all probability finish the job without a single casualty. He would have been a fool not to accept it.

“But why didn’t you do that yourself?” asked Stratton.

“With eight men and a sergeant?”

Stratton did not answer.

“Anyhow, it’s not a bad idea and we’ll settle on it. It gives us plenty of time, so with your permission, Mrs Torel, I’ll have a bath.”

They set out at sunset, Captain Stratton and his twenty Sikhs, Alban with his policemen and the natives he had collected. The night was dark and moonless. Trailing behind them were the dug-outs that Alban had gathered together and into which after a certain distance they proposed to transfer their force. It was important that no sound should give warning of their approach. After they had gone for about three hours by launch they took to the dug-outs and in them silently paddled up-stream. They reached the border of the vast estate and landed. Guides led them along a path so narrow that they had to march in single file. It had been long unused and the going was heavy. They had twice to ford a stream. The path led them circuitously to the rear of the coolie lines, but they did not wish to reach them till nearly dawn and presently Stratton gave the order to halt. It was a long cold wait. At last the night seemed to be less dark; you did not see the trunks of the trees, but were vaguely sensible of them against its darkness. Stratton had been sitting with his back to a tree. He gave a whispered order to a sergeant and in a few minutes the column was once more on the march. Suddenly they found themselves on a road. They formed fours. The dawn broke and in the ghostly light the surrounding objects were wanly visible. The column stopped on a whispered order. They had come in sight of the coolie lines. Silence reigned in them. The column crept on again and again halted. Stratton, his eyes shining, gave Alban a smile.

“We’ve caught the blighters asleep.”

He lined up his men. They inserted cartridges in their guns. He stepped forward and raised his hand. The carbines were pointed at the coolie lines.

“Fire.”

There was a rattle as the volley of shots rang out. Then suddenly there was a tremendous din and the Chinese poured out, shouting and waving their arms, but in front of them, to Alban’s utter bewilderment, bellowing at the top of his voice and shaking his fists at them, was a white man.

“Who the hell’s that?” cried Stratton.

A very big, very fat man, in khaki trousers and a singlet, was running towards them as fast as his fat legs would carry him and as he ran shaking both fists at them and yelling:

“Smerige flikkers! Vervloekte ploerten!”

“My God, it’s Van Hasseldt,” said Alban.

This was the Dutch manager of the timber camp which was situated on a considerable tributary of the river about twenty miles away.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he puffed as he came up to them.

“How the hell did you get here?” asked Stratton in turn.

He saw that the Chinese were scattering in all directions and gave his men instructions to round them up. Then he turned again to Van Hasseldt.

“What’s it mean?”

“Mean? Mean?” shouted the Dutchman furiously. “That’s what I want to know. You and your damned policemen. What do you mean by coming here at this hour in the morning and firing a damned volley. Target practice? You might have killed me. Idiots!”

“Have a cigarette,” said Stratton.

“How did you get here, Van Hasseldt?” asked Alban again, very much at sea. “This is the force they’ve sent from Port Wallace to quell the riot.”

“How did I get here? I walked. How did you think I got here? Riot be damned. I quelled the riot. If that’s what you came for you can take your damned policemen home again. A bullet came within a foot of my head.”

“I don’t understand,” said Alban.

“There’s nothing to understand,” spluttered Van Hasseldt, still fuming. “Some coolies came to my estate and said the Chinks had killed Prynne and burned the bally place down, so I took my assistant and my head overseer and a Dutch friend I had staying with me and came over to see what the trouble was.”

Captain Stratton opened his eyes wide.

“Did you just stroll in as if it was a picnic?” he asked.

“Well, you don’t think after all the years I’ve been in this country I’m going to let a couple of hundred Chinks put the fear of God into me? I found them all scared out of their lives. One of them had the nerve to pull a gun on me and I blew his bloody brains out. And the rest surrendered. I’ve got the leaders tied up. I was going to send a boat down to you this morning to come up and get them.”

Stratton stared at him for a minute and then burst into a shout of laughter, He laughed till the tears ran down his face. The Dutchman looked at him angrily, then began to laugh too; he laughed with the big belly laugh of a very fat man and his coils of fat heaved and shook. Alban watched them sullenly. He was very angry.

“What about Prynne’s girl and the kids?” he asked.

“Oh, they got away all right.”

It just showed how wise he had been not to let himself be influenced by Anne’s hysteria. Of course the children had come to no harm. He never thought they would.

Van Hasseldt and his little party started back for the timber camp, and as soon after as possible Stratton embarked his twenty Sikhs and leaving Alban with his sergeant and his policemen to deal with the situation departed for Port Wallace. Alban gave him a brief report for the Governor. There was much for him to do. It looked as though he would have to stay for a considerable time; but since every house on the estate had been burned to the ground and he was obliged to install himself in the coolie lines he thought it better that Anne should not join him. He sent her a note to that effect. He was glad to be able to reassure her of the safety of poor Prynne’s girl. He set to work at once to make his preliminary inquiry. He examined a host of witnesses. But a week later he received an order to go to Port Wallace at once. The launch that brought it was to take him and he was able to see Anne on the way down for no more than an hour. Alban was a trifle vexed.

“I don’t know why the Governor can’t leave me to get things straight without dragging me off like this. It’s extremely inconvenient.”

“Oh, well, the Government never bothers very much about the convenience of its subordinates, does it?” smiled Anne.

“It’s just red-tape. I would offer to take you along, darling, only I shan’t stay a minute longer than I need. I want to get my evidence together for the Sessions Court as soon as possible. I think in a country like this it’s very important that justice should be prompt.”

When the launch came in to Port Wallace one of the harbour police told him that the harbour-master had a chit for him. It was from the Governor’s secretary and informed him that His Excellency desired to see him as soon as convenient after his arrival. It was ten in the morning. Alban went to the club, had a bath and shaved, and then in clean ducks, his hair neatly brushed, he called a rickshaw and told the boy to take him to the Governor’s office. He was at once shown in to the secretary’s room. The secretary shook hands with him.

“I’ll tell H.E. you’re here,” he said. “Won’t you sit down?”

The secretary left the room and in a little while came back.

“H.E. will see you in a minute. Do you mind if I get on with my letters?”

Alban smiled. The secretary was not exactly come-hither. He waited, smoking a cigarette, and amused himself with his own thoughts. He was making a good job of the preliminary inquiry. It interested him. Then an orderly came in and told Alban that the Governor was ready for him. He rose from his seat and followed him into the Governor’s room.

“Good morning, Torel.”

“Good morning, sir.”

The Governor was sitting at a large desk. He nodded to Alban and motioned to him to take a seat. The Governor was all grey. His hair was grey, his face, his eyes; he looked as though the tropical suns had washed the colour out of him; he had been in the country for thirty years and had risen one by one through all the ranks of the Service; he looked tired and depressed. Even his voice was grey. Alban liked him because he was quiet; he did not think him clever, but he had an unrivalled knowledge of the country, and his great experience was a very good substitute for intelligence. He looked at Alban for a full moment without speaking and the odd idea came to Alban that he was embarrassed. He very nearly gave him a lead.

“I saw Van Hasseldt yesterday,” said the Governor suddenly.

“Yes, sir?”

“Will you give me your account of the occurrences at the Alud Estate and of the steps you took to deal with them.”

Alban had an orderly mind. He was self-possessed. He marshalled his facts well and was able to state them with precision. He chose his words with care and spoke them fluently.

“You had a sergeant and eight policemen. Why did you not immediately go to the scene of the disturbance?”

“I thought the risk was unjustifiable.”

A thin smile was outlined on the Governor’s grey face.

“If the officers of this Government had hesitated to take unjustifiable risks it would never have become a province of the British Empire.”

Alban was silent. It was difficult to talk to a man who spoke obvious nonsense.

“I am anxious to hear your reasons for the decision you took.”

Alban gave them coolly. He was quite convinced of the Tightness of his action. He repeated, but more fully, what he had said in the first place to Anne. The Governor listened attentively.

“Van Hasseldt, with his manager, a Dutch friend of his, and a native overseer, seems to have coped with the situation very efficiently,” said the Governor.

“He had a lucky break. That doesn’t prevent him from being a damned fool. It was madness to do what he did.”

“Do you realize that by leaving a Dutch planter to do what you should have done yourself, you have covered the Government with ridicule?”

“No, sir.”

“You’ve made yourself a laughing-stock in the whole colony.”

Alban smiled.

“My back is broad enough to bear the ridicule of persons to whose opinion I am entirely indifferent.”

“The utility of a government official depends very largely on his prestige, and I’m afraid his prestige is likely to be inconsiderable when he lies under the stigma of cowardice.”

Alban flushed a little.

“I don’t quite know what you mean by that, sir.”

“I’ve gone into the matter very carefully. I’ve seen Captain Stratton, and Oakley, poor Prynne’s assistant, and I’ve seen Van Hasseldt. I’ve listened to your defence.”

“I didn’t know that I was defending myself, sir.”

“Be so good as not to interrupt me. I think you committed a grave error of judgement. As it turns out, the risk was very small, but whatever it was, I think you should have taken it. In such matters promptness and firmness are essential. It is not for me to conjecture what motive led you to send for a force of constabulary and do nothing till they came. I am afraid, however, that I consider that your usefulness in the Service is no longer very great.”

Alban looked at him with astonishment.

“But would you have gone under the circumstances?” he asked him.

“I should.”

Alban shrugged his shoulders.

“Don’t you believe me?” rapped out the Governor.

“Of course I believe you, sir. But perhaps you will allow me to say that if you had been killed the colony would have suffered an irreparable loss.”

The Governor drummed on the table with his fingers. He looked out of the window and then looked again at Alban. When he spoke it was not unkindly.

“I think you are unfitted by temperament for this rather rough-and-tumble life, Torel. If you’ll take my advice you’ll go home. With your abilities I feel sure that you’ll soon find an occupation much better suited to you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what you mean, sir.”

“Oh, come, Torel, you’re not stupid. I’m trying to make things easy for you. For your wife’s sake as well as for your own I do not wish you to leave the colony with the stigma of being dismissed from the Service for cowardice. I’m giving you the opportunity of resigning.”

“Thank you very much, sir. I’m not prepared to avail myself of the opportunity. If I resign I admit that I committed an error and that the charge you make against me is justified. I don’t admit it.”

“You can please yourself. I have considered the matter very carefully and I have no doubt about it in my mind. I am forced to discharge you from the Service. The necessary papers will reach you in due course. Meanwhile you will return to your post and hand over to the officer appointed to succeed you on his arrival.”

“Very good, sir,” replied Alban, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “When do you desire me to return to my post?”

“At once.”

“Have you any objection to my going to the club and having tiffin before I go?”

The Governor looked at him with surprise. His exasperation was mingled with an unwilling admiration.

“Not at all. I’m sorry, Torel, that this unhappy incident should have deprived the Government of a servant whose zeal has always been so apparent and whose tact, intelligence, and industry seemed to point him out in the future for very high office.”

“Your Excellency does not read Schiller, I suppose. You are probably not acquainted with his celebrated line: mit der Dummheit kämpfen die Götter selbst vergebens.”

“What does it mean?”

“Roughly: Against stupidity the gods themselves battle in vain.”

“Good morning.”

With his head in the air, a smile on his lips, Alban left the Governor’s office. The Governor was human, and he had the curiosity to ask his secretary later in the day if Alban Torel had really gone to the club.

“Yes, sir. He had tiffin there.”

“It must have wanted some nerve.”

Alban entered the club jauntily and joined the group of men standing at the bar. He talked to them in the breezy, cordial tone he always used with them. It was designed to put them at their ease. They had been discussing him ever since Stratton had come back to Port Wallace with his story, sneering at him and laughing at him, and all who had resented his superciliousness, and they were the majority, were triumphant because his pride had had a fall. But they were so taken aback at seeing him now, so confused to find him as confident as ever, that it was they who were embarrassed.

One man, though he knew perfectly, asked him what he was doing in Port Wallace.

“Oh, I came about the riot on the Alud Estate. H.E. wanted to see me. He does not see eye to eye with me about it. The silly old ass has fired me. I’m going home as soon as he appoints a D.O. to take over.”

There was a moment of awkwardness. One, more kindly disposed than the others, said:

“I’m awfully sorry.”

Alban shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear fellow, what can you do with a perfect damned fool? The only thing is to let him stew in his own juice.”

When the Governor’s secretary had told his chief as much of this as he thought discreet, the Governor smiled.

“Courage is a queer thing. I would rather have shot myself than go to the club just then and face all those fellows.”

A fortnight later, having sold to the incoming D.O. all the decorations that Anne had taken so much trouble about, with the rest of their things in packing-cases and trunks, they arrived at Port Wallace to await the local steamer that was to take them to Singapore. The padre’s wife invited them to stay with her, but Anne refused; she insisted that they should go to the hotel. An hour after their arrival she received a very kind little letter from the Governor’s wife asking her to go and have tea with her. She went. She found Mrs Hannay alone, but in a minute the Governor joined them. He expressed his regret that she was leaving and told her how sorry he was for the cause.

“It’s very kind of you to say that,” said Anne, smiling gaily, “but you mustn’t think I take it to heart. I’m entirely on Alban’s side. I think what he did was absolutely right and if you don’t mind my saying so I think you’ve treated him most unjustly.”

“Believe me, I hated having to take the step I took.”

“Don’t let’s talk about it,” said Anne.

“What are your plans when you get home? asked Mrs Hannay.

Anne began to chat brightly. You would have thought she had not a care in the world. She seemed in great spirits at going home. She was jolly and amusing and made little jokes. When she took leave of the Governor and his wife she thanked them for all their kindness. The Governor escorted her to the door.

The next day but one, after dinner, they went on board the clean and comfortable little ship. The padre and his wife saw them off. When they went into their cabin they found a large parcel on Anne’s bunk. It was addressed to Alban. He opened it and saw that it was an immense powder-puff.

“Hullo, I wonder who sent us this,” he said, with a laugh. “It must be for you, darling.”

Anne gave him a quick look. She went pale. The brutes! How could they be so cruel? She forced herself to smile.

“It’s enormous, isn’t it? I’ve never seen such a large powder-puff in my life.”

But when he had left the cabin and they were out at sea, she threw it passionately overboard.

And now, now that they were back in London and Sondurah was nine thousand miles away, she clenched her hands as she thought of it. Somehow, it seemed the worst thing of all. It was so wantonly unkind to send that absurd object to Alban, Powder-Puff Percy; it showed such a petty spite. Was that their idea of humour? Nothing had hurt her more and even now she felt that it was only by holding on to herself that she could prevent herself from crying. Suddenly she started, for the door opened and Alban came in. She was still sitting in the chair in which he had left her.

“Hullo, why haven’t you dressed?” He looked about the room. “You haven’t unpacked.”

“No.”

“Why on earth not?”

“I’m not going to unpack. I’m not going to stay here. I’m leaving you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve stuck it out till now. I made up my mind I would till we got home. I set my teeth, I’ve borne more than I thought it possible to bear, but now it’s finished. I’ve done all that could be expected of me. We’re back in London now and I can go.”

He looked at her in utter bewilderment.

“Are you mad, Anne?”

“Oh, my God, what I’ve endured! The journey to Singapore, with all the officers knowing, and even the Chinese stewards. And at Singapore, the way people looked at us at the hotel, and the sympathy I had to put up with, the bricks they dropped and their embarrassment when they realized what they’d done. My God, I could have killed them. That interminable journey home. There wasn’t a single passenger on the ship who didn’t know. The contempt they had for you and the kindness they went out of their way to show me. And you so self-complacent and so pleased with yourself, seeing nothing, feeling nothing. You must have the hide of a rhinoceros. The misery of seeing you so chatty and agreeable. Pariahs, that’s what we were. You seemed to ask them to snub you. How can anyone be so shameless?”

She was flaming with passion. Now that at last she need not wear the mask of indifference and pride that she had forced herself to assume she cast aside all reserve and all self-control. The words poured from her trembling lips in a virulent stream.

“My dear, how can you be so absurd?” he said good-naturedly, smiling. “You must be very nervous and high-strung to have got such ideas in your head. Why didn’t you tell me? You’re like a country bumpkin who comes to London and thinks everyone is staring at him. Nobody bothered about us, and if they did what on earth did it matter? You ought to have more sense than to bother about what a lot of fools say. And what do you imagine they were saying?”

“They were saying you’d been fired.”

“Well, that was true,” he laughed.

“They said you were a coward.”

“What of it?”

“Well, you see, that was true too.”

He looked at her for a moment reflectively. His lips tightened a little.

“And what makes you think so?” he asked acidly.

“I saw it in your eyes, that day the news came, when you refused to go to the estate and I followed you into the hall when you went to fetch your topee. I begged you to go, I felt that whatever the danger you must take it, and suddenly I saw the fear in your eyes. I nearly fainted with the horror.”

“I should have been a fool to risk my life to no purpose. Why should I? Nothing that concerned me was at stake. Courage is the obvious virtue of the stupid. I don’t attach any particular importance to it.”

“How do you mean that nothing that concerned you was at stake? If that’s true then your whole life is a sham. You’ve given away everything you stood for, everything we both stand for. You’ve let all of us down. We did set ourselves up on a pinnacle, we did think ourselves better than the rest of them because we loved literature and art and music, we weren’t content to live a life of ignoble jealousies and vulgar tittle-tattle, we did cherish the things of the spirit, and we loved beauty. It was our food and drink. They laughed at us and sneered at us. That was inevitable. The ignorant and the common naturally hate and fear those who are interested in things they don’t understand. We didn’t care. We called them Philistines. We despised them and we had a right to despise them. Our justification was that we were better and nobler and wiser and braver than they were. And you weren’t better, you weren’t nobler, you weren’t braver. When the crisis came you slunk away like a whipped cur with his tail between his legs. You of all people hadn’t the right to be a coward. They despise us now and they have the right to despise us. Us and all we stood for. Now they can say that art and beauty are all rot; when it comes to a pinch people like us always let you down. They never stopped looking for a chance to turn and rend us and you gave it to them. They can say that they always expected it. It’s a triumph for them. I used to be furious because they called you Powder-Puff Percy. Did you know they did?”

“Of course. I thought it very vulgar, but it left me entirely indifferent.”

“It’s funny that their instinct should have been so right.”

“Do you mean to say you’ve been harbouring this against me all these weeks? I should never have thought you capable of it.”

“I couldn’t let you down when everyone was against you. I was too proud for that. Whatever happened I swore to myself that I’d stick to you till we got home. It’s been torture.”

“Don’t you love me any more?”

“Love you? I loathe the very sight of you.”

“Anne!”

“God knows I loved you. For eight years I worshipped the ground you trod on. You were everything to me. I believed in you as some people believe in God. When I saw the fear in your eyes that day, when you told me that you weren’t going to risk your life for a kept woman and her half-caste brats, I was shattered. It was as though someone had wrenched my heart out of my body and trampled on it. You killed my love there and then, Alban. You killed it stone-dead. Since then when you’ve kissed me I’ve had to clench my hands so as not to turn my face away. The mere thought of anything else makes me feel physically sick. I loathe your complacence and your frightful insensitiveness. Perhaps I could have forgiven it if it had been just a moment’s weakness and if afterwards you’d been ashamed. I should have been miserable, but I think my love was so great that I should only have felt pity for you. But you’re incapable of shame. And now I believe in nothing. You’re only a silly, pretentious, vulgar poseur. I would rather be the wife of a second-rate planter so long as he had the common human virtues of a man than the wife of a fake like you.”

He did not answer. Gradually his face began to discompose. Those handsome, regular features of his horribly distorted and suddenly he broke out into loud sobs. She gave a little cry.

“Don’t Alban, don’t.”

“Oh, darling, how can you be so cruel to me? I adore you. I’d give my whole life to please you. I can’t live without you.”

She put out her arms as though to ward off a blow.

“No, no, Alban, don’t try to move me. I can’t. I must go. I can’t live with you any more. It would be frightful. I can never forget. I must tell you the truth, I have only contempt for you and repulsion.”

He sank down at her feet and tried to cling to her knees. With a gasp she sprang up and he buried his head in the empty chair. He cried painfully with sobs that tore his chest. The sound was horrible. The tears streamed from Anne’s eyes and, putting her hands to her ears to shut out that dreadful, hysterical sobbing, blindly stumbling she rushed to the door and ran out.