The Vessel of Wrath

W. Somerset Maugham

THERE are few books in the world that contain more meat than the Sailing Directions published by the Hydrographic Department by order of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. They are handsome volumes, bound (very flimsily) in cloth of different colours, and the most expensive of them is cheap. For four shillings you can buy the Yangtse Kiang Pilot, “containing a description of, and sailing directions for, the Yangtse Kiang from the Wusung river to the highest navigable point, including the Han Kiang, the Kialing Kiang, and the Min Kiang’; and for three shillings you can get Part III of the Eastern Archipelago Pilot, “comprising the N.E. end of Celebes, Molucca and Gilolo passages, Banda and Arafura Seas, and North, West, and South-West coasts of New Guinea’. But it is not very safe to do so if you are a creature of settled habits that you have no wish to disturb or if you have an occupation that holds you fast to one place. These business-like books take you upon enchanted journeys of the spirit; and their matter-of-fact style, the admirable order, the concision with which the material is set before you, the stern sense or the practical that informs every line, cannot dim the poetry that, like the spice-laden breeze that assails your senses with a more than material languor when you approach some of those magic islands of the Eastern seas, blows with so sweet a fragrance through the printed pages. They tell you the anchorages and the landing places, what supplies you can get at each spot, and where you can get water; they tell you the lights and buoys, tides, winds, and weather that you will find there. They give you brief information about the population and the trade. And it is strange when you think how sedately it is all set down, with no words wasted, that so much else is given you besides. What? Well, mystery and beauty, romance and the glamour of the unknown. It is no common book that offers you casually turning its pages such a paragraph as this: “Supplies. A few jungle fowl are preserved, the island is also the resort of vast numbers of sea birds. Turtle are found in the lagoon, as well as quantities of various fish, including grey mullet, shark, and dog-fish; the seine cannot be used with any effect; but there is a fish which may be taken on a rod. A small store of tinned provisions and spirits is kept in a hut for the relief of shipwrecked persons. Good water may be obtained from a well near the landing-place.” Can the imagination want more material than this to go on a journey through time and space?

In the volume from which I have copied this passage, the compilers with the same restraint have described the Alas Islands. They are composed of a group or chain of islands, “for the most part low and wooded, extending about 75 miles east and west, and 40 miles north and south’. The information about them, you are told, is very slight; there are channels between the different groups, and several vessels have passed through them, but the passages have not been thoroughly explored, and the positions of many of the dangers not yet determined; it is therefore advisable to avoid them. The population of the group is estimated at about 8,000, of whom 200 are Chinese and 400 Mohammedans. The rest are heathen. The principal island is called Baru, it is surrounded by a reef, and here lives a Dutch Controleur. His white house with its red roof on the top of a little hill is the most prominent object that the vessels of the Royal Netherlands Steam Packet Company see when every other month on their way up to Macassar and every four weeks on their way down to Merauke in Dutch New Guinea they touch at the island.

At a certain moment of the world’s history the Controleur was Mynheer Evert Gruyter and he ruled the people who inhabited the Alas Islands with firmness tempered by a keen sense of the ridiculous. He had thought it a very good joke to be placed at the age of twenty-seven in a position of such consequence, and at thirty he was still amused by it. There was no cable communication between his islands and Batavia, and the mail arrived after so long a delay that even if he asked advice, by the time he received it, it was useless, and so he equably did what he thought best and trusted to his good fortune to keep out of trouble with the authorities. He was very short, not more than five feet four in height, and extremely fat; he was of a florid complexion. For coolness’ sake he kept his head shaved and his face was hairless. It was round and red. His eyebrows were so fair that you hardly saw them; and he had little twinkling blue eyes. He knew that he had no dignity, but for the sake of his position made up for it by dressing very dapperly. He never went to his office, nor sat in court, nor walked abroad but in spotless white. His stengahshifter, with its bright brass buttons, fitted him very tightly and displayed the shocking fact that, young though he was, he had a round and protruding belly. His good-humoured face shone with sweat and he constantly fanned himself with a palm-leaf fan.

But in his house Mr Gruyter preferred to wear nothing but a sarong and then with his white podgy little body he looked like a fat funny boy of sixteen. He was an early riser and his breakfast was always ready for him at six. It never varied. It consisted of a slice of papaia, three cold fried eggs, Edam cheese, sliced thin, and a cup of black coffee. When he had eaten it, he smoked a large Dutch cigar, read the papers if he had not read them through and through already, and then dressed to go down to his office.

One morning while he was thus occupied his head boy came into his bedroom and told him that Tuan Jones wanted to know if he could see him. Mr Gruyter was standing in front of a looking-glass. He had his trousers on and was admiring his smooth chest. He arched his back in order to throw it out and throw in his belly and with a good deal of satisfaction gave his breast three or four resounding slaps. It was a manly chest. When the boy brought the message he looked at his own eyes in the mirror and exchanged a slightly ironic smile with them. He asked himself what the devil his visitor could want. Evert Gruyter spoke English, Dutch, and Malay with equal facility, but he thought in Dutch. He liked to do this. It seemed to him a pleasantly ribald language.

“Ask the tuan to wait and say I shall come directly.” He put on his tunic, over his naked body, buttoned it up, and strutted into the sitting-room. The Rev. Owen Jones got up.

“Good morning, Mr Jones,” said the Controleur. “Have you come in to have a peg with me before I start my day’s work?”

Mr Jones did not smile.

“I’ve come to see you upon a very distressing matter, Mr Gruyter,” he answered.

The Controleur was not disconcerted by his visitor’s gravity nor depressed by his words. His little blue eyes beamed amiably.

“Sit down, my dear fellow, and have a cigar.”

Mr Gruyter knew quite well that the Rev. Owen Jones neither drank nor smoked, but it tickled something prankish in his nature to offer him a drink and a smoke whenever they met. Mr Jones shook his head.

Mr Jones was in charge of the Baptist Mission on the Alas Islands. His headquarters were at Baru, the largest of them, with the greatest population, but he had meeting-houses under the care of native helpers in several other islands of the group. He was a tall, thin, melancholy man, with a long face, sallow and drawn, of about forty. His brown hair was already white on the temples and it receded from the forehead. This gave him a look of somewhat vacuous intellectuality. Mr Gruyter both disliked and respected him. He disliked him because he was narrow-minded and dogmatic. Himself a cheerful pagan who liked the good things of the flesh and was determined to get as many of them as his circumstances permitted, he had no patience with a man who disapproved of them all. He thought the customs of the country suited its inhabitants and had no patience with the missionary’s energetic efforts to destroy a way of life that for centuries had worked very well. He respected him because he was honest, zealous, and good. Mr Jones, an Australian of Welsh descent, was the only qualified doctor in the group and it was a comfort to know that if you fell ill you need not rely only on a Chinese practitioner, and none knew better than the Controleur how useful to all Mr Jones’s skill had been and with what charity he had given it. On the occasion of an epidemic of influenza the missionary had done the work of ten men and no storm short of a typhoon could prevent him from crossing to one island or another if his help was needed.

He lived with his sister in a little white house about half a mile from the village, and when the Controleur had arrived came on board to meet him and begged him to stay till he could get his own house in order. The Controleur had accepted and soon saw for himself with what simplicity the couple lived. It was more than he could stand. Tea at three sparse meals a day, and when he lit his cigar Mr Jones politely but firmly asked him to be good enough not to smoke, since both his sister and he strongly disapproved of it. In twenty-four hours Mr Gruyter moved into his own house. He fled, with panic in his heart, as though from a plague-stricken city. The Controleur was fond of a joke and he liked to laugh; to be with a man who took your nonsense in deadly earnest and never even smiled at your best story was more than flesh and blood could stand. The Rev. Owen Jones was a worthy man, but as a companion he was impossible. His sister was worse. Neither had a sense of humour, but whereas the missionary was of a melancholy turn, doing his duty so conscientiously, with the obvious conviction that everything in the world was hopeless, Miss Jones was resolutely cheerful. She grimly looked on the bright side of things. With the ferocity of an avenging angel she sought out the good in her fellow-men. Miss Jones taught in the mission school and helped her brother in his medical work. When he did operations she gave the anaesthetic and was matron, dresser, and nurse of the tiny hospital which on his own initiative Mr Jones had added to the mission. But the Controleur was an obstinate little fellow and he never lost his capacity of extracting amusement from the Rev. Owen’s dour struggle with the infirmities of human nature, and Miss Jones’s ruthless optimism. He had to get his fun where he could. The Dutch boats came in three times in two months for a few hours and then he could have a good old crack with the captain and chief engineer, and once in a blue moon a pearling lugger came in from Thursday Island or Port Darwin and for two or three days he had a grand time. They were rough fellows, the pearlers, for the most part, but they were full of guts, and they had plenty of liquor on board, and good stories to tell, and the Controleur had them up to his house and gave them a fine dinner, and the party was only counted a success if they were all too drunk to get back on the lugger again that night. But beside the missionary the only white man who lived on Baru was Ginger Ted, and he, of course, was a disgrace to civilization. There was not a single thing to be said in his favour. He cast discredit on the white race. All the same, but for Ginger Ted the Controleur sometimes thought he would find life on the island of Baru almost more than he could bear.

Oddly enough it was on account of this scamp that Mr Jones, when he should have been instructing the pagan young in the mysteries of the Baptist faith, was paying Mr Gruyter this early visit.

“Sit down, Mr Jones,” said the Controleur. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I’ve come to see you about the man they call Ginger Ted. What are you going to do now?”

“Why, what’s happened?”

“Haven’t you heard? I thought the sergeant would have told you.”

“I don’t encourage the members of my staff to come to my private house unless the matter is urgent,” said the Controleur rather grandly. “I am unlike you, Mr Jones, I only work in order to have leisure, and I like to enjoy my leisure without disturbance.”

But Mr Jones did not care much for small talk and he was not interested in general reflections.

“There was a disgraceful row in one of the Chinese shops last night. Ginger Ted wrecked the place and half killed a Chinaman.”

“Drunk again, I suppose,” said the Controleur placidly.

“Naturally. When is he anything else? They sent for the police and he assaulted the sergeant. They had to have six men to get him to the jail.”

“He’s a hefty fellow,” said the Controleur.

“I suppose you’ll send him to Macassar.”

Evert Gruyter returned the missionary’s outraged look with a merry twinkle. He was no fool and he knew already what Mr Jones was up to. It gave him considerable amusement to tease him a little.

“Fortunately my powers are wide enough to enable me to deal with the situation myself,” he answered.

“You have power to deport anyone you like, Mr Gruyter, and I’m sure it would save a lot of trouble if you got rid of the man altogether.”

“I have the power of course, but I am sure you would be the last person to wish me to use it arbitrarily.”

“Mr Gruyter, the man’s presence here is a public scandal. He’s never sober from morning till night; it’s notorious that he has relations with one native woman after another.”

“That is an interesting point, Mr Jones. I had always heard that alcoholic excess, though it stimulated sexual desire, prevented its gratification. What you tell me about Ginger Ted does not seem to bear out this theory.”

The missionary flushed a dull red.

“These are physiological matters which at the moment I have no wish to go into,” he said, frigidly. “The behaviour of this man does incalculable damage to the prestige of the white race, and his example seriously hampers the efforts that are made in other quarters to induce the people of these islands to lead a less vicious life. He’s an out-and-out bad lot.”

“Pardon my asking, but have you made any attempts to reform him?”

“When he first drifted here I did my best to get in touch with him. He repelled all my advances. When there was that first trouble I went to him and talked to him straight from the shoulder. He swore at me.”

“No one has a greater appreciation than I of the excellent work that you and other missionaries do on these islands, but are you sure that you always exercise your calling with all the tact possible?”

The Controleur was rather pleased with this phrase. It was extremely courteous and yet contained a reproof that he thought worth administering. The missionary looked at him gravely. His sad brown eyes were full of sincerity.

“Did Jesus exercise tact when he took a whip and drove the money-changers from the Temple? No, Mr Gruyter. Tact is the subterfuge the lax avail themselves of to avoid doing their duty.”

Mr Jones’s remark made the Controleur feel suddenly that he wanted a bottle of beer. The missionary leaned forward earnestly.

“Mr Gruyter, you know this man’s transgressions just as well as I do. It’s unnecessary for me to remind you of them. There are no excuses for him. Now he really has overstepped the limit. You’ll never have a better chance than this. I beg you to use the power you have and turn him out once for all.”

The Controleur’s eyes twinkled more brightly than ever. He was having a lot of fun. He reflected that human beings were much more amusing when you did not feel called upon in dealing with them to allot praise or blame.

“But, Mr Jones, do I understand you right? Are you asking me to give you an assurance to deport this man before I’ve heard the evidence against him and listened to his defence?”

“I don’t know what his defence can be.”

The Controleur rose from his chair and really he managed to get quite a little dignity into his five feet four inches.

“I am here to administer justice according to the laws of the Dutch Government. Permit me to tell you that I am exceedingly surprised that you should attempt to influence me in my judicial functions.”

The missionary was a trifle flustered. It had never occurred to him that this little whipper-snapper of a boy, ten years younger than himself, would dream of adopting such an attitude. He opened his mouth to explain and apologize, but the Controleur raised a podgy little hand.

“It is time for me to go to my office, Mr Jones. I wish you good morning.”

The missionary, taken aback, bowed and without another word walked out of the room. He would have been surprised to see what the Controleur did when his back was turned. A broad grin broke on his lips and he put his thumb to his nose and cocked a snook at the Rev. Owen Jones.

A few minutes later he went down to his office. His head clerk, who was a Dutch half-caste, gave him his version of the previous night’s row. It agreed pretty well with Mr Jones’s. The court was sitting that day.

“Will you take Ginger Ted first, sir?” asked the clerk.

“I see no reason to do that. There are two or three cases held over from the last sitting. I will take him in his proper order.”

“I thought perhaps as he was a white man you would like to see him privately, sir.”

“The majesty of the law knows no difference between white and coloured, my friend,” said Mr Gruyter, somewhat pompously.

The court was a big square room with wooden benches on which, crowded together, sat natives of all kinds, Polynesians, Bugis, Chinese, Malays, and they all rose when a door was opened and a sergeant announced the arrival of the

Controleur. He entered with his clerk and took his place on a little dais at a

table of varnished pitch pine. Behind him was a large engraving of Queen Wilhelmina. He dispatched half a dozen cases and then Ginger Ted was brought in. He stood in the dock, handcuffed, with a warder on either side of him. The Controleur looked at him with a grave face, but he could not keep the amusement out of his eyes.

Ginger Ted was suffering from a hang-over. He swayed a little as he stood and his eyes were vacant. He was a man still young, thirty perhaps, of somewhat over the middle height, rather fat, with a bloated red face and a shock of curly red hair. He had not come out of the tussle unscathed. He had a black eye and his mouth was cut and swollen. He wore khaki shorts, very dirty and ragged, and his singlet had been almost torn off his back. A great rent showed the thick mat of red hair with which his chest was covered, but showed also the astonishing whiteness of his skin. The Controleur looked at the charge sheet. He called the evidence. When he had heard it, when he had seen the Chinaman whose head Ginger Ted had broken with a bottle, when he had heard the agitated story of the sergeant who had been knocked flat when he tried to arrest him, when he had listened to the tale of the havoc wrought by Ginger Ted who in his drunken fury had smashed everything he could lay hands on, he turned and addressed the accused in English.

“Well, Ginger, what have you got to say for yourself?”

“I was blind. I don’t remember a thing about it. If they say I half killed “im I suppose I did. I’ll pay the damage if they’ll give me time.”

“You will, Ginger,” said the Controleur, “but it’s me who’ll give you time.”

He looked at Ginger Ted for a minute in silence. He was an unappetizing object. A man who had gone completely to pieces. He was horrible. It made you shudder to look at him and if Mr Jones had not been so officious, at that moment the Controleur would certainly have ordered him to be deported.

“You’ve been a trouble ever since you came to the islands, Ginger. You’re a disgrace. You’re incorrigibly idle. You’ve been picked up in the street dead drunk time and time again. You’ve kicked up row after row. You’re hopeless. I told you the last time you were brought here that if you were arrested again I should deal with you severely. You’ve gone the limit this time and you’re for it. I sentence you to six months’ hard labour.”

“Me?”

“You.”

“By God, I’ll kill you when I come out.”

He burst into a string of oaths both filthy and blasphemous. Mr Gruyter listened scornfully. You can swear much better in Dutch than in English and there was nothing that Ginger Ted said that he could not have effectively capped.

“Be quiet,” he ordered. “You make me tired.”

The Controleur repeated his sentence in Malay and the prisoner was led struggling away.

Mr Gruyter sat down to tiffin in high good-humour. It was astonishing how amusing life could be if you exercised a little ingenuity. There were people in Amsterdam and even in Batavia and Surabaya, who looked upon his island home as a place of exile. They little knew how agreeable it was and what fun he could extract from unpromising material. They asked him whether he did not miss the club and the races and the cinema, the dances that were held once a week at the Casino and the society of Dutch ladies. Not at all. He liked comfort. The substantial furniture of the room in which he sat had a satisfying solidity. He liked reading French novels of a frivolous nature and he appreciated the sensation of reading one after the other without the uneasiness occasioned by the thought that he was wasting his time. It seemed to him a great luxury to waste time. When his young man’s fancy turned to thoughts of love his head boy brought to the house a little dark-skinned bright-eyed creature in a sarong. He took care to form no connexion of a permanent nature. He thought that change kept the heart young. He enjoyed freedom and was not weighed down by a sense of responsibility. He did not mind the heat. It made a sluice over with cold water half a dozen times a day a pleasure that had almost an aesthetic quality. He played the piano. He wrote letters to his friends in Holland. He felt no need for the conversation of intellectual persons. He liked a good laugh, but he could get that out of a fool just as well as out of a professor of philosophy. He had a notion that he was a very wise little man.

Like all good Dutchmen in the Far East he began his lunch with a small glass of Hollands gin. It has a musty acrid flavour, and the taste for it must be acquired, but Mr Gruyter preferred it to any cocktail. When he drank it he felt besides that he was upholding the traditions of his race. Then he had rijsttafel. He had it every day. He heaped a soup-plate high with rice, and then, his three boys waiting on him, helped himself to the curry that one handed him, to the fried egg that another brought, and to the condiment presented by the third. Then each one brought another dish, of bacon, or bananas, or pickled fish, and presently his plate was piled high in a huge pyramid. He stirred it all together and began to eat. He ate slowly and with relish. He drank a bottle of beer.

He did not think while he was eating. His attention was applied to the mass in front of him and he consumed it with a happy concentration. It never palled on him. And when he had emptied the great plate it was a compensation to think that next day he would have rijsttafel again. He grew tired of it as little as the rest of us grow tired of bread. He finished his beer and lit his cigar. The boy brought him a cup of coffee. He leaned back in his chair then and allowed himself the luxury of reflection.

It tickled him to have sentenced Ginger Ted to the richly deserved punishment of six months’ hard labour, and he smiled when he thought of him working on the roads with the other prisoners. It would have been silly to deport from the island the one man with whom he could occasionally have a heart-to-heart talk, and besides, the satisfaction it would have given the missionary would have been bad for that gentleman’s character. Ginger Ted was a scamp and a scallywag, but the Controleur had a kindly feeling for him. They had drunk many a bottle of beer in one another’s company, and when the pearl fishers from Port Darwin came in and they all made a night of it, they had got gloriously tight together. The Controleur liked the reckless way in which Ginger Ted squandered the priceless treasure of life.

Ginger Ted had wandered in one day on the ship that was going up from Merauke to Macassar. The captain did not know how he had found his way there, but he had travelled steerage with the natives, and he stopped off at the Alas Islands because he liked the look of them. Mr Gruyter had a suspicion that their attraction consisted perhaps in their being under the Dutch flag and so out of British jurisdiction. But his papers were in order, so there was no reason why he should not stay. He said that he was buying pearl-shell for an Australian firm, but it soon appeared that his commercial undertakings were not serious. Drink, indeed, took up so much of his time that he had little left over for other pursuits. He was in receipt of two pounds a week, paid monthly, which came regularly to him from England. The Controleur guessed that this sum was paid only so long as he kept well away from the persons who sent it. It was anyway too small to permit him any liberty of movement. Ginger Ted was reticent. The Controleur discovered that he was an Englishman, this he learnt from his passport, which described him as Edward Wilson, and that he had been in Australia. But why he had left England and what he had done in Australia he had no notion. Nor could he ever quite tell to what class Ginger Ted belonged. When you saw him in a filthy singlet and a pair of ragged trousers, a battered topee on his head, with the pearl fishers and heard his conversation, coarse, obscene, and illiterate, you thought he must be a sailor before the mast who had deserted his ship, or a labourer, but when you saw his handwriting you were surprised to find that it was that of a man not without at least some education, and on occasion when you got him alone, if he had had a few drinks but was not yet drunk, he would talk of matters that neither a sailor nor a labourer would have been likely to know anything about. The Controleur had a certain sensitiveness and he realized that Ginger Ted did not speak to him as an inferior to a superior but as an equal. Most of his remittance was mortgaged before he received it, and the Chinamen to whom he owed money were standing at his elbow when the monthly letter was delivered to him, but with what was left he proceeded to get drunk. It was then that he made trouble, for when drunk he grew violent and was then likely to commit acts that brought him into the hands of the police. Hitherto Mr Gruyter had contented himself with keeping him in jail till he was sober and giving him a talking to. When he was out of money he cadged what drink he could from anyone who would give it him. Rum, brandy, arak, it was all the same to him. Two or three times Mr Gruyter had got him work on plantations run by Chinese in one or other of the islands, but he could not stick to it, and in a few weeks was back again at Baru on the beach. It was a miracle how he kept body and soul together. He had, of course, a way with him. He picked up the various dialects spoken on the islands, and knew how to make the natives laugh. They despised him, but they respected his physical strength, and they liked his company. He was as a result never at a loss for a meal or a mat to sleep on. The strange thing was, and it was this that chiefly outraged the Rev. Owen Jones, that he could do anything he liked with a woman. The Controleur could not imagine what it was they saw in him. He was casual with them and rather brutal. He took what they gave him, but seemed incapable of gratitude. He used them for his pleasure and then flung them indifferently away. Once or twice this had got him into trouble, and Mr Gruyter had had to sentence an angry father for sticking a knife in Ginger Ted’s back one night, and a Chinese woman had sought to poison herself by swallowing opium because he had deserted her. Once Mr Jones came to the Controleur in a great state because the beachcomber had seduced one of his converts. The Controleur agreed that it was very deplorable, but could only advise Mr Jones to keep a sharp eye on these young persons. The Controleur liked it less when he discovered that a girl whom he fancied a good deal himself and had been seeing for several weeks had all the time been according her favours also to Ginger Ted. When he thought of this particular incident he smiled again at the thought of Ginger Ted doing six months’ hard labour. It is seldom in this life that in the process of doing your bounden duty you can get back on a fellow who has played you a dirty trick.

A few days later Mr Gruyter was taking a walk, partly for exercise and partly to see that some job he wanted done was being duly proceeded with, when he passed a gang of prisoners working under the charge of a warder. Among them he saw Ginger Ted. He wore the prison sarong, a dingy tunic called in Malay a baju, and his own battered topee. They were repairing the road, and Ginger Ted was wielding a heavy pick. The way was narrow and the Controleur saw that he must pass within a foot of him. He remembered his threats. He knew that Ginger Ted was a man of violent passion, and the language he had used in the dock made it plain that he had not seen what a good joke it was of the Controleur’s to sentence him to six months’ hard labour. If Ginger Ted suddenly attacked him with the pick, nothing on God’s earth could save him. It was true that the warder would immediately shoot him down, but meanwhile the Controleur’s head would be bashed in. It was with a funny little feeling in the pit of his stomach that Mr Gruyter walked through the gang of prisoners. They were working in pairs a few feet from one another. He set his mind on neither hastening his pace nor slackening it. As he passed Ginger Ted, the man swung his pick into the ground and looked up at the Controleur and as he caught his eye winked. The Controleur checked the smile that rose to his lips and with official dignity strode on. But that wink, so lusciously full of sardonic humour, filled him with satisfaction. If he had been the Caliph of Bagdad instead of a junior official in the Dutch Civil Service, he could forthwith have released Ginger Ted, sent slaves to bath and perfume him, and having clothed him in a golden robe entertained him to a sumptuous repast.

Ginger Ted was an exemplary prisoner and in a month or two the Controleur, having occasion to send a gang to do some work on one of the outlying islands, included him in it. There was no jail there, so the ten fellows he sent, under the charge of a warder, were billeted on the natives and after their day’s work lived like free men. The job was sufficient to take up the rest of Ginger Ted’s sentence. The Controleur saw him before he left.

“Look here, Ginger,” he said to him, “here’s ten guilder for you so that you can buy yourself tobacco when you’re gone.”

“Couldn’t you make it a bit more? There’s eight pounds a month coming in regularly.”

“I think that’s enough. I’ll keep the letters that come for you, and when you get back you’ll have a tidy sum. You’ll have enough to take you anywhere you want to go.”

“I’m very comfortable here,” said Ginger Ted.

“Well, the day you come back, clean yourself up and come over to my house. We’ll have a bottle of beer together.”

“That’ll be fine. I guess I’ll be ready for a good crack then.”

Now chance steps in. The island to which Ginger Ted had been sent was called Maputiti, and like all the rest of them it was rocky, heavily wooded, and surrounded by a reef. There was a village among coconuts on the sea-shore opposite the opening of the reef and another village on a brackish lake in the middle of the island. Of this some of the inhabitants had been converted to Christianity. Communication with Baru was effected by a launch that touched at the various islands at irregular intervals. It carried passengers and produce. But the villagers were seafaring folk, and if they had to communicate urgently with Baru, manned a prahu and sailed the fifty miles or so that separated them from it. It happened that when Ginger Ted’s sentence had but another fortnight to run the Christian headman of the village on the lake was taken suddenly ill. The native remedies availed him nothing and he writhed in agony. Messengers were sent to Baru imploring the missionary’s help; but as ill luck would have it Mr Jones was suffering at the moment from an attack of malaria. He was in bed and unable to move. He talked the matter over with his sister.

“It sounds like acute appendicitis,” he told her.

“You can’t go, Owen,” she said.

“I can’t let the man die.”

Mr Jones had a temperature of a hundred and four. His head was aching like mad. He had been delirious all night. His eyes were shining strangely and his sister felt that he was holding on to his wits by a sheer effort of will.

“You couldn’t operate in the state you’re in.”

“No, I couldn’t. Then Hassan must go.”

Hassan was the dispenser.

“You couldn’t trust Hassan. He’d never dare to do an operation on his own responsibility. And they’d never let him. I’ll go. Hassan can stay here and look after you.”

“You can’t remove an appendix.”

“Why not? I’ve seen you do it. I’ve done lots of minor operations.”

Mr Jones felt he didn’t quite understand what she was saying.

“Is the launch in?”

“No, it’s gone to one of the islands. But I can go in the prahu the men came in.”

“You? I wasn’t thinking of you. You can’t go.”

“I’m going, Owen.”

“Going where?” he said.

She saw that his mind was wandering already. She put her hand soothingly on his dry forehead. She gave him a dose of medicine. He muttered something and she realized that he did not know where he was. Of course she was anxious about him, but she knew that his illness was not dangerous, and she could leave him safely to the mission boy who was helping her nurse him and to the native dispenser. She slipped out of the room. She put her toilet things, a night-dress, and a change of clothes into a bag. A little chest with surgical instruments, bandages, and antiseptic dressings was kept always ready. She gave them to the two natives who had come over from Maputiti, and telling the dispenser what she was going to do gave him instructions to inform her brother when he was able to listen. Above all he was not to be anxious about her. She put on her topee and sallied forth. The mission was about half a mile from the village. She walked quickly. At the end of the jetty the prahu was waiting. Six men manned it. She took her place in the stern and they set off with a rapid stroke. Within the reef the sea was calm, but when they crossed the bar they came upon a long swell. But this was not the first journey of the sort Miss Jones had taken and she was confident of the seaworthiness of the boat she was in. It was noon and the sun beat down from a sultry sky. The only thing that harassed her was that they could not arrive before dark, and if she found it necessary to operate at once she could count only on the light of hurricane lamps.

Miss Jones was a woman of hard on forty. Nothing in her appearance would have prepared you for such determination as she had just shown. She had an odd drooping gracefulness, which suggested that she might be swayed by every breeze; it was almost an affectation; and it made the strength of character which you soon discovered in her seem positively monstrous. She was flat-chested, tall, and extremely thin. She had a long sallow face and she was much afflicted with prickly heat. Her lank brown hair was drawn back straight from her forehead. She had rather small eyes, grey in colour, and because they were somewhat too close they gave her face a shrewish look. Her nose was long and thin and a trifle red. She suffered a good deal from indigestion. But this infirmity availed nothing against her ruthless determination to look upon the bright side of things. Firmly persuaded that the world was evil and men unspeakably vicious, she extracted any little piece of decency she could find in them with the modest pride with which a conjurer extracts a rabbit from a hat. She was quick, resourceful, and competent. When she arrived on the island she saw that there was not a moment to lose if she was to save the headman’s life. Under the greatest difficulties, showing a native how to give the anaesthetic, she operated, and for the next three days nursed the patient with anxious assiduity. Everything went very well and she realized that her brother could not have made a better job of it. She waited long enough to take out the stitches and then prepared to go home. She could flatter herself that she had not wasted her time. She had given medical attention to such as needed it, she had strengthened the small Christian community in its faith, admonished such as were lax, and cast the good seed in places where it might be hoped under divine providence to take root.

The launch, coming from one of the other islands, put in somewhat late in the afternoon, but it was full moon and they expected to reach Baru before midnight. They brought her things down to the wharf and the people who were seeing her off stood about repeating their thanks. Quite a little crowd collected. The launch was loaded with sacks of copra, but Miss Jones was used to its strong smell and it did not incommode her. She made herself as comfortable a place to sit in as she could, and waiting for the launch to start, chatted with her grateful flock. She was the only passenger. Suddenly a group of natives emerged from the trees that embowered the little village on the lagoon and she saw that among them was a white man. He wore a prison sarong and a baju. He had long red hair. She at once recognized Ginger Ted.

A policeman was with him. They shook hands and Ginger Ted shook hands with the villagers who accompanied him. They bore bundles of fruit and a jar which Miss Jones guessed contained native spirit, and these they put in the launch. She discovered to her surprise that Ginger Ted was coming with her. His term was up and instructions had arrived that he was to be returned to Baru in the launch. He gave her a glance, but did not nod -indeed Miss Jones turned away her head-and stepped in. The mechanic started his engine and in a moment they were jug-jugging through the channel in the lagoon. Ginger Ted clambered on to a pile of sacks and lit a cigarette.

Miss Jones ignored him. Of course she knew him very well. Her heart sank when she thought that he was going to be once more in Baru, creating a scandal and drinking, a peril to the women and a thorn in the flesh of all decent people. She knew the steps her brother had taken to have him deported and she had no patience with the Controleur, who would not see a duty that stared him so plainly in the face. When they had crossed the bar and were in the open sea Ginger Ted took the stopper out of the jar of arak and putting his mouth to it took a long pull. Then he handed the jar to the two mechanics who formed the crew. One was a middle-aged man and the other a youth.

“I do not wish you to drink anything while we are on the journey,” said Miss Jones sternly to the elder one.

He smiled at her and drank.

“A little arak can do no one any harm,” he answered. He passed the jar to his companion, who drank also.

“If you drink again I shall complain to the Controleur,” said Miss Jones.

The elder man said something she could not understand, but which she suspected was very rude, and passed the jar back to Ginger Ted. They went along for an hour or more. The sea was like glass and the sun set radiantly. It set behind one of the islands and for a few minutes changed it into a mystic city of the skies. Miss Jones turned round to watch it and her heart was filled with gratitude for the beauty of the world.

“And only man is vile,” she quoted to herself.

They went due east. In the distance was a little island which she knew they passed close by. It was uninhabited. A rocky islet thickly grown with virgin forest. The boatman lit his lamps. The night fell and immediately the sky was thick with stars. The moon had not yet risen. Suddenly there was a slight jar and the launch began to vibrate strangely. The engine rattled. The head mechanic calling to his mate to take the helm, crept under the housing. They seemed to be going more slowly. The engine stopped. She asked the youth what was the matter, but he did not know. Ginger Ted got down from the top of the copra sacks and slipped under the housing. When he reappeared she would have liked to ask him what had happened, but her dignity prevented her. She sat still and occupied herself with her thoughts. There was a long swell and the launch rolled slightly. The mechanic emerged once more into view and started the engine. Though it rattled like mad they began to move. The launch vibrated from stem to stern. They went very slowly. Evidently something was amiss, but Miss Jones was exasperated rather than alarmed. The launch was supposed to do six knots, but now it was just crawling along; at that rate they would not get into Baru till long, long after midnight. The mechanic, still busy under the housing, shouted out something to the man at the helm. They spoke in Bugi, of which Miss Jones knew very little. But after a while she noticed that they had changed their course and seemed to be heading for the little uninhabited island a good deal to the lee of which they should have passed.

“Where are we going?” she asked the helmsman with sudden misgiving.

He pointed to the islet. She got up and went to the housing and called to the man to come out.

“You’re not going there? Why? What’s the matter?”

“I can’t get to Baru,” he said.

“But you must. I insist. I order you to go to Baru.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. He turned his back on her and slipped once more under the housing. Then Ginger Ted addressed her.

“One of the blades of the propeller has broken off. He thinks he can get as far as that island. We shall have to stay the night there and he’ll put on a new propeller in the morning when the tide’s out.”

“I can’t spend the night on an uninhabited island with three men,” she cried.

“A lot of women would jump at it.”

“I insist on going to Baru. Whatever happens we must get there tonight.”

“Don’t get excited, old girl. We’ve got to beach the boat to put a new propeller on, and we shall be all right on the island.”

“How dare you speak to me like that! I think you’re very insolent.”

“You’ll be O.K. We’ve got plenty of grub and we’ll have a snack when we land. You have a drop of arak and you’ll feel like a house on fire.”

“You’re an impertinent man. If you don’t go to Baru I’ll have you all put in prison.”

“We’re not going to Baru. We can’t. We’re going to that island and if you don’t like it you can get out and swim.”

“Oh, you’ll pay for this.”

“Shut up, you old cow,” said Ginger Ted.

Miss Jones gave a gasp of anger. But she controlled herself. Even out there, in the middle of the ocean, she had too much dignity to bandy words with that vile wretch. The launch, the engine rattling horribly, crawled on. It was pitch dark now, and she could no longer see the island they were making for. Miss Jones, deeply incensed, sat with lips tight shut and a frown on her brow; she was not used to being crossed. Then the moon rose and she could see the bulk of Ginger Ted sprawling on the top of the piled sacks of copra. The glimmer of his cigarette was strangely sinister. Now the island was vaguely outlined against the sky. They reached it and the boatman ran the launch on to the beach. Suddenly Miss Jones gave a gasp. The truth had dawned on her and her anger changed to fear. Her heart beat violently. She shook in every limb. She felt dreadfully faint. She saw it all. Was the broken propeller a put-up job or was it an accident? She could not be certain; anyhow, she knew that Ginger Ted would seize the opportunity. Ginger Ted would rape her. She knew his character. He was mad about women. That was what he had done, practically, to the girl at the mission, such a good little thing she was and an excellent sempstress; they would have prosecuted him for that and he would have been sentenced to years of imprisonment only very unfortunately the innocent child had gone back to him several times and indeed had only complained of his ill usage when he left her for somebody else. They had gone to the Controleur about it, but he had refused to take any steps, saying in that coarse way of his that even if what the girl said was true, it didn’t look very much as though it had been an altogether unpleasant experience. Ginger Ted was a scoundrel. And she was a white woman. What chance was there that he would spare her? None. She knew men. But she must pull herself together. She must keep her wits about her. She must have courage. She was determined to sell her virtue dearly, and if he killed her–well, she would rather die than yield. And if she died she would rest in the arms of Jesus. For a moment a great light blinded her eyes and she saw the mansions of her Heavenly Father. They were a grand and sumptuous mixture of a picture palace and a railway station. The mechanics and Ginger Ted jumped out of the launch and, waist-deep in water, gathered round the broken propeller. She took advantage of their preoccupation to get her case of surgical instruments out of the box. She took out the four scalpels it contained and secreted them in her clothing. If Ginger Ted touched her she would not hesitate to plunge a scalpel in his heart.

“Now then, miss, you’d better get out,” said Ginger Ted. “You’ll be better off on the beach than in the boat.”

She thought so too. At least here she would have freedom of action. Without a word she clambered over the copra sacks. He offered her his hand.

“I don’t want your help,” she said coldly.

“You can go to hell,” he answered.

It was a little difficult to get out of the boat without showing her legs, but by the exercise of considerable ingenuity she managed it.

“Damned lucky we’ve got something to eat. We’ll make a fire and then you’d better have a snack and a nip of arak.”

“I want nothing. I only want to be left alone.”

“It won’t hurt me if you go hungry.”

She did not answer. She walked, with head erect, along the beach. She held the largest scalpel in her closed fist. The moon allowed her to see where she was going. She looked for a place to hide. The thick forest came down to the very edge of the beach; but, afraid of its darkness (after all, she was but a woman), she dared not plunge into its depth. She did not know what animals lurked there or what dangerous snakes. Besides, her instinct told her that it was better to keep those three bad men in sight; then if they came towards her she would be prepared. Presently she found a little hollow. She looked round. They seemed to be occupied with their own efforts and they could not see her. She slipped in. There was a rock between them and her so that she was hidden from them and yet could watch them. She saw them go to and from the boat carrying things. She saw them build a fire. It lit them luridly and she saw them sit around it and eat, and she saw the jar of arak passed from one to the other. They were all going to get drunk. What would happen to her then? It might be that she could cope with Ginger Ted, though his strength terrified her, but against three she would be powerless. A mad idea came to her to go to Ginger Ted and fall on her knees before him and beg him to spare her. He must have some spark of decent feeling in him and she had always been so convinced that there was good even in the worst of men. He must have had a mother. Perhaps he had a sister. Ah, but how could you appeal to a man blinded with lust and drunk with arak? She began to feel terribly weak. She was afraid she was going to cry. That would never do. She needed all her self-control. She bit her lip. She watched them, like a tiger watching his prey; no, not like that, like a lamb watching three hungry wolves. She saw them put more wood on the fire, and Ginger Ted, in his sarong, silhouetted by the flames. Perhaps after he had had his will of her he would pass her on to the others. How could she go back to her brother when such a thing had happened to her? Of course he would be sympathetic, but would he ever feel quite the same to her again? It would break his heart. And perhaps he would think that she ought to have resisted more.

For his sake perhaps it would be better if she said nothing about it. Naturally the men would say nothing. It would mean twenty years in prison for them. But then supposing she had a baby. Miss Jones instinctively clenched her hands with horror and nearly cut herself with the scalpel. Of course it would only infuriate them if she resisted.

“What shall I do?” she cried. “What have I done to deserve this?”

She flung herself down on her knees and prayed to God to save her. She prayed long and earnestly. She reminded God that she was a virgin and just mentioned, in case it had slipped the divine memory, how much St Paul had valued that excellent state. And then she peeped round the rock again. The three men appeared to be smoking and the fire was dying down. Now was the time that Ginger Ted’s lewd thoughts might be expected to turn to the woman who was at his mercy. She smothered a cry, for suddenly he got up and walked in her direction. She felt all her muscles grow taut, and though her heart was beating furiously she clenched the scalpel firmly in her hand. But it was for another purpose that Ginger Ted had got up. Miss Jones blushed and looked away. He strolled slowly back to the others and sitting down again raised the jar of arak to his lips. Miss Jones, crouching behind the rock, watched with straining eyes. The conversation round the fire grew less and presently she divined, rather than saw, that the two natives wrapped themselves in blankets and composed themselves to slumber. She understood. This was the moment Ginger Ted had been waiting for. When they were fast asleep he would get up cautiously and without a sound, in order not to wake the others, creep stealthily towards her. Was it that he was unwilling to share her with them or did he know that his deed was so dastardly that he did not wish them to know of it? After all, he was a white man and she was a white woman. He could not have sunk so low as to allow her to suffer the violence of natives. But his plan, which was so obvious to her, had given her an idea; when she saw him coming she would scream, she would scream so loudly that it would wake the two mechanics. She remembered now that the elder, though he had only one eye, had a kind face. But Ginger Ted did not move. She was feeling terribly tired. She began to fear that she would not have the strength now to resist him. She had gone through too much. She closed her eyes for a minute.

When she opened them it was broad daylight. She must have fallen asleep and, so shattered was she by emotion, have slept till long after dawn. It gave her quite a turn. She sought to rise, but something caught in her legs. She looked and found that she was covered with two empty copra sacks. Someone had come in the night and put them over her. Ginger Ted! She gave a little scream. The horrible thought flashed through her mind that he had outraged her in her sleep. No. It was impossible. And yet he had had her at his mercy. Defenceless. And he had spared her. She blushed furiously. She raised herself to her feet, feeling a little stiff, and arranged her disordered dress. The scalpel had fallen from her hand and she picked it up. She took the two copra sacks and emerged from her hiding-place. She walked towards the boat. It was floating in the shallow water of the lagoon.

“Come on, Miss Jones,” said Ginger Ted. “We’ve finished. I was just going to wake you up.”

She could not look at him, but she felt herself as red as a turkey cock.

“Have a banana?” he said.

Without a word she took it. She was very hungry, and ate it with relish.

“Step on this rock and you’ll be able to get in without wetting your feet.”

Miss Jones felt as though she could sink into the ground with shame, but she did as he told her. He took hold of her arm-good heavens his hand was like an iron vice, never, never could she have struggled with him-and helped her into the launch. The mechanic started the engine and they slid out of the lagoon. In three hours they were at Baru.

That evening, having been officially released, Ginger Ted went to the Controleur’s house. He wore no longer the prison uniform but the ragged singlet and the khaki shorts in which he had been arrested. He had had his hair cut and it fitted his head now like a little curly red cap. He was thinner. He had lost his bloated flabbiness and looked younger and better. Mr Gruyter, a friendly grin on his round face, shook hands with him and asked him to sit down. The boy brought two bottles of beer.

“I’m glad to see you hadn’t forgotten my invitation, Ginger,” said the Controleur.

“Not likely. I’ve been looking forward to this for six months.”

“Here’s luck, Ginger Ted.”

“Same to you, Controleur.”

They emptied their glasses and the Controleur clapped his hands. The boy brought two more bottles.

“Well, you don’t bear me any malice for the sentence I gave you, I hope.”

“No bloody fear. I was mad for a minute, but I got over it. I didn’t have half a bad time, you know. Nice lot of girls on that island, Controleur. You ought to give “em a look over one of these days.”

“You’re a bad lot, Ginger.”

“Terrible.”

“Good beer, isn’t it?”

“Fine.”

“Let’s have some more.”

Ginger Ted’s remittance had been arriving every month and the Controleur now had fifty pounds for him. When the damage he had done to the Chinaman’s shop was paid for there would still be over thirty.

“That’s quite a lot of money, Ginger. You ought to do something useful with it.”

“I mean to,” answered Ginger. “Spend it.”

The Controleur sighed.

“Well, that’s what money’s for, I guess.”

The Controleur gave his guest the news. Not much had happened during the last six months. Time on the Alas Islands did not matter very much and the rest of the world did not matter at all.

“Any wars anywhere?” asked Ginger Ted.

“No. Not that I’ve noticed. Harry Jervis found a pretty big pearl. He says he’s going to ask a thousand quid for it.”

“I hope he gets it.”

“And Charlie McCormack’s married.”

“He always was a bit soft.”

Suddenly the boy appeared and said Mr Jones wished to know if he might come in. Before the Controleur could give an answer Mr Jones walked in.

“I won’t detain you long,” he said. “I’ve been trying to get hold of this good man all day and when I heard he was here I thought you wouldn’t mind my coming.”

“How is Miss Jones?” asked the Controleur politely. “None the worse for her night in the open, I trust.”

“She’s naturally a bit shaken. She had a temperature and I’ve insisted on her going to bed, but I don’t think it’s serious.”

The two men had got up on the missionary’s entrance, and now the missionary went up to Ginger Ted and held out his hand.

“I want to thank you. You did a great and noble thing. My sister is right, one should always look for the good in their fellow-men; I am afraid I misjudged you in the past; I beg your pardon.”

He spoke very solemnly. Ginger Ted looked at him with amazement. He had not been able to prevent the missionary taking his hand. He still held it.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You had my sister at your mercy and you spared her. I thought you were all evil and I am ashamed. She was defenceless. She was in your power. You had pity on her. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Neither my sister nor I will ever forget. God bless and guard you always.”

Mr Jones’s voice shook a little and he turned his head away. He released Ginger Ted’s hand and strode quickly to the door. Ginger Ted watched him with a blank face.

“What the blazes does he mean?” he asked.

The Controleur laughed. He tried to control himself, but the more he did the more he laughed. He shook and you saw the folds of his fat belly ripple under the sarong. He leaned back in his long chair and rolled from side to side. He did not laugh only with his face, he laughed with his whole body, and even the muscles of his podgy legs shook with mirth. He held his aching ribs. Ginger Ted looked at him frowning, and because he did not understand what the joke was he grew angry. He seized one of the empty beer bottles by the neck.

“If you don’t stop laughing, I’ll break your bloody head open,” he said.

The Controleur mopped his face. He swallowed a mouthful of beer. He sighed and groaned because his sides were hurting him.

“He’s thanking you for having respected the virtue of Miss Jones,” he spluttered at last.

“Me?” cried Ginger Ted.

The thought took quite a long time to travel through his head, but when at last he got it he flew into a violent rage. There flowed from his mouth such a stream of blasphemous obscenities as would have startled a marine.

“That old cow,” he finished. “What does he take me for?”

“You have the reputation of being rather hot stuff with the girls, Ginger,” giggled the little Controleur.

“I wouldn’t touch her with the fag-end of a barge-pole. It never entered my head. The nerve. I’ll wring his blasted neck. Look here, give me my money, I’m going to get drunk.”

“I don’t blame you,” said the Controleur.

“That old cow,” repeated Ginger Ted. “That old cow.”

He was shocked and outraged. The suggestion really shattered his sense of decency.

The Controleur had the money at hand and having got Ginger Ted to sign the necessary papers gave it to him.

“Go and get drunk, Ginger Ted,” he said, “but I warn you, if you get into mischief it’ll be twelve months next time.”

“I shan’t get into mischief,” said Ginger Ted sombrely. He was suffering from a sense of injury. “It’s an insult,” he shouted at the Controleur. “That’s what it is, it’s a bloody insult.”

He lurched out of the house, and as he went he muttered to himself: “Dirty swine, dirty swine.” Ginger Ted remained drunk for a week. Mr Jones went to see the Controleur again.

“I’m very sorry to hear that poor fellow has taken up his evil course again,” he said. “My sister and I are dreadfully disappointed. I’m afraid it wasn’t very wise to give him so much money at once.”

“It was his own money. I had no right to keep it back.”

“Not a legal right, perhaps, but surely a moral right.”

He told the Controleur the story of that fearful night on the island. With her feminine instinct, Miss Jones had realized that the man, inflamed with lust, was determined to take advantage of her, and, resolved to defend herself to the last, had armed herself with a scalpel. He told the Controleur how she had prayed and wept and how she had hidden herself. Her agony was indescribable, and she knew that she could never have survived the shame. She rocked to and fro and every moment she thought he was coming. And there was no help anywhere and at last she had fallen asleep; she was tired out, poor thing, she had undergone more than any human being could stand, and then when she awoke she found that he had covered her with copra sacks. He had found her asleep, and surely it was her innocence, her very helplessness that had moved him, he hadn’t the heart to touch her; he covered her gently with two copra sacks and crept silently away.

“It shows you that deep down in him there is something sterling. My sister feels it’s our duty to save him. We must do something for him.”

“Well, in your place I wouldn’t try till he’s got through all his money,” said the Controleur, “and then if he’s not in jail you can do what you like.”

But Ginger Ted didn’t want to be saved. About a fortnight after his release from prison he was sitting on a stool outside a Chinaman’s shop looking vacantly down the street when he saw Miss Jones coming along. He stared at her for a minute and once more amazement seized him. He muttered to himself and there can be little doubt that his mutterings were disrespectful. But then he noticed that Miss Jones had seen him and he quickly turned his head away; he was conscious, notwithstanding, that she was looking at him. She was walking briskly, but she sensibly diminished her pace as she approached him. He thought she was going to stop and speak to him. He got up quickly and went into the shop. He did not venture to come out for at least five minutes. Half an hour later Mr Jones himself came along and he went straight up to Ginger Ted with outstretched hand.

“How do you do, Mr Edward? My sister told me I should find you here.”

Ginger Ted gave him a surly look and did not take the proffered hand. He made no answer.

“We’d be so very glad if you’d come to dinner with us next Sunday. My sister’s a capital cook and she’ll make you a real Australian dinner.”

“Go to hell,” said Ginger Ted.

“That’s not very gracious,” said the missionary, but with a little laugh to show that he was not affronted. “You go and see the Controleur from time to time, why shouldn’t you come and see us? It’s pleasant to talk to white people now and then. Won’t you let bygones be bygones? I can assure you of a very cordial welcome.”

“I haven’t got clothes fit to go out in,” said Ginger Ted sulkily.

“Oh, never mind about that. Come as you are.”

“I won’t.”

“Why not? You must have a reason.”

Ginger Ted was a blunt man. He had no hesitation in saying what we should all like to when we receive unwelcome invitations. “I don’t want to.”

“I’m sorry. My sister will be very disappointed.”

Mr Jones, determined to show that he was not in the least offended, gave him a breezy nod and walked on. Forty-eight hours later there mysteriously arrived at the house in which Ginger Ted lodged a parcel containing a suit of ducks, a tennis shirt, a pair of socks, and some shoes. He was unaccustomed to receiving presents and next time he saw the Controleur asked him if it was he who had sent the things.

“Not on your life,” replied the Controleur. “I’m perfectly indifferent to the state of your wardrobe.”

“Well, then, who the hell can have?”

“Search me.”

It was necessary from time to time for Miss Jones to see Mr Gruyter on business and shortly after this she came to see him one morning in his office. She was a capable woman and though she generally wanted him to do something he had no mind to, she did not waste his time. He was a little surprised then to discover that she had come on a very trivial errand. When he told her that he could not take cognizance of the matter in question, she did not as was her habit try to convince him, but accepted his refusal as definite. She got up to go and then as though it were an afterthought said:

“Oh, Mr Gruyter, my brother is very anxious that we should have the man they call Ginger Ted to supper with us and I’ve written him a little note inviting him for the day after tomorrow. I think he’s rather shy, and I wonder if you’d come with him.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“My brother feels that we ought to do something for the poor fellow.”

“A woman’s influence and all that sort of thing,” said the Controleur demurely.

“Will you persuade him to come? I’m sure he will if you make a point of it, and when he knows the way he’ll come again. It seems such a pity to let a young man like that go to pieces altogether.”

The Controleur looked up at her. She was several inches taller than he. He thought her very unattractive. She reminded him strangely of wet linen hung on a clothes-line to dry. His eyes twinkled, but he kept a straight face.

“I’ll do my best,” he said.

“How old is he?” she asked.

“According to his passport he’s thirty-one.”

“And what is his real name?”

“Wilson.”

“Edward Wilson,” she said softly.

“It’s astonishing that after the life he’s led he should be so strong,” murmured the Controleur. “He has the strength of an ox.”

“Those red-headed men sometimes are very powerful,” said Miss Jones, but spoke as though she were choking.

“Quite so,” said the Controleur.

Then for no obvious reason Miss Jones blushed. She hurriedly said goodbye to the Controleur and left his office.

“Godverdomme!” said the Controleur.

He knew now who had sent Ginger Ted the new clothes.

He met him during the course of the day and asked him whether he had heard from Miss Jones. Ginger Ted took a crumpled ball of paper out of his pocket and gave it to him. It was the invitation. It ran as follows:

Dear Mr Wilson

My brother and I would be so very glad if you would come and have supper with us next Thursday at 7.30. The Controleur has kindly promised to come. We have some new records from Australia which I am sure you will like. I am afraid I was not very nice to you last time we met, but I did not know you so well then, and I am big enough to admit it when I have committed an error. I hope you will forgive me and let me be your friend,

Yours sincerely, Martha Jones

The Controleur noticed that she addressed him as Mr Wilson and referred to his own promise to go, so that when she told him she had already invited Ginger Ted she had a little anticipated the truth.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not going, if that’s what you mean. Damned nerve.”

“You must answer the letter.”

“Well, I won’t.”

“Now look here, Ginger, you put on those new clothes and you come as a favour to me. I’ve got to go and, damn it all, you can’t leave me in the lurch. It won’t hurt you just once.”

Ginger Ted looked at the Controleur suspiciously, but his face was serious and his manner sincere: he could not guess that within him the Dutchman bubbled with laughter.

“What the devil do they want me for?”

“I don’t know. The pleasure of your society, I suppose.”

“Will there be any booze?”

“No, but come up to my house at seven, and we’ll have a tiddly before we go.”

“Oh, all right,” said Ginger Ted sulkily.

The Controleur rubbed his little fat hands with joy. He was expecting a great deal of amusement from the party. But when Thursday came and seven o’clock, Ginger Ted was dead drunk and Mr Gruyter had to go alone. He told the missionary and his sister the plain truth. Mr Jones shook his head.

“I’m afraid it’s no good, Martha, the man’s hopeless.”

For a moment Miss Jones was silent and the Controleur saw two tears trickle down her long thin nose. She bit her lip.

“No one is hopeless. Everyone has some good in him. I shall pray for him every night. It would be wicked to doubt the power of God.”

Perhaps Miss Jones was right in this, but the divine providence took a very funny way of effecting its ends. Ginger Ted began to drink more heavily than ever. He was so troublesome that even Mr Gruyter lost patience with him. He made up his mind that he could not have the fellow on the island any more and resolved to deport him on the next boat that touched at Baru. Then a man died under mysterious circumstances after having been for a trip to one of the islands and the Controleur learnt that there had been several deaths on the same island. He sent the Chinese who was the official doctor of the group to look into the matter, and very soon received intelligence that the deaths were due to cholera. Two more took place at Baru and the certainty was forced upon him that there was an epidemic.

The Controleur cursed freely. He cursed in Dutch, he cursed in English, and he cursed in Malay. Then he drank a bottle of beer and smoked a cigar. After that he took thought. He knew the Chinese doctor would be useless. He was a nervous little man from Java and the natives would refuse to obey his orders. The Controleur was efficient and knew pretty well what must be done, but he could not do everything single-handed. He did not like Mr Jones, but just then he was thankful that he was at hand, and he sent for him at once. He was accompanied by his sister.

“You know what I want to see you about, Mr Jones,” he said abruptly.

“Yes. I’ve been expecting a message from you. That is why my sister has come with me. We are ready to put all our resources at your disposal. I need not tell you that my sister is as competent as a man.”

“I know. I shall be very glad of her assistance.”

They set to without further delay to discuss the steps that must be taken. Hospital huts would have to be erected and quarantine stations. The inhabitants of the various villages on the islands must be forced to take proper precautions. In a good many cases the infected villages drew their water from the same well as the uninfected, and in each case this difficulty would have to be dealt with according to circumstances. It was necessary to send round people to give orders and make sure that they were carried out. Negligence must be ruthlessly punished. The worst of it was that the natives would not obey other natives, and orders given by native policemen, themselves unconvinced of their efficacy, would certainly be disregarded. It was advisable for Mr Jones to stay at Baru, where the population was largest and his medical attention most wanted; and what with the official duties that forced him to keep in touch with headquarters, it was impossible for Mr Gruyter to visit all the other islands himself. Miss Jones must go; but the natives of some of the outlying islands were wild and treacherous; the Controleur had had a good deal of trouble with them. He did not like the idea of exposing her to danger.

“I’m not afraid,” she said.

“I daresay. But if you have your throat cut I shall get into trouble, and besides, we’re so short-handed I don’t want to risk losing your help.”

“Then let Mr Wilson come with me. He knows the natives better than anyone and can speak all their dialects.”

“Ginger Ted?” The Controleur stared at her. “He’s just getting over an attack of D.T.s.”

“I know,” she answered.

“You know a great deal, Miss Jones.”

Even though the moment was so serious Mr Gruyter could not but smile. He gave her a sharp look, but she met it coolly.

“There’s nothing like responsibility for bringing out what there is in a man, and I think something like this may be the making of him.”

“Do you think it would be wise to trust yourself for days at a time to a man of such infamous character?” said the missionary.

“I put my trust in God,” she answered gravely.

“Do you think he’d be any use?” asked the Controleur. “You know what he is.”

“I’m convinced of it.” Then she blushed. “After all, no one knows better than I that he’s capable of self-control.”

The Controleur bit his lip.

“Let’s send for him.”

He gave a message to the sergeant and in a few minutes Ginger Ted stood before them. He looked ill. He had evidently been much shaken by his recent attack and his nerves were all to pieces. He was in rags and he had not shaved for a week. No one could have looked more disreputable.

“Look here, Ginger,” said the Controleur, “it’s about this cholera business. We’ve got to force the natives to take precautions and we want you to help us.”

“Why the hell should I?”

“No reason at all. Except philanthropy.”

“Nothing doing, Controleur. I’m not a philanthropist.”

“That settles that. That was all. You can go.”

But as Ginger Ted turned to the door Miss Jones stopped him.

“It was my suggestion, Mr Wilson. You see, they want me to go to Labobo and Sakunchi, and the natives there are so funny I was afraid to go alone. I thought if you came I should be safer.”

He gave her a look of extreme distaste.

“What do you suppose I care if they cut your throat?”

Miss Jones looked at him and her eyes filled with tears. She began to cry. He stood and watched her stupidly.

“There’s no reason why you should.” She pulled herself together and dried her eyes. “I’m being silly. I shall be all right. I’ll go alone.”

“It’s damned foolishness for a woman to go to Labobo.”

She gave him a little smile.

“I daresay it is, but you see, it’s my job and I can’t help myself. I’m sorry if I offended you by asking you. You must forget about it. I daresay it wasn’t quite fair to ask you to take such a risk.”

For quite a minute Ginger Ted stood and looked at her. He shifted from one foot to the other. His surly face seemed to grow black.

“Oh, hell, have it your own way,” he said at last. “I’ll come with you. When d’you want to start?”

They set out next day, with drugs and disinfectants, in the Government launch. Mr Gruyter as soon as he had put the necessary work in order was to start off in a prahu in the other direction. For four months the epidemic raged. Though everything possible was done to localize it, one island after another was attacked. The Controleur was busy from morning to night. He had no sooner got back to Baru from one or other of the islands to do what was necessary there than he had to set off again. He distributed food and medicine. He cheered the terrified people. He supervised everything. He worked like a dog. He saw nothing of Ginger Ted, but he heard from Mr Jones that the experiment was working out beyond all hopes. The scamp was behaving himself. He had a way with the natives; and by cajolery, firmness, and on occasion the use of his fist, managed to make them take the steps necessary for their own safety. Miss Jones could congratulate herself on the success of the scheme. But the Controleur was too tired to be amused. When the epidemic had run its course he rejoiced because out of a population of eight thousand only six hundred had died.

Finally he was able to give the district a clean bill of health.

One evening he was sitting in his sarong on the veranda of his house and he read a French novel with the happy consciousness that once more he could take things easy. His head boy came in and told him that Ginger Ted wished to see him. He got up from his chair and shouted to him to come in. Company was just what he wanted. It had crossed the Controleur’s mind that it would be pleasant to get drunk that night, but it is dull to get drunk alone, and he had regretfully put the thought aside. And heaven had sent Ginger Ted in the nick of time. By God, they would make a night of it. After four months they deserved a bit of fun. Ginger Ted entered. He was wearing a clean suit of white ducks. He was shaved. He looked another man.

“Why, Ginger, you look as if you’d been spending a month at a health resort instead of nursing a pack of natives dying of cholera. And look at your clothes. Have you just stepped out of a band-box?”

Ginger Ted smiled rather sheepishly. The head boy brought two bottles of beer and poured them out.

“Help yourself, Ginger,” said the Controleur as he took his glass.

“I don’t think I’ll have any, thank you.”

The Controleur put down his glass and looked at Ginger Ted with amazement.

“Why, what’s the matter? Aren’t you thirsty?”

“I don’t mind having a cup of tea.”

“A cup of what?”

“I’m on the wagon. Martha and I are going to be married.”

“Ginger!”

The Controleur’s eyes popped out of his head. He scratched his shaven pate.

“You can’t marry Miss Jones,” he said. “No one could marry Miss Jones.”

“Well, I’m going to. That’s what I’ve come to see you about. Owen’s going to marry us in chapel, but we want to be married by Dutch law as well.”

“A joke’s a joke, Ginger. What’s the idea?”

“She wanted it. She fell for me that night we spent on the island when the propeller broke. She’s not a bad old girl when you get to know her. It’s her last chance, if you understand what I mean, and I’d like to do something to oblige her. And she wants someone to take care of her, there’s no doubt about that.”

“Ginger, Ginger, before you can say knife she’ll make you into a damned missionary.”

“I don’t know that I’d mind that so much if we had a little mission of our own. She says I’m a bloody marvel with the natives. She says I can do more with a native in five minutes than Owen can do in a year. She says she’s never known anyone with the magnetism I have. It seems a pity to waste a gift like that.”

The Controleur looked at him without speaking and slowly nodded his head three or four times. She’d nobbled him all right.

“I’ve converted seventeen already,” said Ginger Ted.

“You? I didn’t know you believed in Christianity.”

“Well, I don’t know that I did exactly, but when I talked to “em and they just came into the fold like a lot of blasted sheep, well, it gave me quite a turn. Blimey, I said, I daresay there’s something in it after all.”

“You should have raped her, Ginger. I wouldn’t have been hard on you. I wouldn’t have given you more than three years and three years is soon over.”

“Look here, Controleur, don’t you ever let on that the thought never entered my head. Women are touchy, you know, and she’d be as sore as hell if she knew that.”

“I guessed she’d got her eye on you, but I never thought it would come to this.” The Controleur in an agitated manner walked up and down the veranda. “Listen to me, old boy,” he said after an interval of reflection, “we’ve had some grand times together and a friend’s a friend. I’ll tell you what I’ll do, I’ll lend you the launch and you can go and hide on one of the islands till the next ship comes along and then I’ll get “em to slow down and take you on board. You’ve only got one chance now and that’s to cut and run.” Ginger Ted shook his head.

“It’s no good, Controleur, I know you mean well, but I’m going to marry the blasted woman, and that’s that. You don’t know the joy of bringing all them bleeding sinners to repentance, and Christ! that girl can make a treacle pudding. I haven’t eaten a better one since I was a kid.”

The Controleur was very much disturbed. The drunken scamp was his only companion on the islands and he did not want to lose him. He discovered that he had even a certain affection for him. Next day he went to see the missionary.

“What’s this I hear about your sister marrying Ginger Ted?” he asked him. “It’s the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“It’s true nevertheless.”

“You must do something about it. It’s madness.”

“My sister is of full age and entitled to do as she pleases.”

“But you don’t mean to tell me you approve of it. You know Ginger Ted. He’s a bum and there are no two ways about it. Have you told her the risk she’s running? I mean, bringing sinners to repentance and all that sort of thing’s all right, but there are limits. And does the leopard ever change his spots?”

Then for the first time in his life the Controleur saw a twinkle in the missionary’s eye.

“My sister is a very determined woman, Mr Gruyter,” he replied. “From that night they spent on the island he never had a chance.”

The Controleur gasped. He was as surprised as the prophet when the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? Perhaps Mr Jones was human after all.

“Allejezus!” muttered the Controleur.

Before anything more could be said Miss Jones swept into the room. She was radiant. She looked ten years younger. Her cheeks were flushed and her nose was hardly red at all.

“Have you come to congratulate me, Mr Gruyter?” she cried, and her manner was sprightly and girlish. “You see, I was right after all. Everyone has some good in them. You don’t know how splendid Edward has been all through this terrible time. He’s a hero. He’s a saint. Even I was surprised.”

“I hope you’ll be very happy, Miss Jones.”

“I know I shall. Oh, it would be wicked of me to doubt it. For it is the Lord who has brought us together.”

“Do you think so?”

“I know it. Don’t you see? Except for the cholera Edward would never have found himself. Except for the cholera we should never have learnt to know one another. I have never seen the hand of God more plainly manifest.”

The Controleur could not but think that it was rather a clumsy device to bring those two together that necessitated the death of six hundred innocent persons, but not being well versed in the ways of omnipotence he made no remark.

“You’ll never guess where we’re going for our honeymoon,” said Miss Jones, perhaps a trifle archly. “Java.”

“No, if you’ll lend us the launch, we’re going to that island where we were marooned. It has very tender recollections for both of us. It was there that I first guessed how fine and good Edward was. It’s there I want him to have his reward.”

The Controleur caught his breath. He left quickly, for he thought that unless he had a bottle of beer at once he would have a fit. He was never so shocked in his life.