**Before the Party**

W. Somerset Maugham

Mrs. Skinner liked to be in good time. She was already dressed, in black silk as befitted her age and the mourning she wore for her son-in-law, and now she put on her toque. She was a little uncertain about it, since the egrets’ feathers which adorned it might very well arouse in some of the friends she would certainly meet at the party acid expostulations; and of course it was shocking to kill those beautiful white .birds, in the mating season too, for the sake of their feathers; but there they were, so pretty and stylish, and it would have been silly to refuse them, and it would have hurt her son-in-law’s feelings. He had brought them all the way from Borneo and he expected her to be so pleased with them. Kathleen had made herself rather unpleasant about them, she must wish she hadn’t now, after what had happened, but Kathleen had never really liked Harold. Mrs. Skinner, standing at her dressing-table, placed the toque on her head, it was after all the only nice hat she had, and put in a pin with a large jet knob. If anybody spoke to her about the ospreys she had her answer.

‘I know it’s dreadful,’ she would say, ‘and I wouldn’t dream of buying them, but my poor son-in-law brought them back the last time he was home on leave.’ That would explain her possession of them and excuse their use. Everyone had been very kind. Mrs. Skinner took a clean handkerchief from a drawer and sprinkled a little Eau de Cologne on it. She never used scent, and she had always thought it rather fast, but Eau de Cologne was so refreshing. She was very nearly ready now, and her eyes wandered out of the window behind her lookingglass. Canon Heywood had a beautiful day for his garden-party. It was warm and the sky was blue; the trees had not yet lost the fresh green of the spring. She smiled as she saw her little granddaughter in the strip of garden behind the house busily raking her very own flower-bed. Mrs. Skinner wished Joan were not quite so pale, it was a mistake to have kept her so long in the tropics; and she was so grave for her age, you never saw her run about; she played quiet games of her own invention and watered her garden. Mrs. Skinner gave the front of her dress a little pat, took up her gloves, and went downstairs.

Kathleen was at the writing-table in the window busy with lists she was making, for she was honorary secretary of the Ladies’ Golf Club, and when there were competitions had a good deal to do. But she too was ready for the party.

“I see you’ve put on your jumper after all,” said Mrs. Skinner.

They had discussed at luncheon whether Kathleen should wear her jumper or her black chiffon. The jumper was black and white, and Kathleen thought it rather smart, but it was hardly mourning. Millicent, however, was in favour of it. “There’s no reason why we should all look as if we’d just come from a funeral,” she said. “Harold’s been dead eight months.”

To Mrs. Skinner it seemed rather unfeeling to talk like that. Millicent was strange since her return from Borneo.

“You’re not going to leave off your weeds yet, darling?” she asked.

Millicent did not give a direct answer. “People don’t wear mourning in the way they used,” she said. She paused a little and when she went on there was a tone in her voice which Mrs. Skinner thought quite peculiar. It was plain that Kathleen noticed it too, for she gave her sister a curious look. “I’m sure Harold wouldn’t wish me to wear mourning for him indefinitely.”

“I dressed early because I wanted to say something to Millicent,” said Kathleen in reply to her mother’s observation.

“Oh?”

Kathleen did not explain. But she put her lists aside and with knitted brows read for the second time a letter from a lady who complained that the committee had most unfairly marked down her handicap from twenty-four to eighteen. It requires a good deal of tact to be Honorary Secretary to a ladies’ golf club. Mrs. Skinner began to put on her new gloves. The sun-blinds kept the room cool and dark. She looked at the great wooden hornbill, gaily painted, which Harold had left in her safekeeping;and it seemed a little odd and barbaric to her, but he had set much store on it. It had some religious significance and Canon Heywood had been greatly struck by it. On the wall, over the sofa, were Malay weapons, she forgot what they were called, and here and there on occasional tables pieces of silver and brass which Harold at various times had sent to them. She had liked Harold and involuntarily her eyes sought his photograph which stood on the piano with photographs of her two daughters, her grandchild, her sister and her sister’s son. “Why, Kathleen, where’s Harold’s photograph?” she asked.

Kathleen looked round. It no longer stood in its place.

“Someone’s taken it away,” said Kathleen.

Surprised and puzzled, she got up and went over to the piano. The photographs had been rearranged so that no gap should show.

“Perhaps Millicent wanted to have it in her bedroom,” said Mrs. Skinner.

“I should have noticed it. Besides, Millicent has several photographs of Harold. She keeps them locked up.”

Mrs. Skinner had thought it very peculiar that her daughter should have no photographs of Harold in her room. Indeed she had spoken of it once, but Millicent had made no reply. Millicent had been strangely silent since she came back from Borneo, and had not encouraged the sympathy Mrs. Skinner would have been so willing to show her. She seemed unwilling to speak of her great loss. Sorrow took people in different ways. Her husband had said the best thing was to leave her alone. The thought of him turned her ideas to the party they were going to. “Father asked if I thought he ought to wear a tophat,” she said. “I said I thought it was just as well to be on the safe side.”

It was going to be quite a grand affair. They were having ices, strawberry and vanilla, from Boddy, the confectioner, but the Heywoods were making the iced coffee at home. Everyone would be there. They had been asked to meet the Bishop of Hong Kong, who was staying with the Canon, an old college friend of his, and he was going to speak on the Chinese missions. Mrs. Skinner, whose daughter had lived in the East for eight years and whose son-in-law had been Resident of a district in Borneo, was in a flutter of interest. Naturally it meant more to her than to people who had never had anything to do with the Colonies and that sort of thing.

‘What can they know of England who only England know?’ as Mr. Skinner said. He came into the room at that moment. He was a lawyer, as his father had been before him, and he had offices in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. He went up to London every morning and came down every evening. He was only able to accompany his wife and daughters to the Canon’s garden-party, because the Canon had very wisely chosen a Saturday to have it on. Mr. Skinner looked very well in his tail-coat and pepper-and-salt trousers. He was not exactly dressy, but he was neat. He looked like a respectable family solicitor, which indeed he was; his firm never touched work that was not perfectly above board, and if a client went to him with some trouble that was not quite nice, Mr. Skinner would look grave.

“I don’t think this is the sort of case that we very much care to undertake,” he said. “I think you’d do better to go elsewhere.”

He drew towards him his writing-block and scribbled a name and address on it. He tore off a sheet of paper and handed it to his client. “If I were you I think I would go and see these people.

“If you mention my name I believe they’ll do anything they can for you.”

Mr. Skinner was clean-shaven and very bald. His pale lips were tight and thin, but his blue eyes were shy. He had no colour in his cheeks and his face was much lined. “I sec you’ve put on your new trousers,” said Mrs. Skinner.

“I thought it would be a good opportunity,” he answered. “I was wondering if I should wear a buttonhole.”

“I wouldn’t, father,” said Kathleen. “I don’t think it’s awfully good form.”

“A lot of people will be wearing them,” said Mrs. Skinner.

“Only clerks and people like that,” said Kathleen.

“The Heywoods have had to ask everybody, you know. And besides, we are in mourning.”

“I wonder if there’ll be a collection after the Bishop’s address,” said Mr. Skinner.

“I should hardly think so,” said Mrs. Skinner.

“I think it would be rather bad form,” agreed Kathleen.

“It’s as well to be on the safe side,” said Mr. Skinner.

“I’ll give for all of us. I was wondering if ten shillings would be enough or if I must give a pound.”

“If you give anything I think you ought to give a pound, father,” said Kathleen.

“I’ll see when the time comes. I don’t want to give less than anyone else, but on the other hand I see no reason to give more than I need.”

Kathleen put away her papers in the drawer of the writing-table and stood up. She looked at her wristwatch.

“Is Millicent ready?” asked Mrs. Skinner.

“There’s plenty of time. We’re only asked at four, and I don’t think we ought to arrive much before half-past.

“I told Davis to bring the car round at four-fifteen.”

Generally Kathleen drove the car, but on grand occasions like this Davis, who was the gardener, put on his uniform and acted as chauffeur. It looked better when you drove up, and naturally Kathleen didn’t much want to drive herself when she was wearing her new jumper.

The sight of her mother forcing her fingers one by one into her new gloves reminded her that she must put on her own. She smelt them to see if any odour of the cleaning still clung to them. It was very slight. She didn’t believe anyone would notice. At last the door opened and Millicent came in. She wore her widow’s weeds. Mrs. Skinner never could get used to them, but of course she knew that Millicent must wear them for a year. It was a pity they didn’t suit her; they suited some people. She had tried on Millicent’s bonnet once, with its white band and long veil, and thought she looked very well in it. Of course she hoped dear Alfred would survive her, but if he didn’t she would never go out of weeds. Queen Victoria never had. It was different for Millicent; Millicent was a much younger woman; she was only thirty-six: it was very sad to be a widow at thirty-six. And there wasn’t much chance of her marrying again. Kathleen wasn’t very likely to marry now, she was thirty-five; last time Millicent and Harold had come home she had suggested that they should have Kathleen to stay with them; Harold had seemed willing enough, but Millicent said it wouldn’t do. Mrs. Skinner didn’t know why not. It would give her a chance. Of course they didn’t want to get rid of her, but a girl ought to marry, and somehow all the men they knew at home were married already. Millicent said the climate was trying. It was true she was a bad colour. No one would think now that Millicent had been the prettier of the two.

Kathleen had fined down as she grew older, of course some people said she was too thin, but now that she had cut her hair, with her cheeks red from playing golf in all weathers, Mrs. Skinner thought her quite pretty. No one could say that of poor Millicent; she had lost her figure completely; she had never been tall, and now that she had filled out she looked stocky. She was a good deal too fat; Mrs. Skinner supposed it was due to the tropical heat that prevented her from taking exercise. Her skin was sallow and muddy; and her blue eyes, which had been her best feature, had gone quite pale.

‘She ought to do something about her neck,’ Mrs. Skinner reflected. ‘She’s becoming dreadfully jowly.’

She had spoken of it once or twice to her husband.

He remarked that Millicent wasn’t as young as she was; that might be, but she needn’t let herself go altogether.

Mrs. Skinner made up her mind to talk to her daughter seriously, but of course she must respect her grief, and she would wait till the year was up. She was just as glad to have this reason to put off a conversation the thought of which made her slightly nervous. For Millicent was certainly changed. There was something sullen in her face which made her mother not quite at home with her. Mrs. Skinner liked to say aloud all the thoughts that passed through her head, but Millicent when you made a remark (just to say something, you know) had an awkward habit of not answering, so that you wondered whether she had heard. Sometimes Mrs. Skinner found it so irritating, that not to be quite sharp with Millicent she had to remind herself that poor Harold had only been dead eight months.

The light from the window fell on the widow’s heavy face as she advanced silently, but Kathleen stood with her back to it. She watched her sister for a moment.

“Millicent, there’s something I want to say to you,” she said. “I was playing golf with Gladys Heywood this morning.”

“Did you beat her?” asked Millicent.

Gladys Heywood was the Canon’s only unmarried daughter.

“She told me something about you which I think you ought to know.”

Millicent’s eyes passed beyond her sister to the little girl watering flowers in the garden.

“Have you told Annie to give Joan her tea in the kitchen, mother?” she said. “Yes, she’ll have it when the servants have theirs.” Kathleen looked at her sister coolly.

“The Bishop spent two or three days at Singapore on his way home,” she went on. “He’s very fond of travelling. He’s been to Borneo, and he knows a good many of the people that you know.”

“He’ll be interested to see you, dear,” said Mrs. Skinner. “Did he know poor Harold?”

“Yes, he met him at Kuala Solor. He remembers him very well. He says he was shocked to hear of his death.”

Millicent sat down and began to put on her black gloves. It seemed strange to Mrs. Skinner that she received these remarks with complete silence. “Oh, Millicent,” she said, “Harold’s photo has disappeared. Have you taken it?”

“Yes, I put it away.”

“I should have thought you’d like to have it out.”

Once more Millicent said nothing. It really was an exasperating habit. Kathleen turned slightly in order to face her sister. “Millicent, why did you tell us that Harold died of fever?”

The widow made no gesture, she looked at Kathleen with steady eyes, but her sallow skin darkened with a flush. She did not reply.

“What do you mean, Kathleen?” asked Mr. Skinner, with surprise.

“The Bishop says that Harold committed suicide.”

Mrs. Skinner gave a startled cry, but her husband put out a deprecating hand.

“Is it true, Millicent?”

“It is.”

“But why didn’t you tell us?”

Millicent paused for an instant. She fingered idly a piece of Brunei brass which stood on the table by her side. That too had been a present from Harold.

“I thought it better for Joan that her father should be thought to have died of fever. I didn’t want her to know anything about it.”

“You’ve put us in an awfully awkward position,” said Kathleen, frowning a little.

“Of course I told Gladys that we weren’t to blame. We only told them what you told us.”

“Gladys Heywood said she thought it rather nasty of me not to have told her the truth. I had the greatest difficulty in getting her to believe that I knew absolutely nothing about it. She said her father was rather put out. He says, after all the years we’ve known one another, and considering that he married you, and the terms we’ve been on, and all that, he does think we might have had confidence in him. And at all events, if we didn’t want to tell him the truth we needn’t have told him a lie.”

“I hope it didn’t put you off your game,” said Millicent.

“I must say I sympathise with him there,” said Mr. Skinner, acidly.

“Really, my dear, I think that is a most improper observation,” exclaimed her father. He rose from his chair, walked over to the empty fireplace, and from force of habit stood in front of it with parted coat-tails. “It was my business,” said Millicent, “and if I chose to keep it to myself I didn’t see why I shouldn’t.”

“It doesn’t look as if you had any affection for your mother if you didn’t even tell her,” said Mrs. Skinner.

Millicent shrugged her shoulders.

“You might have known it was bound to come out,” said Kathleen.

“Why? I didn’t expect that two gossiping old parsons would have nothing else to talk about than me.”

“When the Bishop said he’d been to Borneo it’s only natural that the Heywoods should ask him if he knew you and Harold.”

“All that’s neither here nor there,” said Mr. Skinner.

“I think you should certainly have told us the truth, and we could have decided what was the best thing to do. As a solicitor I can tell you that in the long run it only makes things worse if you attempt to hide them.”

“Poor Harold,” said Mrs. Skinner, and the tears began to trickle down her raddled checks. “It seems dreadful. He was always a good son-in-law to me. Whatever induced him to do such a dreadful thing?”

“The climate.”

“I think you’d better give us all the frets, Millicent,” said her father. “Kathleen will tell you.”

Kathleen hesitated. What she had to say really was rather dreadful. It seemed terrible that such things should happen to a family like theirs.

“The Bishop says he cut his throat.”

Mrs. Skinner gasped and she went impulsively up to her bereaved daughter. She wanted to fold her in her arms. “My poor child,” she sobbed.

But Millicent withdrew herself. “Please don’t fuss me, mother. I really can’t stand being mauled about.”

“Really, Millicent,” said Mr. Skinner, with a frown.

He did not think she was behaving very nicely.

Mrs. Skinner dabbed her eyes carefully with her handkerchief and with a sigh and a little shake of the head returned to her chair. Kathleen fidgeted with the long chain she wore round her neck.

“It does seem rather absurd that I should have to be told the details of my brother-in-law’s death by a friend. It makes us all look such fools. The Bishop wants very much to see you, Millicent; he wants to tell you how much he feels for you.” She paused, but Millicent did not speak. “He says that Millicent had been away with Joan and when she came back she found poor Harold lying dead on his bed.”

“It must have been a great shock,” said Mr. Skinner.

Mrs. Skinner began to cry again, but Kathleen put her hand gently on her shoulder, “Don’t cry, mother,” she said. “It’ll make your eyes red and people will think it so funny.”

They were all silent while Mrs. Skinner, drying her eyes, made a successful effort to control herself. It seemed very strange to her that at this very moment she should be wearing in her toque the ospreys that poor Harold had given her. “There’s something else I ought to tell you,” said Kathleen.

Millicent looked at her sister again, without haste, and her eyes were steady, but watchful. She had the look of a person who is waiting for a sound which he is afraid of missing.

“I don’t want to say anything to wound you, dear,” Kathleen went on, “but there’s something else and I think you ought to know it. The Bishop says that Harold drank.”

“Oh, my dear, how dreadful!” cried Mrs. Skinner.

“What a shocking thing to say. Did Gladys Heywood tell you? What did you say?”

“I said it was entirely untrue.”

“This is what comes of making secrets of things,” said Mr. Skinner, irritably. “It’s always the same. If you try and hush a thing up all sorts of rumours get about which are ten times worse than the truth.”

“They told the Bishop in Singapore that Harold had killed himself while he was suffering from delirium tremens. I think for all our sakes you ought to deny that, Millicent.”

“It’s such a dreadful thing to have said about anyone who’s dead,” said Mrs. Skinner. “And it’ll be so bad for Joan when she grows up.”

“But what is the foundation of this story, Millicent?” asked her father. “Harold was always very abstemious.”

“Here,” said the widow.

“Did he drink?”

“Like a fish.” The answer was so unexpected, and the tone so sardonic, that all three of them were startled. “Millicent, how can you talk like that of your husband when he’s dead?” cried her mother, clasping her neatly gloved hands. “I can’t understand you. You’ve been so strange since you came back. I could never have believed that a girl of mine could take her husband’s death like that.”

“Never mind about that, mother,” said Mr. Skinner.

“We can go into all that later.” He walked to the window and looked out at the sunny little garden, and then walked back into the room. He took his pince-nez out of his pocket and, though he had no intention of putting them on, wiped them with his handkerchief. Millicent looked at him and in her eyes, unmistakably, was a look of irony which was quite cynical. Mr. Skinner was vexed. He had finished his week’s work and he was a free man till Monday morning.

Though he had told his wife that this garden-party was a great nuisance and he would much sooner have tea quietly in his own garden, he had been looking forward to it. He did not care very much about Chinese missions, but it would be interesting to meet the Bishop. And now this! It was not the kind of thing he cared to be mixed up in; it was most unpleasant to be told on a sudden that his son-in-law was a drunkard and a suicide. Millicent was thoughtfully smoothing her white cuffs. Her coolness irritated him; but instead of addressing her he spoke to his younger daughter.

“Why don’t you sit down, Kathleen? Surely there are plenty of chairs in the room.”

Kathleen drew forward a chair and without a word seated herself. Mr. Skinner stopped in front of Millicent and faced her. “Of course I see why you told us Harold had died of fever. I think it was a mistake, because that sort of thing is bound to come out sooner or later. I don’t know how far what the Bishop has told the Heywoods coincides with the facts, but if you will take my advice you will tell us everything as circumstantially as you can, then we can see. We can’t hope that it will go no further now that Canon Heywood and Gladys know. In a place like this people are bound to talk. It will make it easier for all of us if we at all events know the exact truth.”

Mrs. Skinner and Kathleen thought he put the matter very well. They waited for Millicent’s reply. She had listened with an impassive face; that sudden flush had disappeared and it was once more, as usual, pasty and sallow.

“I don’t think you’ll much like the truth if I tell it you,” she said. “You must know that you can count on our sympathy and understanding,” said Kathleen gravely.

Millicent gave her a glance and the shadow of a smile flickered across her set mouth. She looked slowly at the three of them. Mrs. Skinner had an uneasy impression that she looked at them as though they were mannequins at a dressmaker’s. She seemed to live in a different world from theirs and to have no connection with them.

“You know, I wasn’t in love with Harold when I married him,” she said reflectively.

Mrs. Skinner was on the point of making an exclamation when a rapid gesture of her husband, barely indicated, but after so many years of married life perfectly significant, stopped her. Millicent went on. She spoke with a level voice, slowly, and there was little change of expression in her tone.

C T was twenty-seven, and no one else seemed to want to marry me. It’s true he was forty-four, and it seemed rather old, but he had a very good position, hadn’t he? I wasn’t likely to get a better chance.”

Mrs. Skinner felt inclined to cry again, but she remembered the party.

“Of course I see now why you took his photograph away,” she said dolefully.

“Don’t, mother,” exclaimed Kathleen.

It had been taken when he was engaged to Millicent and was a very good photograph of Harold. Mrs. Skinner had always thought him quite a fine man. He was heavily built, tall and perhaps a little too fat, but he held himself well, and his presence was imposing. He was inclined to be bald, even then, but men did go bald very early nowadays, and he said that topees, sunhelmets, you know, were very bad for the hair. He had a small dark moustache, and his face was deeply burned by the sun. Of course his best feature was his eyes; they were brown and large, like Joan’s. His conversation was interesting. Kathleen said he was pompous, but Mrs. Skinner didn’t think him so, she didn’t mind it if a man laid down the law; and when she saw, as she very soon did, that he was attracted by Millicent she began to like him very much. He was always very attentive to Mrs. Skinner, and she listened as though she were really interested when he spoke of his district, and told her of the big game he had killed. Kathleen said he had a pretty good opinion of himself, but Mrs. Skinner came of a generation which accepted without question the good opinion that men had of themselves. Millicent saw very soon which way the wind blew, and though she said nothing to her mother, her mother knew that if Harold asked her she was going to accept him.

Harold was staying with some people who had been thirty years in Borneo and they spoke well of the country.

There was no reason why a woman shouldn’t live there comfortably; of course, the children had to come home when they were seven but Mrs. Skinner thought it unnecessary to trouble about that yet. She asked Harold to dine, and she told him they were always in to tea. He seemed to be at a loose end, and when his visit to his old friends was drawing to a close, she told him they would be very much pleased if he would come and spend a fortnight with them. It was towards the end of this that Harold and Millicent became engaged. They had a very pretty wedding, they went to Venice for their honeymoon, and then they started for the East. Millicent wrote from various ports at which the ship touched. She seemed happy.

“People were very nice to me at Kuala Solor,” she said. Kuala Solor was the chief town of the state of Sembulu. “We stayed with the Resident and everyone asked us to dinner. Once or twice I heard men ask Harold to have a drink, but he refused; he said he had turned over a new leaf now he was a married man. I didn’t know why they laughed. Mrs. Gray, the Resident’s wife, told me they were all so glad Harold was married. She said it was dreadfully lonely for a bachelor on one of the outstations. When we left Kuala Solor Mrs. Gray said goodbye to me so funnily that I was quite surprised. It was as if she was solemnly putting Harold in my charge.”

They listened to her in silence. Kathleen never took her eyes off her sister’s impassive face; but Mr. Skinner stared straight in front of him at the Malay arms, krises and parangs, which hung on the wall above the sofa on which his wife sat. “It wasn’t till I went back to Kuala Solor a year and a half later, that I found out why their manner had seemed so odd.” Millicent gave a queer little sound like the echo of a scornful laugh. “I knew then a good deal that I hadn’t known before. Harold came to England that time in order to marry. He didn’t much mind who it was. Do you remember how we spread ourselves out to catch him, mother? We needn’t have taken so much trouble.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Millicent,” said Mrs. Skinner, not without acerbity, for the insinuation of scheming did not please her. “I saw he was attracted by you.”

Millicent shrugged her heavy shoulders.

“He was a confirmed drunkard. He used to go to bed every night with a bottle of whisky and empty it before morning. The Chief Secretary told him he’d have to resign unless he stopped drinking. He said he’d give him one more chance. He could take his leave then and go to England. He advised him to marry so that when he got back he’d have someone to look after him. Harold married me because he wanted a keeper. They took bets in Kuala Solor on how long I’d make him stay sober.”

“But he was in love with you,” Mrs. Skinner interrupted. “You don’t know how he used to speak to me about you, and at that time you’re speaking of, when you went to Kuala Solor to have Joan, he wrote me such a charming letter about you.”

Millicent looked at her mother again and a deep colour dyed her sallow skin. Her hands, lying on her lap, began to tremble a little. She thought of those first months of her married life. The Government launch took them to the mouth of the river, and they spent the night at the bungalow which Harold said jokingly was their seaside residence. Next day they went up stream in a prahu.

From the novels she had read she expected the rivers of Borneo to be dark and strangely sinister, but the sky was blue, dappled with little white clouds, and the green of the mangroves and the nipahs, washed by the flowing water, glistened in the sun. On each side stretched the pathless jungle, and in the distance, silhouetted against the sky, was the rugged outline of a mountain. The air in the early morning was fresh and buoyant. She seemed to enter upon a friendly, fertile land, and she had a sense of spacious freedom. They watched the banks for monkeys sitting on the branches of the tangled trees, and once Harold pointed out something that looked like a log and said it was a crocodile. The Assistant Resident, in ducks and a topee, was at the landing-stage to meet them, and a dozen trim little soldiers were lined up to do them honour. The Assistant Resident was introduced to her. His name was Simpson.

“By Jove, sir,” he said to Harold, “I’m glad to see you back. It’s been deuced lonely without you.”

The Resident’s bungalow, surrounded by a garden in which grew wildly all manner of gay flowers, stood on the top of a low hill. It was a trifle shabby and the furniture was sparse, but the rooms were cool and of generous size. “The kampong is down there,” said Harold, pointing.

Her eyes followed his gesture, and from among the coconut trees rose the beating of a gong. It gave her a queer little sensation in the heart. Though she had nothing much to do the days passed easily enough. At dawn a boy brought them their tea and they lounged about the verandah, enjoying the fragrance of the morning (Harold in a singlet and a sarong, she in a dressing-gown) till it was time to dress for breakfast. Then Harold went to his office and she spent an hour or two learning Malay. After tiffin he went back to his office while she slept. A cup of tea revived them both, and they went for a walk or played golf on the nine hole links which Harold had made on a level piece of cleared jungle below the bungalow. Night fell at six and Mr. Simpson came along to have a drink.

They chatted till their late dinner hour, and sometimes Harold and Mr. Simpson played chess. The balmy evenings were enchanting. The fireflies turned the bushes just below the verandah into coldly-sparkling, tremulous beacons, and flowering trees scented the air with sweet odours. After dinner they read the papers which had left London six weeks before and presently went to bed. Millicent enjoyed being a married woman, with a house of her own, and she was pleased with the native servants, in their gay saron’gs, who went about the bungalow, with bare feet, silent but friendly. It gave her a pleasant sense of importance to be the wife of the Resident. Harold impressed her by the fluency with which he spoke the language, by his air of command, and by his dignity. She went into the court-house now and then to hear him try cases. The multifariousness of his duties and the competent way in which he performed them aroused her respect. Mr. Simpson told her that Harold understood the natives as well as any man in the country. He had the combination of firmness, tact and good humour, which was essential in dealing with that timid, revengeful and suspicious race. Millicent began to feel a certain admiration for her husband.

They had been married nearly a year when two English naturalists came to stay with them for a few days on their way to the interior. They brought a pressing recommendation from the Governor, and Harold said he wanted to do them proud. Their arrival was an agreeable change. Millicent asked Mr. Simpson to dinner (he lived at the Fort and only dined with them on Sunday nights) and after dinner the men sat down to play bridge.

Millicent left them presently and went to bed, but they were so noisy that for some time she could not get to sleep. She did not know at what hour she was awakened by Harold staggering into the room. She kept silent. He made up his mind to have a bath before getting into bed; the bath-house was just below their room, and he went down the steps that led to it. Apparently he slipped, for there was a great clatter, and he began to swear. Then he was violently sick. She heard him sluice the buckets of water over himself and in a little while, walking very cautiously this time, he crawled up the stairs and slipped into bed. Millicent pretended to be asleep. She was disgusted. Harold was drunk. She made up her mind to speak about it in the morning. What would the naturalists think of him? But in the morning Harold was so dignified that she hadn’t quite the determination to refer to the matter. At eight Harold and she, with their two guests, sat down to breakfast. Harold looked round the table. “Porridge,” he said. “Millicent, your guests might manage a little Worcester Sauce for breakfast, but I don’t think they’ll much fancy anything else. Personally I shall content myself with a whisky and soda.”

The naturalists laughed, but shamefacedly.

“Your husband’s a terror,” said one of them.

“I should not think I had properly performed the duties of hospitality if I sent you sober to bed on the first night of your visit,” said Harold, with his round, stately way of putting things.

Millicent, smiling acidly, was relieved to think that her guests had been as drunk as her husband. The next evening she sat up with them and the party broke up at a reasonable hour. But she was glad when the strangers went on with their journey. Their life resumed its placid course. Some months later Harold went on a tour of inspection of his district and came back with a bad attack of malaria. This was the first time she had seen the disease of which she had heard so much, and when he recovered it did not seem strange to her that Harold was very shaky. She found his manner peculiar. He would come back from the office and stare at her with glazed eyes; he would stand on the verandah, swaying slightly, but still dignified, and make long harangues about the political situation in England; losing the thread of his discourse, he would look at her with an archness which his natural stateliness made somewhat disconcerting and say: “Pulls you down dreadfully, this confounded malaria.

Ah, little woman, you little know the strain it puts upon a man to be an empire builder.”

She thought that Mr. Simpson began to look worried, and once or twice, when they were alone, he seemed on the point of saying something to her which his shyness at the last moment prevented. The feeling grew so strong that it made her nervous, and one evening when Harold, she knew not why, had remained later than usual at the office she tackled him.

“What have you got to say to me, Mr. Simpson?” she broke out suddenly.

He blushed and hesitated. “Nothing. What makes you think I have anything in particular to say to you?”

Mr. Simpson was a thin, weedy youth of four and twenty, with a fine head of waving hair which he took great pains to plaster down very flat. His wrists were swollen and scarred with mosquito bites. Millicent looked at him steadily.

“If it’s something to do with Harold don’t you think it would be kinder to tell me frankly?”

He grew scarlet now. He shuffled uneasily on his rattan chair. She insisted. “I’m afraid you’ll think it awful cheek,” he said at last. “It’s rotten of me to say anything about my chief behind his back. Malaria’s a rotten thing, and after one’s had a bout of it one feels awfully down and out.”

He hesitated again. The corners of his mouth sagged as if he were going to cry. To Millicent he seemed like a little boy.

“I’ll be as silent as the grave,” she said with a smile, trying to conical her apprehension. “Do tell me.”

“I think it’s a pity your husband keeps a bottle of whisky at the office. He’s apt to take a nip more often then he otherwise would.”

Mr. Simpson’s voice was hoarse with agitation.

Millicent felt a sudden coldness shiver through her. She controlled herself, for she knew that she must not frighten the boy if she were to get out of him all there was to tell. He was unwilling to speak. She pressed him, wheedling, appealing to his sense of duty, and at last she began to cry. Then he told her that Harold had been drunk more or less for the last fortnight, the natives were talking about it, and they said that soon he would be as bad as he had been before his marriage. He had been in the habit of drinking a good deal too much then, but details of that time, notwithstanding all her attempts, Mr. Simpson resolutely declined to give her.

“Do you think he’s drinking now?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

Millicent felt herself on a sudden hot with shame and anger. The Fort, as it was called because the rifles and the ammunition were kept there, was also the court-house.

It stood opposite the Resident’s bungalow in a garden of its own. The sun was just about to set and she did not need a hat. She got up and walked across. She found Harold sitting in the office behind the large hall in which he administered justice. There was a bottle of whisky in front of him. He was smoking cigarettes and talking to three or four Malays who stood in front of him listening with obsequious and at the same time scornful smiles.

His face was red. The natives vanished.

“I came to see what you were doing,” she said. He rose, for he always treated her with elaborate politeness, and lurched. Feeling himself unsteady he assumed an elaborate stateliness of demeanour.

“Take a seat, my dear, take a seat. I was detained bypress of work.”

She looked at him with angry eyes. “You’re drunk,” she said. He stared at her, his eyes bulging a little, and a haughty look gradually traversed his large and fleshy face. “I haven’t the remotest idea what you mean,” he said. She had been ready with a flow of wrathful expostulation, but suddenly she burst into tears. She sank into a chair and hid her face. Harold looked at her for an instant, then the tears began to trickle down his own cheeks; he came towards her with outstretched arms and fell heavily on his knees. Sobbing, he clasped her to him.

“Forgive me, forgive me,” he said. “I promise you it shall not happen again. It was that damned malaria.”

“It’s so humiliating,” she moaned.

He wept like a child. There was something very touching in the self-abasement of that big dignified man.

Presently Millicent looked up. H’s eyes, appealing and contrite, sought hers. “Will you give me your word of honour that you’ll never touch liquor again?”

“Yes, yes. I hate it.” It was then she told him that she was with child. He was overjoyed.

“That is the one thing I wanted. That’ll keep me straight.”

They went back to the bungalow. Harold bathed himself and had a nap. After dinner they talked long and quietly. He admitted that before he married her he had occasionally drunk more than was good for him; in outstations it was easy to fall into bad habits. He agreed to everything that Millicent asked. And during the months before it was necessary for her to go to Kuala Solor for her confinement, Harold was an excellent husband; tender, thoughtful, proud and affectionate; he was irreproachable. A launch came to fetch her, she was to leave him for six weeks, and he promised faithfully to drink nothing during her absence. He put his hands on her shoulders.

“I never break a promise,” he said in his dignified way. “But even without it, can you imagine that while you are going through so much, I should do anything to increase your troubles?”

Joan was born. Millicent stayed at the Resident’s and Mrs. Gray, his wife, a kindly creature of middle age, was very good to her. The two women had little to do during the long hours they were alone but to talk, and in course of time Millicent learnt everything there was to know of her husband’s alcoholic past. The fact which she found most difficult to reconcile herself to, was that Harold had been told that the only condition upon which he would be allowed to keep his post was that he should bring back a wife. It caused in her a dull feeling of resentment. And when she discovered what a persistent drunkard he had been, she felt vaguely uneasy. She had a horrid fear that during her absence he would not have been able to resist the craving. She went home with her baby and a nurse. She spent a night at the mouth of the river and sent a messenger in a canoe to announce her arrival. She scanned the landing-stage anxiously as the launch approached it. Harold and Mr. Simpson were standing there. The trim little soldiers were lined up. Her heart sank, for Harold was swaying slightly, like a man who seeks to keep his balance on a rolling ship, and she knew he was drunk.

It wasn’t a very pleasant home-coming. She had almost forgotten her mother and father and her sister who sat there silently listening to her. Now she roused herself and became once more aware of their presence.

All that she spoke of seemed very far away.

“I know that I hated him then,” she said.

“I could have killed him.”

“Oh, Millicent, don’t say that,” cried her mother.

“Don’t forget that he’s dead, poor man.”

Millicent looked at her mother, and for a moment a scowl darkened her impassive face. Mr. Skinner moved uneasily.

“Go on,” said Kathleen.

“When he found out that I knew all about him he didn’t bother very much more. In three months he had another attack of D.T.’s.”

“Why didn’t you leave him?” said Kathleen.

“What would have been the good of that? He would have been dismissed from the service in a fortnight.

Who was to keep me and Joan? I had to stay. And when he was sober I had nothing to complain of. He wasn’t in the least in love with me, but he was fond of me; I hadn’t married him because I was in love with him, but because I wanted to be married. I did everything I could to keep liquor from him; I managed to get Mr. Gray to prevent whisky being sent from Kuala Solor, but he got it from the Chinese. I watched him as a cat watches a mouse. He was too cunning for me. In a little while he had another outbreak. He neglected his duties. I was afraid complaints would be made. We were two days from Kuala Solor and that was our safeguard, but I suppose something was said, for Mr. Gray wrote a private letter of warning to me. I showed it to Harold. He stormed and blustered, but I saw he was frightened, and for two or three months he was quite sober. Then he began again. And so it went on till our leave became due.

“Before we came to stay here I begged and prayed him to be careful. I didn’t want any of you to know what sort of a man I had married. All the time he was in England he was all right and before we sailed I warned him. He’d grown to be very fond of Joan, and very proud of her, and she was devoted to him. She always liked him better than she liked me. I asked him if he wanted to have his child grow up, knowing that he was a drunkard, and I found out that at last I’d got a hold on him. The thought terrified him. I told him that I wouldn’t allow it, and if he ever let Joan see him drunk I’d take her away from him at once. Do you know, he grew quite pale when I said it. I fell on my knees that night and thanked God, because I’d found a way of saving my husband.

“He told me that if I would stand by him he would have another try. We made up our minds to fight the thing together. And he tried so hard. When he felt as though he must drink he came to me. You know he was inclined to be rather pompous; with me he was so humble, he was like a child; he depended on me. Perhaps he didn’t love me when he married me, but he loved me then, me and Joan. I’d hated, him, because of the humiliation, because when he was drunk and tried to be dignified and impressive he was loathsome; but now I got a strange feeling in my heart. It wasn’t love, but it was a queer, shy tenderness. He was something more than my husband, he was like a child that I’d carried under my heart for long and weary months. He was so proud of me and you know, I was proud too. His Jong speeches didn’t irritate me any more, and I only thought his stately ways rather funny and charming. At last we won. For two years he never touched a drop. He lost his craving entirely. He was even able to joke about it.

“Mr. Simpson had left us then and we had another young man called Francis. “‘I’m a reformed drunkard you know, Francis,’ Harold said to him once. ‘If it hadn’t been for my wife I’d have been sacked long ago. I’ve got the best wife in the world, Francis.’

“You don’t know what it meant to me to hear him say that. I felt that all I’d gone through was worth while. I was so happy.”

She was silent. She thought of the broad, yellow and turbid river on whose banks she had lived so long. The egrets, white and gleaming in the tremulous sunset, flew down the stream in a flock, flew low and swift, and scattered. They were like a ripple of snowy notes, sweet and pure and spring-like, which an unseen hand drew forth, a divine arpeggio, from an unseen harp. They fluttered along between the green banks, wrapped in the shadows of evening, like the happy thoughts of a contented mind.

“Then Joan fell ill. For three weeks we were very anxious. There was no doctor nearer than Kuala Solor and we had to put up with the treatment of a native dispenser. When she grew well again I took her down to the mouth of the river in order to give her a breath of sea air. We stayed there a week. It was the first time I had been separated from Harold since I went away to have Joan. There was a fishing village, on piles, not far from us, but really we were quite alone. I thought a great deal about Harold, so tenderly, and all at once I knew that I loved him. I was so glad when the prahu came to fetch us back, because I wanted to tell him. I thought it would mean a good deal to him. I can’t tell you how happy I was. As we rowed up stream the headman told me that Mr. Francis had had to go up-country to arrest a woman who had murdered her husband. Fie had been gone a couple of days.

I was surprised that Harold was not on the landing stage to meet me; he was always very punctilious about that sort of thing; he used to say that husband and wife should treat one another as politely as they treated acquaintances; and I could not imagine what business had prevented him. I walked up the little hill on which the bungalow stood. The ayah brought Joan behind me. The bungalow was strangely silent. There seemed to be no servants about, and I could not make it out; I wondered if Harold hadn’t expected me so soon and was out. I went up the steps. Joan was thirsty and the ayah took her to the servants’ quarters to give her something to drink. Harold was not in the sitting-room. I called him, but there was no answer. I was disappointed because I should have liked him to be there. I went into our bedroom. Harold wasn’t out after all; he was lying on the bed asleep. I was really very much amused, because he always pretended he never slept in the afternoon. He said it was an unnecessary habit that we white people got into.

I went up to the bed softly. I thought I would have a joke with him. I opened the mosquito curtains. He was lying on his back, with nothing on but a sarong, and there was an empty whisky bottle by his Side. He was drunk.

“It had begun again. All my struggles for so many years were wasted. My dream was shattered. It was all hopeless. I was seized with rage.”

Millicent’s face grew once again darkly red and she clenched the arms of the chair she sat in. “I took him by the shoulders and shook him with all my might. ‘You beast,’ I cried, ‘you beast.’ I was so angry I don’t know what I did, I don’t know what I said. I kept on shaking him. You don’t know how loathsome he looked, that large fat man, half naked; he hadn’t shaved for days, and his face was bloated and purple. He was breathing heavily. I shouted at him, but he took no notice. I tried to drag him out of bed, but he was too heavy. He lay there like a log. ‘Open your eyes,’ I screamed. I shook him again. I hated him. I hated him all the more because for a week I’d loved him with all my heart. He’d let me down. He’d let me down. I wanted to tell him what a filthy beast he was. I could make no impression on him. ‘You shall open your eyes,’ I cried. I was determined to make him look at me.”

The widow licked her dry lips. Her breath seemed hurried. She was silent. “If he was in that state I should have thought it best to have let him go on sleeping,” said Kathleen.

“There was a parang on the wall by the side of the bed. You know how fond Harold was of curios.”

“What’s a parang?” said Mrs. Skinner.

“Don’t be silly, mother,” her husband replied irritably. “There’s one on the wall immediately behind you.”

He pointed to the Malay sword on which for some reason his eyes had been unconsciously resting. Mrs. Skinner drew quickly into the corner of the sofa, with a little frightened gesture, as though she had been told that a snake lay curled up beside her. “Suddenly the blood spurted out from Harold’s throat. There was a great red gash right across it.”

“Millicent,” cried Kathleen, springing up and almost leaping towards her, “what in God’s name do you mean?”

Mrs. Skinner stood staring at her with wide startled eyes, her mouth open.

“The parang wasn’t on the wall any more. It was on the bed. Then Harold opened his eyes. They were just like Joan’s.”

“I don’t understand,” said Mr. Skinner. “How could he have committed suicide if he was in the state you describe?”

Kathleen took her sister’s arm and shook her angrily.

“Millicent, for God’s sake explain.”

Millicent released herself. “The parang was on the wall, I told you. I don’t know what happened. There was all the blood, and Harold opened his eyes. He died almost at once. He never spoke, but he gave a sort of gasp.”

At last Mr. Skinner found his voice.

“But, you wretched woman, it was murder.”

Millicent, her face mottled with red, gave him such a look of scornful hatred that he shrank back. Mrs. Skinner cried out. “Millicent, you didn’t do it, did you?”

Then Millicent did something that made them all feel as though their blood were turned to ice in their veins.

She chuckled.

“I don’t know who else did,” she said. “My God,” muttered Mr. Skinner.

Kathleen had been standing bolt upright, with her hands to her heart, as though its beating were intolerable. “And what happened then?” she said. “I screamed. I went to the window and flung it open.

I called for the ayah. She came across the compound with Joan. ‘Not Joan,’ I cried. “Don’t let her come.’ She called the cook and told him to take the child. I cried to her to hurry. And when she came I showed her Harold.

“The Tuan’s killed himself!’ I cried. She gave a scream and ran out of the house.

“No one would come near. They were all frightened out of their wits. I wrote a letter to Mr. Francis, telling him what had happened and asking him to come at once.”

“How do you mean you told him what had happened?”

“I said, on my return from the mouth of the river, I’d found Harold with his throat cut. You know, in the tropics you have to bury people quickly. I got a Chinese coffin, and the soldiers dug a grave behind the Fort. When Mr. Francis came, Harold had been buried for nearly two days. He was only a boy. I could do anything I wanted with him. I told him I’d found the parang in Harold’s hand and there was no doubt he’d killed himself in an attack of delirium tremens. I showed him the empty bottle. The servants said he’d been drinking hard ever since I left to go to the sea. I told the same story at Kuala Solor. Everyone was very kind to me, and the Government granted me a pension.”

For a little while nobody spoke. At last Mr. Skinner gathered himself together.

“I am a member of the legal profession. I’m a solicitor. I have certain duties. We’ve always had a most respectable practice. You’ve put me in a monstrous position.”

He fumbled, searching for the phrases that played at hide and seek in his scattered wits. Millicent looked at him with scorn.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“It was murder, that’s what it was; do you think I can possibly connive at it?”

“Don’t talk nonsense, father,” said Kathleen sharply.

“You can’t give up your own daughter.”

“You’ve put me in a monstrous position,” he repeated.

Millicent shrugged her shoulders again.

“You made me tell you. And I’ve borne it long enough by myself. It was time that all of you bore it too.”

At that moment the door was opened by the maid.

“Davis has brought the car round, sir,” she said. Kathleen had the presence of mind to say something, and the maid withdrew.

“We’d better be starting,” said Millicent.

“I can’t go to the party now,” cried Mrs. Skinner, with horror. “I’m far too upset. How can we face the Heywoods? And the Bishop will want to be introduced to you.”

Millicent made a gesture of indifference. Her eyes held their ironical expression.

“We must go, mother,” said Kathleen. “It would look so funny if we stayed away.” She turned on Millicent furiously. “Oh, I think the whole thing is such frightfully bad form.”

Mrs. Skinner looked helplessly at her husband. He went to her and gave her his hand to help her up from the sofa. “I’m afraid we must go, mother,” he said. “And me with the ospreys in my toque that Harold gave me with his own hands,” she moaned.

He led her out of the room, Kathleen followed close on their heels, and a step or two behind came Millicent.

“You’ll get used to it, you know,” she said quietly.

“At first I thought of it all the time, but now I forget it for two or three days together. It’s not as if there was any danger.”

They did not answer. They walked through the hall and out of the front door. The three ladies got into the back of the car and Mr. Skinner seated himself beside the driver. They had no self-starter; it was an old car, and Davis went to the bonnet to crank it up. Mr. Skinner turned round and looked petulantly at Millicent.

“I ought never to have been told,” he said. “I think it was most selfish of you.”

Davis took his seat and they drove off to the Canon’s garden-party.

P. & O.

Mrs. Hamlyn lay on her long chair and lazily watched the passengers come along the gangway. The ship had reached Singapore in the night, and since dawn had been taking on cargo; the winches had been grinding away all day, but by now her ears were accustomed to their insistent clamour. She had lunched at the Europe, and for lack of anything better to do had driven in a rickshaw through the gay, multitudinous streets of the city.

Singapore is the meeting place of many races. The Malays, though natives of the soil, dwell uneasily in towns, and are few; and it is the Chinese, supple, alert and industrious, who throng the streets; the dark-skinned Tamils walk: on their silent, naked feet, as though they were but brief sojourners in a strange land, but the Bengalis, sleek and prosperous, are easy in their surroundings, and self-assured; the sly and obsequious Japanese seem busy with pressing and secret affairs; and the English in their topees and white ducks, speeding past in motor-cars or at leisure in their rickshaws, wear a nonchalant and careless air. The rulers of these teeming peoples take their authority with a smiling unconcern. And now, tired and hot, Mrs. Hamlyn waited for the ship to set out again on her long journey across the Indian Ocean.

She waved a rather large hand, for she was a big woman, to the doctor and Mrs. Linsell as they came on board. She had been on the ship since she left Yokohama, and had watched with acrid amusement the intimacy which had sprung up between the two. Linsell was a naval officer who had been attached to the British Embassy at Tokio, and she had wondered at the indifference with which he took the attentions that the doctor paid his wife. Two men came along the gangway, new passengers, and she amused herself by trying to discover from their demeanour whether they were single or married. Close by, a group of men were sitting together on rattan chairs, planters she judged by their khaki suits and wide-brimmed double felt hats, and they kept the deck-steward busy with their orders. They were talking loudly and laughing, for they had all drunk enough to make them somewhat foolishly hilarious, and they were evidently giving one of their number a send-off; but Mrs. Hamlyn could not tell which it was that was to be a fellow-passenger. The time was growing short. More passengers arrived, and then Mr. Jephson with dignity strolled up the gangway. He was a consul and was going home on leave. He had joined the ship at Shanghai and had immediately set about making himself agreeable to Mrs. Hamlyn. But just then she was disinclined for anything in the nature of a flirtation. She frowned as she thought of the reason which was taking her back to England. She would be spending Christmas at sea, far from anyone who cared two straws about her, and for a moment she felt a little twist at her heartstrings; it vexed her that a subject which she was so resolute to put away from her should so constantly intrude on her unwilling mind.

But a warning bell clanged loudly, and there was a general movement among the men who sat beside her. “Well, if we don’t want to be taken on we’d better be toddling,” said one of them.

They rose and walked towards the gangway. Now that they were all shaking hands she saw who it was that they had come to see the last of. There was nothing very interesting about the man on whom Mrs. Hamlyn’s eyes rested, but because she had nothing better to do she gave him more than a casual glance. He was a big fellow, well over six feet high, broad and stout; he was dressed in a bedraggled suit of khaki drill and his hat was battered and shabby. His friends left him, but they bandied chaff from the quay, and Mrs. Hamlyn noticed that he had a strong Irish brogue; his voice was full, loud and hearty.

Mrs. Linsell had gone below and the doctor came and sat down beside Mrs. Hamlyn. They told one another their small adventures, of the day. The bell sounded again and presently the ship slid away from the wharf.

The Irishman waved a last farewell to his friends, and then sauntered towards the chair on which he had left papers and magazines. He nodded to the doctor.

“Is that someone you know?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“I was introduced to him at the club before tiffin. His name is Gallagher. He’s a planter.”

After the hubbub of the port and the noisy bustle of departure, the silence of the ship was marked and grateful. They steamed slowly past green-clad, rocky cliffs (the P. & O. anchorage was in a charming and secluded cove), and came out into the main harbour.

Ships of all nations lay at anchor, a great multitude, passenger boats, tugs, lighters, tramps; and beyond, behind the break-water, you saw the crowded masts, a bare straight forest, of the native junks. In the soft light of the evening the busy scene was strangely touched with mystery, and you felt that all those vessels, their activity for the moment suspended, waited for some event of a peculiar significance.

Mrs. Hamlyn was a bad sleeper and when the dawn broke she was in the habit of going on deck. It rested her troubled heart to watch the last faint stars fade before the encroaching day, and at that early hour the glassy sea had often an immobility which seemed to make all earthly sorrows of little consequence. The light was wan, and there was a pleasant shiver in the air. But next morning, when she went to the end of the promenade deck, she found that someone was up before her. It was Mr. Gallagher. He was watching the low coast of Sumatra which the sunrise like a magician seemed to call forth from the dark sea. She was startled and a little vexed, but before she could turn away he had seen her and nodded.

“Up early,” he said. “Have a cigarette?”

He was in pyjamas and slippers. He took his case from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She hesitated. She had on nothing but a dressing-gown and a little lace cap which she had put over her tousled hair, and she knew that she must look a sight; but she had her reasons for scourging her soul. “I suppose a woman of forty has no right to mind how she looks,” she smiled, as though he must know what vain thoughts occupied her. She took the cigarette.

“But you’re up early too.”

“I’m a planter. I’ve had to get up at five in the morning for so many years that I don’t know how I’m going to get out of the habit.”

“You’ll not find it will make you very popular at home.”

She saw his face better now that it was not shadowed by a hat. It was agreeable without being handsome. He was of course much too fat, and his features which must have been good enough when he was a young man were thickened. His skin was red and bloated. But his dark eyes were merry; and though he could not have been less than five and forty his hair was black and thick. He gave you an impression of great strength. He was a heavy, ungraceful, commonplace man, and Mrs. Hamlyn, except for the promiscuity of ship-board, would never have thought it worth while to talk to him.

“Are you going home on leave?” she hazarded.

“No, I’m going home for good.”

His black eyes twinkled. He was of a communicative turn, and before it was time for Mrs. Hamlyn to go below in order to have her bath he had told her a good deal about himself. He had been in the Federated Malay States for twenty-five years, and for the last ten had managed an estate in Selantan. It was a hundred miles from anything that could be described as civilisation and the life had been lonely; but he had made money; during the rubber boom he had done very well, and with an astuteness which was unexpected in a man who looked so happy-golucky he had invested his savings in Government stock. Now that the slump had come he was prepared to retire. “What part of Ireland do you come from?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“Galway.”

Mrs. Hamlyn had once motored through Ireland and she had a vague recollection of a sad and moody town with great stone warehouses, deserted and crumbling, which faced the melancholy sea. She had a sensation of greenness and of soft rain, of silence and of resignation.

Was it here that Mr. Gallagher meant to spend the rest of his life? He spoke of it with boyish eagerness. The thought of his vitality in that grey world of shadows was so incongruous that Mrs. Hamlyn was intrigued.

“Does your family live there?” she asked.

“I’ve got no family. My mother and father are dead. So far as I know I haven’t a relation in the world.”

He had made all his plans, he had been making them for twenty-five years, and he was pleased to have someone to talk to of all these things that he had been obliged for so long only to talk to himself about. He meant to buy a house and he would keep a motor-car. He was going to breed horses. He didn’t much care about shooting; he had shot a lot of big game during his first years in the F.M.S.; but now he had lost his zest. He didn’t see why the blasts of the jungle should be killed; he had lived in the jungle .so long. But he could hunt.

“Do you think I’m too heavy?” he asked.

Mrs. Hamlyn, smiling, looked him up and down with appraising eyes. “You must weigh a ton,” she said. He laughed. The Irish horses were the best in the world, and he’d always kept pretty fit. You had a devil of a lot of walking exercise on a rubber estate and he’d played a good deal of tennis. He’d soon get thin in Ireland. Then he’d marry. Mrs. Hamlyn looked silently at the sea coloured now with the tenderness of the sunrise. She sighed.

“Was it easy to drag up all your roots? Is there no one you regret leaving behind? I should have thought after so many years, however much you’d looked forward to going home, when the time came at last to go it must have given you a pang.”

“I was glad to get out. I was fed up. I never want to see the country again or anyone in it.” One or two early passengers now began to walk round the deck and Mrs. Hamlyn, remembering that she was scantily clad, went below.

During the next day or two she saw little of Mr. Gallagher who passed his time in the smoking-room.

Owing to a strike the ship was not touching at Colombo and the passengers settled down to a pleasant voyage across the Indian Ocean. They played deck games, they gossiped about one another, they flirted. The approach of Christmas gave them an occupation, for someone had suggested that there should be a fancy-dress dance on Christmas Day, and the ladies set about making their dresses. A meeting was held of the first-class passengers to decide whether the second-class passengers should be invited, and notwithstanding the heat the discussion was animated. The ladies said that the second-class passengers would only feel ill-at-ease. On Christmas Day it was to be expected that they would drink more than was good for them and unpleasantness might ensue. Everyone who spoke insisted that there was in his (or her) mind no idea of class distinction, no one would be so snobbish as to think there was any difference between first- and second-class passengers as far as that went, but it would really be kinder to the second-class passengers not to put them in a false position. They would enjoy themselves much more if they had a party of their own in the second-class cabin.

On the other hand, no one wanted to hurt their feelings, and of course one had to be more democratic nowadays (this was in reply to the wife of a missionary in China who said she had travelled on the P. & O. for thirty-five years and she had never heard of the second-class passengers being invited to a dance in the first-class saloon) and even though they wouldn’t enjoy it, they might like to come. Mr. Gallagher, dragged unwillingly from the card-table because it had been foreseen that the voting would be close, was asked his opinion by the consul. He was taking home in the second-class a man who had been employed on his estate. He raised his massive bulk from the couch on which he sat. “As far as I’m concerned I’ve only got this to say: I’ve got the man who was looking after our engines with me. He’s a rattling good fellow, and he’s just as fit to come to your party as I am. But he won’t come because I’m going to make him so drunk on Christmas Day that by six o’clock he’ll be fit for nothing but to be put to bed.”

Mr. Jephson, the consul, gave a distorted smile. On account of his official position, he had been chosen to preside at the meeting and he wished the matter to be taken seriously. He was a man who often said that if a thing was worth doing it was worth doing well. “I gather from your observations,” he said, not without acidity, “that the question before the meeting does not seem to you of great importance.”

“I don’t think it matters a tinker’s curse,” said Gallagher, with twinkling eyes. Mrs. Hamlyn laughed. The scheme was at last devised to invite the second-class passengers, but to go to the captain privily and point out to him the advisability of withholding his consent to their coming into the first-class saloon. It was on the evening of the day on which this happened that Mrs. Hamlyn, having dressed for dinner, came on deck at the same time as Mr. Gallagher.

“Just in time for a cocktail, Mrs. Hamlyn,” he said jovially.

“I’d like one. To tell you the truth I need cheering up.”

“Why?” he smiled.

Mrs. Hamlyn thought his smile attractive, but she did not want to answer his question.

“I told you the other morning,” she answered cheerfully. “I’m forty.”

“I never met a woman who insisted on the fact so much.”

They went into the lounge and the Irishman ordered a dry Martini for her and a gin pahit for himself. He had lived too long in the East to drink anything else. “You’ve got hiccups,” said Mrs. Hamlyn.

“Yes, I’ve had them all the afternoon,” he answered carelessly. “It’s rather funny, they came on just as we got out of sight of land.”

“I daresay they’ll pass off after dinner.”

They drank, the second bell rang, and they went into the dining-saloon.

“You don’t play bridge?” he said, as they parted.

“No.”

Mrs. Hamlyn did not notice that she saw nothing of Gallagher for two or three days. She was occupied with her own thoughts. They crowded upon her when she was sewing; they came between her and the novel with which she sought to cheat their insistence. She had hoped that as the ship took her further away from the scene of her unhappiness, the torment of her mind would be eased; but contrariwise, each day that brought her nearer England increased her distress. She looked forward with dismay to the bleak emptiness of the life that awaited her; and then, turning her exhausted wits from a prospect that made her flinch, she considered, as she had done she knew not how many times before, the situation from which she had fled. She had been married for twenty years. It was a long time, and of course she could not expect her husband to be still madly in love with her; she was not madly in love with him; but they were good friends and they understood one another. Their marriage, as marriages go, might very well have been looked upon as a success. Suddenly she discovered that he had fallen in love. She would not have objected to a flirtation, he had had those before, and she had chaffed him about them; he had not minded that, it somewhat flattered him, and they had laughed together at an inclination which was neither deep nor serious. But this was different. He was in love as passionately as a boy o. eighteen. He was fifty-two. It was ridiculous. It was indecent. And he loved without sense or prudence: by the time the hideous fact was forced upon her all the foreigners in Yokohama knew it. After the first shock of astonished anger, for he was the last man from whom such a folly might have been expected, she tried to persuade herself that she could have understood, and so have forgiven, if he had fallen in love with a girl. Middle-aged men often make fools of themselves with flappers, and after twenty years in the Far East she knew that the fifties were the dangerous age for men. But he had no excuse. He was in love with a woman eight years older than herself. It was grotesque, and it made her, his wife, perfectly absurd. Dorothy Lacom was hard on fifty. He had known her for eighteen years, for Lacom, like her own husband, was a silk merchant in Yokohama. Year in, year out, they had seen one another three or four times a week, and once, when they happened to be in England together, had shared a house at the seaside. But nothing! Not till a year ago had there been anything between them but a chaffing friendship. It was incredible. Of course Dorothy was a handsome woman; she had a good figure, over-developed, perhaps, but still comely; with bold black eyes and a red mouth and lovely hair; but all that she had had years before.

She was forty-eight. Forty-eight!

Mrs. Hamlyn tackled her husband at once. At first he swore that there was not a word of truth in what she accused him of, but she had her proofs; he grew sulky; and at last he admitted what he could no longer deny.

Then he said an astonishing thing.

“Why should you care?” he asked.

It maddened her. She answered him with angry scorn. She was voluble, finding in the bitterness of her heart wounding things to say. He listened to her quietly.

“I’ve not been such a bad husband to you for the twenty years we’ve been married. For a long time now we’ve only been friends. I have a great affection for you, and this hasn’t altered it in the very smallest degree. I’m giving Dorothy nothing that I take away from you.”

“But what have you to complain of in me?”

“Nothing. No man could want a better wife.”

“How can you say that when you have the heart to treat me so cruelly?”

“I don’t want to be cruel to you. I can’t help myself.”

“But what on earth made you fall in love with her?”

“How can I tell? You don’t think I wanted to, do you?”

“Couldn’t you have resisted?”

“I tried. I think we both tried.”

“You talk as though you were twenty Why, you’re both middle-aged people. She’s eight years older than I am. It makes me look such a perfect fool.”

He did not answer. She did not know what emotions seethed in her heart. Was it jealousy that seemed to clutch at her throat, anger, or was it merely wounded pride?

“I’m not going to let it go on. If only you and she were concerned I would divorce you, but there’s her husband, and then there are the children. Good heavens, does it occur to you that if they were girls instead of boys she might be a grandmother by now?”

“Easily.”

“What a mercy that we have no children!”

He put out an affectionate hand as though to caress her, but she drew back with horror.

“You’ve made me the laughing stock of all my friends. For all our sakes I’m willing to hold my tongue, but only on the condition that everything stops now, at once, and for ever.”

He looked down and played reflectively with a Japanese knick-knack that was on the table.

“I’ll tell Dorothy what you say,” he replied at last. She gave him a little bow, silently, and walked past him out of the room. She was too angry to observe that she was somewhat melodramatic.

She waited for him to tell her the result of his interview with Dorothy Lacom, but he made no further reference to the scene. He was quiet, polite and silent; and at last she was obliged to ask him: “Have you forgotten what I said to you the other day?” she inquired, frigidly.

“No. I talked to Dorothy. She wishes me to tell you that she is desperately sorry that she has caused you so much pain. She would like to come and see you, but she is afraid you wouldn’t like it.”

“What decision have you come to?”

He hesitated. He was very grave, but his voice trembled a little.

“I’m afraid there’s no use in our making a promise we shouldn’t be able to keep.”

“That settles it then,” she answered.

“I think I should tell you that if you brought an action for divorce we should have to contest it. You would find it impossible to get the necessary evidence and you would lose your case.”

“I wasn’t thinking of doing that. I shall go back to England and consult a lawyer. Nowadays these things can be managed fairly easily, and I shall throw myself on your generosity. I daresay you will enable me to get my freedom without bringing Dorothy Lacom into the matter.”

He sighed.

“It’s an awful muddle, isn’t it? I don’t want you to divorce me, but of course I’ll do anything I can to meet your wishes.”

“What on earth do you expect me to do?” she cried, her anger rising again. “Do you expect me to sit still and be made a damned fool of?”

“I’m awfully sorry to put you in a humiliating position.” He looked at her with harassed eyes. “I’m quite sure we didn’t want to fall in love with one another. We’re both of us very conscious of our age. Dorothy, as you say, is old enough to be a grandmother and I’m a baldish, stoutish gentleman of fifty-two. When you fall in love at twenty you think your love will last for ever, but at fifty you know so much, about life and about love, and you know that it will last so short a time.” His voice was low and rueful. It was as though before his mind’s eye he saw the sadness of autumn and the leaves falling from the trees. He looked at her gravely. “And at that age you feel that you can’t afford to throw away the chance of happiness which a freakish destiny has given you. In five years it will certainly be over, and perhaps in six months. Life is rather drab and grey, and happiness is so rare. We shall be dead so long.”

It gave Mrs. Hamlyn a bitter sensation of pain to hear her husband, a matter-of-fact and practical man, speak in a strain which was quite new to her. He had gained on a sudden a wistful and tragic personality of which she knew nothing. The twenty years during which they had lived together had no power over him and she was helpless in face of his determination. She could do nothing but go, and now, resentfully determined to get the divorce with which she had threatened him, she was on her way to England.

The smooth sea, upon which the sun beat down so that it shone like a sheet of glass, was as empty and hostile as life in which there was no place for her. For three days no other craft had broken in upon the solitariness of that expanse. Now and again its even surface was scattered for the twinkling of an eye by the scurry of flying fish. The heat was so great that even the most energetic of passengers had given up deck-games, and now (it was after luncheon) such as were not resting in their cabins lay about on chairs. Linsell strolled towards her and sat down.

“Where’s Mrs. Linsell?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“Oh, I don’t know. She’s about somewhere.”

His indifference exasperated her. Was it possible that he did not see that his wife and the surgeon were falling in love with one another? Yet, not so very long ago, he must have cared. Their marriage had been romantic.

They had become engaged when Mrs. Linsell was still at school and he little more than a boy. They must have been a charming, handsome pair, and their youth and their mutual love must have been touching. And now, after so short a time, they were tired of one another. It was heart-breaking. What had her husband said?

“I suppose you’re going to live in London when you get home?” asked Linsell lazily, for something to say. “I suppose so,” said Mrs. Hamlyn.

It was hard to reconcile herself to the fact that she had nowhere to go, and where she lived mattered not in the least to anyone alive. Some association of ideas made her think of Gallagher. She envied the eagerness with which he was returning to his native land, and she was touched, and at the same time amused, when she remembered the exuberant imagination he showed in describing the house he meant to live in and the wife he meant to marry. Her friends in Yokohama, apprised in confidence of her determination to divorce her husband, had assured her that she would marry again. She did not much want to enter a second time upon a state which had once so disappointed her, and besides, most men would think twice before they suggested marriage to a woman of forty. Mr. Gallagher wanted a buxom young person.

“Where is Mr. Gallagher?” she asked the submissive Linsell. “I haven’t seen him for the last day or two.”

“Didn’t you know? He’s ill.”

“Poor thing. What’s the matter with him?”

“He’s got hiccups.”

Mrs. Hamlyn laughed.

“Hiccups don’t make one ill, do they?”

“The surgeon is rather worried. He’s tried all sorts of things, but he can’t stop them.”

“How very odd.”

She thought no more about it, but next morning, chancing upon the surgeon, she asked him how Mr. Gallagher was. She was surprised to see his boyish, cheerful face darken and grow perplexed.

“I’m afraid he’s very bad, poor chap.”

“With hiccups?” she cried in amazement.

It was a disorder that really it was impossible to take seriously.

“You see, he can’t keep any food down. He can’t sleep. He’s fearfully exhausted. I’ve tried everything I can think of.” He hesitated. “Unless I can stop them soon—I don’t quite know what’ll happen.”

Mrs. Hamlyn was startled. “But he’s so strong. He seemed so full of vitality.”

“I wish you could see him now.”

“Would he like me to go and see him?”

“Come along.”

Gallagher had been moved from his cabin into the ship’s hospital, and as they approached it they heard a loud hiccup. The sound, perhaps owing to its connection with insobriety, had in it something ludicrous. But Gallagher’s appearance gave Mrs. Hamlyn a shock. He had lost flesh and the skin hung about his neck in loose folds; under the sunburn his face was pale. His eyes, before, full of fun and laughter, were haggard and tormented. His great body was shaken incessantly by the hiccups and now there was nothing ludicrous in the sound; to Mrs. Hamlyn, for no reason that she knew, it seemed strangely terrifying. He smiled when she came in. “I’m sorry to see you like this,” she said. “I shan’t die of it, you know,” he gasped. “I shall reach the green shores of Erin all right.”

There was a man sitting beside him and he rose as they entered.

“This is Mr. Pryce,” said the surgeon. “He was in charge of the machinery on Mr. Gallagher’s estate.” Mrs. Hamlyn nodded. This was the second-class passenger to whom Gallagher had referred when they had discussed the party which was to be given on Christmas Day. He was a very small man, but sturdy, with a pleasantly impudent countenance and an air of self-assurance. “Are you glad to be going home?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“You bet I am, lady,” he answered.

The intonation of the few words told Mrs. Hamlyn that he was a cockney and, recognising the cheerful, sensible, good-humoured and careless type, her heart warmed to him.

“You’re not Irish?” she smiled.

“Not me, miss. London’s my ʼome and I shan’t be sorry to see it again, I can tell you.”

Mrs. Hamlyn never thought it offensive to be called miss.

“Well, sir, I’ll be getting along,” he said to Gallagher, with the beginning of a gesture as though he were going to touch a cap which he hadn’t got on. Mrs. Hamlyn asked the sick man whether she could do anything for him and in a minute or two left him with the doctor. The little cockney was waiting outside the door.

“Can I speak to you a minute or two, miss?” he asked.

“Of course.”

The hospital cabin was aft and they stood, leaning against the rail, and looked down on the well-deck where lascars and stewards off duty were lounging about on the covered hatches.

“I don’t know exactly ʼow to begin,” said Pryce, uncertainly, a serious look strangely changing his lively, puckered face. “I’ve been with Mr. Gallagher for four years now and a better gentleman you wouldn’t find in a week of Sundays.”

He hesitated again.

“I don’t like it and that’s the truth.”

“What don’t you like?”

“Well, if you ask me ʼe’s for it, and the doctor don’t know it. I told ʼim, but ʼe won’t listen to a word I say.”

“You mustn’t be too depressed, Mr. Pryce. Of course the doctor’s young, but I think he’s quite clever, and people don’t die of hiccups, you know. I’m sure Mr. Gallagher will be all right in a day or two.”

“You know when it come oh? Just as we was out of sight of land. She said ʼe’d never see ʼis ʼome.”

Mrs. Hamlyn turned and faced him. Sher stood a good three inches taller than he. “What do you mean?”

“My belief is, it’s a spell been put on ʼim, if you understand what I mean. Medicine’s going to do ʼim no good. You don’t know them Malay women like what I do.”

For a moment Mrs. Hamlyn was startled, and because she was startled she shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

“Oh, Mr. Pryce, that’s nonsense.”

“That’s what the doctor said when I told ʼim. But you mark my words, ʼe’ll die before we see land again.”

The man was so serious that Mrs. Hamlyn, vaguely uneasy, was against her will impressed.

“Why should anyone cast a spell on Mr. Gallagher?” she asked.

“Well, it’s a bit awkward speakin’ of it to a lady.”

“Please tell me.”

Pryce was so embarrassed that at another time Mrs. Hamlyn would have had difficulty in concealing her amusement.

“Mr. Gallagher’s lived a long time up-country, if you understand what I mean, and of course it’s lonely, and you know what men are, miss.”

“I’ve been married for twenty years,” she replied, smiling.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am. The fact is he had a Malay girl living with him. I don’t know ʼow long, ten or twelve years, I think. Well, when ʼe made up ʼis mind to come ʼome for good she didn’t say nothing. She just sat there. He thought she’d carry on no end, but she didn’t. Of course ʼe provided for ʼer all right, ʼe gave ʼer a little ʼouse for herself, an’ ʼe fixed it up so as so much should be paid ʼer every month. ʼe wasn’t mean, I will say that for ʼim, an’ she knew all along as ʼe’d be going some time.

She didn’t cry or anything. When ʼe packed up all ʼis things and sent them off, she just sat there an’ watched ʼem go. And when ʼe sold ʼis furniture to the Chinks she never said a word. He’d give ʼer all she wanted. And when it was time for ʼim to go so as to catch the boat she just kep’ on sitting, on the steps of the bungalow, you know, and she just looked an’ said nothing. He wanted to say good-bye to ʼer, sr.mc as anyone would, an’, would you believe it? she never even moved. “Aren’t you going to say good-bye to me,” he says. A rare funny look come over ʼer face. And do you know what she says? “You go,” she says; they ʼave a funny way of talking, them natives, not like we ʼave, “you go,” she says, “hut I tell you that you will never come to your own country. When the land sinks into the sea, death will come upon you, an’ before them as goes with you sees the land again, death will have took you.’ It gave me quite a turn.”

“What did Mr. Gallagher say?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“Oh, well, you know what ʼe is. He just laughed.

“Always merry and bright, ʼe says and ʼe jumps into the motor, an’ off we go.”

Mrs. Hamlyn saw the bright and sunny road that ran through the rubber estates, with their trim green trees, carefully spaced, and their silence, and then wound its way up hill and down through the tangled jungle. The car raced on, driven by a reckless Malay, with its white passengers, past Malay houses that stood away from the road among the coconut trees, sequestered and taciturn, and through busy villages where the market-place was crowded with dark-skinned little people in gay sarongs. Then towards evening it reached the trim, modern town, with its clubs and its golf links, its well-ordered rest-house, its white people, and its railway station, from which the two men could take the train to Singapore. And the woman sat on the steps of the bungalow, empty till the new manager moved in, and watched the road down which the car had panted, watched the car as it sped on, and watched till at last it was lost in the shadow of the night. “What was she like?” Mrs. Hamlyn asked.

“Oh, well, to my way of thinking them Malay women are all very much alike, you know,” Pryce answered.

“Of course she wasn’t so young any more, and you know what they are, them natives, they run to fat something terrible.”

“Fat?”

The thought, absurdly enough, filled Mrs. Hamlyn with dismay.

“Mr. Gallagher was always one to do himself well, if you understand what I mean.”

The idea of corpulence at once brought Mrs. Hamlyn back to common sense. She was impatient with herself because for an instant she had seemed to accept the little cockney’s suggestion.

“It’s perfectly absurd, Mr. Price. Fat women can’t throw spells on people at a distance of a thousand miles. In fact life is very difficult for a fat woman any way.”

“You can laugh, miss, but unless something’s done, you mark my words, the governor’s for it. And medicine ain’t goin’ to save him, not white man’s medicine.”

“Pull yourself together, Mr. Pryce. This fat lady had no particular grievance against Mr. Gallagher. As these things are done in the East he seems to have treated her very well. Why should she wish him any harm?”

“We don’t know ʼow they look at things. Why, a man can live there for twenty years with one of them natives, and d’you think ʼe knows what’s goin’ on in that black heart of hers? Not ʼim!”

She could not smile at his melodramatic language, for his intensity was impressive. And she knew, if anyone did, that the hearts of men, whether their skins are yellow or white or brown, are incalculable. “But even if she felt angry with him, even if she hated him and wanted to kill him, what could she do?” It was strange that Mrs. Hamlyn with her questions was trying now, unconsciously, to reassure herself. “There’s no poison that could start working after six or seven days.”

“I never said it was poison.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Pryce,” she smiled, “but I’m not going to believe in a magic spell, you know.”

“You’ve lived in the East?”

“Off and on for twenty years.”

“Well, if you can say what they can do and what they can’t, it’s more than I can.” He clenched his fist and beat it on the rail with sudden, angry violence. “I’m fed up with the bloody country. It’s got on my nerves, that’s what it is. We’re no match for them, us white men, and that’s a fact. If you’ll excuse me I think I’ll go an’ ʼave a tiddley. I’ve got the jumps.”

He nodded abruptly and left her. Mrs. Hamlyn watched him, a sturdy, shuffling little man in shabby khaki, slither down the companion into the waist of the ship, walk across it with bent head, and disappear into the second-class saloon. She did not know why he left with her a vague uneasiness. She could not get out of her mind that picture of a stout woman, no longer young, in a sarong, a coloured jacket and gold ornaments, who sat on the steps of a bungalow looking at an empty road.

Her heavy face was painted, but in her large, tearless eyes there was no expression. The men who drove in the cat were like schoolboys going home for the holidays.

Gallagher gave a sigh of relief. In the early morning, under the bright sky, his spirits bubbled. The future was like a sunny road that wandered through a wide-flung, wooded plain.

Later in the day Mrs. Hamlyn asked the doctor how his patient did. The doctor shook his head.

“I’m done. I’m at the end of my tether.” He frowned unhappily. “It’s rotten luck, striking a case like this. It would be bad enough at home, but on board ship …” He was an Edinburgh man, but recently qualified, and he was taking this voyage as a holiday before settling down to practice. He felt himself aggrieved. He wanted to have a good time and, faced with this mysterious illness, he was worried to death. Of course he was inexperienced, but he was doing everything that could be done and it exasperated him to suspect that the passengers thought him an ignorant fool. “Have you heard what Mr. Pryce thinks?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“I never heard such rot. I told the captain and he’s right up in the air. He doesn’t want it talked about. He thinks it’ll upset the passengers.”

“I’ll be as silent as the grave.”

The surgeon looked at her sharply.

“Of course you don’t believe that there can be any truth in nonsense of that sort?” he asked.

“Of course not.” She looked out at the sea which shone, blue and oily and still, all round them. “I’ve lived in the East a long time,” she added. “Strange things happen there.”

“This is getting on my nerves,” said the doctor. Near them two little Japanese gentlemen were playing deck quoits. They were trim and neat in their tennis shirts, white trousers and buckram shoes. They looked very European, they even called the score to one another in English, and yet somehow to look at them filled Mrs. Hamlyn at that moment with a vague disquiet. Because they seemed to wear so easily a disguise there was about them something sinister. Her nerves too were on edge.

And presently, no one quite knew how, the notion spread through the ship that Gallagher was bewitched. While the ladies sat about on their deck-chairs, stitching away at the costumes they were making for the fancy dress party on Christmas Day, they gossiped about it in undertones, and the men in the smoking-room talked of it over their cocktails. A good many of the passengers had lived long in the East and from the recesses of their memory they produced strange and inexplicable stories. Of course it was absurd to think seriously that Gallagher was suffering from a malignant spell, such things were impossible, and yet this and that was a fact and no one had been able to explain it. The doctor had to confess that he could suggest no cause for Gallagher’s condition, he was able to give a physiological explanation, but why these terrible spasms should have suddenly assailed him he did not say. Feeling vaguely to blame, he tried to defend himself.

“Why, it’s the sort of case you might never come across in the whole of your practice,” he said. “It’s rotten luck.”

He was in wireless communication with passing ships, and suggestions for treatment came from here and there. “I’ve tried everything they tell me,” he said irritably.

“The doctor of the Japanese boat advised adrenalin.

How the devil does he expect me to have adrenalin in the middle of the Indian Ocean?”

There was something impressive in the thought of this ship speeding through a deserted sea, while to her from all parts came unseen messages. She seemed at that moment strangely alone and yet the centre of the world.

In the lazaret the sick man, shaken by the cruel spasms, gasped for life. Then the passengers became conscious that the ship’s course was altered, and they heard that the captain had made up his mind to put in at Aden. Gallagher was to be landed there and taken to the hospital, where he could have attention which on board was impossible.

The chief engineer received orders to force his engines.

The ship was an old one and she throbbed with the greater effort. The passengers had grown used to the sound and feel of her engines, and now the greater vibration shook their nerves with a new sensation. It would not pass into each one’s unconsciousness, but beat on their sensibilities so that each felt a personal concern. And still the wide sea was empty of traffic, so that they seemed to traverse an empty world. And now the uneasiness which had descended upon the ship, but which no one had been willing to acknowledge, became a definite malaise. The passengers grew irritable, and people quarrelled over trifles which at another time would have seemed insignificant. Mr. Jephson made his hackneyed jokes, but no one any longer repaid him with a smile. The Linsells had an altercation, and Mrs. Linsell was heard late at night walking round the deck with her husband, and uttering in a low, tense voice a stream of vehement reproaches. There was a violent scene in the smoking-room one night over a game of bridge, and the reconciliation which followed it was attended with general intoxication. People talked little of Gallagher, but he was seldom absent from their thoughts. They examined the route map. The doctor said now that Gallagher could not live more than three or four days, and they discussed acrimoniously what was the shortest time in which Aden could be reached. What happened to him after he was landed was no affair of theirs; they did not want him to die on board.

Mrs. Hamlyn saw Gallagher every day. With the suddenness with which after tropical rain in the spring you seem to see the herbage grow before your very eyes, she saw him go to pieces. Already his skin hung loosely on his bones, and his double chin was like the wrinkled wattle of a turkey-cock. His cheeks were sunken. You saw now how large his frame was, and through the sheet under which he lay his bony structure was like the skeleton of a prehistoric giant. For the most part he lay with his eyes closed, torpid with morphia, but shaken still with terrible spasms, and when now and again lie opened his eyes they were preternaturally large; they looked at you vaguely, perplexed and troubled, from the depths of their bony sockets. But when, emerging from his stupor, he recognised Mrs. Hamlyn, he forced a gallant smile to his lips.

“How are you, Mr. Gallagher?” she said. “Getting along, getting along. I shall be all right when we get out of this confounded heat. Lord, how I look forward to a dip in the Atlantic. I’d give anything for a good long swim. I want to feel the cold grey sea of Galway beating against my chest.”

Then the hiccup shook him from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Mr. Pryce and the stewardess shared the care of him. The little cockney’s face wore no longer its look of impudent gaiety, but instead was sullen. “The captain sent for me yesterday,” he told Mrs. Hamlyn when they were alone. “He gave me a rare talking to.”

“What about?”

“He said ʼe wouldn’t ʼave all this hoodoo stud’. He said it was frightening the passengers and I’d better keep a watch on me tongue or I’d ʼave ʼim to reckon with. It’s not my doing. I never said a word except to you and the doctor.”

“It’s all over the ship.”

“I know it is. D’you think it’s only me that’s saying h? All them Lascars and the Chinese, they all know what’s the matter with him. You don’t think you can teach them much, do you? They know it ain’t a natural illness.” Mrs. Hamlyn was silent. She knew through the amahs of some of the passengers that there was no one on the ship, except the whites, who doubted that the woman whom Gallagher had left in distant Selantan was killing him with her magic. All were convinced that as they sighted the barren rocks of Arabia his soul would be parted from his body.

“The captain says if he hears of me trying any hankypanky he’ll confine me to my cabin for the rest of the voyage,” said Pryce, suddenly, a surly frown on his puckered face. “What do you mean by hanky-panky?”

He looked at her for a moment fiercely as though she too were an object of the anger he felt against the captain.

“The doctor’s tried every damned thing he knows, and he’s wirelessed all over the place, and what good ʼas e’ done? Tell me that. Can’t ʼe see the man’s dying? There’s only one way to save him now.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s magic what’s killing ʼim, and it’s only magic what’ll save him. Oh, don’t you say it can’t be done. I’ve seen it with me own eyes.” His voice rose, irritable and shrill. “I’ve seen a man dragged from the jaws of death, as you might say, when they got in a pawang, what we call a witch-doctor, an’ e’ did ʼis little tricks. I seen it with me own eyes, I tell you.”

Mrs. Hamlyn did not speak. Pryce gave her a searching look.

“One of them Lascars on board, he’s a witch-doctor, same as the pawang thet we ʼave in the F.M.S. An’ ʼe says he’ll do it. Only he must ʼave a live animal. A cock would do.”

“What do you want a live animal for?” Mrs. Hamlyn asked, frowning a little. The cockney looked at her with quick suspicion.

“If you take my advice you won’t know anything about it. But I tell you what, I’m going to leave no stone unturned to save my governor. An’ if the captain ʼears of it and shuts me up in me cabin well, let ʼim.”

At that moment Mrs. Linscll came up and Pryce with his quaint gesture of salute left them. Mrs. Linsell wanted Mrs. Hamlyn to fit the dress she had been making herself for the fancy-dress ball, and on the way down to the cabin she spoke to her anxiously of the possibility that Mr. Gallagher might die on Christmas Day. They could not possibly have the dance if he did. She had told the doctor that she would never speak to him again if this happened, and the doctor had promised her faithfully that he would keep the man alive over Christmas Day somehow.

“It would be nice for him, too,” said Mrs. Linsell. “For whom?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn.

“For poor Mr. Gallagher. Naturally no one likes to die on Christmas Day. Do they?”

“I don’t really know,” said Mrs. Hamlyn.

That night, after she had been asleep a little while, she awoke weeping. It dismayed her that she should cry in her sleep. It was as though then the weakness of the flesh mastered her, and, her will broken, she were defenceless against a natural sorrow. She turned over in her mind, as so often before, the details of the disaster which had so profoundly affected her; she repeated the conversations with her husband, wishing she had said this and blaming herself because she had said the other. She wished with all her heart that she had remained in comfortable ignorance of her husband’s infatuation, and asked herself whether she would not have been wiser to pocket her pride and shut her eyes to the unwelcome truth. She was a woman of the world, and she knew too well how much more she lost in separating herself from her husband than his love; she lost the settled establishment and the assured position, the ample means and the support of a recognised background. She had known of many separated wives, living equivocally on smallish incomes, and knew how quickly their friends found them tiresome. And she was lonely. She was as lonely as the ship that throbbed her hasting way through an unpeopled sea, and lonely as the friendless man who lay dying in the ship’s lazaret. Mrs. Hamlyn knew that her thoughts had got the better of her now and that she would not easily sleep again. It was very hot in her cabin. She looked at the time; it was between four and half-past; she must pass two mortal hours before broke the reassuring day.

She slipped into a kimono and went on deck. The night was sombre and although the sky was unclouded no stars were visible. Panting and shaking, the old ship under full steam lumbered through the darkness. The silence was uncanny. Mrs. Hamlyn with bare feet groped her way slowly along the deserted deck. It was so black that she could see nothing. She came to the end of the promenade deck and leaned against the rail. Suddenly she started and her attention was fixed, for on the lower deck she caught a fitful glow. She leaned forward cautiously. It was a little fire, and she saw only the glow because the naked backs of men, crouched round, hid the flame. At the edge of the circle she divined, rather than the casuarina tree saw, a stocky figure in pyjamas. The rest were natives, but this was a European. It must be Pryce and she guessed immediately that some dark ceremony of exorcism was in progress. Straining her ears she heard a low voice muttering a string of secret words. She began to tremble. She was aware that they were too intent upon their business to think that anyone was watching them, but she dared not move. Suddenly, rending the sultry silence of the night like a piece of silk violently torn in two, came the crowing of a cock. Mrs. Hamlyn almost shrieked. Mr. Pryce was trying to save the life of his friend and master by a sacrifice to the strange gods of the East. The voice went on, low and insistent. Then in the dark circle there was a movement, something was happening, she knew not what; there was a cluck-cluck from the cock, angry and frightened, and then a strange, indescribable sound; the magician was cutting the cock’s throat; then silence; there were vague doings that she could not follow, and in a little while it looked as though someone were stamping out the fire. The figures she had dimly seen were dissolved in the night and all once more was still. She heard again the regular throbbing of the engines.

Mrs. Hamlyn stood still for a little while, strangely shaken, and then walked slowly along the deck. She found a chair and lay down in it. She was trembling still. She could only guess what had happened. She did not know how long she lay there, but at last she felt that the dawn was approaching. It was not yet day, and it was no longer night. Against the darkness of the sky she could now see the ship’s rail. Then she saw a figure come towards her. It was a man in pyjamas.

“Who’s that?” she cried nervously.

“Only the doctor,” came a friendly voice.

“Oh! What are you doing here at this time of night?”

“I’ve been with Gallagher.” He sat down beside her and lit a cigarette. “I’ve given him a good strong hypodermic and he’s quiet now.”

“Has he been very ill?”

“I thought he was going to pass out. I was watching him, and suddenly he started up on his bed and began to talk Malay. Of course I couldn’t understand a thing. He kept on saying one word over and over again.”

“Perhaps it was a name, a woman’s name.”

“He wanted to get out of bed. He’s a damned powerful man even now. By George, I had a struggle with him. I was afraid he’d throw himself overboard. He seemed to think someone was calling him.”

“When was that?” asked Mrs. Hamlyn, slowly.

“Between four and half-past. Why?”

“Nothing.”

She shuddered.

Later in the morning when the ship’s life was set upon its daily round, Mrs. Hamlyn passed Pryce on the deck, but he gave her a brief greeting and walked on with quickly averted gaze. He looked tired and overwrought.

Mrs. Hamlyn thought again of that fat woman, with golden ornaments in her thick, black hair, who sat on the steps of the deserted bungalow and looked at the road which ran through the trim lines of the rubber trees.

It was fearfully hot. She knew now why the night had been so dark. The sky was no longer blue, but a dead, level white; its surface was too even to give the effect of cloud; it was as though in the upper air the heat hung like a pall. There was no breeze and the sea, as colourless as the sky, was smooth and shining like the dye in a dyer’s vat. The passengers were listless; when they walked round the deck they panted, and beads of sweat broke out on their foreheads. They spoke in undertones. Something uncanny and disquieting brooded over the ship, and they could not bring themselves to laugh. A feeling of resentment arose in their hearts; they were alive and well, and it exasperated them that, so near, a man should be dying and by the fact (which was after all no concern of theirs) so mysteriously affect them. A planter in the smoking-room over a gin sling said brutally what most of them felt, though none had confessed.

“Well, if he’s going to peg out,” he said, “I wish he’d hurry up and get it over. It gives me the creeps.”

The day was interminable. Mrs. Hamlyn was thankful when the dinner hour arrived. So much time, at all events, was passed. She sat at the doctor’s table. “When do we reach Aden?” she asked.

“Some time to-morrow. The captain says we shall sight land between five and six in the morning.”

She gave him a sharp look. He stared at her for a moment, then dropped his eyes and reddened. He remembered that the woman, the fat woman sitting on the bungalow steps, had said that Gallagher would never see the land. Mrs. Hamlyn wondered whether he, the sceptical, matter-of-fact young doctor, was wavering at last. He frowned a little and then, as though he sought to pull himself together, looked at her once more.

“I shan’t be sorry to hand over my patient to the hospital people at Aden, I can tell you,” he said. Next day was Christmas Cve. When Mrs. Hamlyn awoke from a troubled sleep the dawn was breaking. She looked out of her porthole and saw that the sky was clear and silvery; during the night the haze had melted, and the morning was brilliant. With a lighter heart she went on deck. She walked as far forward as she could go. A late star twinkled palely close to the horizon. There was a shimmer on the sea as though a loitering breeze passed playful fingers over its surface. The light was exquisitely soft, tenuous like a budding wood in spring, and crystalline so that it reminded you of the bubbling of water in a mountain brook. She turned to look at the sun rising rosy in the east, and saw coming towards her the doctor. He wore his uniform; he had not been to bed all night; he was dishevelled and he walked, with bowed shoulders, as though he were dog-tired. She knew at once that Gallagher was dead. When he came up to her she saw that he was crying. He looked so voung then that her heart went out to him. She took his hand.

“You poor dear,” she said. “You’re tired out.”

“I did all I could,” he said. “I wanted so awfully to save him.”

His voice shook and she saw that he was almost hysterical.

“When did he die?” she asked.

He closed his eyes, trying to control himself, and his lips trembled.

“A few minutes ago.”

Mrs. Hamlyn sighed. She found nothing to say. Her gaze wandered across the calm, dispassionate and ageless sea. It stretched on all sides of them as infinite as human sorrow. But on a sudden her eyes were held, for there, ahead of them, on the horizon was something which looked like a precipitous and massy cloud. But its outline was too sharp to be a cloud’s. She touched the doctor on the arm. “What’s that?”

He looked at it for a moment and under his sunburn she saw him grow white.

“Land.”

Once more Mrs. Hamlyn thought of the fat Malay woman who sat silent on the steps of Gallagher’s bungalow. Did she know?

They buried him when the sun was high in the heavens.

They stood on the lower deck and on the hatches, the first- and second-class passengers, the white stewards and the European officers. The missionary read the burial service.

“Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.”

Pryce looked down at the deck with knit brows. His teeth were tight clenched. He did not grieve, for his heart was hot with anger. The doctor and the consul stood side by side. The consul bore to a nicety the expression of an official regret, but the doctor, clean-shaven now, in his neat fresh uniform and his gold braid, was pale and harassed. From him Mrs. Hamlyn’s eyes wandered to Mrs. Linsell. She was pressed against her husband, weeping, and he was holding her hand tenderly.

Mrs. Hamlyn did not know why this sight singularly affected her. At that moment of grief, her nerves distraught, the little woman went by instinct to the protection and support of her husband. But then Mrs. Hamlyn felt a little shudder pass through her and she fixed her eyes on the scams in the deck, for she did not want to see what was toward. There was a pause in the reading. There were various movements. One of the officers gave an order. The missionary’s voice continued.

“Forasmuch as it has pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed: we therefore commend his body to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall give up its dead.”

Airs. Hamlyn felt the hot tears flow down her checks.

There was a dull splash. The missionary’s voice went on. When the service was finished the passengers scattered; the second-class passengers returned to their quarters and a bell rang to summon them to luncheon. But the first-class passengers sauntered aimlessly about the promenade deck. Most of the men made for the smoking-room and sought to cheer themselves with whiskies and sodas and with gin slings. But the consul put up a notice on the board outside the dining-saloon summoning the passengers to a meeting. Most of them had an idea for what purpose it was called, and at the appointed hour they assembled. They were more cheerful than they had been for a week and they chattered with a gaiety which was only subdued by a mannerly reserve. The consul, an eye-glass in his eye, said that he had gathered them together to discuss the question of the fancy-dress dance on the following day. He knew they all had the deepest sympathy for Mr. Gallagher and he would have proposed that they should combine to send an appropriate message to the deceased’s relatives; but his papers had been examined by the purser and no trace could be found of any relative or friend with whom it was possible to communicate. The late Mr. Gallagher appeared to be quite alone in the world. Meanwhile he (the consul) ventured to offer his sincere sympathy to the doctor who, he was quite sure, had done everything that was possible in the circumstances.

“Hear, hear,” said the passengers.

They had all passed through a very trying time, proceeded the consul, and to some it might seem that it would be more respectful to the deceased’s memory if the fancy-dress ball were postponed till New Year’s Eve.

This, however, he told them frankly was not his view, and he was convinced that Mr. Gallagher himself would not have wished it. Of course it was a question for the majority to decide. The doctor got up and thanked the consul and the passengers for the kind things that had been said of him, it had of course been a very trying time, but he was authorised by the captain to say that the captain expressly wished all the festivities to be carried out on Christmas Day as though nothing had happened.

He (the doctor) told them in confidence that the captain felt the passengers had got into a rather morbid state, and thought it would do them all good if they had a jolly good time on Christmas Day. Then the missionary’s wife rose and said they mustn’t think only of themselves; it had been arranged by the Entertainment Committee that there should be a Christmas Tree for the children, immediately after the first-class passengers’ dinner, and the children had been looking forward to seeing everyone in fancy-dress; it would be too bad to disappoint them; she yielded to no one in her respect for the dead, and she sympathised with anyone who felt too sad to think of dancing just then, her own heart was very heavy, but she did feel it would be merely selfish to give way to a feeling which could do no good to anyone. Let them think of the little ones. This very much impressed the passengers.

They wanted to forget the brooding terror which had hung over the boat for so many days, they were alive and they wanted to enjoy themselves; but they had an uneasy notion that it would be decent to exhibit a certain grief.

It was quite another matter if they could do as they wished from altruistic motives. When the consul called for a show of hands everyone, but Mrs. Hamlyn and one old lady who was rheumatic, held up an eager arm. “The ayes have it,” said the consul. “And I venture to congratulate the meeting on a very sensible decision.”

It was just going to break up when one of the planters got on his feet and said he wished to offer a suggestion.

Under the circumstances didn’t they all think it would be as well to invite the second-class passengers? They had all come to the funeral that morning. The missionary jumped up and seconded the motion. The events of the last few days had drawn them all together, he said, and in the presence of death all men were equal. The consul again addressed them. This matter had been discussed at a previous meeting, and the conclusion had been reached that it would be pleasanter for the second-class passengers to have their own party, but circumstances alter cases, and he was distinctly of opinion that their previous decision should be reversed.

“Hear, hear,” said the passengers.

A wave of democratic feeling swept over them and the motion was carried by acclamation. They separated light-heartedly, they felt charitable and kindly. Everyone stood everyone else drinks in the smoking-room.

And so, on the following evening, Mrs. Hamlyn put on her fancy-dress. She had no heart for the gaiety before her, and for a moment had thought of feigning illness, but she knew no one would believe her, and was afraid to be thought affected. She was dressed as Carmen and she could not resist the vanity of making herself as attractive as possible. She darkened her eyelashes and rouged her cheeks. The costume suited her. When the bugle sounded and she went into the saloon she was received with flattering surprise. The consul (always a humourist) was dressed as a ballet-girl and was greeted with shouts of delighted laughter. The missionary and his wife, self-conscious but pleased with themselves, were very grand as Manchus. Mrs. Linsell, as Columbine, showed all that was possible of her very pretty legs. Her husband was an Arab sheik and the doctor was a Malay sultan. A subscription had been collected to provide champagne at dinner and the meal was hilarious. The company had provided crackers in which were paper hats of various shapes and these the passengers put on. There were paper streamers too which they threw at one another and little balloons which they beat from one to the other across the room. They laughed and shouted. They were very gay. No one could say that they were not having a good time. As soon as dinner was finished they went into the saloon where the Christmas Tree, with candles lit, was ready, and the children were brought in, shrieking with delight, and given presents. Then the dance began.

The second-class passengers stood about shyly round the part of the deck reserved for dancing and occasionally danced with one another.

“I’m glad we had them,” said the consul, dancing with Mrs. Hamlyn. “I’m all for democracy, and I think they’re very sensible to keep themselves to themselves.”

But she noticed that Pryce was not to be seen, and when an opportunity presented asked one of the secondclass passengers where he was. “Blind to the world,” was the answer. “We put him to bed in the afternoon and locked him up in his cabin.”

The consul claimed her for another dance. He was very facetious. Suddenly Mrs. Hamlyn felt that she could not bear it any more, the noise of the amateur band, the consul’s jokes, the gaiety of the dancers. She knew not why, but the merriment of those people passing on their ship through the night and the solitary sea affected her on a sudden with horror. When the consul released her she slipped away and, with a look to see that no one had noticed her, ascended the companion to the boat deck.

Here everything was in darkness. She walked softly to a spot where she knew she would be safe from all intrusion.

But she heard a faint laugh and she caught sight in a hidden corner of a Columbine and a Malay sultan. Mrs. Linsell and the doctor had resumed already the flirtation which the death of Gallagher had interrupted.

Already all those people had put out of their minds with a kind of ferocity the thought of that poor lonely man who had so strangely died in their midst. They felt no compassion for him, but resentment rather, because on his account they had been ill-at-ease. They seized upon life avidly. They made their jokes, they flirted, they gossiped. Mrs. Hamlyn remembered what the consul had said, that among Mr. Gallagher’s papers no letters could be found, not the name of a single friend to whom the news of his death might be sent, and she knew not why this seemed to her unbearably tragic. There was something mysterious in a man who could pass through the world in such solitariness. When she remembered how he had come on deck in Singapore, so short a while since, in such rude health, full of vitality, and his arrogant plans for the future, she was seized with dismay. Those words of the burial service filled her with a solemn awe: ‘Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower …ʼ Year in, year out, he had made his plans for the future, he wanted to live so much and he had so much to live for, and then just when he stretched out his hand—oh, it was pitiful; it made all the other distresses of the world of small account. Death with its mystery was the only thing that really mattered. Mrs. Hamlyn leaned over the rail and looked at the starry sky. Why did people make themselves unhappy? Let them weep for the death of those they loved, death was terrible always, but for the rest, was it worth while to be wretched, to harbour malice, to be vain and uncharitable? She thought again of herself and her husband and the woman he so strangely loved. He too had said that we live to be happy so short a time and we are so long dead. She pondered long and intently, and suddenly, as summer lightning flashes across the darkness of the night, she made a discovery which filled her with tremulous surprise; for she found that in her heart was no longer anger with her husband nor jealousy of her rival. A notion dawned on some remote horizon of her consciousness and like the morning sun suffused her soul with a tender, blissful glow. Out of the tragedy of that unknown Irishman’s death, she gathered elatedly the courage for a desperate resolution. Her heart beat quickly, she was impatient to carry it into effect. A passion for self-sacrifice seized her. The music had stopped, the ball was over; most of the passengers would have gone to bed and the rest would be in the smoking-room. She went down to her cabin and met no one on the way. She took her writing pad and wrote a letter to her husband.

‘My dear. It is Christmas Day and I want to tell you that my heart is filled with kindly thoughts towards both of you. I have been foolish and unreasonable. I think we should allow those we care for to be happy in their own way, and we should care for them enough not to let it make us unhappy. I want you to know that I grudge you none of the joy that has so strangely come into your life. I am no longer jealous, nor hurt, nor vindictive. Do not think I shall be unhappy or lonely. If ever you feel that you need me, come to me, and I will welcome you with a cheerful spirit and without reproach or ill-will. I am most grateful for all the years of happiness and of tenderness that you gave me, and in return I wish to offer you an affection which makes no claim on you and is, I hope, utterly disinterested. Think kindly of me and be happy, happy, happy.’

She signed her name and put the letter into an envelope.

Though it would not go till they reach Port Said she wanted to place it at once in the letter-box. When she had done this, beginning to undress, she looked at herself in the glass. Her eyes were shining and under her rouge her colour was bright. The future was no longer desolate, but bright with a fair hope. She slipped into bed and fell at once into a sound and dreamless sleep.