

Exotic
Martha
by
D. Gerard



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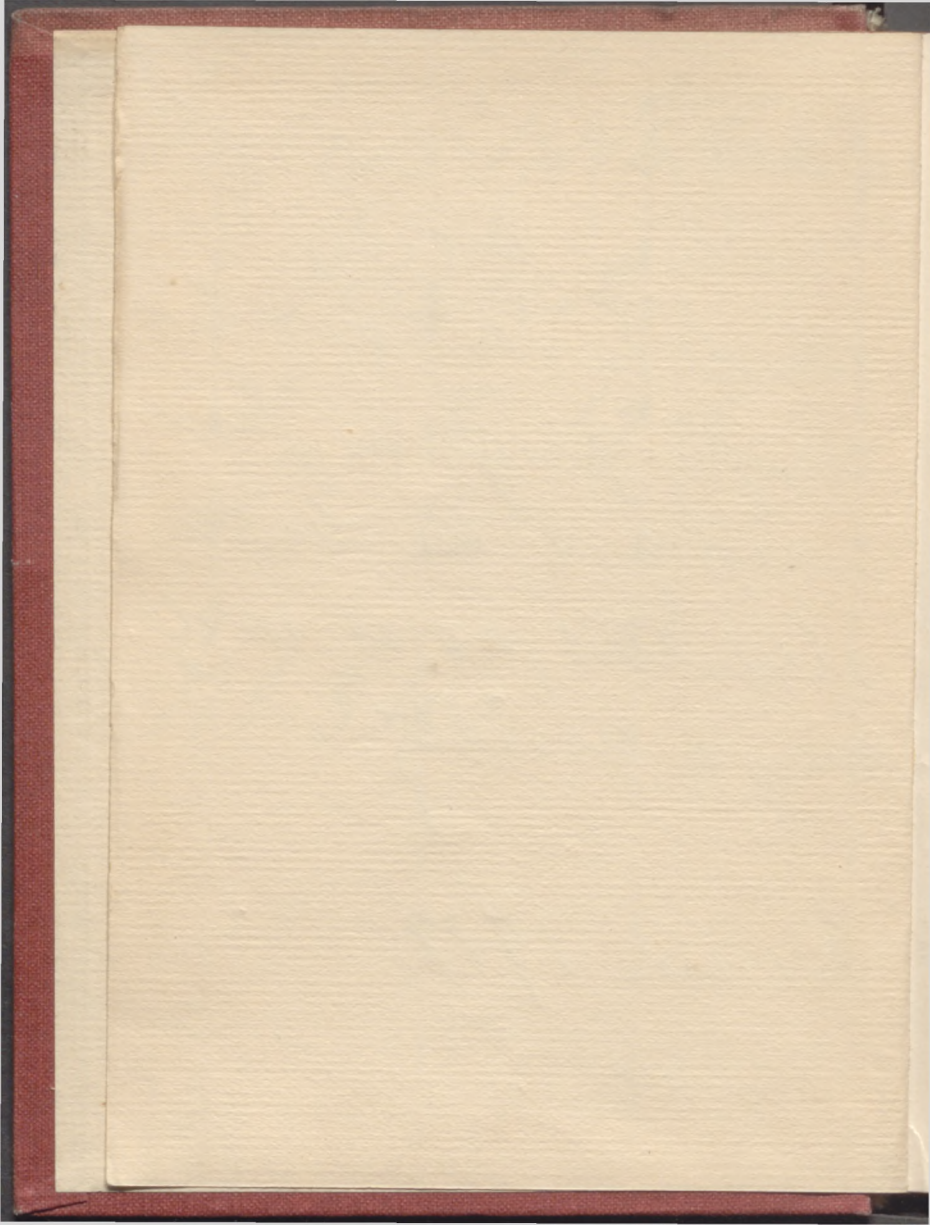
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A very readable, quite
exciting story, begins
scenes in Scotland but
chiefly plays in Java
amongst the Dutch
planters, as is in its
way a novelty.

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EXOTIC MARTHA

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

(MADAME LONGARD DE LONGGARDE)

AUTHOR OF "LADY BABY," "ONE YEAR," "ITINERANT DAUGHTERS,"
"THE CITY OF ENTICEMENT," ETC.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1913

EXOTIC MARTHA

DOROTHY GRAY



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BERNHARD TAUBNER

1912

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EXOTIC MARTHA.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOME-COMING.

"THERE'S the wheels!"

The words were followed by an avalanche-like descent of bare arms and legs from the sofa, and a break-neck race for the door, through which, barely a minute later, a mop-headed, richly freckled boy of eight, with a small sister to match, in tow, slunk back, crestfallen.

"Considering that the train isn't due for a quarter of an hour yet, and that it takes ten minutes to drive from the station, it couldn't well be *our* wheels, could it?" observed Mrs. McGillies upon the fourth or fifth repetition of the manœuvre—for Andy and Molly had been hearing "wheels" all evening almost as plentifully as the wicked innkeeper hears "bells" in a certain popular melodrama.

"If Martha hasn't brought any stamps with her, then she's a pig," pronounced Andy, recommencing to sprawl over the huge stamp album which happened to be the hinge on which turned his present universe.

"And if she hasn't brought any Edinburgh rock with

her, then she's—two pigs," completed Molly, having hesitated for a moment before deciding to cap her brother's epithet by the simple process of doubling it.

"As though Edinburgh rock grew in Switzerland, stupid! If she brings you anything, it'll be condensed milk—depend upon it!"

"I don't want condensed milk!" whimpered Molly, on the verge of a howl, which Mrs. McGillies averted, by sharply raising her hand and deceitfully turning her head in the direction of the window, upon which another avalanche of arms and legs took place.

"She wouldn't *dare* to come back without bringing something," decided Andy, on the back of the newest disappointment. "She promised it separately to each of us—even to baby. What did she promise you, mother, by the way? Not stamps, surely?" with an anxious inflection of the voice.

"No. The only thing she promised me was to come back well and strong."

"Humph!" said Andy, sprawling a little more generously, in order to put straight the row of Swiss stamps which were the latest additions to his hoard.

In light-footed restlessness Mrs. McGillies left the room and climbed the stairs, in order to assure herself—for the fifteenth time, at least—that Martha's bedroom was ready for her reception. Stamps and sweetmeats indeed! It was not for the sake of any gifts that the mother was counting the minutes till the advent of that dreadful station cab. All that Martha need bring with her would be the roses in her cheeks, which for a year past had been fading so conspicuously—the soft lustre with which her blue-grey eyes used to shine, until consumed by a new and feverish flame.

Upon the purse of a small country attorney, the stay at Schneeliberger had put an almost unbearable strain. If left to himself, Mr. McGillies, whose habits were eminently frugal, and who had three small children of his own flesh and blood to provide for, would most certainly have shirked so heroic a step. But he had not been left to himself. A dove in everyday life, Mrs. McGillies was apt to become a tigress where Martha was concerned, for Martha was all that remained to her of a first, sentimental love-match, while the three later-born children were the fruits of a second venture, dictated not so much by prudence as by sheer necessity. On the day on which the family doctor had prescribed Schneeliberger, the tigress had been very much to the fore, with the result that—in the teeth of arithmetical figures—the plan was carried.

Would the sacrifice be rewarded?

The accounts from Schneeliberger all seemed to answer yes; but Mrs. McGillies would trust nothing but the testimony of her own eyes.

Before the freshly covered toilet-table she now stood still, to look into the depth of the small mirror, as though in search of the youthful features so soon to be reflected there. But what the mirror sent back was only her own delicately haggard face, the prototype, maybe, of what Martha's would be in twenty years, with the same somewhat misty grey-blue eyes, only laden with the experiences of those twenty years—the same dash of red in the no longer luxuriant golden hair, with the congealed and patchy remains of the very same roses which used to bloom in Martha's cheeks. It was a spare little body that stood before the toilet-table, thin to the verge of scragginess, but with a sort of sham youthfulness hanging about its sharp outlines and nervously quick movements.

There was nervousness in the gesture with which she once more settled the primroses in the glass upon the toilet-table, and then turned to arrange the folds of the new chintz curtains—a surprise from which she expected great things. They, as well as Martha's favourite pudding, which had been ordered for dinner, formed but a modest welcome, yet surely could not miss their effect. So, at least, argued Mrs. McGillies, measuring Martha's yearning by her own.

"Ah!" she suddenly exclaimed, turning her head in earnest, for this time the sound of wheels stopping before the door was no hallucination.

"Thank God! Thank God!" was all that the mother was able to say, as again and again she embraced Martha, and even this she was only able to say in her heart.

The very first glance had put to rest the great fear: Martha had returned from Schneeliberg not only restored to health, but blooming, as Mrs. McGillies had never dared hope to see her bloom. And beautiful—yes, positively and quite unexpectedly beautiful. Martha had always been pretty, of course—acknowledgedly pretty—but this was something altogether different, some subtle transformation of her whole person, which neither the newly rounded cheeks nor the healthily bright eyes could quite account for.

It was a triumphant glance that, over Martha's shoulder, Mrs. McGillies sent towards her husband, carefully pulling off his gloves in the background. He was a tired, depressed-looking little man in spectacles; but just now the chronic look of fatigue had been lifted, no doubt by the same observations made by his wife, and which

for him translated themselves into the fact that the money, at least, had not been wasted.

"She looks fit, doesn't she?" he remarked almost cheerily, answering that triumphant gaze. "The station-master scarcely seemed to know her—nor Mr. Fettes either."

"Was Mr. Fettes at the station?" asked Mrs. McGillies quickly.

"Aye—so he was. Happened to be expecting somebody by the same train."

Mr. McGillies actually achieved a wink as he said it, though winking was not at all in his line.

Upon which his wife drew back, in order to take a furtive look into Martha's face; but Martha was far too busy with a laughing repulse of Andy and Molly to have any attention for other things.

"Yes, yes; I've got a whole packet of Swiss chocolate—real Swiss chocolate—in my bag"—this to the unpleasantly adhesive Molly; "and, oh, *such* stamps for you, Andy! A real exotic one among them—you'll just see!"

"Well done, Exotic Martha!" shouted the grinning possessor of the album. "Out with it!"

"Don't tear her to pieces between you!" interpolated Mrs. McGillies, somewhat fiercely, peeling Martha out of the four clinging hands. "She has got to take off her things first."

Upstairs, in the spotless little attic room, Mrs. McGillies, with shaking fingers, lit the candles on the toilet-table. Would Martha notice the new curtains? But Martha's eyes were, no doubt, dazed with travelling, for both the curtains and the primroses—which she all but knocked over while pushing them aside—passed unremarked; nor did

she cast around her that look of dumb greeting which, with the home-coming traveller, is almost instinctive.

"You are glad to be home again, darling?" asked Mrs. McGillies at last, thirsting for the word that had not come, and vaguely puzzled by the remote look in the eyes of this new Martha in whom she almost hesitated to recognise her own child.

In reply, Martha threw her arms around her mother's neck, which, of course, precluded any necessity of returning her gaze.

"Oh, I am glad, mother, much more glad than you can imagine," she whispered into the maternal ear, and then stopped short, rather abruptly, leaving upon Mrs. McGillies the impression that though the gladness was real, it had nothing particular to do with the home-coming.

There was no attempt at dressing for dinner that night.

During the modest meal *à trois*—Andy and Molly having been packed off to bed, the one gorged with chocolate, the other half demented with joy over the possession of the "exotic" stamp—it turned out to hail from the Dutch Indies—Martha defrayed the cost of the conversation, almost single-handed. Neither her stepfather, who ate his meals as conscientiously as he did everything else, nor her mother, who could not take her eyes off Martha's transformed face, seemed inclined to interrupt her spirited and somewhat excited account of life at Schneeliberg, and of the various small adventures of the journey. She talked almost incessantly, and did not seem to notice what she ate. With a faint qualm at her heart, the mother saw the favourite pudding pass as unremarked as had done the curtains and the primroses.

Every now and then, from Martha's animated face, Mrs. McGillies' eyes would glide to Martha's hand upon which, among a few familiar, girlish rings, an oval opal, set in somewhat fantastic-looking fashion, gleamed conspicuously. She had not dared to question Martha concerning it, and Molly, who, unhampered by discretion, had unhesitatingly exclaimed, "Why, you've got a new ring, Martha! Where's that from?" had only earned a sham box on the ear and the advice to keep her fingers out of other people's pies.

By dessert-time, Martha's flow of talk seemed rather suddenly to run dry. She was thoughtfully peeling a banana, and smiling at it too, in a curiously familiar sort of way, which suggested some secret understanding between them—when Mr. McGillies pushed back his chair. For the teetotaller that he was, after-dinner sittings did not exist; and to-day, owing to the excursion to the station, he had arrears of work to catch up.

This he explained, while shuffling to his feet; but before he had got under way, Martha's next move rooted him to the spot.

Promptly abandoning the banana, she jerked up her head with a familiar and significant movement.

"Wait a bit, papa! and never mind about your arrears; I have another occupation for you, a far more pressing occupation," she added, with a morsel of a laugh, both defiant and nervous.

Then, after a tiny pause, during which she felt the weight of two pairs of eyes upon her:

"The fact is, I have something to tell you. But I think it had better be in the sitting-room."

She rose with the words, flicking the crumbs off the front of her dress, and outwardly self-possessed, though in

truth her heart was beating furiously, led the way, followed by two dumb people, too much taken aback even to exchange glances.

It may have been some obscure idea of commanding the situation which caused Martha to install herself upon the sofa, while the elders dropped a little helplessly into two convenient armchairs.

"I had better come to the point at once," said Martha, scarcely waiting till they were seated. "You heard Molly asking me what this new ring meant"—she was twirling the opal on her finger as she spoke—"I didn't tell her, but I mean to tell you. It is my engagement-ring."

She paused to give them time to speak, but neither Mr. nor Mrs. McGillies were in a position to do so, as the somewhat vacant look of their eyes sufficiently demonstrated.

"My engagement-ring," repeated Martha, with aggravated distinctness. "I have been engaged to be married for a whole week now."

"To whom?" breathed Mrs. McGillies, recovering a small and very hoarse portion of her voice.

"To Mynheer Henrik Klaas."

The lips which spoke the words curved, unconsciously, into a smile.

"A foreigner?"

"A Dutchman by birth. But he doesn't live in Holland."

At this juncture, the mental paralysis which had overtaken Martha's stepfather lifted abruptly. Though not, in any sense of the word, a strong man, he was eminently a conscientious one, and the effrontery of the announcement had outraged all his sense of the fitness of things.

"My dear Martha," he observed, carefully "collecting"

himself, both morally and physically, "you surely forget that you are not of age, and that you cannot marry without your mother's and my consent."

"I will get it," said Martha, with a confidence that might well have been enraging, had Mr. McGillies been addicted to rages.

"Circumstances alone can decide that point," was all he could find to say, deliberately shamming a dignity which he did not feel.

"Tell us about it!" pleaded the mother, almost humbly. "You met him at Schneeliberg, I suppose?"

"Yes; of course."

"What was he doing there?" came the next quick question.

"The same thing that I was doing—going through a cure."

"That means that he isn't strong?" commented Mr. McGillies.

"He wasn't strong when he came there, but he is all right now, as right as I am."

"And he's well enough off to marry you without a portion?"

"He has a good position," said Martha, in the same tolerant tone in which she had answered the other questions, the tone of a person who, out of pure good nature, submits to being catechised.

"As what?"

"As overseer in a large tobacco plantation."

"Tobacco plantation?"

The word was echoed by both the elders in one breath. But it was only Mr. McGillies who had the courage to add:

"Where?"

"On Java," said Martha, striking out her already prominent chin a little farther, as was her habit when taking up a defensive attitude.

Mrs. McGillies sank back wordless in her chair, while her husband broke into an uncertain but distinctly ironical laugh.

"No health, no fortune, and an alien inhabiting the ends of the earth!" he summed up, drumming with nervous fingers upon the arms of his chair. "And you are actually daft enough to suppose that we will permit you to commit this folly?"

"How will you prevent me?" asked Martha, sitting up a little straighter upon the sofa.

This being a matter for consideration, Mr. McGillies took off his spectacles and began to polish them perplexedly as a means of gaining time.

"You could lock me up, of course," suggested Martha, by way of helping him out of the difficulty. "But you would need to be very sure of the lock and also of the window fastenings, and I fancy you wouldn't care to put up iron bars, because of the neighbours' talk. And even if you did, I suppose you have heard before of the thing—or personage—who laughs at locksmiths? In this case he would snap his fingers at them, quite audibly—be sure of that!"

In illustration of which Martha snapped hers.

"You are not of age," Mr. McGillies fell back upon saying, though without conviction. "You couldn't marry him legally without our consent."

"Then I would just marry him illegally. They're not so particular out there, I fancy."

"Martha!" broke from Mrs. McGillies, half unheard and wholly unheeded.

Here Mr. McGillies flung himself headlong into arguments, the object of which was to demonstrate the folly, not to say monstrosity, of the proposed arrangement, and to which Martha listened with a fixed smile which had been prepared for the unavoidable ordeal. Her stepfather's sincere but incoherent eloquence having run dry, she said with studied patience, as though speaking to a child:

"Yes; I knew you would say all that, and, from your point of view, I daresay you are right; but it all has nothing to do with the fact that I have *quite* made up my mind to marry Henrik, and that he has *quite* made up his mind to marry me."

With the words the chin took up a yet more prominent position.

Mr. McGillies gazed desperately at his stepdaughter. It had always been that way with Martha ever since she was a mite. Such a mere slip of a girl—a creature whom it looked as though you would only have to take a firm grip of in order to crush in your hand, and yet so absolutely impossible to deal with, whenever she had quite made up her mind to anything, however preposterous. People—those who opposed her wishes, that is to say—when deceived by the misty blue eyes, were apt to make the discovery that there was a rock behind the mist against which they had unwittingly hurled themselves.

It was with an almost hysterical laugh that Mr. McGillies cut short the fruitless discussion.

"Nothing to be done with you to-night, I see. We'll take up the subject to-morrow."

"That would have to be rather early then," remarked Martha, with apparent equanimity. "Because, you see, Henrik will be here by lunch-time."

Exotic Martha.



Mr. McGillies paused in the very act of flight.

"To-morrow? He is coming to-morrow?"

"Yes. He thought it proper to present himself to you before sailing for Batavia, where he will get everything ready for the marriage."

"You propose to marry him out there?"

"Naturally, since he is obliged to return at once to his post. We have settled that I am to follow in about a month, he meeting me in the port from which we drive straight to a registry-office. We would prefer to do things in a regular way," added Martha quite kindly, "if only you will listen to reason."

"Good night," was all that Mr. McGillies felt able to utter, while making for the door.

When it had closed behind him, his wife, looking rather ghastly, emerged from the depth of the chair in which she had been cowering.

"Come to bed!" she whispered. And Martha, feeling all at once rather tired, complied wordlessly.

Upstairs in the spotless attic-room Mrs. McGillies broke down at last with her arms round Martha.

Very tenderly, yet very firmly, Martha returned the caresses.

"Mother dear, don't cry so! It hurts me. Do, do be reasonable! You always expected me to get married some day, did you not? Well, the day has come a little quicker than you expected—that is all."

"But so far away, Martha, and so suddenly," gasped Mrs. McGillies, incoherent with grief. "And a stranger, an alien like that, a person one knows nothing about!"

"You know that he loves me and that I love him—is that not enough?" comforted Martha, with all the triumph and all the trust of first love vibrating in her voice.

When presently they sat side by side on Martha's bed—so like each other in feature and form, so different with the difference of the twenty years between them—the natural rôles seemed to be reversed, for it was Martha who soothed and comforted, almost maternally, and who talked what she sincerely took to be reason. But as she talked, the necessity for pleading her own cause began to gain on her—the need of having her mother on her side. Only a few minutes more, and it was she who was weeping upon her mother's neck—tears of joy, of course—as she confided to her the raptures of her love, backed up by an appeal whose boldness was well-nigh unanswerable.

“What am I doing different to what you did after all? Would *you* have stuck at anything in order to marry father—my own father, I mean? Wasn't your whole family against that too?”

Mrs. McGillies, thinking of her own improvident marriage with the handsome subaltern whose face had been his fortune, could only weep silently in reply. Some whiff of her dead youth, subtle as the scent of a dried flower, swept over her. Had she the right to thwart Martha of that happiness which, despite many hard moments, she had not found too dearly paid for by the sacrifice of material comfort?

“It is your happiness I want—only your happiness,” she murmured, as she pressed to her the child whom she thought she had regained, but whom she now knew that she had lost for ever. “But I cannot feel as if this——”

“You will feel so to-morrow. Only wait till you have seen him!”

It was upon this note that—late at night—they

parted, Mrs. McGillies half won over, yet ever again starting back in terror before the thought of that which her consent would incur; and Martha, with the remote look in her eyes, meeting all objections with the simple formula:

“Wait till you have seen him!”

CHAPTER II.

THE PAL.

THE day on which Dr. Muggins had prescribed Schneelberg had been one memorable in the annals of the McGillies family—a day fraught with consternation for Martha’s stepfather, with anguish for Martha’s mother, with flurry for the entire household. The one person distinctly elated by the discovery that she possessed “lungs” was Martha herself. In defiance of her languid body her spirit exulted. Anything for a change! Anything to escape from the deadly round of present existence! The unusual, the unexpected, even the startling and the gaudy was what she had always craved for, and the humdrum, the conventionally respectable, the pallidly monotonous was what she got. Small wonder that something within her remained hungry and thirsty—for what, precisely, she could not well have said. How, through the solidity of atmosphere which surrounds a typical Scotch town, this thirst for the unusual had been able to penetrate might be a problem, but remained a fact. It was but a small edge of this thirst which she sought to still by devouring every book of travels which came her way, of Eastern travel, by preference—as well

as by wearing the brightest tints which fashion tolerated, by way of conjuring up an illusion of the all too often absent sunshine. Had the colours been less well chosen they would have been called vulgar; as it was they were only called strong. Even people who would have preferred to compare her to a parrakeet or a peacock found themselves reduced to the simile of the humming-bird. It was on the strength of the humming-bird that Andy had first called her Exotic Martha; the adjective being one which had figured in a peculiarly tiresome dictation, in which you were expected to give a "reasoned account" of each word as it came.

"Mother, what is—eggs-oh-tick"—for it was in this shape that the word had issued from his pen—Andy had asked on this occasion.

"Foreign or outlandish, that's what the dictionary says. When you speak of a hothouse full of exotics, you mean plants that grow in other climates. But birds and beasts can be exotic too, like humming-birds and tigers."

"And people?" asked Andy.

"People too, of course, if they are outlandish."

"Then I'm sure Martha is an eggs-oh-tick," said Andy, with conviction, "even though she's not been grown in a hothouse. She's all for outlandish things; and Mrs. Digby was saying the other day that she reminds her of a humming-bird. Ex-o-tic?—what a funny way of spelling it! But it's a ripping word, and I'm going to call her that from this day on."

Despite Martha's personal disapproval the name had stuck.

"How can anything so drab-coloured as 'Martha'

couple with so gorgeous an adjective?" she scornfully asked.

Her very name with its aggressive domesticity had always been to her a thorn in the flesh.

Schneeliberg was anything but the home of humming-birds, yet might serve for the moment. At any rate it had the merit of not being Ballenweem. Alpine heights and eternal snow could not help being more exciting than the gentle swell of turnip-covered ground, which, in this least romantic part of the lowlands, formed the chief feature of the landscape.

Yes—but in order to enjoy Schneeliberg, she would first have to reach it, and as yet a big "How?" barred the prospect.

A "scene" little short of violent between Mr. and Mrs. McGillies—since this was one of the latter's rare but effective "tigress" days—had already resulted in the triumph of the cause as such, but had brought no enlightenment as to ways and means.

Having made himself hoarse with repeating that with three small children to provide for it would be little short of sinful to sacrifice all their savings, and finding himself beaten at every point, Mr. McGillies had feebly put forward that there existed open-air health resorts in Scotland.

"To send her to one of these would cost a lot, of course, yet greatly diminish the expense."

"Hang the expense!" said Mrs. McGillies, quite deliberately.

It was the nearest approach to bad language which the solicitor had ever heard his wife use, and it practically settled the matter.

"How do you propose to get her there?" he asked

presently, with a certain rather malicious satisfaction. "You know that I can't possibly leave my work, and I presume that you don't mean to abandon the children."

"I don't know *how* I shall get her there, but only *that* I shall get her there," said Mrs. McGillies, looking remarkably like Martha as she said it.

"By herself, perhaps?"

"Certainly not by herself—in her present state of health."

The problem was still unsolved when that same afternoon George Fettes walked into the solicitor's office. During the last year he had walked into it rather frequently, having, ever since the day on which he had helped Martha out of a difficulty with her bicycle, developed a chronic need for legal advice, connected with such abstruse subjects as "rights of way," or of water, as well as of niceties of frontier demarcations and of game laws. As it happened that Mr. McGillies' office was under the same roof as his lodging, a nearer acquaintance with the solicitor's family had been an almost unavoidable development—an arrangement to which—considering that Bannacuik was quite a "nice" estate, and Mr. Fettes his own master at the acceptable age of twenty-five—no reasonable objection could be made. Even when he began to turn up—accidentally, of course—during the course of Martha's solitary constitutionals, Mr. McGillies, though very behindhand in the matter of "proprieties," saw fit to close an eye. In proportion as the constitutionals became rarer and shorter, Mr. Fettes' legal difficulties multiplied. Formerly the most peace-loving of men, he now seemed—to judge from the frequency of his appearance in the solicitor's office—bent upon going to law with every tenant on the estate. An

enquiry after Martha's health usually ended these conferences, and just as usually he was invited to judge for himself. Her increasing delicacy was watched by him with an attention which presumably meant interest, though his features were not well adapted to express whatever there might be to express. They were large features, but not too large for the size of his limbs, with about them something of the massive and elementary regularity of a ship's figure-head, also something of its woodenness. Alone the small shrewd eyes—eyes that were at once sharp and kindly—did not seem to fit into the countenance. Thanks to this impassibility of feature, few people discovered the deadly shyness which was the bane of his life. It was an invention of his own—this mask behind which he could feel as uncomfortable as he liked without anyone knowing—and he was distinctly proud of it. As carefully did he cultivate a brevity of speech which verged on laconicism, since the less he spoke the less danger was there of "putting his foot in it," and of having to blush for his blunders. His eyes, indeed, were apt to tell tales, for which reason he was much addicted to the study of his boots. The combination of the impassibility and the laconicism had earned for Mr. Fettes the reputation of being at least as dull as he was steady.

And yet, strange to say, this dull young man was absolutely everything in the shape of a confidant that Martha had ever known. The few girl acquaintances she owned fitted far too well into the atmosphere of Ballenweem ever to become more than acquaintances, while her half-brother and half-sister were mere babies. On the occasion of one of the accidental meetings aforementioned, her spirits being particularly charged, she had given air

to the rebellion within her, and had read sympathy in the small eyes of her new friend. Encouraged by that look she had gone on talking, and although what Mr. Fettes said in return was chiefly said in monosyllables, she knew that she had at least found a listener, and one who did not seem to think her crazy. He had no advice to give, no suggestions to offer, but, on the other hand, he never looked horrified, never in the least shocked. Also she had the comfortable conviction that, whatever wild things she might say, they would remain buried as in a grave.

"I do wish you were my brother!" she said to him one day, only a few weeks after their first meeting. "A big brother is so much more useful than a small one. Don't you wish you were my brother, Mr. Fettes?"

Mr. Fettes, who was carefully following the progress of a hole dug by his walking-stick in the bank on which they were sitting, looked more wooden than ever as he replied:

"No."

But Martha was speaking again and did not catch this particular monosyllable.

"Since you can't be my brother, we might at least be pals. Will you be my pal, Mr. Fettes?"

To which, after a longish pause and still intent upon the hole, Mr. Fettes said:

"Yes."

It seemed to them both that a pact had been signed on that day.

Upon that other momentous day—the day of Doctor Muggins' prescription—it was therefore scarcely astonishing that Mr. Fettes should once more find himself in need of legal advice. It was only after discussing an intricate poaching case with Mr. McGillies that—according to

custom—he drifted into the sitting-room, where he found Martha alone, poring over a map of Switzerland.

“Have you heard the news?” she asked, lifting an eager face in which the colour burnt in two over-brilliant spots.

“Yes,” said Mr. Fettes, with unmoved features, but a slight roughness of voice which she had never before noticed.

“And aren’t you glad?”

“No.”

“That’s horrid of you! You ought to be glad. Don’t you know that a change is *the* thing I’m pining after?”

“Glad—when you’re ill?” asked Mr. Fettes, after a pause during which he had apparently recognised that a monosyllable would not serve this time.

Martha tossed her red-golden head.

“Oh, that’s nothing! I shall get all right again at Schneeliberg. The only point is how I’m to reach it. Has papa——”

When Martha recovered from the fit of coughing which here interrupted her, she found Mr. Fettes’ gaze fixed upon her, and for a moment had an impression of moisture of which she could not be quite sure to which pair of eyes it belonged, her own, she supposed, never having noticed how these attacks were apt to shake her pal quite as severely as herself.

“Has papa told you of our difficulty?”

“Yes.”

“And I suppose you can’t suggest any way out of it?”

“I think I can.”

The answer was so unexpected that Martha, who had sunk back exhausted in her chair, gazed up at him with

startled eyes as he towered above her, not having yet sat down.

"You can? Out with it then!"

Instead of coming out with it at once, Mr. Fettes walked to the window and stood staring into the street for so long that Martha wondered whether he had forgotten her existence.

"You see, I can't go with papa because he can't leave his office, nor with mother because she can't leave the kids—nor——"

"Go with me!" said Mr. Fettes, wheeling round suddenly, and speaking in a tone of reckless desperation.

"With *you!*"

Martha began by gaping and ended by bursting into a weak invalid's laugh.

"I should like to see papa's face when you proposed that to him!"

"As my wife, of course, I mean," completed Mr. Fettes, turning a fine beetroot-red up to the roots of his brown hair. He had almost cured himself of the ignominious habit of blushing, but there were moments in which the rebellious blood still showed right through the healthy sunburn of his skin.

"As your wife? Good gracious! You are asking me to marry you?"

"Yes," he said, still with that touch of recklessness.

Martha began to laugh in the same feeble fashion, but broke off, checked by something in his eyes. She decided instead to be indignant.

"Now you've spoilt everything!" she declared, with displeasure flaring out of the eyes that had grown so much too big for her face. "I've lost my pal!"

"Then you won't?"

"Of course I won't! How could you for a moment suppose that I would—you, who know so exactly what I feel about the sort of life here!"

"Beg your pardon—very stupid of me—it just happened to occur to me," stammered the suitor, visibly perspiring under the effort of so long a speech, and once more turning his back straight upon her.

With eyes still full of amazement, Martha contemplated that back, and presently its very immovability stirred something like compunction within her. After all, perhaps she had been too hard upon him. His intentions had evidently been excellent, though a little too naïve.

"Mr. Fettes," she began, after a moment.

From the window embrasure there came a huskily interrogative sound which was perhaps meant for "yes?"

"Would you like to be taken back as a pal?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, let's both forget this little episode, and just go on as before. It was very obliging of you to want to help us out of our fix; it was that which occurred to you, wasn't it? But the thing won't work. I'll take you back for a pal if you promise never to return to the subject. Do you promise?"

Whether Mr. Fettes would have promised or not was never known, owing to an irruption of the junior members of the family which took place at this juncture.

By the time he reached home George Fettes had pretty well succeeded in swallowing his disappointment. Not that it was exactly a disappointment either. Ever since the day on which he had first perceived Martha perched upon a bank beside her damaged bicycle, like some bright-plumaged, broken-winged bird, she had seemed to him, with her ruddy hair and that peculiar brightness of com-

plexion which so often goes along with delicacy of lungs, to be something too exquisitely decorative, too utterly remote from everyday life ever to enter intimately into his own prosaic existence. The comradeship she had offered him was all he dared aspire to. The declaration of this afternoon had been an affair of pure impulse. Neither had her refusal surprised him half as much as his own offer had done; but, of course, it had hurt—illogically much.

But he had no time now to attend to his own hurts. It was her he had to think of. To possess Martha was an impossible dream; but the chief thing, after all, was that there should continue to be a Martha. And for that the first essential condition was the carrying out of Dr. Muggins' prescription; since she would not have his escort some other must be found.

As diligently as though the matter rested upon his shoulders alone, Mr. Fettes began to turn over the problem.

As a result of much reflection seasoned with innumerable briar-wood pipes, he started next day for Edinburgh, in which town he possessed an aunt, not inordinately loved, but periodically visited. The sole occupation in life of this lady—a distinctly "merry" widow on the right side of forty—was, having a good time of it, which she accomplished by enjoying the fruits of a "marriage of reason," in which the other party had been reasonable enough to withdraw from the scene at the end of one brief year. Many were the would-be successors to Mr. Wold, who had been decrepit and generally insupportable, but "catch me at it again, after such an escape," was Mrs. Wold's stereotyped answer for the occasion.

Lately the "merry" widow had reported herself as

suffering from the after-effects of a severe influenza. This Mr. Fettes had remembered during his midnight vigil—also that Mrs. Wold—probably because she had nothing else to torment herself about—was apt periodically to torment herself about her health. Upon these two circumstances his plan—an astonishingly wily one for so dull a young man—was built.

“You horrid boy! So you *have* ended by remembering my existence?” was Mrs. Wold’s greeting to the nephew who possessed the double advantage of being a model listener and of never trying to borrow money. “To what do I owe this treat?”

“Your last letter,” uttered George, adding, with a further effort: “It alarmed me.”

“Oh yes; I was alarmed myself when I wrote it. How do you find me looking?”

“Bad,” said Mr. Fettes slowly and deliberately shaking his massive head as he gazed into his relative’s face.

Mrs. Wold changed colour. By nature she belonged to the bouncing order of women for whose plumpness and whose liveliness an india-rubber ball is the handiest simile; but to-day the ball was rather flabby, its elasticity relaxed by a long course of doctors and their pills.

“Really? You find me pulled down?” she asked, in a voice charged with anxiety.

“Shocking!” pronounced Mr. Fettes concisely.

Mrs. Wold sank back limply among her cushions.

“I knew it!” she wailed. “I wonder if I had better change my doctor?”

“Change of air better than change of doctor.”

“Do you think so?”

“Dead sure of it.”

“I *had* thought of going south. Perhaps Mentone——”

"Mentone exploded. Nothing but Alpine climate nowadays—for lungs."

"But there is nothing wrong with my lungs—at least, I think not," faltered Mrs. Wold, her mottled pallor growing more conspicuous.

"Shouldn't be too sure about it, Aunt Sophy. Don't like the look of you at all."

"It's true that I cough a good deal at night, and doctors never tell one the truth. I wonder which would be the best place to go to?"

"Schneeliberger, of course," said Mr. Fettes, in a tone which made mincemeat of all other possible claimants.

"Ah, yes—Schneeliberger! But fancy sitting all alone in the middle of a snowfield among a lot of people who eat with their knives!"

"Wouldn't be so bad with an amusing companion," suggested the new-made diplomat.

"Ah, but where find the right person?"

"Almost think I could procure her," said George, in the tone of a man struck with a happy inspiration. "Just occurs to me that I know of another person bound for Schneeliberger."

"Ah? What sort of person?"

"A girl," said George Fettes, beginning to study his boots.

"Ah!"

"Just been ordered off there—for same sort of thing as yourself. Parents sure to be delighted to confide her to you. Find her a very lively companion. Sort of mutual advantage arrangement, don't you see?"

"I'd need to hear more about this," said Mrs. Wold, looking a little suspiciously at her nephew.

"First-class skating, of course—as well as tobogganing,"

remarked that young man casually, "in case you feel well enough to enjoy it."

"Yes; I've heard of the tobogganing," said Mrs. Wold, visibly brightening.

To chaperon a sick girl was not in itself an enticing prospect, yet might not be incompatible with having quite a novel sort of "good time."

What between this reflection and alarm for her health, and a streak of good nature which the various "good times" already enjoyed had not succeeded in eradicating from her constitution, Mrs. Wold began to incline to the plan.

And so successfully was this inclination fostered that barely a week later Martha started for Schneelberg under the widow's well-feathered wing.

CHAPTER III.

HENRIK.

"ARE you quite certain you don't mind my leaving you for a bit?" asked Mrs. Wold of her protégée, just now installed upon a couch with her legs wrapped in furs and her small, thin face half drowned in an ocean of feather beds.

"Quite certain, Mrs. Wold! I'm as comfortable as possible. In fact, I think I'll go to sleep."

"That's right! Because, you see, those nice Americans I met yesterday are so pressing, and I shouldn't like to disappoint them, particularly as I really feel up to the Ice Feast."

Mrs. Wold herself had already had quite enough of "lying about in fur bags," as she expressed it, as well as of medical control of her movements. For two days past she had been coquetting with the snowy slope, down which the toboggans slid from morn till night amid peals of laughter which the thin, pure atmosphere brought very close; and to-day, hearing of the Ice Feast, she had simply struck work.

"It certainly is a miraculous place. George was quite right to send me here. I positively can't believe I've ever had the 'flu'—at the end of a week! And at the end of

a month you'll probably have forgotten that you ever had 'lungs.' You're sure you're quite comfortable?"

Having bestowed a few more pinches upon Martha's pillows, by way of satisfying her chaperon's conscience, Mrs. Wold bounced down the steps of the wide wooden verandah, with her old elasticity entirely recovered.

With firmly closed lips and dilated nostrils—as she had been taught by the doctor—Martha drew in a deep breath of the cold air. Could iced champagne taste better than this? She did not think so. A panorama of peaks, dazzling enough to be the battlements of some Snow Queen's castle, stretched across the pale-blue sky. She had never actually believed that such skies and such air existed. Looking at them now it became, in turn, difficult to believe that Ballenweem existed, with its muddy roads and muddier turnip-fields, upon which the sheep would now be stumbling about after a living, through the low-hanging winter mist.

And besides the scenery, there were the people—a perfect patchwork of nationalities. On the very evening of her arrival Martha had, with lively satisfaction, ascertained that her right-hand neighbour at the table d'hôte was a Russian, and her *vis-à-vis* a Portuguese. There was every shade of hair and of complexion, of manners and of attire to be found among these unfortunates flocking to this white haven of hope from the ends of the earth; but a certain family resemblance ran through them all—not so much the physical resemblance of their over-bright eyes and sunken cheeks, as that of a certain anxious eagerness written on all these so dissimilar features. "Will I get well? Will I not get well?" was the question ticking like a clock in each one of these black or blonde, old or young, heads. Even without

hearing a person cough it was easy to distinguish the patients from the relations on guard.

Already Martha had made various what she termed "exciting" acquaintances, besides that of the Russian lady, who was immensely elegant and evidently dying, and that of the Portuguese gentleman, whose chest was positively hollow, and who made a point of handing Martha Colman's mustard at each course, presumably as a tribute to her nationality.

But with the person who struck her as the most "exciting" of the group she had, so far, not exchanged a word.

It was not so much that he was good-looking as that he was so in a way which particularly appealed to her personal tastes. In vain she tried to make up her mind as to his probable nationality. The silky black of his hair and the luminous brown of his somewhat long-cut eyes seemed to argue a Southern origin; and yet his name was Dutch, as she had found out through the mistake of a postman. Upon the picture post-card handed to her among several of her own—and which she had subsequently seen in the stranger's possession—she had read: "Mynheer Henrik Klaas." There were palm-trees depicted on the card, and an outlandish-looking stamp, but she had no time to investigate the postmark, the man having already noticed his mistake.

There resulted a fresh growth of curiosity. The palm-trees fitted so much better than the name. Certainly Mynheer Klaas was not at all her idea of a Dutchman, far more of something out of "The Arabian Nights." The somewhat languid grace of his movements, as well as his evident isolation, appealed to her imagination, always greedy for the unusual. She began to wonder—having

so much time for idle thoughts—exactly how ill he was; whether the shadows beneath those luminous eyes would fade away, and whether that so finely oval face of his would ever take on a more ordinarily healthy colour than its present almost amber-tinted pallor. Once or twice, while studying the problem, she had met his eyes, and, ashamed of her curiosity, had glanced aside, feeling rather hot, and—so she feared—looking it too.

How much that unruly imagination of hers was caught was proved by the fact that when she presently fell asleep upon the half-deserted verandah—almost every patient who could stand having gone to the Ice Feast—it was of the enigmatical stranger that she dreamed. She was walking with him under palm-trees—the palm-trees of the post-card, though, strangely enough, with the flanks of snow mountains showing between the trunks. “In what country are we?” she asked him, amazed. And, with his melancholy smile, he answered: “In the country of happiness.” But just then the tawny head of a tiger peeped round one of the stems, and, with a start, Martha awoke.

At first she thought she must be dreaming still, for the gaze of the luminous brown eyes was still upon her. It took a moment for her to realise where she was, and to grasp the fact that the nearest couch, which had been empty when she fell asleep, was now occupied by exactly the object of her curiosity.

Thinking of that stupid dream, she coloured with vexation, then made a hasty attempt to sit up, as a preliminary to retreat, but which resulted only in the feather bed slipping to the floor, while she herself sank back helpless among her pillows.

“Allow me!” said the stranger, in a slightly foreign-

sounding English, and, swiftly divesting himself of the encumbering furs, he rose to pick up her feather bed.

"You should be more careful. A chill is so easily taken," he said, while disposing it with deft movements which showed off his delicate hands and wrists to great advantage. "I have been here much longer than you have, or I should not venture to give advice."

"But I want to go in," said Martha, still confused.

"Would that not be a waste of good sunshine?"

"Perhaps it would. Where is everyone gone to?"

"To the Ice Feast principally—except those that have followed your example by going to sleep over there," glancing towards the farther end of the verandah.

"And why are you not at the Ice Feast?"

He smiled a charmingly sad smile which showed a gleam of ivory teeth.

"What should an alien like me do at any sort of feast?"

"But we are all aliens here, are we not?"

"Within limits, perhaps; but there are degrees. I am sure that even Senor Serrera must feel more at home among snow and ice than I do."

"It's among palm-trees that you feel at home, isn't it?" asked Martha, pushed by invincible curiosity.

Already she had got over the strangeness of this conversation across two feather beds—Mynheer Klaas having by this time slipped back under his own coverings. Existence here was altogether too unconventional to be measured by everyday standards. Where so many walked on the edge of the grave, there was only one sort of *faux pas* that really counted: the one that went over the edge.

The brown eyes were looking frankly surprised. They

were set rather far apart under a low, broad brow, which gave to their expression something of childlike candour.

"How did you guess that?"

Martha coloured furiously.

"That post-card you got the other day; the postman gave it me first by mistake. I noticed it because I happen to have a small brother who is mad upon stamps."

"Ah—the one from Batavia. I get many of them."

"Batavia? That's in India, isn't it?"

"Not in your India, but in ours. Surely you know that it is the capital of Java?" he asked, with sorrowful reproach.

"I suppose I learned it at school; but I'd forgotten. You have friends there?"

"I live there."

"Oh, tell me about it!" said Martha impulsively. "It has always been my dream to see the tropics. It *is* beautiful, over there, is it not?"

"Yes; it *is* beautiful," said the stranger, his eyes wandering off across the feather bed to the snow mountains on the horizon. "Though I suppose this is beautiful too in its way. I hear it said on all sides, but I cannot feel it. Their sunshine is like painted sunshine to me, and my eyes ache from the eternal whiteness—they starve for want of the colour they are so used to feed upon."

"Ah—you like colour too! At home they laugh at me for wearing such bright dresses, but it's a need with me. I also starve for want of colour—for my home is all one colour, only that it is grey instead of white, for I live in the flattest bit of Scotland."

"I thought you must come from the North," he said pensively, "because of the tint of your hair."

Martha laughed to cover her embarrassment. So he, too, had been speculating about her. What a curious coincidence!

"Tell me about your home!" she pleaded.

Then, upon the half-deserted verandah, while the disc of the sun slid slowly towards the mountain ramparts, and in accents necessarily hushed out of regard to those slumberers alongside, he began to tell her things, to which she could not but listen entranced, not only because of the fascination of the subject, but also because Mynheer Klaas undoubtedly possessed the gift of picturesque expression. Before her mind's eye he made the bamboo wave and the tree-fern droop—caused a tropical forest to grow up and peopled it with scampering grey apes and with birds of bright plumage. He piled up the ruins of vast grey temples, and sent the green lizards darting over the sun-baked stones and between the feet of broken idols. Martha only had to close her eyes—and instinctively she did close them—in order to see it all. When she opened them again it was almost a shock to see the snowfields before her, with, for relief, only the sombre masses of the pines upon the slopes, like serried ranks of an army on the march to the valley—and even these in white uniform.

"It must have been hard for you to leave that country for this," she sighed.

"I would never have left it but for my health."

"But you are getting well, are you not?"

"The doctors tell me so, at least. In three months I hope to be able to start for home."

Martha said nothing, but drew a deep breath of satisfaction. Three months was the projected length of her own stay at Schneeliberg. She might now look

forward to more such absorbing conversations as this one.

"And you have always lived over there?"

"Very nearly always. Java is my virtual home, though, of course, Holland is my official one—my country upon paper."

"It is so funny to think of your being Dutch."

"Why?" he asked a little sharply.

"Because all the pictures I have ever seen of Dutchmen are so different."

"Ah, you have the Boers in your head, of course. But in Asia we become different. Surroundings tell in the long run, you know, just as the soil tells upon a transplanted flower. And I represent the third of the transplanted generations—for my grandfather already was settled in Java. I am of the soil, you see, but that cannot prevent me being a Dutchman."

He spoke with a touch of anxiety to which Martha only much later on learnt to give its true value.

"I see," was all she said, without the shadow of an afterthought.

And then, a moment later, in a tone of sudden alarm:

"Good gracious, I have just remembered that the doctor has forbidden talking in the open air! And I have been making you talk! Will it not have done you harm?"

"I think, on the contrary, it has done me good," said her new acquaintance, with gentle conviction and an eloquent look out of his sad, soft eyes, that were not unlike those of a stricken deer.

When Mrs. Wold returned, radiant, from the Ice Feast, she was much relieved to hear that Martha had

not found the afternoon a bit long—a discovery which encouraged her to join the tobogganing party planned for the morrow.

“Go, by all means!” said Martha, when consulted. “What would be the good of your staying? You know the doctor said I wasn’t to talk much.”

“That’s true!” agreed Mrs. Wold; and from that day on gave herself up frankly to the newest of “good things,” whose absorbing nature quite swept aside the distaste she had begun by feeling at finding herself surrounded by “coughing and spitting people,” as she put it. The elaborate precautions taken—amongst which high-art portable spittoons figured conspicuously—were certainly calculated to soothe alarm. It was a comfort, too, that Martha should have found some nice acquaintances. That good-looking Dutchman was perhaps a trifle too much to the fore. When she had broken into the third *tête-à-tête*, Mrs. Wold experienced her first qualm of conscience. She had a notion that not only Martha’s parents, but her own nephew George, might possibly disapprove. But let her newly purchased skates rust on that account? It was not to be thought of. So a sop was thrown to the chaperon’s conscience in the shape of a recommendation to the Russian lady, and another in that of a warning word to Martha herself, eliciting an answer which fully convinced her that her protégée was in no need whatever of protection. After which Mrs. Wold plunged back into the whirlpool.

Swiftly the three months began to roll away—all too swiftly for Martha who, with dismay, saw approaching the day which would take her back to Ballenweem, and her new friend to that far-off wonderland with whose features she became, from day to day, more familiar. It was not

on the verandah alone that the word-pictures were now painted, but also during the walks which—as both their healths improved—they began to take, first in the grounds of the Kurhaus, and by degrees on the roads of the valley, which the runners of the sledges had conveniently flattened. The contrast between the subject and its setting served but to enhance the effect. The red and orange tropical blossoms bloomed all the more gorgeously because of their frozen surroundings; the humming-birds and parakeets gleamed all the more brilliantly for the coal-black crows that hopped across the snow and the dusky eagles soaring about the rocks.

By this time Martha had, of course, secured the stamp for Andy, and had seen several more picture post-cards with the Batavia postmark upon them. Most of these were signed with a name she had never heard before—“Leenebet”—but which revealed itself as belonging to the feminine gender.

“The daughter of my employer,” Klaas volunteered.

He had told her previously that his employment was that of overseer upon a big tobacco plantation.

“That is why I must be back by the end of April,” he explained. “It is the season at which we plant out the seedlings. Another man’s servant cannot be his own master.”

He spoke with childlike openness, smiling that candid and rather sad smile of his.

“My father *was* his own master; but he overspeculated in indigo, and so I had to become a servant.”

“Is she Dutch too? I mean the daughter of your employer.”

“Yes; of course she is Dutch.”

“And she is pretty, I suppose?”

"Why should you suppose so?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because her name is pretty."

"Herself isn't. She is fat, and two of your hands would not make one of hers."

"Ah!" said Martha; and from that day on she paid little attention to the post-cards.

Quaint legends—of Malayan origin—varied the word-pictures. But the story which took chief possession of Martha's imagination was the story of the *Padjagalan*—the "Valley of Death"—no legend this, although tradition had certainly had a hand in heaping up the horrors. The floor of this unblest valley—so Martha learned—breathed poison; in other words, emitted a deadly gas which, hanging like a pall over the ground, killed every form of life that came within its fortunately limited range. Not a blade of grass upon the rock-strewn floor; instead, the bleached bones of those beasts that had found their end here. For to come within the grip of that poison-fiend meant instant death.

"An old Malayan told me once of a gazelle he had seen pursued by a tiger," recounted Klaas. "In terror of the death behind, it raced down the slope, right into the arms of the death in front. And after it came the tiger, and, like it, unable to check its pace, rolled over, as dead as a stone."

"I should like to have seen that," said Martha, with shining eyes. "I should like to stand on the edge of that valley and look down at the uncanny bottom."

"You could do more than look down: you could, without danger, if sure-footed, go down and walk in that poisonous bottom as in a pool of shallow water; for the vapours hang low, barely reaching to a man's waist.

Many men have walked through it, and are safe as long as they do not stumble; for if they fall they are lost."

"How delightfully shivery! Then, however tired they are feeling, they must not lie down? Not a walk for faint-hearted people, certainly, nor for weak-kneed ones. But I think I could take it. I'm always for keeping my head in the air and my feet on the ground. Aren't you, Mr. Klaas?"

"I suppose I am." He smiled reflectively. "Yet, if I felt very tired—as tired as I am feeling to-day—I believe I would lie down, even though I knew it meant death."

Martha looked at him a little anxiously.

"You must be feeling very tired to say that. It is always a bad plan to halt on the road. Even if one doesn't get suffocated, one is apt to get trampled on. In my opinion there's nothing like sticking to the perpendicular. And, besides, it would be giving in, and I hate giving in."

Long before the end of the three months Martha knew what had happened to her. Her happiness now seemed to depend upon whether the same thing had happened to Mynheer Klaas. The yearning of his wonderful brown eyes scarcely left room for doubt on that subject, but it was only on the last day but one of her stay that certainty came.

On that day they had ventured to sit down on a slab of rock, to watch what promised to be a particularly gorgeous sunset. Through the melting snow patches of bleached grass, all flattened by the weight it had borne throughout the winter, were beginning to show. Martha sat with her face towards the sunset sky, aware of her companion's intense gaze; aware also of her own reco-

vered beauty. Passionately she desired to break a silence which was beginning to be oppressive. But it was difficult to speak without turning; and she dared not turn because of the tears in her eyes—for the thought of the impending separation weighed upon her to an incredible degree. Both her heart and her pride were smarting. His eyes had spoken so plainly—why then did his lips remain dumb? Had it all been to him a mere pastime?

“Tell me another legend,” she said at last, with an effort, still gazing towards the horizon where the Snow Queen’s fortress stood invulnerable, scorning the arrows of the sun.

He stirred as though awaking from sleep.

“A legend? I have told you most of them already; and the Malayan legends are very like each other. But stop—I remember another. There was a maiden who dwelt in a cavern, and all around the cavern was a sea of *Alang-Alang* grass—that deadly grass which is the curse of the planter, which sucks up the life of the soil and can destroy a forest in a few years. And there was a youth who was ready to give his life if he could reach that cavern. Armed with his *kris* he plunged into the thicket of grass, and cut and slashed his way onwards. But with each step he sank into the mass of decayed leaves and stalks that had been rotting there for years; cords seemed to be about his feet, knives to meet his hands; above his head the giant blades closed. It seemed impossible to reach that cavern wherein the maiden slept.”

“It sounds rather like ‘The Sleeping Beauty,’” remarked Martha dreamily. “There, too, the prince has to cut his way through a thicket. But he reached the castle. Did your youth get to the cavern?”

"I do not think so," said Klaas, very low. "I fear the *Alang-Alang* strangled his hopes."

"He should not have let them do so. What had he got his *kris* for?"

"Then you think that he should not have given up hope?"

"I never give up anything I really want. Obstacles are made to be overcome, are they not?"

"I will give him that message," said Klaas, in a liquid whisper.

If she could have thought of any safe remark to make Martha would have made it, but, nothing coming to her mind, the oppressive silence fell once more.

It had lasted but a minute when she felt something upon her knee and perceived his delicate, ungloved hand creeping softly towards her own. Within the same moment he had possessed himself of it. And then, perforce, Martha turned and, with a shock of delicious terror, realised how close his face was to hers. Giddily she felt what was coming, and had only just time to close her eyes before their lips met.

After that first delirious moment she would have drawn back, but the clasp of those long and slender arms was not to be withstood. Even in the midst of this strange, new rapture she wondered vaguely at the strength of hands that were so delicate to look at.

"Oh, let me go! let me go!" she panted, in a mixture of ecstasy and panic, the words hacked into pieces, as it were, by the rain of his insatiable kisses.

With a long-drawn, almost sobbing breath, he released her at last.

"Forgive me!" he whispered, in shaking accents; "I did not mean to do it. I did not mean to speak—

but you were too beautiful—that way—against the sky!”

“Why did you not mean to speak?” asked Martha under her breath.

“Because I have no right. I, an alien, a servant of another—how could I ask of you that you should leave your country, your people? What have I to offer in return?”

“Is that all?” smiled Martha.

The flame leaped back to his eyes.

“It is true, then? You would become my own—my wife? You would come to me—over there?”

“If I were not ready to become your wife, do you suppose I would have let you do—what you have been doing now?”

“Sun of my life! Star of my heaven!”

He had slipped to her feet, and on his knees upon the winter-bleached grass gazed up at her with eyes that plainly adored.

“But the sacrifice? You will not regret it?”

“If it was a sacrifice I would not make it.”

“And your parents? Will they consent?”

“They will have to,” said Martha, with profound conviction.

“Yes—they will have to! they will have to! Who could resist you?” exulted the man, springing to his feet, caught by the infection of her own confidence.

“How about the sunset?” said Martha, some ten minutes later. “Can it be over already?”

And over it was, to be sure, with nothing but cold, blue shadows remaining in the hollows of the mountain

flanks, like the ashes of the conflagration which had lately been raging along the Snow Queen's stronghold.

Before night already the opal ring gleamed upon Martha's finger.

CHAPTER IV.

MARTHA HAS HER WAY.

"WAIT till you see him!" Martha had said to her mother, in a tone which plainly ranged Henrik Klaas among those who have only to come and to be seen, in order to conquer.

But before this communication, there was a long and distasteful morning to wade through. Mr. McGillies had indeed not carried out his threat of reopening the argument of last night, having decided to let the matter stand over until he had seen "the fellow," and Mrs. McGillies confined herself to being tongue-tied and tearful; but by both parties the cessation of hostilities was clearly understood to be no more than an armistice. Disapproval hung heavily in the air. A heart overflowing with its own interests, and not a sympathising ear at hand. Hard lines indeed! It was almost a relief, when, towards twelve o'clock, Mr. Fettes turned up in the sitting-room via the office, as customary.

In this very room Martha had told him that she could not marry him; but she had almost forgotten the incident.

As on that other day, she greeted him with the eager question:

"Have you heard the news?"

He had heard it, in the deepest confidence, from Mr. McGillies, who—perhaps with some obscure hope that Mr. Fettes might yet prove the required saviour of this absurd situation—had seized the opportunity of unburdening his heart. Yet, for all his features betrayed, the conversation in the office might have turned exclusively around game laws. To Martha's question he did not answer immediately, being far too occupied in gauging the changes in her face.

"Have you heard the news?" repeated Martha impatiently.

"I've heard that you're well," said George, his small eyes very bright.

"Oh, I don't mean that! But the other piece of news. I'm sure papa has been pouring out."

"Yes."

"Then, why don't you come out with your good wishes? It's customary, you know."

"Is it?"

Martha stamped her foot.

"Why are you trying to look stupider than you are? What are you thinking of at this moment, Mr. Fettes?"

"Of how well you look."

Positively it was all he had room for in his mind just then. Even the pang of her engagement had been overborne by the joy of her recovery. Later on, the smart would come, no doubt, but, for the present, joy predominated.

"How should I not look well when I am so happy?"

"You *are* happy?"

"Don't you see it?"

"Yes."

"Then, if you were a proper pal, you'd be happy too."

"I am."

"And you would do another thing. You would help me to talk over my people. You see, everything has got to be settled before Henrik leaves this evening, and the time is so short. Shall I tell you what you would do if you were *really* nice?"

"What?"

"You would go back to the office, and put in a word for me with papa; tell him, I mean, that you have been talking to me, and that you see that my happiness depends upon this, and so on—you know the sort of thing. You really would be helping me then, for papa has a great regard for your opinion. Of course I shall marry Henrik, whatever papa says, but, for mother's sake, I should prefer not to have to elope. You'll speak to papa, won't you?"

Her eyes were very compelling, yet George, engrossed in the study of his boots, delayed with his reply.

"I'll tell you what! If you're good and do it, then you may stop to lunch, and that means, you know, that you will see Henrik! Just think of that! Now, will you stay to lunch or not?"

"Yes," said George, rather to his own surprise, for he had really meant to say "No!"

"Thanks! And now I must go and dodge up my hair. Henrik will be here in half-an-hour, you know!"

With a cruelly sweet smile sent to him from over her shoulder, she slipped from the room and up to her own little attic, in order to consult the looking-glass, beside which the neglected primroses were fast fading. What

chance could poor little Scotch primroses have beside the gorgeous tropical blossoms around which her fancy had been lately twining?

What chance, for the matter of that, could plain Scotch people have when confronted by a personage so startlingly unlike any of the inhabitants of Ballenweem as was the man who, half-an-hour later, entered the McGillies' sitting-room, with Martha, who had met him in the lobby, hanging radiant and glowing upon his arm. In spite of his being quietly and correctly dressed, his appearance in that room created quite as sensational a contrast as would have done a cactus blossom among the primroses, or an antelope in the midst of a flock of sheep. Mr. McGillies, who had been arming himself to encounter a juvenile edition of the late President Kruger, lost his bearings so completely as to entail the loss of his power of speech, while Mrs. McGillies, from the moment of setting eyes upon him, mentally gave up all hope of turning Martha from her purpose. How could a girl like Martha, how could any girl, be expected to give up the love of this fairy-tale prince? Perhaps never before had Henrik Klaas looked to fuller advantage than he did on this occasion. On him, too, the magic air of Schneeliberg had done its work. A delicate shade of carmine now showed under his creamy skin. The face had filled out just enough to perfect the oval; the shadows under the eyes still lingered indeed, but only to enhance their soft brilliancy. Just now, they still showed the after-glow of the greeting in the lobby, which is as much as saying that their beauty was doubled. Yet it was a disquieting sort of beauty, perhaps only because of its unfamiliar character. In a gazelle, or an antelope, that gentle and candid gaze would have been all right, of course, and in a girl that dazzling

smile, and those undulating movements—but how did a man come by them?

The afternoon that followed could fairly be called strenuous. Into the four hours, which was all that Henrik had to spare before catching his evening-train, were crowded more discussions, arguments, counter-arguments, pleadings and declarations than could, by rights, have found place in four days. During luncheon, indeed, at which Mr. Fettes was present, silent and observant, the armistice was, perforce, upheld. It was the engaged couple who kept up the ball of talk, seconded presently by Andy and Molly; for, after the inevitable interval of awe, both children had taken rapturously to the stranger. To such questions as whether rabbits lived in Java, and whether people had to go to school there, he answered smilingly and in his own peculiarly picturesque language. More than once, while the little ones hung upon his lips, Martha looked triumphantly at her parents. "Didn't I tell you so!" She only just stopped short of saying it.

But her stepfather, oblivious of these glances, ate his luncheon despondently and mechanically. A few words which he had had with Mr. Fettes just before adjourning to the sitting-room had quite taken the taste out of the mutton chops and rice pudding; for those few words—they had barely run to sentences—had made it clear that he was not the hoped-for saviour of the situation. With the ground thus cut away from under his feet, the solicitor felt less than ever able to grapple with the disconcerting person who now graced his board. Yet, where duty called, Mr. McGillies had never been known to hang back; nor did he hang back now.

It was on rising from table that the real business of

the day began, the order of events being somewhat as follows:—

Invitation from Mr. McGillies to Mynheer Klaas to follow him to his study. Reappearance of Klaas at the end of half-an-hour, looking slightly perturbed, and in search of Martha. While consulting with her, a counter-consultation takes place between husband and wife. Klaas once more summoned to the study, to which he returns in the company of Martha, who flatly refuses to be left out of the matter any longer. Labouring argument on the part of the solicitor as to the folly of marrying upon nothing but a "situation." Conscientious array of all the reasons which speak against this marriage in particular; reasons of money—or the want of it—of health, of difference of nationality, of habits, etc., etc. Counter-arguments of the lovers—chiefly worded by Martha—as to the negligible nature of all these objections when weighed in the balance with happiness. Appeal to Mrs. McGillies for a confirmation of this principle (answered by tears). Excited eruption of the young people from the study; collision with Andy and Molly who had been listening at the keyhole. *Tête-à-tête* between Mynheer Klaas and Mrs. McGillies—very eloquent on his side and very tearful on hers. Another *tête-à-tête* between Martha and her stepfather—this one being marked respectively by nervous unctuousness and open defiance. General harassment of nerves and growing irritation of temper.

Final result—just thirty minutes before Henrik's start for the station—reluctant but unconditional surrender of the elders.

With the man alone, Mr. McGillies felt that he might possibly have succeeded. Despite his evident infatuation, the prospect of getting some commonsense into that sleek

black head of his need not have been hopeless: for he seemed a modest young man, quite conscious of his own social and financial deficiencies. Alone, something might have been done with him, but not in league with Martha.

“Have your way; but you’ll rue it!” were the words in which Mr. McGillies tendered his surrender.

When the cab had started once more for the station, carrying with it the human meteor which had no more than traversed the McGillies’ household—carrying with it Martha too, who would not hear of saying good-bye anywhere but on the platform—a great sense of exhaustion fell upon the family. While Mrs. McGillies retired to her room, in order to bathe her eyes and recover her mental breath upon the sofa, her husband sat in his study, alternately wiping his spectacles and the sweat from his brow. He knew himself beaten, and yet, strangely enough, was not feeling abject; for, in the very heart of the defeat, there lurked consolation. He had done all that could reasonably be expected of him, and the conviction that all his arguments had made about as much impression upon Martha as a bombardment, say, of golf balls would make on Edinburgh Castle, brought with it a certain relief to his exacting conscience. Mr. Fettes having proved a broken reed—what else could that sudden and surprising advocacy of Martha’s cause, which had taken the taste out of the mutton chops, have meant?—the Dutchman might do as well as another. Martha would be provided for—in a way; which meant that, for the future, Mr. McGillies might hope to feel a little less tired and harassed by life in general.

And just about this time the man who had proved a broken reed, and who, having concluded his notes made

at luncheon, had hastened to disappear from the scene, was stuffing a pipe in the smoking-room at Bannacuik. As he did so, he scanned his own features in the glass above the mantelpiece—possibly occupied with mental comparisons. Once or twice he shook his massive head in massive disapproval, and presently took the pipe out of his mouth in order to say aloud:

“Soft chap!”

But although his eyes were fixed upon his own features in the mirror there is reason to suppose that the epithet was not being applied to himself.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLUNGE.

“A WHOLE hour still before we start!”

“Yes, only an hour!”

Martha had made the first of these remarks and Mrs. McGillies the second.

The boxes were safe in the hold, the hand luggage safe in the cabin which Martha was to share with a Dutch girl exchanging a “finishing” school for the bosom of her family. She had made acquaintance with the stewardess, and had even had the good luck to secure the lower berth. An hour remained to pass before the final parting. By common consent it was to be passed on deck. Both mother and daughter felt that the privacy of the cabin held too many emotional possibilities, which, in the interests of self-control, had better be shunned. What Mrs. McGillies was afraid of was looking too unhappy; what Martha was afraid of was looking too happy. If

Mrs. McGillies broke down at all she knew that she would break down hopelessly: her determination to avoid the catastrophe was therefore almost fierce, and apparently invulnerable. True, she was of an almost mortal pallor, and her eyes were heavy with unshed tears; but at least she had succeeded in not shedding them—in public. The death of hope is generally followed by a measure of peace; and now that she stood on the brink of the irrevocable the calmness of despair had come to the mother's aid—that and the fear of casting a shadow upon her child's radiant and palpitating joy. She would not live in her memory as a figure of gloom.

During the two months that had followed upon Henrik's visit—the second month was the only concession which Mrs. McGillies had been able to obtain—the merciful bustle of preparations had afforded small room for pain, pure and simple. Days spent in choosing linen and matching stuffs, in making estimates and then unmaking them again, did not leave enough energy, either moral or physical, for brooding over the approaching event. This hour before the anchor was weighed was the first in which Mrs. McGillies felt at leisure to look the coming desolation in the face.

Besides one big bustle for the McGillies household, the past month had likewise been one big sensation for Ballenweem. To marry a foreigner of any sort was always a dreadfully adventurous thing to do, in the opinion of Ballenweem; why, even union with any person born south of the Tweed entailed a certain amount of risk; but a Dutchman—and one who lived in such an unheard-of place as Java, and planted tobacco for somebody else, and upon whose "people" nobody had ever called—the thing lay beyond the grasp of local comprehension. Un-

avoidably, since even Ballenweem knew that young people will do foolish things, the brunt of the blame fell upon the parents.

"They must be mad—simply mad to allow it!" was the cry that went round.

The parents alone, to whose ears the cry reached, knew themselves to be not mad, but impotent. But how explain this to people who, either because their children were not yet grown up or had grown up before the modern era, still believed in the fable of parental authority?

One or two of the more strenuous-minded tried remonstrance. Upon their fingers they counted up all the objections to the marriage, not one of which was refuted by either the solicitor or his wife.

"Then why don't you put a stop to it?" asked an indignant busybody, whose very substantial finger was sure to be found in every pie within a round of five miles.

"I'll answer you that question when your own daughter is grown up," said Mr. McGillies a little grimly, while Martha's mother only smiled a forlornly wise smile.

Then Martha herself was tried. Ballenweem seemed abruptly to have become peopled with Cassandras, pouring upon the adventurous girl prophecies of the gloomiest description, warnings of the deadliest complexion.

"You'll be eaten by tigers," assured Mrs. Jobwell, the busybody above mentioned, who was also the wife of the county Cræsus, a circumstance which naturally strengthened her already brazen confidence in her own judgment. Considering the fine purplish crimson of Mrs. Jobwell's complexion, it was almost unavoidable that jokes should be made touching the aniline dye which was re-

sponsible for Mr. Jobwell's millions. And naturally they were made.

"Tigers are almost extinct in the inhabited parts," said Martha regretfully. "I had so hoped to see one."

"Or by savages—which wouldn't be any better."

"I shouldn't mind the difference; but Java doesn't boast the possession of cannibals. The Malayans are the gentlest of mortals, I am told."

"Then you'll be bitten by snakes, and killed by earthquakes and hurricanes."

"Not all that, surely, Mrs. Jobwell! Even to oblige you I don't see how I can manage to die more than once."

"And blown up by volcanoes. Are you aware that there are fifty volcanoes on Java? I made David look it up in the *Encyclopædia*."

"No; I wasn't aware. But if I'm doomed to be blown up, I fancy one would serve my turn."

"You'll never get anything eatable," said a lady for whom the pleasures of life resolved themselves into those of the table. "Never a decent scone or dish of porridge. Nothing but rice messes and curry."

"I dote upon curry, Mrs. Digby."

"And the bother you'll have with the servants! All those black people steal like magpies!"

"They aren't black, Mrs. Russel; they are a beautiful warm brown."

"And then there's the fever, and the mosquitoes and—and the rickshaws," finished Mrs. Jobwell, striving to gather all the horrors of the tropics into one supreme sentence.

"But there are also quinine and mosquito nets, Mrs. Jobwell."

"What will you do about clothes?" asked a yellow-haired girl, who, until Martha's "coming out," had ranked as the "belle" of Ballenweem, and whom Martha's going off would reinstate in this proud position. Thence the note of sympathy in her question. "I hear that frocks and hats cost a ransom out there."

"Not if you stick to white muslin and run it up yourself. I'm taking my sewing-machine with me."

"Ah, yes; you're awfully clever at it, and white *does* suit you," smiled the yellow-haired girl, who could now afford to be generous.

"And what does the family consist of?" catechised Mrs. Jobwell. "Will you have a mother-in-law to look after you?"

"Thank goodness, no! The family consists of just Henrik himself—a solitary fact."

"Then, who will receive you when you get there?"

"Henrik, of course. I don't need anybody except Henrik and the registry office clerk."

From its habitual magenta, Mrs. Jobwell's complexion turned to a purple which would certainly not have shamed her husband's dye-works.

"I don't believe you'll do it!" she at last more gurgled than said.

"Not do what?"

"Go into that registry-office. You'll think better of it before the end of the journey and step onto a home-bound boat. Just see if you don't!"

Martha laughed gaily. It was not worth being angry about.

"You'll see something quite else, Mrs. Jobwell, with your own eyes, if you like. Mr. Jobwell has bought a yacht, hasn't he? Well, put in Batavia to your next trip,

and come and drink tea, or lemon squash, or whatever it is out there, with Mevrouw Martha Klaas; and after that I'll show you over the tobacco plantation, if you care to see it."

From that day on Mrs. Jobwell said nothing more to Martha's face, but a good deal behind her back.

"Who knows whether the man will marry her at all!" This was among the things she whispered to her intimates amid many ominous head-shakes. "The whole affair almost looks like a trap."

The only exceptions in the chorus of disapproval were made by the mothers of marriageable daughters, who naturally preferred to have Martha's recovered roses well out of the way, and Andy, who counted upon innumerable Javanese stamps.

At all this disapproval Martha laughed light-heartedly, finding the zest of the enterprise, if anything, enhanced thereby; but what distinctly annoyed her was that she had been forced to quarrel rather seriously with her pal, all through his own fault, of course, he having behaved in what she considered to be a mean and disloyal fashion.

When a whole week had passed without Mr. Fettes having brought a single legal difficulty to her stepfather's office, Martha began to think this all the stranger as he had actually, so she found out, kept his promise of intercession on her behalf. Partly because she wanted to air her gratitude, and partly because she required a hearer for a lot of things that there was no one else to listen to, she ended by summoning him.

"What do you mean by hiding yourself in this way?" was her greeting. "Don't you know that I want to say 'Thank you?'"

"What for?" he gloomily asked.

"For that word you put in with papa. I do believe it helped to weigh down the balance."

With his large mouth so tight shut that it looked like a mere seam in his face, George earnestly contemplated his boots. Of gratification not a trace upon his features, nor of anything else either, for the matter of that.

"You did put in a word, didn't you? I gathered it from something that papa said."

Continued study of the boots and continued absence of gratification.

Martha grew restive.

"Why don't you answer? Did you say that word or did you not?"

Then at last George jerked up his head, disclosing a pair of eyes that burnt like coals in the mask of his face.

"Yes, I did; but I wish I hadn't!"

Amazed and incredulous Martha stared back at him. "Say that again, Mr. Fettes! You wish you hadn't—was that what you said?"

"Yes."

"But, in the name of wonder, why?"

"Wouldn't have done it if I'd seen the man," ground out George, with as much difficulty as though each word were a stone that had to be crushed before it could find its way out from between his teeth.

"Mr. Fettes!" was all that Martha could utter all at once, falling from one depth of amazement into the other. If the lightnings that shot from her eyes did not in that moment annihilate him, it was certainly not for want of the intention.

"You can't surely mean that you have any objection to make to him?" she asked, after a painful interval, and in the accents of a judge. Then, as George volunteered

no information on this subject: "I dare you to say that his manners are not perfect!"

"They're all right," said George sulkily.

"Or that he isn't both good-looking and a gentleman? Is he that or not?"

"Yes."

"Then what can you possibly mean?"

Mr. Fettes moved uneasily in his chair, evidently half choked by something which he both wanted and did not want to say. It was not until Martha had imperiously repeated her question that he blurted out one of his own:

"Are you sure his blood's all white?" ("Are you sure he's not half a nigger?" was the form which the question took in his own mind.)

A second passed before Martha had fully digested the import of the words. Having done so, she sprang to her feet with burning cheeks and a renewed discharge of lightning from her eyes.

"What are you daring to insinuate? The Klaas are an excellent Dutch family, though they have lost their fortune. Henrik is as white as—as you are; whiter, in fact, as far as sunburn goes"—this with an almost venomous glance at George's well-tanned complexion—"and I think it's simply *horrid* of you to make remarks of that sort!"

George had followed her example by rising. "Then I suppose I'd better be going," was all he said, with impassible features, but eyes no less stormy than hers.

"Far better!" came back the wrathful reply.

Without another word, and without touching her hand, which, for the matter of that, she did not offer him, he went out.

What other meetings they had were merely formal

ones, before witnesses, so that this had been their actual parting. Quite at the end, it is true, while holding her hand at the final "Good-bye," there had been certain symptoms, both of complexion and of respiration, which pointed to some speech or other in the making; but this time the words never got farther than George Fettes's visibly working throat, and the hand which he held was dropped in silence.

It was at this moment only that the possibility of jealousy as an extenuating circumstance occurred to Martha. Perhaps, after all, that astonishing offer made before her departure for Schneeliberg had not been prompted alone by willingness to oblige. Well, it did not matter much now; and, whichever way it lay, she had lost her pal, and this time irrevocably.

"A whole hour still!"

"Only an hour!"

This the burden of the thought circling in the heads of the two women who leaned side by side over the parapet of the big steamer taking in the last of the cargo beside the wharfs of Rotterdam. In the background the gaping mouths of storehouses, black as caverns, yielding up their treasures—in the foreground the groaning arms of cranes ceaselessly at work, each like the gigantic paw of some fabulous monster grabbing up packing-cases, sacks and mere bundles, to dangle them aloft for one moment before dropping them into the abyss of the hold. On the farther side coal barges lying close, and men with blackened faces and hands, feeding the outward-bound boat with that which presently will make her pulses throb. And over it all that mingled smell of tar and of machine-oil which is the first greeting of the sea to the dweller on land.

"I wonder what there is in those cases?" said Martha, not because she wondered at all, but because the topic seemed a nice and neutral one to help filling up this dreadful last hour.

And again, indicating the white headdresses of some women among the loiterers on the wharf, "Those caps are quite becoming. I must try one on first chance I have."

Mrs. McGillies preferred to cling to the priceless weather topic.

"It does look as if you were going to have a good passage, does it not?" she said at intervals, and with increasing conviction. "After these dreadful gales there is sure to be a reaction."

The gales had been a trial to both mother and daughter; to the former because they had kept her awake, pursued by the thought of Martha at sea, tossed as the unhappy wretches afloat at that moment; to the latter because they had delayed the mails, and thus caused her to miss a final letter from Henrik. Mrs. McGillies' attempt to obtain a respite on this account had, however, failed ignominiously.

"Put off sailing because of that?" Martha had repeated indignantly. "What earthly object could that have? Everything was settled in the last letter, this one would only have been to wish me *bon voyage*. Just fancy his standing on the pier and the boat coming in without me!"

So the programme was held to, despite the belated mail.

When they were stiff with leaning over the parapet, the two took a cautious turn over the small portion of deck unencumbered by coils of rope, or by luggage which

had not yet found its final resting-place. And ever and again Martha's eyes, bright with hope, strayed to the horizon beyond the ship masts; and while they were thus engaged, those of Mrs. McGillies, dull with desolation and as charged with memories as were those of her child with dreams, stole towards the beloved face, as though more intensely to imprint upon her memory the features which for nineteen years she had seen daily, and might never see again.

Slowly and painfully for both that last hour dragged past. The spot at which the life paths of two human beings diverge has always got something unpleasantly solemn about it, and when these two are mother and child, the parting seems to be made over a gravestone—the gravestone of the past. As the final moment approached, Martha's tongue began to lose its glibness. Right through her happy excitement that gravestone began to loom.

But until the very last the mutual fortitude held out; then as the final signal was given and Mrs. McGillies, faint and shaking, but still heroically tearless, stretched her arms towards her child, it seemed as though it were Martha whose strength were foresaking her. For the first time since the day on which she had made a pretence of watching the sunset at Schneeliberg, the immensity of what she was doing became borne in upon her. For one intense moment she clung to her mother with the groping, uncertain hands of a child.

“Oh, mother, mother!” came the sudden sob.

With greedily embracing arms Mrs. McGillies pressed the frail figure to her breast.

“Are you afraid, Martha?” she whispered eagerly,

amid the din of departure. "Will you come home with me? There's still time!"

But the very words gave back to Martha her pride, and with it her strength.

"Back?" she echoed, tearing herself out of her mother's arms. "Back to Ballenweem, when *he* is waiting for me over there!"

And already her eyes were back on the horizon.

Five minutes later Mrs. McGillies stood alone on the pier, mechanically waving her handkerchief in response to another being waved on board the black monster, whose screws were beginning to churn up the water.

When she turned away, it was with the sensation of having taken her child and deliberately cast her into the sea.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WELCOME.

"SUCH a catch!" crowed Andy, bursting into the schoolroom, his freckled face shining with a lustre for which mental causes, more than soap and water, were responsible, and one equally freckled hand held tight behind his back. "Here, Molly, such a catch!"

Molly hopped promptly from her chair.

"Oh, Andy, what is it? Have you got it behind your back? A frog or a bird?"

"Neither. It isn't alive."

"Is it something to eat?"

"No."

"Then I don't care about it," pronounced Molly, turning back to her picture-book.

"But I do, greedy pig! Look!"

And from behind his back he produced a closed envelope.

Molly made a face expressive both of disgust and of indifference.

"Who's it from? You never get letters."

"I haven't got one now. It's for Martha, from Java; and with such a beauty of a stamp upon it, a new sort that I haven't got yet."

"But Martha's gone," said Molly, with her accustomed density.

"Of course she's gone; that's just the point. If she'd been here I shouldn't have got this beauty, since she's got some absurd objection to cutting up the envelopes that she gets from her young man—calls it desecration or some rot of that sort."

"And this way?"

"This way I'll help myself to it, of course, stupid! It's only just come in time, too, since mother will be home to-night, and she might make difficulties—want to forward it to Martha or something; though there couldn't possibly be any sense in that, for I heard Martha saying to mother that it didn't really matter the mails being delayed as everything was settled already; and her young man would only be writing to say something nice at the end. And, besides, she'll see him long before the letter could catch her up, so I'm not doing her any harm, don't you see, by bagging it," argued Andy, by way of convincing both Molly and himself of the complete righteousness of his action.

"But you only want the stamp," remarked Molly.

"Of course I only want the stamp, stupid! But the only certain way of getting the stamp is by taking the letter too. Nobody has seen it yet. They'll just think it's gone astray in the post and won't bother further."

Molly reflected deeply upon this aspect of the matter.

"And when you've cut out the stamp, what will you do with the letter? Read it?"

"Certainly not!" said Andy, with a touch of virtuous indignation. "To read other people's letters isn't a *game* thing to do. Just like a girl suggesting it!"

"But just think what fun it would be to see what the 'nice things' are like that he says to her!" pleaded Molly, her indifference destroyed by the flame of feminine curiosity. "Do you think he calls her his Ducky Darling? Andy, do let's read the letter!"

But on this point Andy remained adamant. To bag the letter—all circumstances considered—was all right; but at the violation of its privacy his manly conscience drew the line.

"Then, I suppose, you'll burn it," sighed the disappointed Molly. "That's what one does in stories."

Having rapidly considered this proposal Andy discovered a fresh scruple.

"No; I shall not burn it. I'll just put it away safely in case Martha should ever want it, though, of course, it isn't likely. It doesn't really belong to me, after all, and one shouldn't destroy foreign property."

"Well, I think you're very tiresome," was Molly's comment upon the decision in this extremely intricate case of conscience.

With dissatisfied eyes she followed the movements of her brother, who now proceeded first to cut out the precious stamp, presently to occupy a place of honour in the

album, and then to lock away the mutilated letter in a certain much-slashed deal box whose contents formed a museum of the various exploded crazes which had preceded the stamp mania, and where broken birds' eggs and imperfectly stuffed sparrows shared an ignominious oblivion with carving-tools and magic-lantern slides.

"Is mademoiselle aware that we are traversing the equator? There, on that third island on the right, the line passes. In one minute we shall be in a new hemisphere."

"Ah, the equator!"

From beneath the brim of her shady hat Martha gazed with rapt eyes at the green islet pointed out, as though expecting to see some tangible mark. The equator seemed to her at that moment to be the frontier line between the past and the future. The enchantment of the hour, so close to the swift tropical sunset, and the enchantment of this sea as blue as sapphires and as smooth as oil, strewn with what might have been green nose-gays floating on its surface, joined hands to make the moment unforgettable.

"The sun has still some arrows in its shaft; may I be permitted to offer my sunshade as a supplementary buckler?"

"Quite unnecessary," said Martha, with decision, though, in truth, despite the most skilful disposal of her own sunshade, the left side of her face was being scorched. "I am feeling quite cool, thank you."

"Mademoiselle will nevertheless permit me to increase the area of shade," remarked her companion, with a decision at least equal to hers, as, permission or no permission, he took place by her side. "My professional

conscience will not allow me to look on at so unhygienic an arrangement. One sees, indeed, that mademoiselle is new to the tropics."

"I don't feel at all new, I assure you. I feel as though I were coming back to my native land."

"Ah, how should you not? With a *fiancé* counting the moments over there; and so close already, only one more night ahead! Fortunate man!"

As answer to which Martha preferred to gaze intently away among those enchanted islets beyond which lay the land which was so soon to claim her as a subject.

The lively mannikin who now sat beside her had been both an amusement and a trial to her during the voyage whose end was so near. His ugly but striking profile, an almost reckless arrangement of feature, with roguish, black eyes and an irregular nose as conspicuous as a promontory, and which seemed bent upon boring a hole into space, had forced itself upon her notice long before she had exchanged a word with him.

On the occasion of that first exchange she had made two discoveries about him: firstly, that he was a Frenchman, which had not astonished her at all; secondly, that he was a doctor, which had astonished her considerably, since nothing less like a medical adviser than this vivacious, talkative and careless-looking individual could well be imagined.

Coming one day into the cabin which she shared with Freule Rosa Klaas, the discovery of her fellow-traveller's name (of which more anon) had been another astonishment, she was startled to find the man with the reckless profile bending over the berth in which prolonged seasickness still held Freule Klaas prostrate, and apparently feeling her pulse.

He looked up with eyes that at sight of Martha's amazed face seemed to become a concentrated essence of roguishness.

"Shall I tell mademoiselle what she is thinking?" he said promptly, an *espiègle* smile showing under his thin moustache. "'Que diable fait-il dans cette galere?' Is it not something to that tune which passes through your charming head? Mademoiselle did not guess that I am of the medical profession, did she? No one ever does. Far more often am I taken for an actor, a comic one, too, or even for a master of the dance. It is the fault of an injudicious nature which has given me a face *pour rire*. And yet my *diplôme* reposes safely at the bottom of my valise. It is in its strength that I replace my colleague of this vessel who himself is ill. Precisely in this moment have I been prescribing to Mademoiselle Klaas a course of cold drinks. It would be extremely kind of you, mademoiselle, to use a little *surveillance* in the matter with your companion of voyage."

This was the beginning of an acquaintance which, on the whole, amused Martha more than it bored her, although something in Dr. Brulôt's black eyes had made her consider it wise to mention her engagement at the earliest moment convenient.

The reception of the announcement was, on the whole, reassuring.

"A *fiancé*? That is charming!" he cordially declared. "I should have thought badly indeed of my sex if so fair a flower had not already found a hand to gather it. Where are their eyes? I should have said, Where are their eyes? But since many leagues of ocean still divide her from the fortunate man, mademoiselle will allow her humble servant to help shorten the tedious hours."

It was far more of an assertion than a question, and breathed that light-hearted audacity which was the leading note of his personality; for very soon Martha learnt that his speech was quite as reckless as his profile.

But although presently she began to suspect that the treatment of Freule Klaas, who was dumpy and red-faced, was being artificially prolonged, not for the sake of the patient, Martha could find no foothold for indignation. In face of the airy compliments which tripped so lightly off Dr. Brulôt's tongue and which, with a virtuosity of which only a Frenchman could be capable, managed to steer clear of impertinence, prudery would have seemed too absurdly out of place.

"You know I am in love with you, *follement amoureux*," he had said to her before they had been a week acquainted, but in so light-hearted a tone and with such gaily dancing eyes that it was impossible to do anything but laugh and enter into the spirit of the joke, which, accordingly, Martha did, answering in a tone to match his own:

"That's a pity certainly, since I'm already bespoken. Couldn't you manage to transfer your affections to Freule Klaas? It's so strange, by the way"—this in order to create a diversion—"to think that in a few weeks I too shall be called Klaas! It gave me quite a shock when I heard my companion's name. Such a funny coincidence! And she isn't even related to Henrik."

"It would have been more of a coincidence if she hadn't been called Klaas. About every fifth person you meet in Holland is called Klaas, just as he is called Mayer in Germany or Jones in England."

"Ah!" said Martha, with a touch of disappointment. So general a name did not seem to fit the fairy-tale figure of Henrik.

After various quite unsuccessful efforts at snubbing, Martha had ended by resigning herself to a good deal of the talkative doctor's company. Among the unavoidable acquaintances produced by the five weeks' voyage he remained the most conspicuous. The fact of his familiarity with the land that was to be her home, where he had practised for close upon ten years, could not but add to the interest of many a conversation. If Martha answered him impatiently to-day it was because her thoughts had taken to themselves wings, in order to outstrip the steamer's course. With the meeting of to-morrow in her mind the Frenchman's chatter must fall flat on her ear. He had done very well as a *passe-temps*, but she had no further use for him now.

"In twelve hours' time he will be curling his hair," remarked Dr. Brulôt, who seemed to have been thought-reading. "Or does it perhaps curl naturally?"

"No; it does not," said Martha shortly. "I hate curly hair."

"One for you, *mon pauvre* Brulôt!" exclaimed the doctor, with a stage groan and running his fingers through the rather obstreperous waves of his rough-looking hair. "Put a limit to your cruelty, mademoiselle! Surely even your noble *fiancé* would not grudge to a poor bereaved wretch the joy of sitting by your side for a little space longer!"

Suddenly he bounded upon his seat, drawing in his breath with a sound as sharp as a hiss.

"Ah! If I could have him there!"

"Have whom, where?" asked Martha startled.

"Monsieur Henrik Klaas—upon my operation-table. How I would send the knife into his heart!"

"Doctor!" said Martha indignantly. Then, meeting

his twinkling eyes, felt ashamed of her tragic tone, and laughed perforce.

"That's stupid of me! I'm always forgetting that you can't be serious. Are you ever serious with your patients, I wonder."

"I would be serious with you if you were my patient, mademoiselle," he said, with an eloquent grin, "deadly serious. During all the voyage I have been praying fervently that you would fall ill."

"How charmingly amiable! But I am very glad I am not your patient. I should never dare to take your prescriptions. It would seem to me a mere toss-up whether you put medicines or poison into the dose; whichever happened to be handiest, I suppose."

"It wouldn't be poison for you, mademoiselle, but for your *fiancé*—I will not answer."

"Oh, do let's talk sense!" said Martha impatiently.

"*D'accord!* Shall we have a turn at philosophy? Has it ever occurred to you, for instance, to ask yourself why one man should draw all the prizes and another all the blanks of life? Perhaps you haven't discovered yet—but you will in time—that Luck is the real master of the world. If you're born under the right star you just walk over the course, as a certain tobacco planter *not* of my acquaintance appears to have done; but if your luck is against you, not even the laws of nature will save you. You'll drown in a puddle; or you'll fall upon your back in the grass and break your nose."

"Well, you haven't broken yours yet, doctor. I don't miss a single chip."

"Another for you, *Brulôt!*" registered the doctor, with one of his peculiarly cheerful sighs, and giving a gleeful pinch to the conspicuous organ. "Another cruelty of

yours to remind me that this article was ordered a size too large. Well, well, there's always Cyrano de Bergerac to console myself with! But what's a Cyrano who can't make verses? Does Monsieur Klaas make verses, *mademoiselle*?"

"He has never made any to my knowledge," laughed Martha, who had long ago given up being astonished at the unexpected turns of Dr. Brulôt's conversation.

"Ah, that's better! Perhaps I may yet hope to outshine him on one point. To-morrow I begin to cultivate poetry; and by the time we meet again——"

"But it is not at all likely that we shall ever meet again," objected Martha, who knew that Dr. Brulôt was bound for a place in the interior and at a long distance from Batavia.

"Pardon me if I contradict; but something within me tells me that this is but the beginning of our acquaintance. What depends upon your humble servant to make true this presentiment will not be omitted, believe me!"

"The sun is going down and so am I—to the cabin," remarked Martha, becoming abruptly of opinion that the conversation would not well bear prolongation, and severely avoiding the Frenchman's roguish eyes. "It will be dark in a minute."

Upon a bed of purple, under a canopy of fiery gold—truly regal couch—the monarch of the day was preparing to take a quite illusive repose.

"*Le coucher du roi!*" murmured the doctor, as his eyes followed hers across the water.

"*Le lever du roi!*" he might with equal right have said, had he been looking out of his porthole at six o'clock on the following morning—as Martha was doing with eager eyes, after a sleepless night. As the decora-

tions of the sunset had been gold and purple, so those of the sunrise were gold and rose-coloured. Swiftly, as though thrown aside with mighty gestures, the splendid wrappings fall, until the dazzling disc dominates the horizon, naked and unashamed. And now, against an intensely blue sky, two twin forms take shape—cones of two mighty volcanoes—the first features of Java to be spied by the mariner's eye, and appearing to float in space, the land at their feet rendered invisible by distance. To Martha it was the crowning sight of the many wonders of the voyage, and in especial of this last, tedious and yet so delicious night during which the thought that every throb of the steamer's screw was bringing her nearer to the supreme moment of her life, had banished even the desire of sleep. While her cabin companion snored peaceably in the berth above her she lay through the long, vaguely sweet hours, alternately dreaming of the morrow and looking through her port-hole. That voyage through the warm night, under the tropical stars, with the coast of Sumatra slipping past mysteriously like a shadow on the horizon, and with phosphorescent lights dancing past the ship's side, over the still waters, was altogether so much more like a dream than a reality as to make Martha doubt whether she had actually been awake all the time.

The tinge of trepidation which coloured her happiness enhanced rather than diminished it. Now that the consummation stood so close a little questioning alarm had begun to stir. Was there really no mistake at all about the date of her arrival? Would nothing prevent Henrik from being on the pier? Almost she wished that she had, after all, cabled from the last port. At the time it had seemed a needless expense, and she had promised

her stepfather to be so very "frugal." Or perhaps it would have been wiser to have waited for that final letter?

But these were foolish and craven thoughts. Of course it could only have repeated what the former one had said.

To this thought she clung when later in the morning she stood among a crowd of variously agitated passengers, all straining their eyes towards the long-stretched line of cocoanut-palms which was all that announced the neighbourhood of Batavia, and which, owing to the flatness of the strand, appeared to be growing straight out of the water. The twin volcanoes had, in their turn, become invisible, swallowed up by the rising heat haze. Just now Java seemed to consist of nothing but those crooked cocoanut-trees, tumbling over each other like a procession of drunkards.

All through the long and weary entry into port, Martha kept her hold upon the comforting thought. The stoppages at Colombo and at Singapore had familiarised her already with the features of a tropical harbour, so that neither the fleet of hollowed tree-trunks, laden with unfamiliar fruit, soon swarming around the steamer, nor the still more miniature fleet of empty cocoanut shells in its wake, nor the feats of the naked divers were complete novelties. Also she was long past the emotion which the sight of her first palm-tree had caused her, helping her to realise with a shock of delight that she had reached other climes. To-day she had eyes only for the pier and for the waiting crowd upon it. Yet where all figures are white-clad and most heads helmeted it requires sharp eyes to identify features, and Martha's eyes were dimmed by agitation. Beside her and before her, cries of re-

cognition were being uttered, names shrilly called, handkerchiefs joyfully waved.

"Myn Vader!" she heard her cabin companion gurgling beside her, amid sobs of joy.

Every moment her heart beat with more suffocating haste. When would her own turn come?

"Would mademoiselle not permit me to feel her pulse?" asked a familiar voice close by. "I perceive symptoms of nervous agitation. Can it be that the fortunate man has overslept himself?"

"No, no; he is here," said Martha feverishly. "He *must* be here; but the sun dazzles me so."

"*He* has other things to be dazzled by than the sun. No doubt his eyes have found their goal already. I wait only to see the meeting, before going to hang myself upon one of those cocoanut-trees; no, *parbleu*, it had better be a case of drowning. That has the advantage of coolness—— Doctor! doctor! Who's crowing there? Is it me they are calling?"

The cry had come from the gangway, on which a too impatient passenger had slipped and badly twisted her foot.

"Thank heaven! that disposes of him!" breathed Martha, having grasped the facts.

During the long and torturing half-hour that followed she was more than ever thankful to be spared the mocking observation of the Frenchman. Around her the crowd began to melt with a rapidity which presently made her feel conspicuous. Most people were fortunately too busy with their own concerns to do more than brush past her with unseeing eyes; yet one or two enquiring glances were sent in the direction of the girl whom most people on board knew to be a bride-elect, sailing to meet the bride-

groom. Soon she stood isolated beside her small heap of hand-luggage, straining towards the pier eyes that were beginning to look wild. For half-an-hour the panic had been gnawing in her heart before she realised that Henrik was not upon the pier. What she felt was neither mortification nor exactly disappointment, but panic, pure and simple. Something had happened to Henrik, of course; he was ill, possibly dead. Nothing but this could explain his failure at the tryst.

There were tears of anguish in her eyes as she turned to answer a question put to her by one of the ship's officers—a fatherly man with grizzled whiskers, whose attention had been caught by her plight.

"No; he is not here, I am so frightened," she said, her wild eyes fixed upon the kind elderly face. "I am sure something dreadful has happened."

"Tut—tut—why need it be something dreadful?" he soothed in a comfortably guttural voice. "A slight accident, perhaps. Has he far to come?"

"No; quite a short way. He lives only a few miles from Batavia, about an hour's drive."

"Even in an hour's drive one might have a slight upset, though our roads are excellent," he hastened to add, at sight of the alarm on her face. "You are sure there was no mistake about the ship you were coming by?"

"Quite sure; it was all settled. It must be either an accident or an illness."

"If he were ill he would have sent a message, surely. Wait here while I enquire."

When at the end of ten minutes he came back towards her his face told Martha from afar that the enquiries had produced a blank. There was neither letter

nor messenger with tidings of any sort from Mynheer Klaas.

"What shall I do?" asked Martha, looking up with anguished eyes into the grizzled face of her adviser.

"You have no friends in the town?"

"None at all."

"Then there is nothing for it but to go to a respectable hotel—I will direct you to one—and from there communicate with Mynheer Klaas. On the boat you cannot stay; and it is time, at any rate, that you get into the shade. A heat-stroke would scarcely improve matters, would it? I'll send a man to see you through the custom house and also to put you into the train, for I suppose you know that you have still a railway-journey before you, though not a formidable one."

Passively, with dazed eyes and senses, for which the increasing heat was no doubt partly responsible, Martha submitted to the arrangements made.

"You are a British subject, are you not?" asked her helper at the last moment. "Don't forget that there is a British consul at Batavia—just in case you should get into difficulties."

It was kindly meant, yet the mere suggestion of what might be lying ahead only helped to bear in upon Martha more poignantly the uncertainty of her present position.

CHAPTER VII.

MUDER COGHEN.

HOWEVER mixed the pictures which Martha's imagination had drawn of her disembarkment in Java, she had not expected to look upon its first wonders through a veil of burning tears, which blurred alike the outline of soaring palm and tufted banana, and caused the aerial roots of the waringarias to multiply themselves into fantastic numbers before her dazed eyes. How she had hung upon Henrik's account of this marvel of the tropics! How longed to see the maze of threads descending to take root in the soil and form a miniature forest round the mother tree! Yet now, as she gazed at more than one fine specimen gliding past the railway-carriage window, she seemed to be viewing them as things near at hand but as seen from a great, an immeasurable distance.

Short though the journey was, it was too long for her painful suspense. And yet the end was but a beginning of new difficulties; since disembarking on the Batavia platform meant coming to a duel of wits between herself and the half-naked Malayan coolies who, with a gentle tenacity which was more telling than any amount of chattering vehemence could have been, took possession both of her luggage and of herself. The store of Dutch so laboriously acquired during the last months proved

useless here, since not even the most elaborately pronounced sentences could awaken a gleam of understanding in the gentle brown eyes of her helpers—eyes which touched her with a strange sense of familiarity. Only by dint of sticking to the name of the Hotel Coghen did she presently find herself hoisted bodily into a sort of travesty of a dog-cart, and borne away like the wind through what appeared to be a big garden, rather than a town, a garden traversed by sleepy canals, and where the houses played hide-and-seek so successfully among the thick foliage that a gleam of white or the section of a pillared verandah was all that betrayed their presence.

The various pavilions of which the Hotel Coghen proved to consist seemed to be playing exactly the same game with each other in the wooded grounds which sheltered them. The biggest of these pavilions stretched two long, low wings to the right and to the left, as though ready to fold them around the weary traveller—and here one numbered door after another opened onto the inevitable verandah, whose length was that of the building itself.

“You want a room only for a few hours?” repeated the rotund, middle-aged woman who, with a white apron over her ample skirt and a bunch of keys at her equally ample waist, received Martha in the entrance. Considering the temperature and her probable pounds, she looked almost miraculously cool, and so barefacedly good-natured that it seemed quite natural to hear her addressed as “Muder Coghen.” This buxom matron possessed a button of a nose, which, to judge from her habit of vigorously rubbing it in moments of doubt, represented the seat of her wisdom. She was rubbing it now in response to the guest’s unusual request.

"Only for a few hours," Martha insisted, by way of reassuring herself. Surely, it was unthinkable that Henrik should take more than a few hours to reach her side!

The room, situated in one of the wings afore-mentioned—to which Muder Coghen now briskly led Martha—was far from being up to date. In fact, the brick floor, the whitewashed walls, the plain iron bedstead and the grated opening above the door, doing duty for a window, corresponded to nothing so much as to Martha's idea of a prison cell—but of an impeccable cell, spick and span with Dutch cleanliness and almost smelling of soap and water. The one door opened straight onto the long wooden verandah, which slight barriers divided into sections, each assigned to the corresponding room, and each furnished, at the very least, with a rocking-chair, a table and a footstool. As Martha passed along she had been somewhat startled by the costumes of the few loungers perceived, for both men and women were taking the air *en négligé*, the former in white jackets and pyjamas, their bare feet sticking in linen slippers, the latter either in dressing-gown or attired in the picturesque Malayan costume, best adapted to the exigencies of the climate. Her nearest neighbour, occupier of the slice of verandah adjoining her room, had chiefly struck her attention—by her almost phenomenal ugliness. The rocking-chair assigned to her seemed to be literally groaning under the mountain of flesh which heaved beneath a flowered dressing-gown; and as Martha crossed to her own door, a vast, leathery physiognomy was turned for a moment towards her, while the sound of stertorous breathing reached her ears.

"An asthmatic rhinoceros—that's what she looks like." It passed through Martha's mind as she followed her hostess into the pseudo prison cell, and little dreaming

the part which the "asthmatic rhinoceros" was yet to play in her life.

"If you require anything you only have to touch this button. We had the electric bells put in this year," said Muder Coghen, with a touch of pride, "and the *Rystafel* is at one o'clock."

"I don't want to eat anything," said Martha quickly; "but can I have pen and ink and a messenger to take a letter out of town?"

Muder Coghen immediately began to rub her nose.

"Pen and ink and paper too, I presume—and a messenger; good."

Briskly the required articles were produced, and Martha, without waiting to remove her hat, sat down to pen an agitated note.

"DEAREST HENRIK," she wrote, with fingers which closed convulsively over the penholder,—“I am here; but where are you? What has happened? Are you ill? I know that if you were not ill you would have met me. Do not try to hide anything from me. Let me have but one word, and I come to you—if you cannot come to me. Even though we have not been to the registry-office, my place is by your side. No one but I has any right to nurse you. One word, my beloved—my husband—I implore it of you! Yours till death,

“MARTHA.”

Upon the writing of the letter and its despatch by the messenger procured by Muder Coghen—a scantily clothed lad who seemed to consist partly of polished bronze and partly of soiled linen—there fell upon Martha the reaction of a passing relief. The first positive step

was taken, the first attempt made to re-knot that thread of contact between herself and Henrik which had been so mysteriously broken. By the landlady's computation, between three and four hours must elapse before the return of the messenger, and for those hours there was no remedy but patience.

Overcome with a sudden lassitude, that was both physical and mental, she crept under the mosquito-curtain surrounding the bed and, throwing herself upon the pillow, fell into a dreamless sleep. Her hat was all she had removed, and not even her handbag had been opened. By every means at her command she wanted to assure herself of the transient nature of her presence here.

It was the sound of a deep and hoarse voice close at hand, talking in what was evidently a passion, which abruptly awakened her. With a shock of alarm she sat up, having lost all her bearings, and gazing at her surroundings with unrecognising eyes. It was only when, in her attempts to reach the floor, she found herself entangled in the mosquito-net that the consciousness of her situation rushed back upon her. Then in a moment she stood upright.

How long had she slept? Had the messenger returned? Was that his voice she heard? But no, those deep bass tones, penetrating through the thin wall of partition, could never come from the boy she had seen. Was it a man or a woman who was uttering this torrent of evidently violent language? And what on earth was happening in the neighbouring apartment?

Freeing herself definitely from the folds of the mosquito-net, Martha hastened to the door.

The bit of verandah alongside was deserted—as indeed were all the other bits, this being the moment of

preparations for the *Rydstafel*—the chief meal of the day—but from out of the door which led into it violent tones were audible, if not exactly comprehensible. It was to be supposed that they issued from the lips of the formidable old lady whom Martha had lately seen in the rocking-chair. Other tones, of feebly squeaking protest, were occasionally heard, but quickly smothered. Then, while Martha gazed in alarm towards the neighbouring door, a small, dark-haired creature darted out, like a frightened mouse, right across the verandah, and behind her flew a heavy, silver-backed hairbrush, just missing her ear as she precipitately descended the steps, to scuttle across the path and disappear among the dense foliage of the bushes opposite.

“What a fury!” reflected Martha, startled for a moment out of the circle of her own interests. “If that brush had hit the girl it would have bowled her over like a ninepin. Good gracious, what’s *that?*”

For at that moment the doorway was filled by an almost terrifying figure—that of the “asthmatic rhinoceros”—dishevelled and livid, with a big white *peignoir* over the flowered dressing-gown, and over that again an extraordinary mass of coarse, brown, faintly grizzled hair, whose appearance suggested that the doormat was doing duty as a cloak—for it was a veritable cloak that hung about her clumsy person and to below the height of her knees.

Having picked up the hairbrush and glared at Martha, she was on the point of retiring when something new arrested her attention. Stopping short abruptly she transferred her glare from Martha’s face to a small brown lizard on whose tail she had, in her stormy entrance, heavily trodden, and which now sprawled helpless on the

floor. The glare became a look almost of distress as, with a few soft grunts and breathing like a steam-engine, she bent down to examine the injured animal. In another moment she had got it between her huge, fleshy hands, carefully cuddled, and, still softly grunting, had disappeared through the door of her room.

For a moment longer Martha stood in wonder, struck by the strangeness of the scene just witnessed; then quickly the thought of her own plight swept aside all else.

What o'clock was it? Half-past twelve. The messenger had been gone for little over an hour. There were at least two more to wait. It was now only that she began to taste of the agony of suspense. With tortured eyes she looked round her room, upon whose immaculate walls tiny lizards were running with adhesive feet, in pursuit of tinier flies, chirping softly the while, with gentle, birdlike voices. No, she could not stop here, it was too like a prison. The verandah would be better than this.

Reclining in the rocking-chair, and fanning herself with a paper fan supplied by the establishment, Martha proceeded to torture herself with the possible nature of the news presently to be brought up these very steps by her brown, youthful messenger—unless, indeed, ah! unless it was Henrik himself who would ascend them with wings to his lover's feet.

This whole part of the building was deserted by this time, for the hour of the *Rystafel* had come. Martha had seen the guests trooping towards the main pavilion, among them her neighbour, with her head muffled in a lace shawl. In the distance she could hear the faint click of knives and forks. On the table at her elbow stood a plate of rice and another of some indescribable mixture which a smiling Malayan handmaiden had placed there,

apparently by order of Muder Coghén. Mechanically she ate a few spoonfuls, her eyes straying the while between the bit of path visible, and the opal ring upon her finger. If things had gone right, another ring should now be gleaming there. Would it be there by this time to-morrow?"

Presently the faint click of knives and forks ceased, and the guests came trooping back towards their apartments. The sound of their lively tongues talking in various languages died away as each unit or couple vanished behind a numbered door. Within a few minutes, silence had settled back upon the building, for the sacred hour of the *siesta* had set in. But Martha, a solitary figure upon the whole length of the deserted verandah, sat on listening, gazing, and thinking.

And yet, strained though her attention was, the soft, barefooted tread took her by surprise. Out of the ground at her feet the messenger seemed to grow, with a profound salutation and a smile of childish gravity, holding out a closed envelope.

Having torn it out of his brown hand, into which she pressed a coin at random, Martha precipitately retired into the deeper privacy of her room, to gaze first with distended eyes at the envelope which must hold for her either happiness or misery, either life or death.

His writing—yes—no doubt about that. Of this one fact she was sure, as soon as the mists had cleared from her eyes. So he lived; he was able to write, even though somewhat shakily, as it struck her. Why, then, was he not able to come?

As she opened the envelope her fingers felt cold in spite of the temperature, and again she had to wait until another wave of mist had rolled away.

“MY DEAREST MARTHA!”

She paused, with a sensation of chill. All the beginnings to Henrik's letters had been so different from this—“Pearl of my heart!” “Angel of my life!” Upon ideas such as this his headings had run. During the whole length of their betrothal he had never called her anything so sober as “Dearest Martha.”

But what followed was not sober—seemed rather to have been written in a mental tumult which made a problem of its meaning.

“I am the most unhappy of mankind, and also the most perplexed. Did you not receive my letter? I made sure it would arrive in time. But maybe I miscalculated. For weeks past my head has ached so—together with my heart—that I can no longer lean upon my own judgment. When we parted how strong I felt! how able to battle with life! And if you saw me now—what a change! But you must not see me. I would live in your memory in more gracious form. Therefore do not come. Go back to the home you were so generously willing to abandon, and forget the sick wretch that I am—sick of soul and body. I am not worthy. Someone comes, I must end quickly. Yours for the last time,

“HENRIK.”

Upon the signature there was a blot that looked almost like the blot of a tear, and several of the lines were blurred in the same suspicious fashion. Nevertheless, the words were quite decipherable. But the sense?

Twice over Martha read the letter, striving to establish a connection between the different sentences.

“The only thing that seems quite clear is that he is

ill," was the conclusion she came to after a minute of deep perplexity. "He calls himself a sick man and says his head aches. Yes, that's it!" she pursued, still struggling to arrange her thoughts. "I begin to understand. He has fallen ill again and thinks he has no right to marry me, and therefore he wrote to stop me coming. As if that could have stopped me! And as if it could make any difference to me what he looks like now! He doesn't know me yet!"

For a minute she sat quite still, reviewing this aspect of the case; then, under the grip of final conviction, started to her feet.

"What am I doing here? Is not my place by his side? But how shall I get there? How shall I get there?"

The electric button seemed the first stepping-stone in her path. Being pressed assiduously, it presently produced the same smiling native girl who had brought the rice, wide-eyed with astonishment at finding anyone awake at this hour—and, in the course of time, Muder Coghén, equally wide-eyed.

"Drive into the country *now?*" she repeated, rubbing her nose hard and examining Martha's flushed face with almost scandalised eyes.

"But this is madness, my dear! Far better wait till the cool of the evening. It is never done."

"Then I shall be the first person who does it—that's all. The only question is whether you will procure me a vehicle, or whether I shall have to go and look for one myself?"

"On your feet?" said the landlady, in accents of unmistakable horror. "But that would mean certain death."

"Then perhaps you will save me from it by sending a native?"

Muder Coghen looked at Martha's face, in which the chin was protruding in exactly the fashion it had done during a certain memorable interview with her stepfather. It is to be presumed that the Dutchwoman had, in the course of much hotel-keeping, picked up some experience of physiognomies, for having watched the tilt of the chin she protested no further.

When, later on, Martha thought back of the drive, she seemed to remember wondering whether the "gates of hell" could be much hotter than this; but at the time the temperature seemed as far away as everything else. Having got clear of the avenues which did duty as streets, she found herself rolling through clouds of white dust amid a landscape which, under a cursory glance, had a sort of pseudo-European look about it. A closer examination indeed revealed those terraced fields on which the young green was sprouting, as rice and not corn fields, the bushes by the wayside as infant bamboos and not willows, the herds grazing in the distance as buffaloes instead of the familiar cows, of which they seemed at first sight but enlarged specimens. The workmen in the fields, too, had brown faces instead of white ones—unless they had yellow ones, with a pigtail to boot. But all this was lost on Martha, whose inattentive gaze glided over each object, searching only for the white-pillared house which Henrik had so often described when speaking of his employer's residence.

When at last the driver pointed it out to her, in the heart of an island of trees, standing amid a sea of tufted leaves which stretched in symmetrical lines seemingly to the horizon, a shiver, mingled of expectation and apprehension, ran over her. She had seen tobacco-plants in Mrs. Jobwell's show garden, tended in solitary specimens

as a costly exotic, so the white trumpet-shaped flowers which here and there still lingered on the stems were enlightenment enough. Impossible to look upon these vast fields—no, they were more like miniature forests—without emotion. Was this not *his* work? The scene and setting of his daily life? There were figures moving among the symmetrical rows, for the harvest had begun; there were other figures—mostly Chinese—sitting in long rows under sheds and doing something to the freshly gathered leaves. Through the dust-cloud Martha caught sight of a whole regiment of pigtails. But the small horses which drew her *sado* bore her along at a pace which afforded no more than passing glimpses, and in another few minutes were pulled up on their haunches hard by the verandah of the white house which was her goal.

“Are you sure it is here that Mynheer Van Hagen lives?” asked Martha of the driver.

The name of the wealthy planter, who was Henrik’s employer, was the one word of her question which reached the driver’s comprehension; but the vigour of his nods was reassuring.

Quickly she reached the ground; and then stood hesitating for a moment, striving to adjust Henrik’s descriptions to the reality. There were several smaller white buildings visible among the thick foliage close at hand. One of these must be the overseer’s house, her future home, in which Henrik was lying ill at this moment. Should she try and identify the right one? She made a step, then stood still again, seized by a sudden shyness. No; she would not introduce herself surreptitiously, as it were. She would apply to Mynheer Van Hagen, and make good her right to be here.

For another minute she stood waiting and expectantly

scanning the shuttered windows of the one-storeyed house standing upon a series of low columns which raised it some feet from the ground. Must not the whirlwind fashion of the *sado's* advent have aroused attention? But nothing moved; for the hour of the *siesta* was not yet past. Outside in the sea of tobacco plants activity reigned, but the island of palm-trees was an island of sleep. The door which stood wide open onto the verandah seemed the only sign that the place was inhabited. Resolutely Martha mounted the steps and stood peering into an inner apartment. It took her sun-dazzled eyes a moment to recognise that it was empty of all human presence. There was another door beyond, but it was closed, and at the turning of a handle her audacity drew the line. At the same time impatience was growing. Quickly recrossing the verandah she made her way round to the back of the building and here discovered a small native girl—almost a child—curled up upon a step, looking in her semi-nakedness like nothing so much as a chocolate sweetmeat slipping out of its brilliant wrappings. Her she roused incontinently by speaking the word "Van Hagen" imperatively into her brown shell of an ear. Re-entered into the possession of her senses, the small girl waved an arm in the direction of the fields, and prepared to go to sleep again. But she had reckoned without Martha.

"And Mynheer Klaas? Where is he? Not in the fields, I am sure."

All but the name was, of course, lost upon the child; and even this had to be repeated several times before making any visible impression. At the fourth repetition an idea seemed, nevertheless, to strike her.

"Mevrouw Klaas?" she asked, brightening up.

"No, Mynheer Klaas; there is no Mevrouw yet. Is he in this house or the other?"

The little maiden shrugged her chocolate shoulders as though giving up the matter; then, beckoning to Martha, led the way to a back door, and from that through a passage to the same apartment which the unmasked-for-guest had already once invaded, then vanished with a reassuring smile.

Curiously Martha looked around her; whitewashed walls with nothing but a few good prints to cover their nakedness; spotless white curtains, bits of bright matting on the floor; complicated green shutters so designed as to let in the minimum of sunshine and the maximum of air; these were the features which, at the first glance, she took in. At the second she perceived that the feet of the plain but solid tables and chairs—as well as of the cottage piano—were standing in miniature water-tanks, presumably as a protection against some sort of vermin, also that in the draught that reigned a piece of needlework on the table beside her fluttered continually, as though alive. A gently chirping sound caused her to turn her head, and there on the wall behind her, her acquaintances of the hotel, the busy little lizards, were scuttling in all directions, diligently collecting insects with their rapid, diminutive tongues.

Exhausted with the suspense of what might be coming, Martha sank into the easy-chair beside her and stared vacantly at the piece of needlework on the table. Whom could it belong to? Probably to Freule Leenebet; that, she remembered, was the name of Mynheer Van Hagen's daughter, the one who used to send the post-cards.

CHAPTER VIII.

LEENEBET.

"You have asked for me?"

Martha, turning abruptly, became aware of a young woman standing in the inner doorway. She had crude yellow hair and crude blue eyes, which goggled out of a flat face, and her pink cotton dress fitted her ample bosom as tightly as though it had been a well-conditioned pincushion.

"I am sure she is stuffed with sawdust," it crossed Martha's mind to think. The astonishment with which she regarded the stranger was quite outdone by the amazement in the round eyes resting upon herself.

"You have asked for me?"

Martha rose quickly. "I beg your pardon for intruding," she began, mustering her newly acquired Dutch. "No, I have not asked for you; it is Mynheer Klaas whom I have asked for."

"What can you want of Mynheer Klaas?" asked the wearer of the pink cotton dress, advancing into the room, the flatness of her face—which was likewise pink, but of a shade which did not match the dress—ruffled by a wave of mistrust.

"Is he ill?"

The young woman did not answer, being evidently

too deeply occupied in dissecting the details of Martha's appearance. From the crown of her Panama hat to the soles of her linen shoes the goggle eyes travelled, only to retrace their road.

"Please tell me whether he is ill!" implored Martha, in a voice whose urgency grew. "I can bear anything except this uncertainty. Oh, please be kind and tell me!"

In her eagerness she laid her hand upon the big, print-clad arm, which had the same sort of pincushion look as the rest of the person. But the arm was pulled away sharply, and the hitherto merely staring eyes narrowed abruptly in their sockets.

"What can his illness or his health matter to you? I don't even know who you are."

"I am Martha Grant. You must at least have heard my name."

The yellow head was emphatically shaken. "No; I never heard it before."

"That is rather strange!" said Martha, momentarily taken aback. "And yet I am sure I know yours. You are Freule Van Hagen, are you not? The daughter of Henrik's employer?"

The face before Martha flushed scarlet.

"You dare to call him Henrik?"

"Of course I dare. What else should I call him? Would you not call the man you were engaged to be married to by his Christian name, Freule Van Hagen?"

"I'm not Freule Van Hagen," she snapped. "I am Mevrouw Klaas; and I am not engaged to be married, because I am married already."

Martha made a gesture of half-comical distress. "Another Klaas! What a lot there seem to be!"

"I only know of one, and that is my husband."

"But you must know of another, too, since he lives here—the one who is going to be my husband."

"He doesn't live here; you are making a mistake. There is only one Henrik Klaas here, and I am married to him."

"But this is nonsense!" said Martha vehemently; "unless I have come to the wrong place. Is this not Mynheer Van Hagen's house?"

"Of course it is his house."

"Then I insist upon seeing Henrik. It's no use your telling me that he isn't here."

The crude blue eyes were goggling so hard that they seemed in danger of dropping out of their sockets.

"You insist," she began, in a half-choked voice, and then, unexpectedly, her expression cleared.

"Did you come in that carriage from the town?" she asked, pointing to the *sado* outside.

"Of course I did."

"And you are a stranger?"

"Yes. I disembarked this morning."

A broad smile unruffled the flat face.

"The sun, of course! You have had a slight stroke. It often takes one that way. We had a housekeeper once who, after a stroke she had, imagined that her sister was in the house, and was always searching for her. If you will sit down again, I shall send for some fresh water. Maybe it will pass."

Just at the door Martha intercepted her.

"I have got no sunstroke, and you haven't answered my question. Is Henrik ill? If he is you cannot refuse to take me to him."

"Take you to my husband?" gasped the human pin-cushion, turning to glare upon Martha.

Martha made a movement eloquent of exasperation; then, with a strong effort, controlled herself. The woman was evidently a semi-idiot, and with semi-idiots patience was the first requisite. Or was it possible that the fault lay with her own imperfect command of the language?

"Do you not speak English?" she asked, with new hope.

"Of course I speak English," said the pink and yellow young person in that tongue, and with a very tolerable accent. "I was at school in Europe."

"Oh, that simplifies matters. Let us try and get to an understanding," pursued Martha, carefully governing her voice. "We are evidently at cross purposes. Of course we cannot be talking of the same person. I know that Klaas is a name of very frequent occurrence; but it certainly is strange their both being called Henrik. The man I mean is Mynheer Van Hagen's overseer, who in April returned from Europe, from Schneeliberg, where he had gone for his health. It was there I became betrothed to him; and now I have followed him, as settled. It was also settled that we were to be married at once when I landed, but something must have happened to him, for he did not meet me on the pier. I am sure he must be ill. That is why I am here to enquire."

While she spoke the flat face opposite seemed to crumple up gradually under the influence of what was evidently consternation. The very moderation of Martha's tone, contradicting, as it did, the sunstroke theory, was bringing conviction with it. From pink the circular face grew crimson, and from crimson it turned purple.

"But that is Henrik!" she uttered, with difficulty.

"That is Henrik! And you pretend that he ever talked of marrying you?"

"I am not pretending anything at all," said Martha, still in that laboriously patient voice. "I am stating facts. Neither is it correct to say that he *talked* of marrying me, since I tell you that we are betrothed."

The face opposite crumpled up yet further before the words were blurted out:

"He can't be betrothed to you, because he is married to me. You are either mad or you are an impostor."

Although Martha turned white from sheer astonishment at the words, she was still several leagues from believing them. A certain bewilderment was, nevertheless, beginning to settle upon her.

"If one of us two is mad, I don't think it is myself," she said slowly. "I don't pretend to understand the reason of the delusion under which you are labouring, but it certainly is a delusion. Do you suppose I could speak like this if I were out of my senses?"

"Then there is only the other thing, you are an impostor."

Martha flushed angrily.

"Am I? I will soon show you whether I am."

And drawing out the letter she had received that afternoon she thrust it towards her would-be rival with a gesture as vehement as though it had been a dagger.

In another moment, remembering some details, she would have snatched it back again, but the other kept too greedy a hold of it, and with distended eyes was already devouring its contents. The flat face grew rigid. At the end she fell, all of a pink heap, onto the chair beside her.

"'Yours for the last time,'" she repeated aloud, in

accents which amazement had made almost imbecile. "He could write that! To-day, still! Oh, Henrik! But at least it *is* for the last time! *Yours?* What does it mean? What have you done to him? I understand nothing!"

Martha, too, had sat down rather abruptly, owing to a sudden relaxation of the muscles about her knees. Not that conviction had yet come to her, but that the first shake had been given to the edifice of her faith.

"I understand still less," she said, in a far less assured voice. "Will you please explain?"

"What is there to explain, except that I am married to Henrik Klaas?"

"Since when?"

"Since about six weeks. We are scarcely out of our honeymoon yet," added the pink and yellow young woman, with ponderous coyness.

"That would be before I sailed from Rotterdam," said Martha aloud, speculatively, as it were.

Leaning over, she took the letter from the other's hands and read it through once more, with new eyes.

The injunction of going back to her parents, as well as the reference to his own unworthiness, seemed to have taken on another meaning.

At last she looked up.

"I don't believe a word of it!"

"What do you not believe?"

"That Henrik has married you. It can't be, don't you see, because otherwise I——" She rose with decision, and, with the same decision, said:

"Where is he? I must speak to him at once."

The pink-clad young woman was likewise on her feet, her face a picture of alarm. "Oh no; that will not do!

You must not speak to him. What else is there to say? Does he not himself tell you to go back to your home? And he can't say more than I have said—that we are married. I don't know what he may have said to you over there—at Schneeliberg. Perhaps he was amusing himself. It can have had no meaning for him, because he got engaged to me only a few weeks after he came back. Oh, go away—go away before he comes! What are you still waiting for?"

For Martha had sat down again—deliberately.

"To speak to him. I have told you. I do not move from this room until from Henrik's own lips I hear that he is your husband. If you want to get rid of me you had better send for him."

The other wrung her fat hands.

"Oh, what shall I do? If only my father was at home! What shall I do?"

"I have told you what: send for Henrik. If he tells me that he is married to you, then I swear to you that I shall leave the house, and that, even if it were the only house in the world, I shall never again cross its threshold."

For a space Martha's antagonist stood irresolute, then perhaps the set of the face opposite convinced her in the same way that it had convinced Muder Coghen.

"Very well," she said grudgingly; "I shall send for him. But don't imagine that you will speak to him alone. I shall stop in the room all the time."

Martha having vouchsafed no answer, she went out and, to her guest's unbounded relief, refrained from returning.

With head held high, but empty-looking eyes, the girl sat staring before her, immovable. It seemed to herself that only by maintaining this rigidity would she be able

to maintain her self-control. Also by refraining from thinking. How long she had sat there she never was able to compute; but during the entire interval expectation seemed to be mysteriously suspended, her brain scarcely to be working. All her attention seemed to be absorbed by the lizards on the wall and by a drowned beetle in one of the miniature water-tanks at the foot of one of the table legs.

When the door opened at last, she did not know whether she had sat there for hours or only for minutes.

A man came in, closely followed by her pink and yellow enemy. Henrik—yes, of course it was Henrik, in white clothes and with white dust upon his black hair; but it was not exactly the Henrik she had parted from three months ago, rather the one whom she had first noted at the Schneeliberg table d'hôte, with his coat hanging loose upon him and the blue shade under his eyes. With a pang of pure pity she realised the change for the worse. So it would seem that Schneeliberg had not done for him what it had done for her! As she met his abject eyes the pity turned to something else, not easy to define at the moment. The sun-helmet he held in his hand was visibly jerking, and his lips, too, jerked, almost convulsively, although he was not even trying to speak. It was the young person at his side who opened the interview.

“Here he is!” she said, hooking her substantial arm into his with a gesture which might stand for a formal taking of possession. “You shall hear what you want. Henrik, tell her that we are married! She will not believe me, I don't know why!”

Still he did not attempt to speak. His eyes, full of all sorts of wild wonders and wild prayers, were fixed

upon Martha, who had risen and stood gazing hard at him intently, her lips firmly compressed.

"Tell her!" urged the woman at his side. "She will not go if you do not tell her."

"Yes, tell me," said Martha, stepping forward. "I only require one word. Is it true that you are married to—that one?" jerking her chin in the required direction. "That is what she asserts. Is she telling lies, or speaking the truth? Which? But quickly, please!"

His shaking right hand, armed with a silk handkerchief, went up to his forehead, from which it wiped a sweat which seemed to have broken out there since his entry into the room.

"She is speaking the truth," he said, in a small, abject voice, while his eyes, grown wilder, hung upon her face, trying to say other things which could not now be put into words.

Martha paused for a moment, as though to steady herself.

"And yet you let me come out from Europe?"

There was no emotion discernible in her voice. Only by keeping her nerves taut could she avoid the humiliation of a breakdown under the eyes of that dreadful pink-clad woman.

"I wrote—to put you off," he stammered miserably. "The letter must have missed you."

"Apparently."

There was a moment's silence, then Martha said in a tone that almost succeeded in being conversational:

"That is all I wanted to know. I suppose I had better be going. That is the way out, is it not?"

She walked towards the outer door, moving as circumspectly, and measuring her distances as carefully, as

does the drunkard who is just sober enough to recognise his condition.

At the door she turned, with a sudden recollection, and began pulling off the opal ring upon her finger.

"I was forgetting this. Your husband gave it me—as an engagement-ring. No doubt you will like to wear it."

Then as Leenebet, stonily silent, made no movement towards taking the ring held out:

"To be sure, it isn't likely to fit your finger."

This with a deliberate look at the enormous pink hands issuing from the pink sleeves, and of which one would certainly have amply provided material for two of her own—as Henrik had once remarked. Did he remember? As she glanced at him now, Martha actually achieved a smile as of mutual comprehension.

Laying the ring upon the nearest table, she picked her way across the verandah and down the steps, feeling distinctly relieved. Ever since the simile of the pin-cushion had occurred to her, her fingers had been itching to stick a pin into it, and now she believed that she had succeeded.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ORANG-BLANDA.

LONG before the *sado* reached the outskirts of the town, the abrupt tropical sunset had brought down upon the landscape the first veils of night. When, under cover of these veils, Martha regained the Hotel Coghen, she had actually not yet begun to think out her situation. That

mysterious and probably merciful stoppage of the brain machinery still persisted. As yet she did not feel like breaking down. She was aware indeed that somewhere close at hand a great unhappiness was hovering; but she must not give it audience, nor even look it in the face until she was alone in the little whitewashed room that was so like a cell. Towards its privacy she began to yearn as towards a haven.

But between her and it there was still Muder Coghen—Muder Coghen, with briskness increased by the cool of the evening and brimming over with concern for the fate of her somewhat eccentric guest. Had she really returned alive from her adventurous expedition? As though anyone had ever heard of an *Orang-Baru* (new-comer) going out for a drive before four o'clock on the very day of landing! Well, Heaven was merciful—sometimes. And what was her next desire? Something to eat, no doubt. Dinner would be served at eight o'clock punctually, but perhaps the Freule would prefer some rice to be sent to her room, "For you will be wanting the room for the night, will you not?"

"Yes; I shall be wanting the room for the night," said Martha mechanically.

"I thought you would. Well, I will send the rice. And then there is the entry for the police-register to fill up. It should have been done already. Just your name and station and where you came from. It is the regulation. But that can stand over till to-morrow. You look tired, dear me! How tired you do look to be sure!" exclaimed Muder Coghen, as the light fell more fully upon Martha's strained face.

"Yes, I am tired," repeated Martha, in the same

parrot-like fashion. "I should like to go to my room, please."

Having reached her room, she shut the door behind her with a decisive movement, unheedful of the fact that she was shutting out the precious evening air which her neighbours in their rocking-chairs were greedily drinking in. It was the only way to shut in the sound of the sobs which already she felt rising in her throat.

Though it was nearly quite dark she refrained from lighting the petroleum lamp upon the table. Taking off her hat she groped her way to the bed, and for the second time to-day threw herself upon it, not to sleep, but to indulge in the luxury of that "good cry" whose necessity had become imminent. Everything else must stand over until this need was absolved. Nothing could even be quite realised until this load on her heart was lifted.

Soon, her face buried in the pillow, she was sobbing with a vehemence which made her whole body both ache and heave. She was weeping as people weep who stand beside an open grave—almost it seemed to herself that she was standing thus, throwing handfuls of earth upon the coffin of the man by whose side she had watched the sunset at Schneeliberg, the man from whom she had parted on the platform of the Ballenweem station.

The violence of her sobs, exhausting her physically, brought its own remedy. Presently, unaware of what was happening to her, she had cried herself to sleep.

Possibly, if left to herself, she might have slept there till morning; but her second spell of slumber was doomed to be broken in upon, as had been the first, though in different fashion. This time it was no hoarse, scolding

voice which aroused her, but a discreet whisper close at hand, seconded by a gentle plucking at her sleeve.

"What is it?" she asked dreamily, opening heavy eyes upon the Malayan handmaiden told off to her personal service, and who, by a process of wriggling, had introduced herself under the mosquito-net.

Once more the sense of amazement at her surroundings, followed by the shock of realisation—how much more cruelly poignant this time than the last!—had to be undergone.

"What is it?" she repeated sharply.

The answer was, of course, unintelligible; not so the pantomime of beckoning and pointing doorwards, which clearly invited her in that direction.

"*Orang-Blanda*," repeated the handmaiden, as, wriggling herself free of the mosquito-net, she beckoned towards the door.

Martha knew the word to be an equivalent for "European"; but what had she to do with any European here?

Looking at her watch by the light of the petroleum lamp which the brown handmaiden had had the forethought to light, she perceived that it was long past the dinner-hour—nearly ten o'clock. She had slept for more than two hours. What could anyone be wanting of her just now? Ah, by the way, had not her hostess said something about a police regulation? Perhaps it was an official of some sort come for the register.

Reluctantly Martha rose from the bed, and having rapidly smoothed her tumbled hair, and dabbed her eyes with water, followed her guide down the wooden steps and along the gravelled walk, whose deep shadow was sharply cut by broad bands of light from off the veran-

dahs. There were steps and voices at every turning, and laughter echoing among the bushes. Night had brought to the leafy walk a life which the daylight had not known.

It was to the chief pavilion that her barefooted guide led Martha, up another set of steps and across a broader and more important-looking verandah, where lamps stood upon the tables and where the same people who had lounged through the morning in dressing-gowns and py-jamas were now displaying evening frocks and coats.

The room within, on to which three doors opened, might stand for a cross-breed between a public drawing-room and a reading-room. The long and rather narrow space was lighted by shaded lamps and furnished with wicker chairs and tables, the latter littered with newspapers. At this hour of resuscitated out-of-door life it was usually empty. It was so just now but for one solitary figure pacing the floor restlessly. Towards him the brown maiden pointed before turning to whisk out again by one of the open doors.

From the far end of the room the solitary promenader was coming towards Martha, with a hurried yet halting step. Owing to the distribution of light she did not recognise him until he was a few paces from her.

"Henrik!"

In a breathless whisper the name had rushed over her lips. He still wore the crumpled linen suit she had seen him in that afternoon, and the dust still powdered his black hair. Martha stared at him, honestly amazed. This possibility had not even presented itself to her mind. She had verily believed that the last sight she had had of him—with Leenebet's pink arm linked into his—would remain the last sight. He was lost to her—

so she believed—so everything seemed to say. Yet, seeing him again here and now, a wild hope sprang up in her heart.

“You have come to tell me that it is all a lie?” she exclaimed upon unreflecting impulse, “that the whole thing has been a ghastly comedy? You have come to explain?”

As he stood two paces from her, gazing at her with those mournful brown eyes of his that were now more than ever like the eyes of a stricken deer, his whole figure drooped as though he were about to fall at her feet. What alone restrained him was probably the murmur of voices upon the verandah. A room with three open doors to it is scarcely the place for a “scene,” as, even in the depth of his distress, he felt.

Twice the tip of his tongue passed over his dry lips before he succeeded in saying:

“I have come to explain—yes.”

He spoke in a hushed voice, looking shyly about him. “Must it be here? We shall be disturbed. Would not the garden——”

For one moment Martha wavered, then, warned by the over-great eagerness on his face, took her decision.

“Whatever you have to say must be said here. If you are afraid of an interruption, you had better lose no time. Over there we shall be private enough.”

She led the way towards the end of the room and sat down resolutely, or at any rate with an outward show of resolution, which did almost as well.

Before taking place upon the seat to which she pointed, Henrik seemed once more on the point of sinking to his knees, but a quick movement of her hand stopped him.

"None of that, please, Henrik! I mean Mynheer Klaas. I am waiting to hear what you have to say—though I cannot imagine what that may be. You tell me that you have come to explain. There is only one thing that I want explained. What does the scene of this afternoon mean? Are you married to that woman, or are you not?"

For all answer he flung himself down upon the second chair, his arm thrust over the back and his face buried in it.

At the sight the last spark of hope died within Martha. Though wordless, the confession of guilt was too plain to be misread. Instantly her bearing stiffened. The quiver of excitement died out of her voice, leaving it cold and measured.

"Then it was not a lie, after all? You *are* married to her?"

He looked up with beseeching eyes, of which the white gleamed strangely in the lamplight. Perhaps owing to the green shades his pallor seemed almost ghastly, and she could see the shine of moisture upon his forehead.

"That is just what I want to explain—what I could not rest without explaining—how I came to be married to her. Of course, in your eyes, I must appear to be a traitor."

"And are you not one?" asked Martha, with a jerk of her upper lip.

"In one sense of the word I suppose I am. And yet it was for your sake as much as for my own that I—took the step I have taken."

"For my sake?"

"Yes," he said plaintively. "You see, Martha—let me call you Martha this once more!—when we parted at

Ballenweem—oh! that unforgettable day!—nothing was further from my mind than to break my word to you. My courage for facing the future was as high as your own. With you by my side not all the arguments of your stepfather could shake my resolve. But then came the voyage—the long, weary voyage all alone among a crowd of strangers. And now these arguments pressed back upon me, and for four dreary weeks kept working within me. It was now only that I began to weigh and measure them, discovering by degrees much reason behind what had at first appeared to me to be overdone prudence. Fears for the future—for *your* future, Martha, far more than for my own—began to weigh upon me. Had I the right to accept the sacrifice you were making—to tear you from the safe haven of your home in order to carry you out upon the uncertain sea of my existence? Also I caught a chill on board, and the cough came back again. This could not but increase my doubts. My health was, after all, my only capital, and, if that were to fail me permanently, what was to become of us—of you? Your stepfather had called our marriage an absurd venture. To my own eyes it began now to appear absurd.”

He paused and looked at her deprecatingly. But Martha stared straight in front of her, not unlocking her lips. It was evident that he was to get no assistance in the telling of his tale.

Outside on the verandah someone laughed, almost as though struck by the absurdity in question, and therefore not quite inappropriately—as it seemed to Martha—and about the lamps moths were fluttering. Henrik sighed deeply and pursued his tale.

“In this state of mind I disembarked, asking myself whether it were not my duty to set you free, my heart

torn between the anguish of losing you and the dread of spoiling your life. And then——”

He stopped again, playing nervously with one of the buttons of his coat.

“Go on!” said Martha, without stirring.

“And then Mynheer Van Hagen sent for me on the morrow of my arrival, and told me of the discovery which he had made in my absence. An advantageous offer of marriage which his daughter had in this interval refused had helped him to it. Pressed for her reasons she had confessed the truth—that she loved me, and would hear of no other husband. That the discovery did not please him he told me frankly. He had begun by resisting her wishes; but Leenebet is his only child, and he had ended by yielding. Perhaps he also put some value upon my training as a planter and my knowledge of the estate. In one word, he offered me the hand of his daughter.”

“I see. And you accepted?”

“Not at once!” he protested, in a tone almost of aggrivement. “Oh no, certainly not at once. Even though half resolved already to make the great sacrifice, I shrank back affrighted at thought of the irrevocable. My first impulse was to refuse—and I followed it. It was a most painful interview.”

“And would it not have been less painful if you had mentioned to him the trifle of your engagement? That course does not seem to have occurred to you.”

Henrik hung his black head, while the nervous movements of his fingers grew more rapid.

“It did occur to me—of course, but something held me back. I was still hesitating, you see, as to what I should do ultimately.”

“And therefore wished to keep the door open—exactly,”

said Martha, in a voice that cut like a knife; "both doors open, in fact, since there was no change in your letters, and since you still went on with the farce of discussing all our arrangements."

"It was no farce, Martha, I assure you that it was not! Each time a letter of yours came my courage revived. I felt anew that I could not give you up, and my answer was written in this mood. I was deceiving the Van Hagens—yes; but there was no thought of deceiving you."

The look of childlike candour in the liquid brown eyes was almost convincing; but Martha—though she knew that look well—was in no mood for mercy.

"Strange that you should have succeeded so well where you took so little thought."

"I am not excusing myself," he said humbly, "I am only explaining. No one will ever know what agony of mind I went through during those weeks—how strong I felt at one moment, how weak in the next. And my position, too, had become almost untenable, for Leenebet's face was a continual reproach, and Van Hagen himself could not forgive me for having dared to refuse the honour he had stooped to offer me. One day it was borne in upon me that my marriage with you would entail immediate dismissal; it was only as a son of the house that I could hope to stay on. On that day my courage broke down, and without giving myself time for further reflection I went to Van Hagen and told him that if Leenebet would still have me I would marry her at once. In this way only could an effectual barrier be placed between us, and you be protected from your own generosity. From Leenebet I was accepting no sacrifice, since she would not even have to leave her father's

house. Whatever happened, she would always be well provided for."

"And you, too, would be well provided for."

"I could not help that," said Henrik, with that same look of candour accentuated by distress. "But it was not that which moved me. I was thinking only of you."

"And had I not a right to be consulted regarding my own future?"

"But, Martha—since I tell you that it was against your own self that I wished to protect you! Of course I knew what you would say. You would have answered me in the way you answered me at Schneeliberg when together we watched the sunset, and I told you about the youth in the *Alang-Alang* grass. Even then the doubts were upon me; but you cut them down with the *kris* of your courage and for the time I thought they were conquered; but once I was alone the *Alang-Alang* caught me again by the feet and by the hands."

For a moment there was silence while he sat with bowed head. The verandah seemed, by this time, deserted, and only the moths still softly beat their wings around the lamps.

Then Martha spoke, her voice still hard:

"You might at least have managed to warn me in time. It would seem to have been the occasion for a cable."

"If I had supposed that the letter would not reach you I would, of course, have cabled. It was the gales that upset my calculations. And in a cable it would have been impossible to explain. It could only have frightened without enlightening you."

"Well, I am enlightened now," she said, with a short laugh. "I think I have clearly grasped the position."

"What are you going to do?" he asked earnestly. "You will go back to your home at once, of course?"

"I don't yet know what I am going to do. I haven't had time to think yet. This has been rather sudden."

This time a groan was his only reply.

"I have one more question to ask: I gather that, even married, you made no avowal to your—wife?"

Henrik hung his head a little lower. "What would have been the good?"

"I see. No wonder she took me for an impostor. But you have explained matters to her now, I presume?"

"I have had to explain something, of course. I think she understands."

Martha's nostrils dilated.

"You don't seem to have explained much. Is it with her knowledge that you are here?"

"No, no!" he said precipitately. "She knows nothing of my coming. She might have misunderstood. She thinks I am at the offices; I told her lies, I had to, because I had to come, Martha. *That* could not have been our parting! One moment more I had to steal of Fate—one little moment just between ourselves—without witnesses!"

Martha glanced at his face and rose abruptly. She had realised that the verandah was untenanted, and she, therefore, alone with this man who apparently still loved her.

"Well, you have had that moment. If I had known this was a clandestine visit you would not even have had that. You had better go now. I know all that I wanted to know. Good night!"

He too was on his feet by now.

"Is this to be your last word, Martha? So short—so

cold! And your hand? You will let me touch it once more—only touch it, in token of forgiveness! Remember how I always said that I was not worthy of you!”

He looked so humble, and also so ill, that for a moment Martha's attitude almost wavered. It was his eyes that warned her—too ardent by far—almost too audacious for the pleading voice and deprecating smile. She remembered the conflagration lit by the meeting of their hands on the day of the gorgeous sunset, and instinctively put hers behind her back.

“No,” she said, hardening both her heart and her voice. “There is no need for sentimental leave-taking. You had better go at once, before you are missed—before you are followed. What is that?”

He turned his head to listen as she did.

On the gravel of the approach the sound of wheels was clearly audible. Across a strip of light a hooded vehicle became for one moment visible, to be swallowed into the adjoining shadow where a moment later the wheels stopped abruptly.

Martha turned back to Henrik with an almost wicked smile upon her lips. “I believe you are followed already.”

His thin face had turned of a tallow-like pallor, against which the shadows under the eyes appeared blue.

“No, no!” he stammered, with uncertain tongue. “Surely not! How should she have guessed?”

“How should she not have guessed? Did you suppose that that story about the offices would have blinded any woman—even the stupidest of them?”

“But she does not know even what hotel you are at!”

“She does. She saw the address upon the envelope of your letter which I showed her.”

“A—y!”

It was a sharp exclamation of distress which he uttered, looking about him wildly the while, as though in search of a hiding-place.

“What are you going to do? Run for it?”

He had actually started forward, when, outside, steps became audible. Motionless, he now stood, looking from one door to the other, and Martha did the same, with no doubt in her mind as to what was coming. Voices were heard on the deserted verandah—a question and an answer—there was a vision of one of the brown hand-maidens retreating down the steps, and immediately afterwards the central entrance was darkened by a figure whose outline Martha immediately recognised. She could even catch a glimpse of the pink dress under the light cloak thrown over it, and met the blue goggle-eyes full as they strained into the room. Despite the shaded lights, they did not take long to discover what they searched for.

With a cry of rage she ran forward.

“I knew it! I knew it!”

Already she had hooked her arm into Henrik's with the very gesture of the afternoon; then, her flushed face crumpled up to the resemblance of a fiery rag, turned upon Martha.

“Ah, you baggage! You have lured him to this! You thought you could regain him. But he is mine, I tell you—mine! And nothing will ever make me give him up. Get you away, out of honest people's sight—adventuress that you are!—or I shall send for the police. We do not suffer vagabonds in this country.”

As the words tumbled out over each other Martha, for a space, stood aghast. That word “baggage” had

struck her like a slap in the face. It was her first personal experience of brutality, and proportionately disconcerting. Under the impression she turned first very red, then very white, while looking towards Henrik, as though demanding justice. But Henrik too appeared to have been stunned into silence by the torrent of invective—first English and then Dutch—pouring from Leenebet's lips. There was a distressing want of subtlety about her mode of attack, as well as about her adjectives, which belonged entirely to the sledge-hammer order. The veneer of culture acquired in Europe must have been pretty thin, to judge from the ease with which, under excitement, it peeled off.

It took a minute or so for Henrik to recover at least a portion of his presence of mind. With a beseechingly raised hand he endeavoured to stem the torrent.

"Hush, Leenebet! There may be listeners!"

"There is nobody outside; everybody is gone to bed—all the *respectable* people, that is to say"—with a renewed glare at Martha—"and, besides, I don't care who hears. *I* have nothing to fear."

"I swear to you that my visit to Miss Grant was purely a visit of—explanation. If you would only listen——"

"I will listen to nothing here," said Leenebet, still almost foaming at the mouth. "Come along home!"

By the way he staggered it was evident that she was weighing persuasively upon his arm.

But Martha stepped forward, having by this time succeeded in shaking off the worst of her bewilderment. Her own quiet astonished herself. The more Leenebet raised her voice the more did she feel inclined to lower her own. A very little "answering back" would let the scene

degenerate into a vulgar squabble, and from that idea she shrank with horror.

"Not so quickly, please! We are not quite done with the explanations yet. There is another which your husband has to make. Mynheer Klaas, will you please be so kind as to explain to your wife that she is suffering under a delusion, and that I am neither a 'baggage' nor any of those other charming things she has been calling me. Is that so, or not?"

"It is so," stammered Henrik, gathering together his whole fund of moral courage in order to meet the infuriated gaze bent upon him.

"Also that my voyage to Java is not a pursuit, as she is amiable enough to deduct, but the carrying out of the plan we had made in common—this plan being that we were to be married this very morning. Is that so again?"

"Yes," murmured the unhappy man, giving up the attempt to brave his wife's eyes.

"And that I arrived here in absolute ignorance of the marriage which you had meanwhile thought fit to contract?"

"Yes, yes!" groaned Henrik.

Martha glanced over him, then towards Leenebet, who had been trying to speak, but had only succeeded in choking.

"You had better take him away now. I am done with him."

Now Leenebet spoke, with a splutter:

"Of course I am going to take him away! He belongs to me now—whatever may have gone before. And you shall never get him back again—never!"

"Do you suppose I want him back?" asked Martha,

sending a last pin-prick after the human pincushion, who already was dragging her captive towards the exit.

Even as she said it, Martha, to her own surprise, discovered that she was speaking the truth.

She actually did not want him back.

CHAPTER X.

GEK-KO!

“GEK-KO! Gek-ko!”

“Buzz—buzz!”

“Quack! Quack!”

“Hum—hum!”

“Hoo-oo!”

“Buzz—buzz!”

“Chirp! Chirp!”

“Gek-ko!”

Let this stand for a very imperfect rendering of the sounds which seasoned Martha's first night in Java—that long, interminable, dreadful night that was to have been her wedding-night.

Animal noises all of them, and essentially night noises; for it is only after dark that the orchestra of frogs and crickets tunes up; while the vagabond dogs known as *gladekkers*, and whose long-drawn howl suggested wolves, dare only hunt for refuse—in hotel compounds by preference—under the cover of darkness. The most obtrusive of these noises, that periodically recurring “Gek-ko,” ending in a vibration as of a broken 'cello chord, came from a large lizard-like creature squatted beside the grating above the door, from whence it

stretched its head at intervals as far into the room as the length of its clumsy neck would allow, in order to turn its big black eyes inquisitively upon the human inhabitant.

It was the longest night Martha had ever known, and—with one single exception—the longest she was ever to know. Though she occasionally lay down upon her narrow bed it was only with the object of shutting out the ubiquitous mosquito plague.

The time for a review of the situation had arrived, and necessarily this review must be exhaustive. It surprised herself that there should not be more actual pain about the process, though a dull ache ran like an under-current through all her reflections. Grief was there, of course; but anger and wounded pride spoke so much louder than grief that they almost drowned its voice. She mourned indeed for Henrik, but only for the Henrik she had known at Schneeliberg. For that other Henrik whom she had seen to-day—Leenebet's husband and her possession—she had nothing but scorn, just chequered with pity.

From the moment when she had seen him standing by Leenebet's side, with the fat, pink arm hooked into his, Martha had regained the power of looking at him dispassionately. In doing so she had made discoveries. For one thing she had traced to its source that sense of familiarity with which the brown eyes of the Malays had touched her. No wonder, seeing that Henrik had just the same soft brown eyes! Malayan eyes?

As she put to herself the question, there flashed through her mind that other question launched by George Fettes and which had caused the break with her "pal."

"Sure his blood is all white?" George had blurted out, in his downright fashion.

How indignant she had been, and how prejudiced she had thought him! But now new lights were breaking. It was not the first she had heard of the contamination of European blood in the tropics, and in three generations grown up upon Java—by Henrik's own showing—there would probably have arisen channels through which a drop of brown blood had been able to flow into the originally Dutch veins. Might that not be the explanation of the brown eyes—and of other things besides?—of his grace of movement, for instance, so essentially un-Dutch. Henrik himself had had another explanation? He had spoken of the influence of climate. But had he not been a trifle too anxious over it?—a little too suspiciously emphatic about asserting his unmixed Dutch origin?

Under the new light it almost appeared to Martha so.

In another moment she laughed aloud almost hysterically. It had just occurred to her that if this surmise was correct, and if she had married Henrik, it might easily have happened to her to have brown, or at least brownish, babies. Now, of course, it was Leenebet who would have the brown babies. How was it possible not to be tickled by this suggestion?

"*Gek-ko!*" put in the beast above the door, with another poke of its head and another inquisitive look at the creature upon the bed who was emitting such unusual sounds, so different from the other night noises.

Martha turned her head impatiently upon the pillow in order to avoid those aggressive black eyes. Before attempting to grapple with the situation, she must succeed in understanding how it had come about.

Nor was this difficult. She could see no reason for

doubting Henrik's story. Yes, it had probably happened in that way. The man she had seen this afternoon was just the man to yield to circumstances. Given his want of that quality of doggedness which familiarity with her own countrymen had led her to expect, almost as a matter of course, in anything that called itself a man, there was actually a good deal to be said for his point of view, even for his course of action, all save his failure to warn her in time. She was dispassionate enough to recognise this. For, admitting the fact that the revelation of his engagement would mean the loss of his situation, this in itself—taken together with his physical relapse—would have tenfold increased the risks to be taken. To be sure, another sort of man—the sort of man, for instance, that George Fettes was—would have shown more bull-dog tenacity, would at least have made a fight for it. But not the mournful-eyed youth she had seen that evening. In the sincerity of his motives it was quite possible to believe. He had not been faithless in the vulgar sense of the word; it was only that circumstances had overpowered him; as the *Alang-Alang* grass had overpowered that other youth in the fable.

And that belated letter? What had become of it? It must have arrived almost immediately after her departure. It would be as well to recover it.

So much for the past.

And now for the future. It was this, in especial, which had to be faced without delay.

"What are you going to do?" Henrik had said, and within her brain the question echoed:

"What am I going to do?"

Henrik had further said:

"I suppose you will go home at once?"

Unquestionably this was the obvious thing. Yet, even while acknowledging this, Martha—below the threshold of consciousness, as it were—knew already that she was not going to do it. Even to glance at this so simple solution of the situation was to stir up that sense of rebellion which never lay far below the surface of her mind. Every memory of the past months seemed to rise up and bar the homeward road, beginning with that first after-dinner interview with her parents on the day of her return from Schneeliberg, and going on to the torrent of warning received from almost every individual among their circle of acquaintances. "You'll rue it!" her stepfather had said, shaking his spectacled head at her. Was she to acknowledge humbly that she actually did rue her own headstrong action?

"Rank folly!" "A jump in the dark!"—the too audible whispers had gone round the company. And Martha to confess that the folly really had been rank, and that, jumping short, she had landed in a quagmire? It was not a line of conduct which corresponded either to the mould or to the poise of her chin.

"I told you so!"

With the ears of her fancy Martha could hear the greeting which Ballenweem *en masse* would give to the returned prodigal. A caricature of the parable, that is what her home-coming would be, and probably with the fatted calf left out. Unless perhaps George Fettes killed it—George Fettes, who had actually dared to give her a warning which rankled all the more for proving to be well founded.

"No, I cannot go home!" said Martha aloud, setting her teeth with a defiant click.

What was the alternative?

"Hoo-oo!"

"Buzz-buzz!"

"Gek-ko!"

If only that detestable animal above the door would hold its tongue!—and not stare so shamelessly! Martha threw a vindictive glance towards the grating, where, by the flame of the night light upon the table, she could distinguish the dark, lizard-like form and the inquisitive black eyes. So human did they seem in their interest that they acted almost as an intrusion upon her privacy. Just then, too, the indoor air seemed to become abruptly unbreathable. She put her hand to her forehead, and found it streaming with perspiration. Flinging herself off the bed she took refuge on her bit of verandah, and there sank into the gently creaking rocking-chair.

Some of the night noises—among them the howl of the foraging *gladekkers*—were louder here, yet only seemed to enhance the surrounding stillness. The place was wrapped in slumber, night arrivals being unknown at the Hotel Coghén. Between the big, motionless leaves of the trees close at hand big stars could be spied, shining like lamps.

Here, rocking and fanning herself, Martha repeated her own question:

"What is the alternative?"

There seemed to be only one: to stay where she was. Ah, but how?

Though she did not know it, another force besides mere rebellion was working within her. What! Return to her dreary home life from which she had thought to escape for ever? Go back to Ballenweem and to turnip-fields after the glimpse she had had of palms and bamboos? Inattentive though she had been to her surround-

ings their beauty had, nevertheless, insinuated itself into her consciousness. Only vaguely was she aware of moving in a fairyland, and yet she was aware of it. Ah, how good it would be to stay on here!—to explore these new wonders! But was it feasible? At first sight it did not seem so. She had not one friend in Java, and—beyond her fellow-travellers, from whom she had parted definitely—not even an acquaintance. Her funds, too, were alarmingly small. To write home for money would, under the circumstances, be impossible. Followed, therefore, that the only way of carrying on existence here would be by earning her own bread. But how? How? How?

Like an exceedingly thorny hedge without an opening, the question confronted Martha.

The teaching of English was the only thing that occurred to her, since she had not been trained as a governess, had not so much as an "Oxford Junior" to produce. But did anyone want to learn English here?

Or—in default of her brains—might not her needle prove a stay? She had always been clever at making her own clothes—been clever altogether with her fingers—why should she succeed worse with the clothes of other people? Agencies must exist at Batavia, and then there was that English consul of whom the ship's officer had reminded her. Him she considered for a moment, and then rejected. For the first thing the consul would do would be to find out that she was not of age, and therefore the second thing would be to try and send her home to her stepfather and guardian. No, she had better keep clear of the consul. Who else was there? Why, Muder Coghén, of course. The rotund hostess had the very look of an ark of salvation. Why should she not know of some possible situation? Anything was better than going

back to Ballenweem—jilted, and after having been called a “baggage”! It almost seemed to Martha as though the echo of that ignominious word must have reached as far as Scotland, across the whole breadth of the Indian Ocean. This way, at least, she would not have to face Mrs. Digby’s pitying smile nor Mrs. Jobwell’s triumphant glare, nor her own mother’s tearful joy at the unexpected reunion.

At this point Martha rose as abruptly as though stung by one of the buzzing insects, and began to pace restlessly about.

Her mother!

What would the carrying out of this dawning resolve mean to her? Whether she braved out the truth in her letters or simply disappeared, burying herself in silence, her mother would suffer—cruelly. And she had suffered cruelly already. It was only now that Martha had got a proper hold upon that fact, maybe because to-day she had had her first sip out of the cup of sorrow. Which-ever of these two courses she pursued, the failure of her marriage would be manifest; so in either case the mother’s heart would be torn, either by certainty or by uncertainty—while, of course, her own disgrace would become a public matter.

“Quack! qua-ack!”

“Buzz—buzz!”

“Ho-ooh!”

Martha, as she paced about the verandah, fanning herself violently, was thinking so intensely that the animal voices scarcely penetrated to her consciousness.

Suddenly she stood still, arrested by a thought as by the grip of a hand.

Why need her disgrace become a public matter? *Why* need her mother’s heart be torn so cruelly? There

was another way of doing the thing—the way of concealing facts, of pretending that all had gone off as planned, in one word, of playing the farce of being married to Henrik Van Klaas. Who was to find her out, at this distance, and seeing the complete absence of controlling acquaintances? She had only to tell them that she was married, and how should they doubt?

With a new vivacity of movement, she went down the wooden steps on to the gravelled walk. The thinking out of this required more space than the verandah could afford.

Slowly, under the night stars, the fantastic plan began to take shape in her mind. Soon she was at the details. She would have to begin by cabling, for a cable on the accomplishment of the marriage had been stipulated for. Even so, that would come a day later than expected. But to-morrow the message must go, and, of course, it would have to be signed: Martha Van Klaas. Here she laughed again aloud, and then broke off, remembering her sleeping neighbours.

But that was not nearly all. Here, too, she would have to call herself Van Klaas, else the letters from Scotland would not reach her. Martha stood still to frown thoughtfully at a frog traversing the walk. Was that feasible? After all, why not? No one knew her name here yet. She was sure she had not mentioned it to Muder Coghén. How fortunate that the police register had not yet been filled in! How fortunate, too, that Van Klaas was so common a name! Only Henrik and Leenebet knew her as Miss Grant, and she would run no risk of meeting them again. For, of course, the occupation she sought for would lie out of Batavia; which neighboured too closely with Mynheer Van Hagen's tobacco

plantation. Fortunately Java was big, and owned more than one prosperous town at which a teacher or a dress-maker might be wanted.

Her letter home, which must be written without delay, would be a problem. She would have to invent—good Lord!—how she would have to invent! Well, then, she would just invent. Her imagination felt equal to the task. They *should* believe in her happiness? Yes, they *should*! It seemed the next best thing to having attained that happiness.

Martha threw up her head and stuck out her chin. She had worked herself up to a mood in which she felt equal even to grappling with Fate. No, she would not lie down, like those weak-kneed people who perished in the *Podjagalan*, for, by some untraceable train of thought, the "Valley of Death" had come to her mind.

"I'm always for keeping my head in the air and my feet on the ground," she had said to Henrik on the day they had discussed the subject; and just now she was holding her head as high as though she were keeping it clear of the poisonous ground gases. Henrik, poor man, had lain down and been suffocated morally. But not so Martha.

"I hate giving in!" she had likewise said. Nor did she mean to give in now.

Native obstinacy, provoked by circumstances, was chiefly responsible for the resolution taken; but there was something besides. Leenebet, in her clumsy fashion, had perhaps, after all, hit a nail upon the head when she used the word "adventuress." For without a certain innate leaning to adventure the resolution was not quite thinkable.

"I shall do it!" said Martha aloud, as, worn out with

fatigue, she regained her white-washed cell, in the hope of snatching some rest.

"*Gek-ko!*" replied the creature above the door, taking another look at the creature upon the bed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BURNING OF THE SHIPS.

MARTHA was composing the cable message next morning when Muder Coghen rolled into the room as briskly as a cheerful barrel brimming over with some stimulating liquor.

"The registry entry!" she announced, on the top of a high-toned "good morning!" "It mustn't be delayed another hour if I'm to escape a fine."

And she slapped down a printed form hard by Martha's travelling blotting-book.

"Your name and your station in life, and the place you come from; and the place you're going to: you've only got to look at the headings!"

With a stumpy finger she indicated the places.

Martha's pen was in her hand, but remained for a moment poised in mid-air. During that moment she had the very vivid impression of standing at the parting of the ways. In the next she had set her teeth, and, with a defiant flourish of her pen, had, in resolute characters, put down the entirely fictitious name of: "*Mevrouw Martha Klaas.*"

"*Mevrouw?*" repeated Muder Coghen, who was looking over her shoulder in frank curiosity. "You don't mean to say that you are married?"

"Why should I not be married? I am nearly twenty."

The impression that Martha had this time was of having burnt her ships. She could almost smell the smoke of the conflagration.

Muder Coghen glanced over her with kindly but rather penetrating eyes, as though gauging the points of the slight, girlish figure.

"You don't *look* married," she bluntly observed. "And, besides, I had the impression that the gentleman who called on you last night asked for a Freule—something or other."

"That may be," said Martha, feeling her very ears grow hot. "He—he did not know of my marriage."

"And the lady also, who came after him as Adinda told me."

The landlady broke off, but her eyes continued to explore Martha's perturbed face. This strangely isolated young guest of hers had awakened not only Muder Coghen's curiosity but also her sympathy. That letter yesterday as well as the drive of the afternoon had been remarkable enough, and, on the top of them, the two visits of the evening! Muder Coghen did not at all know what to make of it all. Some of the circumstances verged on the suspicious; but the landlady was one of those persons who are apt to go by instinct rather than by circumstances, and instinct told her that there was nothing fundamentally wrong here.

"So you have a husband?" she said, by way of falling in with Martha's own account of herself.

Then tentatively:

"It's a pity he isn't here to take care of you."

Martha reflected, while drawing lines upon her blotting-paper.

"My husband is dead, Mevrouw Coghen; I am a widow."

For obvious reasons this was the most convenient version, since it disposed of the contingency of being called upon to produce the husband. Besides, it was nearly true, since Henrik had nearly become her husband, and was virtually dead to her henceforth.

"A widow at twenty! Poor dear! You must feel lonely indeed!"

But in spite of strenuous efforts Muder Coghen could not keep the scepticism out of her voice.

"It's not particularly likely that they will ask to look at your papers," she remarked reflectively, "though they sometimes do that."

Martha bent over her blotting-book in order to hide her dismay. She had not thought of this difficulty.

"I have lost my papers," she said firmly. "I lost them on the voyage."

"That's a pity!" said the landlady, not looking a bit surprised. "But I daresay they won't want them. Is that form filled in?"

"Not quite. You see, I don't know at all what place I am going to."

"Don't you?" asked Muder Coghen, with curiosity once more taking a front seat.

"No; that is just what I have been wanting to talk to you about."

"To me?"

"I have been wondering whether you could give me any advice about finding occupation either as English teacher or as dressmaker. You see, I have been disappointed about—about something I had counted upon; and I have to make other arrangements, and quickly too,

for I have very little money left. Do you not know of any place where I could give English lessons? But not in Batavia, as far away from here as possible, in fact."

She spoke quickly, and rather shamefacedly, stumbling over her words, and ended with her eyes hanging on Muder Coghen's face in rather pathetic fashion.

That foolish old woman had actually to blink away a little moisture.

"And can't you go back again, my dear, to where you came from?—to your home if you have one?"

"No; that is quite out of the question."

The landlady, recognising the tone, refrained from pursuing the subject.

Instead, she began to rub her button-like source of inspiration, but, for the moment, could rub nothing more out of it than a question as to whether Martha had had real dressmaking lessons.

"Indeed I have. And I have a sewing-machine of my own," Martha was beginning, when, alongside, there arose a sudden clamour, in which the hoarse tones which yesterday's episode had made familiar, played a dominant part.

"Great heavens! Mevrouw Van Kempen!" was the dismayed exclamation with which Muder Coghen bustled from the room, towards the scene of action.

Martha, following her, was just in time to see a couple of Malayan servant girls flying from the neighbouring room, ducking their black heads, as though in fear of missiles. In face of this stampede it seemed an intrepid thing for the landlady to brave the unseen presence within, yet, without hesitation, she disappeared through the open door, whence soothing tones began immediately to issue,

mingled with an alternately shrill and deep-toned complaint.

When she reappeared again, five minutes later, she was wringing her solid-looking hands.

"What is it?" enquired Martha, who had been lying in wait upon her verandah, intent upon another word with Muder Coghen.

It would seem that the landlady's plight demanded comfort, for, staggering up the steps, she dropped heavily into the rocking-chair, regardless of ceremony.

"It is that I am going to lose a client of twenty years' standing," she moaned softly, for fear of listening ears. "And all because she can't get her hair done as she wants to! Yesterday she sent away her maid——"

"Chased her away, you mean. I saw it happen."

"That's it! That's it! And, though she's offered to double her wages, nothing will induce the girl to come back. She was a French person, and very clever, but she lost her head when she was screamed at, and she was screamed at every day. And there's nobody else. Two of my best girls have been trying their hand at it for an hour, and you've seen the result."

"Why don't you send for a hairdresser?"

"Because every hairdresser in the town knows her of old. They've struck in a body. She has a temper like a volcano, you know," explained Muder Coghen, lowering her voice by another shade. "It's a real misfortune that this eruption should have taken place here; for thus, you see, she holds me responsible, declares that if I cannot produce somebody in time to do her hair properly for the *Rystafel* she will never again put her foot into the hotel. And she has come here for twenty years, and gives good tips! Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"So it's only a question of doing her hair?"

"Yes; only that for the present. She has an absurd quantity of it, and it is what you might call her hobby-horse."

"I almost think I could manage it, if that is all."

"You?" echoed Muder Coghen, with a gape capacious enough to hold an apple.

"Yes; I am rather good at hairdressing, almost as good as at dressmaking. I have some of my own, you know. If it would oblige you I should be very glad to try my hand at the old lady's mane."

Martha, as she spoke, felt pleased with her own presence of mind; for to oblige Muder Coghen was undoubtedly good diplomacy.

The landlady seemed on the point of melting into tears of joy.

"If it would oblige me! I should rather think it would, and may be the preserving of a valuable client. But do you mean it? Are you serious?"

"Perfectly serious."

"Then come, my dear—come! Let's not lose a moment!"

In a hurry as great as though she were afraid that the volunteer might yet change her mind, the landlady pounced upon Martha's hand and hurried her down one set of steps and up another, into a somewhat larger edition of her own prison cell.

"Whatever you do, don't pull her hair!" she had found time to whisper just before crossing the threshold, "else it might end in bloodshed."

Before a table laden with silver-topped toilet appliances sat the "asthmatic rhinoceros," breathing in an alarming

fashion while struggling with the unruly masses of hair which, in her present posture, touched the ground.

"Mevrouw Van Kempen," announced Muder Coghen, in a voice as soothing as syrup, "I have brought you what you want. This young lady, an expert at hairdressing, has offered to do your hair for you. You will not again require to appear at the *Rystafel* with a scarf over your head."

Mevrouw Van Kempen heaved round in her chair to glare suspiciously at Martha. Her leathery countenance, as Martha could now see, was decorated with various large warts, which, together with the width of the nostrils and the smallness of the eyes, served to enhance her likeness to a rhinoceros.

"I've seen you before," she grunted out at last. "Yesterday, on the verandah."

"I saw you too, Mevrouw Van Kempen."

"And maybe you saw my hairbrush?"

Martha might have been mistaken, but it certainly seemed to her that something of a twinkle in the small, sunken eyes went along with this question.

"Yes; I saw your hairbrush too, and I remember noting that it was a very handsome brush, and rather heavy."

Mevrouw Van Kempen, still examining Martha, chuckled just audibly. The audacity of the answer had apparently not displeased.

"And you pretend to be able to do hair?"

"I don't pretend, I am able."

"*My* hair?" asked the Dutchwoman, holding up a handful of the coarse brown stuff that covered her shoulders.

"Why not? since I was able to do my own."

She looked critically at Martha's red-gold hair, coiled with careless art about her small head.

"You don't seem to have as much as I have," she observed, with a touch of anxiety.

Here Muder Coghen pulled Martha's sleeve in an admonitory fashion.

"Not nearly as much!" she put in, before the girl had time to speak. "Everybody knows that there is no other head of hair in Java fit to be matched with yours."

Mevrouw Van Kempen grunted again, then thrust a tortoiseshell comb towards Martha.

"Well, have your try! But I can't stand pulling. Remember that!"

As Martha took the comb Muder Coghen heaved a sigh of relief, and, with another warning glance at Martha, withdrew.

"In what fashion do you want your hair done?"

"In the same fashion as you have yours done. It seems becoming."

Martha began a smile, but cut it short, remembering that the reflection in the silver-framed mirror, which had evidently come out of Mevrouw Van Kempen's travelling-bag, would betray her.

For several minutes the only sound heard was the stertorous breathing of the Dutchwoman. Martha grappled in silence with the masses of coarse and wiry hair, each one of her movements followed by the mistrustful eyes reflected in the mirror. Her task was no easy one. In any woman this mass of hair would have been abnormal; at Mevrouw Van Kempen's age it was almost miraculous. But Martha's fingers were light and dexterous. Soon she had found her way in this dense forest, and orderly paths and divisions began to reign.

"How's the lizard?" she asked suddenly in the midst of her occupation.

"The lizard?"

"Yes; the one you trod on yesterday and then picked up and carried indoors. I'm sure you know exactly which lizard I mean."

The twinkle in the sunken eyes was repeated, but quickly extinguished by a look of genuine distress.

"It died in the night—the little idiot, in spite of my having wrapped it up in my best lace handkerchief. Wouldn't even look at the flies I caught for it."

"That was very unreasonable of it," said Martha gravely, as she stuck another pin.

"There!" she announced, five minutes later. "I *think* that's about it. Take the hand-mirror, Mevrouw Van Kempen, and look at yourself."

The old lady obeyed, grunting under her breath while viewing herself from all sides, but it was plain that the grunts were approving ones. Martha herself was satisfied; for although the brown ropes of hair enlarged the already big head most unbecomingly, they undoubtedly showed off their own masses to full advantage, which evidently was the coveted end.

"That's good!" pronounced the Dutchwoman. Then sharply:

"Show me the comb!"

Martha held it out, innocent of even a single extracted hair.

"That's good too!"

"And do you wear a lace cap, or anything?" asked Martha. "Had I not better fasten that too?"

Mevrouw Van Kempen turned reproachful, almost indignant, eyes upon her.

"A lace cap? What are you thinking of? What would be the use of having all this hair if I covered it up?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" said Martha, nipping another smile in the bud.

"What's your charge?" asked Mevrouw Van Kempen abruptly, still inspecting herself in the mirror.

"My charge?"

"Yes. Aren't you a hairdresser by profession?"

"Certainly not," said Martha, feeling affronted. "And I didn't do this for money, I did it to oblige Mevrouw Coghen."

"Humph! A gratis service. I don't like gratis services. They force one to be polite. Not a hairdresser? Then what are you?"

"I—I am nothing particular."

"Been a lady's maid, perhaps? You *must* have been a lady's maid."

"Certainly not!"

"That's a pity. I should like to have engaged you. I fancy you would suit me. If you won't take money, then take this!"

She had risen and waddled towards her travelling bag, whence she returned a moment later with a small cardboard box, which she pushed into Martha's hand.

"Don't make a fuss. It's only some preserved fruit—European fruit, you know. I send for them whenever I'm sick of the bananas and cocoanuts. Don't you like preserved fruit?"

"Yes," said Martha, with growing amusement, and retired with the cardboard box in her hand.

Half-an-hour later Muder Coghen was back in Martha's room, this time with something like news in her eye.

"My dear! Such a chance! It's not exactly what you were looking for perhaps, but I should advise you to think over it before saying 'no.'"

Having recovered her breath, the landlady explained that she was here in the character of an ambassadress, with a proposal from Mevrouw Van Kempen to Mevrouw Klaas, "For I told her you were a widow," put in Muder Coghen. "That is as you wish it, is it not?"

"Of course it is."

In the sequel it appeared that the Dutchwoman desired to engage Martha as lady's maid, and more especially as hairdresser. If she objected to the designation, Mevrouw Van Kempen was quite ready to call her a companion, provided only that she did her hair and attended to her generally.

"There would have to be a bit of a sick-nurse thrown in," Muder Coghen explained. "She's ill, you know. It's not only the asthma. She has something wrong with her kidneys and something else wrong with her liver. That's what makes her temper so bad, and what brings her to Batavia so often, for consulting doctors. She's been to three yesterday."

"A mixture of lady's maid, companion and sick-nurse," enumerated Martha. "It's a good deal to expect of one person. Really, Mevrouw Coghen, I don't think I can do it!"

"Not even for two hundred pounds a year? That's the salary she offers."

"Two hundred pounds!" repeated Martha, almost scared. "Are you sure of it?"

"Absolutely certain; I made her say it twice over. It's a preposterous sum, of course; but she seems to have

taken a fancy to you, and she's as full of whims as of money."

Martha sat down to consider. The idea of engaging herself as lady's maid had begun by outraging her, but the two hundred pounds put another complexion on the matter. They were nothing less than a solution of the problem of the night.

"But I am almost afraid of her, Muder Coghren. She looked so dreadful yesterday."

"She does look dreadful at times; but she isn't really dreadful—at the bottom. I ought to know—after twenty years' acquaintance, for I began by being housekeeper in her house, while her husband still lived. That's why she always comes to this hotel, though she has money enough to treat herself to an apartment in the newest of their new-fangled establishments. For she's rolling in riches, you know, and not one of the stingy ones either. You would have plenty to eat and to drink, and a good room of your own, be sure of that. *That's* not the way she ill-treats her people, though they do have a good deal to go through, there's no blinking the fact. The maids, in especial. And all because of the hair. Times above times the doctors have advised her to cut it off, because of the headaches she suffers from, but I believe she would rather part with her soul than with her hair. She spends a fortune upon lotions for it, and every hair that is combed out puts her into fits. The girl you saw yesterday is not by any means the first she has shied her hairbrush at. What's true is true."

"If the brush wasn't so heavy," began Martha.

Then something else occurred to her.

"Where does she live usually?"

"At Darakowa, about a day's journey from here."

"And she is going back there soon?"

"To-morrow. That's why the matter has to be settled to-day. If you won't go with her then she would have another try at the agencies. But they, too, know her of old."

"Give me an hour to think over it."

When at the end of the hour Muder Coghen came for the answer, Martha had decided to accept. It was not the two hundred pounds alone which had settled the matter, for the lizard too had helped, as had done the twinkle she had surprised in Mevrouw Van Kempen's small and ugly eyes. The woman might be a fury, but a fury with a sense of humour and a love of animals need not necessarily be impossible to live with. The immediate departure and the distance from Batavia were likewise circumstances which had helped to weigh down the balance.

The interview which followed was brief and business-like, and chiefly devoted to the elucidation of conditions. For Martha, too, had her conditions ready, among which a given amount of leisure for rest and exercise figured conspicuously. At the same time she felt bound to explain that she had never before been a sick-nurse. That need not trouble her, she was told, since the doctor called almost daily. She would only have to follow his directions. Neither would she be expected to sit up at night, since there was a girl told off for that purpose.

"There's just one more point," said the Dutchwoman, when fundamental agreement had been reached. "Would you mind taking out your hairpins? I should like to see your hair down."

"My hair down?"

"Just so. I want to know if there are any hair-rolls in it."

Remembering what she had heard of her new patron's whims, Martha meekly pulled out her hairpins. There were no hair-rolls, as Mevrouw Van Kempen noted to her disappointment.

"It isn't bad hair," she grudgingly pronounced; "but" —taking up a handful of the soft, silken threads—"flabby stuff—it doesn't stand up of its own accord, like mine does. And then it's almost red."

She gave a satisfied grunt. The only possible objection to Martha as a maid had now evidently been disposed of. An attendant with a rival mane to her own would, no doubt, have been too bitter an experience.

"It's settled, then," she pronounced. "And we start to-morrow. You're a widow, I hear? Been quick about it, I must say. Hope you won't be so quick about picking up number two."

"I shall never marry—again," said Martha hotly.

Mevrouw Van Kempen grinned.

"Of course not! Nobody ever is going to marry, either 'again,' or otherwise. Can't myself understand where all the married people come from. Well, I'm not going to bother you with questions, and don't particularly care who you are, so long as my hair is done as it is to-day, and the comb in the same condition. And now you'd better be putting up your own again. Why aren't you going? Anything else?"

"Yes; just this. I should like to give you fair warning that if you ever throw the brush at my head I shall throw it back again."

The Dutchwoman laughed, with twinkling eyes which decidedly appeared to appreciate the joke.

"I'm not going to ask any questions either," whispered Muder Coghen, in whose ample bosom sympathy seemed to have finally conquered curiosity. "You've preserved me my client and I've got you a roof over your head. That makes us quits."

CHAPTER XII.

THE "COFFEE EVENING."

"VILLA MEENA,
"DARAKOWA, JAVA.

"DEAREST MOTHER,—I do hope that my cable eased your mind. I must begin by explaining the altered address, which will, no doubt, puzzle you, though the matter is really very simple; for Mr. Van Hagen has more than one tobacco plantation, and, if he chooses to shunt about his overseers, what right have we to complain? I am quite pleased with the change, for this place might be a slice of paradise. But I'll tell you more about this later on, for I know you'll be wanting to hear of more important things first.

"The voyage was miraculously prosperous, and my first sight of the tropics actually *not* a disappointment."

So far Martha had written fluently; now, pen in hand, she sat reflecting. This would have been the moment for speaking of the meeting with Henrik—of dwelling on her happiness. But against the pushing of the farce to its extreme limits her innate honesty revolted. Fortunately, her mother, well used to her want of expansion, would not be too inordinately surprised "at

even extreme reticence. The subject must, of course, be touched upon, but no more than glided over.

"Shall I tell her that Henrik looks ill?" she asked herself. "That at least would be a bit of truth."

Then she shook her head:

"Better not. It would only encourage her to worry."

Having taken counsel in her mind for another minute, Martha dipped her pen in ink and proceeded:

"I know you will not expect me to give you the details of the scene in the registry-office, nor to talk of my rather mixed sensations. I am sure you agree with me that many things are better left unsaid, and therefore I will go on at once to give you some idea of my present surroundings—or try to do it.

"We are supposed to live in the town, though it isn't always easy here to disentangle town and country, because the trees are everywhere—and such trees! Darakowa strikes me as a sort of glorified garden city in which palm-trees play the part of beeches at home, and verbenas and mimosas that of dandelions and groundsel. I haven't really seen much beyond our own bit of garden as yet, but there is enough material for exploration there to keep me quiet for a week. It's not a garden at all, but just a handful of tropical forest which some giant has dumped down all around this enchanting villa. The depth of the mosses and the size of the ferns which I have already discovered in distant nooks would drive all our Scotch garden maniacs as green with jealousy as are these nooks themselves. Imagine this Eldorado of greenery peopled with stone figures—mostly bearing elephants' heads, and watered by a stream which is crossed by bamboo—yes, positively bamboo bridges—and I am sure

you will admit that amid such surroundings as these your own Exotic Martha cannot but feel at home.

"These elephant-headed or sometimes bird-headed statues are all deities, of course, or were so before the advent of Mohammedanism. They hail from the ruins of a huge temple in the neighbourhood, at which I mean to have a go at the earliest possible opportunity.

"Some things about this place annoy me, however; for instance, the electric trams and the telephones, which do not at all fit in with the elephants' heads, nor with the crocodiles in the canals along whose banks the trams run. As for tropical fruits, they are gorgeous—to look at; but I haven't yet come across anything which beats a Scotch strawberry for flavour, and am beginning to understand Mevrouw Van Kempen's predilection for——"

Here Martha stopped short, aghast, and thickly stroked out the last line, substituting somewhat jerkily:

"Some people's predilection for preserved European fruit."

Then she laid down her pen in order to mop her perspiring forehead. In this temperature telling lies was very hard work. So long as she kept to the safe ground of description it was possible to get along; but the moment the personal note came in she found herself floundering in the quagmire of her own making.

Once more she plunged into neutral subjects:

"There are few birds here, and they don't sing like ours at home. It's the insects that seem to do the work for them, and ah! the butterflies!"

For another page she kept steadily to raptures, then, the requisite amount of paper being covered, paused once more to consider her conclusion.

To finish up without once more touching on the critical subject of her (supposed) new condition might look suspicious. Since she could not bring herself either to mention Henrik again, nor to lie to the extent of asserting her own happiness, she must at least attempt to throw another sop to maternal anxiety.

"Don't worry about me, mother. Everything is going all right. I mind the heat so little that I think I must have been a lizard or a flying-fox in some former incarnation. And, altogether, Providence has been very kind to me—quite surprisingly kind. Love to all from your affectionate

"MARTHA."

There followed a *P.S.*

"Don't expect many letters, I'm dreadfully busy. Besides, you know what a bad correspondent I am. You'll have to be content with cards mostly."

With a sigh of relief Martha finally laid down her pen. The *P.S.* had been dictated by the sensations of the moment, for she had realised that frequent repetition of the task just effected would prove too great a strain. Despite her fertile imagination, she was evidently not good at inventing.

Had circumstances left her free to paint things as they really were, then indeed would she with ease and enjoyment have covered double the number of pages, seeing

that Mevrouw Van Kempen's household lent itself most richly to description, a household of which it was scarcely too much to say that it was ruled by the cult of the hair, since the duties of the domestics, and even the hours of the meals, were regulated by the various manipulations which its treatment called for. The toilet-table, gigantic in size, and laden with mysterious instruments, and still more mysterious vials, might be called the altar upon which the cult of the chosen idol was performed, of which Martha felt herself the priestess, for the time being. Here morning and night the Dutchwoman sat in state, her chair planted upon a sheet destined to preserve the ends of her *chevelure* from contact with the floor, her leathery countenance composed to an expression as devout as though she were saying her prayers, and jealously following every movement of Martha in the mirror. The moment at which the brush and comb were presented for inspection, and the shaking out of the sheet in order to prove that no hair had fallen, marked the close of the ceremony, for it was more than a function. Then there was the preparation of lotions, all home made, under Mevrouw Van Kempen's personal directions, and, above all, there was the weekly head-washing, a day of terror to the entire household, and which rarely ended without at least one servant being discharged.

Most women will agree that the washing even of the scantiest hair is a trial to even the mildest temper. What it must be when the temper is volcanic and the hair of the sort depicted in hairdressers' advertisements is best left to the imagination. On that critical day of the week the water heated for the great purpose was almost certain to be too hot, if it did not happen to be too cold, or else it managed, despite scientific muffling with towels, to

trickle down the small of Mevrouw Van Kempen's back, or else the soap lather got into her eyes, or the operating maid rubbed it in too hard, or the girls acting as her *aides-de-camp* were too slow in changing the basins, or lost their heads and spilt the contents on the floor, all things which invariably led up to a thunderstorm, and generally to an earthquake, dislodging some member of the establishment.

Martha's first experience of the sort lay behind her already. Thanks to those nimble fingers of hers, and partly also to her nimble tongue, the novice had weathered the trial fairly well, and, though generously growled at, had even received something like a compliment on her achievement.

"You've lots to learn yet," the Dutchwoman had gasped as she raised her dripping head from the basin, and while Martha was wringing out the heavy brown coil as one might wring out a wet cloak, "but I will say this much for you, that whereas I usually feel like killing somebody, when my head is washed, to-day I only feel like beating somebody."

The hair cult, though the chief, was by no means the sole cause of the thunderstorms. Unpunctual meals, food not cooked to the pitch of perfection required by her capricious digestion, and specks of dust were equally prolific of passion. Before Martha had been twenty-four hours in the house she had heard more torrents of abusive language pouring upon the heads of male and female retainers alike than in the whole of her previous existence. No one surely but these meek Javanese would put up with such treatment as this. For herself she had no great fears. It might not be easy to live in peace with Mevrouw Van Kempen, yet from the moment she began to pity

her it became possible. And she began to pity her almost at once. For on the very evening of the return from Batavia, answering her mistress's bell, she had found her sitting rigid in her deep invalid's chair, her skin discoloured, her features hideously set, her big hands convulsively clenched, and, having precipitately asked for her orders, had understood by the look in the eyes and by the helpless movements of the lips that she was in the grip of some horrible physical pain.

"My drops!" she had at last succeeded in saying, turning her eyes in the direction of a shelf.

Martha flew for the drops, and, after consultation with the square-faced Dutch girl who always slept in her mistress's room, caused the doctor to be sent for.

The attack soon passed, but from that moment on Martha lost all inclination to "answer back," having realised the cause of the temper.

Also she did not disdain, at the right moment, to burn a grain of incense to the idol. Such a remark as, "The hair"—it was never spoken of as "your hair," but always as "the hair," as though it were the only head of hair in the universe—"looks twice as much since it was washed," went far to soothe a rising paroxysm.

Martha had even caught a glimmering of how the idol had come to be set up. To the Dutchwoman, ill-favoured of person, and infirm of body, that extraordinary mass of hair had come to mean a link not only with vanished youth, but also with perishing life. Owing to the coarseness of its texture, it was far more of a marvel than a beauty, and, more than either, a rarity in a climate which, as a rule, wrought havoc among even the most luxuriant locks. So long as she possessed it she possessed something for which other women must infallibly envy

her, something which was itself a proof of the vital energy which must exist somewhere in her ruined constitution and therefore documented her right to live. To her hair, therefore, she clung as though to life itself, with a tenacity which already Martha was beginning to find more pathetic than ridiculous.

Her own position in this strange household was hard to define and altogether exceptional. Though her duties were, in great measure, those of a servant, she was aware from the first of not being treated as one, for her meals were served apart, and her room, adjoining that of her employer, was almost as large, and quite as well furnished, as the latter's own apartment. Except when occupied with the different operations upon the hair, or reading aloud the daily papers to *Mevrouw Van Kempen*, she was free to come and go as she liked, subject only to putting in a punctual appearance at the beginning of each ceremony. Her duties as sick-nurse consisted chiefly in assuring herself that the square-faced Dutch girl, by name *Anna*, carried out the doctor's directions.

Another occupation—this one voluntarily undertaken—was looking after the sick animals. Having been witness of the scene with the lizard, Martha was only moderately surprised to find that the villa sheltered a decrepit monkey, a broken-winged dwarf-parrot and several invalid cats. With the exception of a watch-dog, who seemed to be in normal health, every animal inmate of the house was on the sick-list. Healthy beasts had apparently got no interest for *Mevrouw Van Kempen*, perhaps because it was so very long since she herself had known what health was, whereas the dumbly complaining eyes of inarticulate patients evidently stirred fellow-feeling. Considering that each of these patients was put on a strictly individual

diet, and that every negligence in this respect was severely controlled, it was no wonder if the animal hospital formed a separate centre of domestic storms, of which more than one cook, and kitchen-maids innumerable, had been the victims.

Having taken footing with the household, Martha, within a week of her arrival, had done the same by her employer's social circle, her duties being the dispensation of the iced coffee with which Mevrouw Van Kempen was accustomed to refresh her guests, possibly as a sort of memorial to the late Mynheer Van Kempen, whose riches had been reaped off coffee-trees. Social gatherings here took place after sunset, in the open-air drawing-rooms modestly termed verandahs. The Villa Meena possessed the biggest verandah in the most fashionable street. Here, with shaded lamps throwing tempered light over the foliage of giant creepers, and with the actual drawing-room, carefully ventilated, serving as a sort of *Hinterland*, Mevrouw Van Kempen, throning in her invalid's chair, held her court as often as the state of her health permitted.

Among the women, of various ages and various degrees of true Dutch dowdiness, all more or less related to the hostess, Martha's appearance caused an unmistakable flutter. Aspirants to fortunes, or at any rate to legacies, are unavoidably mistrustful of strangers who crop up unexpectedly beneath the coveted roof. Although equally mistrustful of each other, it was only natural that these divers half-cousins and semi-nieces should join forces against the common enemy. Thus it was that Martha's *début* was conspicuously wanting in smoothness.

To begin with, she was not easily classified; for although Mevrouw Van Kempen ostentatiously introduced her as

"my companion," the fact of the hairdressing very soon transpired, revealing Martha as virtually the successor of that craven-spirited "Elise" who had fled before the hair-brush. Elise, too, had occasionally been called in to pour out the coffee, but there had never been any introduction, nor had she ever ventured to take part in the conversation, which this young person did quite freely.

"Surely this is a new departure," discreetly remarked to her hostess a thin, nervous-looking woman whose pale skin and black hair made one think simultaneously of cream and of ink.

"What is?"

"Why, this unmuzzling of the maid. The last one only opened her mouth in order to ask how many lumps of sugar were agreeable."

"The last one was a maid—this one is my companion. I suppose you have no objection to my treating myself to a companion?"

"Heaven forbid, Aunt Meena! All I wonder is that you don't treat yourself to a *real* companion, instead of moving up a lady's-maid into the position, for I suppose she must have been a maid before you took her on, otherwise how would she have learned to do hair? And I know she does yours, I heard her say so," added Mevrouw Kettelmakker, looking somewhat defiantly at her relative, while nervously twitching the black eyebrows, which, as well as her vivacity, she owed to an Italian mother.

"That will show, at any rate, that she is above-board," grinned the old Dutchwoman, "more above-board than many people I know, who like to keep their game under the table."

Mevrouw Kettelmakker took instant fright, perceiving that she had gone too far.

"Well, maid or no maid, she certainly does *the* hair to perfection, Aunt Meena," she hastened to remark. "I have never before seen it so thick and glossy."

"Nor I either," put in a mild, elderly person with an anxious-looking face and a deprecating smile.

The burning of incense to the idol, not in single grains, but in handfuls, was a regular accompaniment of the coffee-drinking, and brought a double enjoyment to Mevrouw Van Kempen, who, while perfectly piercing the motive and inwardly chuckling over it, yet swallowed the compliments with paradoxical gusto. Appreciative remarks upon the coffee and tender enquiries after the sick animals were further means of ingratiating, but inevitably ranged behind the chief topic.

"She looks so young to be a widow," remarked the chronically smiling lady, who was a widow herself, with an improvident son whose debts Mevrouw Van Kempen occasionally paid, and who therefore periodically felt bound to accompany his mother to the "coffee evenings," at which, as the only male under fifty, the part of the eagle in the dove-cot naturally fell to his share. He was present to-day, and after bending low over his hostess' hand, upon whose leathery surface he pressed a long and fervent kiss, had gravitated towards the coffee-table, looking as *posé* as a judge and a clergyman rolled into one, instead of the somewhat ponderous but quite incorrigible Lothario that he was. For Niklas Verbrugge was one of those people who take their pleasures with deadly seriousness.

Mevrouw Van Kempen's eyes twinkled as she looked after him. She knew that every appearance of Niklas

heralded a fresh demand for money, and had even learnt to make a guess at the figure by the length and fervour of the kiss with which her hand was honoured.

"He isn't short-sighted, your boy. I'll say that much for him," she remarked to her anxious-visaged neighbour. "Hasn't taken two minutes to discover the only woman present worth looking at."

At which Mevrouw Verbrugge's smile only became a little more deprecating, while a stout, brown-faced matron alongside actually ventured to protest.

"Oh, Cousin Meena, surely there are others!"

Her eyes, as she spoke, went towards a seat upon which three large-faced and heavily built girls in freshly starched white frocks sat perched in a row, after the fashion of owls upon a branch, each balancing a coffee-cup between a pair of massive hands, and silently stowing away cake into a capacious mouth. Once a week, at the very least, the place of these Three Graces, ranging in age from fourteen to eighteen, was upon that seat. Three penniless and plain daughters to marry! Clearly the mother's best course lay in keeping facts well before her wealthy relative's eyes, in the hope that the repeated sight of so much youth and so little beauty might move her to bestow portions upon maidens who, portionless, would run a fair chance of remaining such. For Mevrouw de Ruyter, though a mother, was not blind; while preferring to think that others were so.

Meanwhile, beside the coffee-table, Martha was skirmishing upon her own account.

"You must have had a great deal of practice in hair-dressing," asserted rather than asked Mevrouw Kettel-makker, twitching her black eyebrows at the new-comer, while she vehemently stirred her coffee.

"A good deal, yes, since I never was able to afford myself a lady's-maid."

Mevrouw Kettelmakker almost gasped at the audacity of the remark, while her eyebrows worked furiously. This from a person who herself was a lady's-maid, even though labelled as companion!

"You are Scotch, are you not?" she asked abruptly.

"It wouldn't be much use my denying it, would it," smiled Martha, "considering that my accent would probably betray me?"

"But your husband was Dutch, apparently, since he was called Klaas?"

"Apparently," said Martha, unmoved.

She had the clear impression of being regarded as *suspecte*, not only by this black-browed young woman but by every person in the room, with the exception perhaps of the solemn but over-assiduous young man who had been helping her with the coffee. Most of them had had their try at putting her "in her place," and had retired discomfited, for this was exactly the sort of passage at arms that Martha enjoyed most keenly, as keenly as she had enjoyed baffling Mrs. Jobwell and Mrs. Digby.

A young woman with features apparently moulded out of putty and a pair of sea-green eyes which, set in another face, might possibly have been beautiful, now opened her lips for the first time. Until now the only thing which seemed to be alive about her were those sea-green eyes, moving watchfully from face to face and ever returning to fasten themselves upon that of Martha.

"Was your husband called Klaas?" she enquired deliberately.

"Since I am called Klaas that seems self-evident, does it not?" said Martha a little hurriedly, as she bent

over the coffee-pot. How she wished they would leave that subject alone!

But the green-eyed young woman had evidently no idea of doing this.

"I have a friend who is married to a Klaas, a school-fellow. We were in Europe together. Leenebet Van Hagen, she was."

Martha bent lower over the coffee-pot with something like panic at her heart. The world was a small place, after all, and Java still smaller. It was by a narrow chance only that she succeeded in not losing her head. Once more she blessed the frequency of Henrik's surname, and once more strengthened her spirit with the thought of the miles which lay between Darakowa and Batavia. It was in a tone of artistic carelessness that she said:

"Indeed? I quite believe it; there seem to be as many Klaas' in Java as maggots in a cheese. Will you have another cup of coffee, Mevrouw—— I'm afraid I didn't catch your name?"

"No, thank you," snapped Mevrouw Kettelmakker, to whom the question was addressed, and feeling freshly insulted by the lady's-maid companion. "I must be going. Where is my husband? Ah, asleep as usual!"

Mynheer Kettelmakker, who was considerably the senior of his wife, and at this moment slumbering peacefully in a corner of the drawing-room, awoke with a start at the touch of her hand upon his shoulder.

"How's the porcupine?" he asked precipitately, before his eyes were well open, only to be discreetly cuffed into silence by his spouse.

"You big blunderer! Don't you know that the porcupine is dead! It was the monkey I told you to en-

quire after. Do you mean to say you haven't done so yet? Come along and join it on to the leave-taking; and while you're about it you might as well say something nice about the coffee. You know the usual sort of thing."

"Yes, I know," said this model of a husband, for whom the terrors of the "coffee evenings" were mitigated by the knowledge that he could always count upon a quiet snooze somewhere in the background.

"Do you find her pretty?" asked more than one woman of another upon the homeward way, while from the lighted verandahs to the right and to the left voices and laughter streamed out upon the night.

"It's clear, anyway, that Niklas Verbrugge does," said *Mevrouw Kettelmakker* dryly and without stopping to enquire who might be the subject of the pronoun.

If it had not been so dark the putty-coloured face of *Freule Ella Rosemaer*, the young woman with the sea-green eyes, might have been seen to flush blood-red.

"She seems dreadfully flirtatious! I can't imagine where Aunt Meena picked her up."

"At Batavia, it seems. But cheer up, Ella"—it was again *Mevrouw Kettelmakker* speaking—"she's as quick at dropping as at picking up; it's only a question of how long it will take for the hairbrushes to begin flying about."

"That's true, and her complexion won't keep in this climate," added *Freule Ella* hopefully, though, as it would seem, irrelevantly.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHERE FROM? WHERE TO?

MARTHA had been exercising her miscellaneous duties for nearly two months when early one morning she started on her customary walk. Her morning constitutional was a condition to which she held most tenaciously. It was not without a struggle she had attained it; for although Mevrouw Van Kempen loyally granted the recreation she had promised, she was obviously shocked at Martha's refusal of the vehicle placed at her disposal. That one should desire air she was able to understand, but how one could possibly desire exercise surpassed her comprehension. Europeans on foot for anything but the orthodox evening lounge were so rare a sight as to verge on the scandalous. And when the European in question was a young and attractive woman——

But Martha, putting all objections aside, carried through her will in this as she had done in other things, cheerfully resigning herself to the reputation of eccentricity which she had begun to earn almost from the moment of her arrival at Darakowa. At first she had indeed kept to frequented ways; but by degrees, encouraged by greater familiarity with the mild and harmless natives, she had allowed herself occasionally to yield to the charms of exploration. Thus she had ventured as far as the ruins of

the temple mentioned in her first letter home, and had spent a delightful and troubled hour roaming about its roofless corridors, lined with wonderful mosses and choked with no less wonderful ferns, its crumbling walls over whose tops the cocoanut-palms nodded their heads at each other, its labyrinth of cells and niches, some of which still sheltered the stone deities to whose honour they had been dedicated. The delight came from the dreamlike mysticism of the spot, the trouble from memories. How painfully well she remembered Henrik's pictures of just such a temple as this, painted in glowing words, upon the verandah of the *Kurhaus!* How little had she then foreseen that she would one day look upon these wonders—alone!

She had likewise had more than one peep into the forest which, advancing unchecked down the wooded slope in the rear, had invaded the very sanctuaries of bygone ages. But here she had not ventured far; for the very size of the stems looming through the moist green twilight, like the ribs of some gigantic construction, their crowns soaring away out of sight, had struck her with a sense of awe that was almost fear. And the extravagance of Nature visible on all sides, the riot of creepers—festooning branches, smothering fallen stems and, like a crowd of veritable “struggle-for-lifers,” catching each other by the throat and scrambling onto each other's shoulders in their efforts to reach the light above—only served to enhance the sensation. But most awesome of all was the silence, broken only by one monotonous bird-note, “Mi—re—do,” close at hand, and by a single monkey-cry in the distance.

For a minute Martha stood listening, holding her breath as though she were in church. Then something

rustled close at hand, and, seized with panic, she fled back into the sunlight.

These early walks, with the sun barely over the horizon, had long since become her favourite bit of the day. Often she was out of the house before the shadows of night were well gone, greedily drinking in the precious chill of the air, while from neighbouring forests the wild cocks were still heralding the dawn, and milky vapours crawled along the foot of the mountain ranges. By this mountain light it was quite possible to mistake the small, naked boys, swarming up the stems of cocoa-palms after the day's harvest of nuts, for matutinal monkeys, which had happened to Martha more than once.

To-day she was not quite so early, for already the road—a road which would not have disgraced any earthly paradise—running like a tunnel of verdure between gardens and orchards, was alive with natives in their red and yellow and violet *sarongs*, their gravely friendly faces peeping out of the shadow of huge, basket-like hats. Coolies, naked to the waist, carried the most miscellaneous loads, ranging from live poultry to bottles of lemonade and bundles of grass, from the ends of bamboo sticks, balanced across their shoulders. And all this mixed crowd trotted along quiet and cheerful, in a good-humoured content not to be matched under another hemisphere, with the customary greeting, "Where to? Where from?" exchanged within almost every minute.

Martha, as she walked, was feasting her eyes upon the moving picture, whose features she now knew so well. Familiar the huge, hairy buffaloes bestridden by tiny boys whose every touch they obeyed; familiar too the red stains on the white dust of the road—stains which mark every road in Java, and which Martha had at first taken

for blood though they are caused only by the juice of the brick-coloured *sirih*, chewed by men and women alike.

To judge from the thickness of the crowd to-day, some fair was afoot in the neighbourhood. From somewhere ahead the plaintive notes of a *gamelang*—the much-beloved national orchestra—penetrated from out of a booth erected by the wayside. Martha reached it and passed it by; and a little farther on was arrested by the sound of another musical production of a very different class. Instead of the single-stringed guitars and metal pots tinkling under miniature hammers, it was an unmistakably European musical-box, of that cheap description fabricated for export, which was at work here. And the air it was playing—very slowly, presumably for want of being oiled—was strangely familiar, although she could not at once give it a name. After a moment the sought-for title surged out of some corner of her memory: “The Blue Bells of Scotland.”

Often and often had she heard her mother playing it upon the miserable piano at home. Perhaps that was the reason of the pang which the sound brought with it, and to which it seemed at first as difficult to give a name as to the melody itself. Could it possibly be homesickness?

The feeling was gone in a moment, but it had been there; and during that moment she had been conscious of a curious sensation of satiety—as of a sudden glut of all this tropical luxuriance around her. She had even surprised herself thinking with a new sort of tenderness of the low grey skies and of the monotonous road on which she had once been wont to take her constitutionals, mostly in the company of her “pal.”

A little more slowly Martha walked on, having, for a brief space, lost sight of her surroundings. It was into her own heart that she was looking now.

She knew herself healed of her brief passion for Henrik, forcibly healed, and by Henrik himself, and she had believed herself content with her present lot. Was it possible that, with the fading of the sense of novelty, this content was wearing thin? And what was to follow? Could she go on playing this comedy for ever?

So far she had been wonderfully lucky. The danger of detection seemed fading into the distance. Neither Leenebet nor Henrik were likely ever again to cross her path.

Yes, she had been miraculously successful; but the strain of the part she had to play was at moments unbearable; the composition of the home letters growing ever more irksome. Yet the alternative would be more unbearable still.

Then, just as she was slipping back into the circle of thought which had marked that memorable night at Batavia, Martha brushed against a bundle of hay carried by a coolie, and shook herself out of her abstraction.

She became aware that the gardens on either side had dwindled away, and that from out of the green tunnel she had stepped into the open country. In the distance the terraced *sawas* (ricefields), freshly irrigated, shone like a huge, glassy staircase, and close at hand the miniature windmills which served as scarecrows were whirling upon their bamboo stems at a rate which sent Martha's eyes apprehensively towards the sky.

Sure enough, there across the blue scudded the small angry-looking clouds which she knew to herald one of those storms as abrupt as the tropical sunsets, though fortunately as brief. Reason enough for hastening her steps toward the ruins which were her goal to-day—their treasures not being yet half explored—and able to afford

at least rudimentary shelter. They were close already—splendidly prostrate at the foot of the wooded hill. But the storm was close too. As Martha ran up the last slope, the first big drops were falling, each with the sound as of a miniature splash. Vaguely she noticed one of the small horses of the country tethered to an upright pillar and browsing upon the rank grass between the scattered blocks of stone, but did not stop to think of what the sight might portend. Breathless she plunged into what had once been a corridor, in search of some remaining bit of roof.

She had been stumbling on almost blindly for half-a-minute when, with a shock of alarm, she stood still.

“Where from? Where to?”

From somewhere close at hand the words had been spoken by a voice whose tones echoed weirdly among the walls.

Following the sound Martha became aware of an opening which in her blind hurry she had missed, and within its shadows a man sitting upon a block of stone, and smoking a cigarette. As he rose to his feet she peered at him through the gathering darkness of the storm. A small person in somewhat dingy riding-dress—helmeted and gaitered. She distinguished a smile and a nose.

“Doctor Brulôt!” she exclaimed, in a voice charged with amazement. “Surely that is not *you?*”

“And wherefore should it not be me, mademoiselle?” asked the Frenchman, knocking the ash off his cigarette against the image of a carved lotus blossom, and in an accent which ranged this meeting among the most natural of occurrences.

“What are you doing here?”

"The same thing which, presumably, you yourself are doing, mademoiselle—or is it not madame?—seeking to escape from the shower-bath which is preparing—no, which is already descending. Unless that hat of yours is water-proof I should strongly recommend you to share with me the hospitality of the late goddess Durga, for that, I believe, is the name of the lady standing upon the bull. Quick, madame, quick! or you are in for a fever."

And, presuming, no doubt, upon his professional privileges, Dr. Brulôt possessed himself of both Martha's hands in order to drag her through the entrance.

"Yes; but I mean at Darakowa; how do you come to be here?" asked Martha, unresisting, and still annoyed at this meeting, which was at least as surprising as things touching Dr. Brulôt were apt to be.

He made one of his slight grimaces familiar to her from their talks on board ship.

"Mademoiselle—no—'madame' seems to have taken it for her life task to mortify my vanity; else would she not so plainly show me how completely she has forgotten that Darakowa was the very place at which I told her that I had been at work for two years past."

"I remember now," said Martha half remorsefully. "But I had really quite forgotten."

Then, a little anxiously:

"Did you know that I was here? You look so little surprised."

"No; I did not know that mademoiselle—that madame was here; but I never allow myself to be surprised by circumstances, having long since learned that only the unexpected happens. Not that this meeting is really unexpected. Perhaps madame remembers my foretelling her that our former acquaintance would prove to be no

more than a beginning. This corner is the driest and the most convenient; if madame will allow——”

“Thank you,” said Martha, sitting down upon the fallen stone pillar, which he had dusted carefully with his handkerchief.

She was still breathing rather hard from the pace at which she had ascended the slope, barely in time, for already the rain was lashing the walls and sending a miniature torrent along the passage she had just traversed. In the centre of the cell which formed the welcome refuge the stone figure of a woman, fairly preserved, stood with her colossal foot planted upon the neck of a prostrate bull. Various bunches of flowers and strips of coloured paper, a paper lantern among them, were disposed at the foot of the image, and upon these, through a crack in the precious bit of ceiling, the water trickled plentifully.

“If I was curious, which, of course, I am not,” remarked Doctor Brulôt, who now leaned against a bit of wall rich with moss-grown bas-reliefs, “I think it is I who would have ventured to put a question, since, when last I parted from—madame, she was bound for Batavia and not for Darakowa. It *is* ‘madame,’ is it not?”

“Yes; of course it is,” said Martha, with heightened colour. “I ceased to be ‘mademoiselle’ nearly two months ago. My name is now Mevrouw Klaas.”

“And Mynheer Klaas approves of these matutinal rambles? Some husbands are so foolish——”

“I have no husband, he is dead,” said Martha, scarlet with vexation and evading those roguish black eyes by looking straight at the wall opposite, where the border of lotus flowers surmounting the weather-beaten bas-reliefs was picked out by the mosses nestling in the hollows, as though by a green velvet background.

"Parbleu!" the doctor was surprised into remarking. Then, after a pause, and forcibly composing his features:

"Madame is, of course, desolate? Will she accept my condolences?"

He looked at her narrowly, as though in search of the usual symptoms of desolation. Their rather conspicuous absence did not seem by any means to displease him. Look as he would, there were no signs either of swollen eyelids or of hollow cheeks; nor had the Scotch roses faded so far under the tropical sun. As for widow's weeds, the black ribbon belt upon the white dress was all that represented them.

"Thank you," murmured Martha.

Then, with as guilty a haste as though she were receiving stolen goods, since to these condolences, at any rate, she had no right:

"Of course it was very sudden, but not so sudden as it appears. I found him ill already when I arrived. You see, his lungs never were strong, and Schneeliberg seems only to have interrupted, not cut off, the evil. You must often have heard of such cases?" she questioned anxiously, as though seeking corroboration in his professional experience.

"Often," said Dr. Brulôt, with suitable gravity. "And, if madame will permit me to say it, there are cases in which this swiftness is merciful."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Martha, in supreme discomfort.

Then quickly shifting the ground:

"I came here almost immediately after—after my bereavement, having engaged myself to Mevrouw Van Kempen, whom I met at Batavia. I am something be-

tween her companion and her lady's-maid. You see, I had to do something to earn my living."

"And you preferred this to returning to your country?" asked Dr. Brulôt, still carefully but discreetly observing her face.

"Yes; I could not go home—for various reasons."

"With which I would be the last to quarrel, madame, since it is to them that I owe this auspicious meeting."

A flourishing bow underlined the words.

"How hard it is raining," said Martha nervously. "I wonder how I shall get home."

"I will see to that, with your permission. I have a four-footed thing outside which goes by the name of horse. It will at least save your far too delicate *chaussure* from contact with the wet."

"And you?"

"My boots are calculated for emergencies, as they have to be, in consideration of my country patients."

"You have many of them?"

"A fair number, though the routine of my work lies in the hospital. It is on my way back from the mountains that the storm gods arrest me to-day."

Martha said nothing at once, but lent an ear, fascinated, to the gurgling, moaning, hissing sounds around her. Upon the variously shaped temple ruins the rain seemed to be playing as upon an organ. With uneasy impatience, while attempting to coin small talk, she listened for the end of the concert, which would likewise mean the end of her present embarrassment. Despite Dr. Brulôt's apparent acceptance of her statements, she had the impression that her lame explanation had not convinced him, that he guessed at something behind. All the more agreeably surprised was she at the absence of

further questions on his part. Never would she have credited the possessor of that audacious nose with so much tact. For the first time she felt that possibly this perplexing personage was something more than the *farceur* as which he was accustomed to pose.

Presently, in search of a safe subject, Martha be-thought herself of the lady upon the bull.

"What is it you call her?" she asked, with far more interest than she felt.

"Durga, the wife of Siva, triumphing over the spirit of Evil. That's one of the versions, anyway. I have a certain liking for her because of the size of her muscles, which appeal to my professional heart."

"But I suppose it was not you who brought these flowers here, and this coloured paper, by way of emphasising your devotion?"

"Oh no! I have no leisure to devote to any of my devotions. These are the offerings of some love-sick native, no doubt. For you must know that another version makes of this giantess the goddess of the tender passion, and despite the Mohammedan shell they are all heathens at heart. Happy wretch! If I could only share his confidence, how gladly would I empty a cartload of flowers at the foot of this muscular lady! Would that bring me nearer to the desire of my heart, I wonder?"

The look which from out of the black eyes shot across the cell showed that discretion does not necessarily always go the length of missing the opportunities offered by fate.

"Do you not know *Mevrouw Van Kempen*?" asked Martha abruptly, once more shifting the ground.

"*Par renommée*, only. Most of my colleagues have been her advisers—for a time. That I should not yet

have had the honour I have never regretted—until to-day.”

“Don’t regret it. It’s a slippery sort of honour, and not without its risks.”

“So I believe. I have heard say that it is the lady’s habit to throw about the furniture; but I have been looking in vain for bruises upon the whiteness of your skin.”

“Oh, I know how to manage her—usually.”

“She will get herself killed some day if she doesn’t take care.”

“By whom? Certainly not by one of these mild Javanese.”

“Don’t be too sure of it. These seeming lambs have a nasty way of nursing resentment. If they don’t answer back it is chiefly because they hate nothing so much as noise. They can bear a good deal, but occasionally they use their knives, or, by preference, one of those untraceable native poisons—at whose concoction they are adepts—very quickly, without any fuss.”

“Well, I hope they won’t use them on Mevrouw Van Kempen. She is a sort of monster in a way, but I have got a weakness for the monster. Ah, I do believe the rain has stopped—at last!”

“You say, ‘at last!’ and I say ‘already!’” grinned the doctor, with reproachful and yet laughing black eyes. “Always true to your task of putting your humble servant back into his humble place. And now, allow me to see if that beast of mine still lives, or has not perchance been washed away.”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEW DOCTOR.

"HAS the white rat eaten its breakfast?"

"Yes; an hour ago."

"Rice soaked in milk?"

"Yes; just as usual."

"And the parrakeet's wing been bandaged?"

"I did it myself."

"And the monkey got its fresh litter?"

"It will get that the moment that Mindu brings up the hay."

"It should have been brought up an hour ago!" flew out Mevrouw Van Kempen, with the snarl of a person who has at last found a pretext for losing her temper.

The moment that Martha had set eyes upon her face she had known that Mevrouw was in for one of her "bad days."

"I have told that boy dozens of times that the hay has got to be brought up before eight o'clock. And you I have told as well. Why will nobody obey me? Eh? Ah, but I shall soon have enough of this Scotch liberty of action—or whatever you choose to call it. And, besides, you are pulling my hair. A—i! A—i!"

"I did not pull your hair, Mevrouw. I was not even touching it at the moment."

"You lie!" thundered Mevrouw. And then again in an abruptly higher key: "You lie!"

Someone had once likened her formidable voice to an organ struck by lightning; and the resemblance was at this moment particularly graphic.

"I never lie," said Martha indignantly. And then stopped short, silenced by the recollection that the whole of her present life was in itself a lie.

"At first you took pains—you were the new broom. And now you feel safe enough to ill-treat me. Show me the comb!"

"There!"

Martha held out the tortoiseshell comb, in which, as ill-luck would have it, two long dark hairs had remained entangled.

At sight of them the Dutchwoman's face first turned purple and then of a sickly yellow.

"And you have the effrontery to say that you do not pull my hair? Ah, you are just like the others. I wish I had never set eyes upon you!"

"It's a wish that at moments I share!" said Martha, her own temper rising.

"You dare to answer me! You beggar whom I picked off the street! Worse than beggar, perhaps. How do I know who you are!"

It was all Martha could do not to drop the tortoise-shell comb, so startled was she by the outburst. Although it was by no means the first time she had been flown out at in somewhat of this fashion, words such as these had never before fallen. The blood surged to her head. For one moment she was on the point of answering hotly—of taking her instant leave, regardless of consequences. But even as she opened her lips to speak the sight of the face

in the mirror—hideously distorted—arrested her. With rolling eyes and vast bosom heaving, Mevrouw Van Kempen had sunk back in her chair, her hands clutching at the white cover of the table so convulsively as to bring several of the silver-topped flasks crashing to the ground.

Instantly poignant pity swept aside every other feeling; for Martha had recognised the symptoms of one of those terrible attacks of pain which, for the time being, seemed to deprive the Dutchwoman of the use of her reason.

“Oh, Mevrouw! Mevrouw!” cried Martha, bending over the suffering woman. “I understand now! I understand everything!” Then, sharply, “Anna! The drops! Bring the drops quickly!”

The square-faced girl appeared, bottle in hand, and, the drops having been administered, together they assisted the now silent and trembling woman to reach the sofa by the wall. There she lay breathing stertorously, her features twitching, her big fingers persistently opening and closing.

“Have Dr. Goess sent for at once,” whispered Martha to her stolid but helpful adjutant, whom habit and robustness of nerves had successfully carried through many such a crisis as this.

For nearly half-an-hour Martha watched alone beside the sick woman, who lay with closed eyes—not asleep, but momentarily exhausted by the pain.

Once only during this interval the heavy eyelids were raised, and she spoke a few words slowly, looking hard into Martha’s eyes the while.

“After all, this cannot go on for ever, can it?” she asked, with strange intensity. “Something will have to be done.”

In a moment Martha was on her knees beside the sofa,

"Dr. Goess will do something, Mevrouw! He must be here immediately. You are suffering dreadfully, are you not?"

The small, sunken eyes stared at Martha in reply, then slowly closed again, without the lips having moved.

The words just spoken were the only thing approaching a complaint which Martha had ever heard from her employer. Her form of complaining was not to lament, but to fly into a rage.

In the silence which again fell, Martha sat and brooded. This was the worst of the attacks which she had yet witnessed, and which lately had been growing more frequent. Evidently the disease was advancing. Probably it was incurable. This was a thought which stirred many others.

Dr. Goess arrived after what seemed interminable hours.

The wealthy widow's latest medical adviser was a tall, narrow-shouldered man with a stoop and an elongated oval of a head, so markedly flattened at the sides that it looked as though it had been recently packed up tight with many others of its kind, as, for instance, dates are packed. Although reported a conscientious doctor, his mental disposition seemed to be as yielding as his pliant frame. The fact of his having visited in the Villa Meena for well-nigh a year—in itself a record—spoke for this view of his character. Privately Martha regarded him as something of a worm, expressly made to be trodden on.

During the twenty minutes or so that doctor and patient remained closeted, Martha waited in the next room, in the company of Anna, ready for a summons. The conversation alongside, which had begun in a murmur, gradually rose in tone. Mevrouw's spasmodic growl

and Dr. Goess's low-toned replies were at first barely audible. But soon the growl began to swell, in a way it had when met by opposition. All at once it leaped into shrillness—was this indeed an interview between a doctor and a patient? There was the noise of a chair overturned, a few hurried steps, and then the door opened abruptly and Dr. Goess, looking rather pale, and followed by a torrent of inarticulate language, precipitately appeared.

Without stopping to ask what had happened, Martha rushed past him into the room.

Half sitting upon the sofa, Mevrouw Van Kempen was shaking her fist in the direction of the door, while with the other hand she groped about wildly, as though in search of some missile to send after the fugitive.

"Never again!" she was panting laboriously, "never again will I see his face. Do you hear? That man is not to be let in again!"

"He will not ask to be let in again!" threw back the doctor, over his shoulder—words sufficient to convince Martha that the worm had turned at last.

"Do you know what that fool wanted?" panted Mevrouw, into Martha's face. "He wanted me to cut off my hair. The old story about its sapping up my strength. As if it wasn't just my hair that keeps me alive!"

"He certainly ought to have known better than that," agreed Martha, and in the same moment stooped forward in alarm, for once more the sick woman was writhing upon the sofa. The short respite afforded by the drops had run its course and the cruel pain was once more tearing at her entrails.

When a second dose had been tried without effect, panic seized upon Martha. Impossible to grapple with

these terrors, unaided, and useless to recall Dr. Goess, since—even if he consented to return—the sight of him would be certain to bring on a new fit of frenzy. Another doctor must be procured without delay.

Leaving Anna in charge, Martha left the room in order to consult with Saidjah, the faithful Malayan butler, who alone of the whole household had weathered the storms of twenty years. Doctor Goess had been dismissed, she told him—to one as initiated as was Saidjah no further explanation was necessary—but, of course, there were plenty other doctors in the town, only she did not know their names. Did Saidjah know any?

Yes, Saidjah knew several names, but evidently was of opinion that this knowledge was somewhat barren.

There was Dr. Haagendorp, for instance, a very clever doctor—but he had, in consequence of some little difference, sworn an oath never again to darken the doors of the villa. And there was Dr. Gerstberger, a German, who had somehow collided with a medicine bottle and had his face badly cut by a splinter. And there were several others, some of whom had been personally turned out of the house by Mevrouw—for in those days she had still owned more bodily vigour—and others of whom had departed of their own accord, shaking the dust of the Villa Meena off their feet. No doubt there existed others, too, but Saidjah did not know their names and addresses. Perhaps in the hospital——

“The hospital—of course—that’s it!” exclaimed Martha, striking her forehead, behind which something like the light of an inspiration seemed to have flared up. “I even know one of the doctors in the hospital. I will write down his name, and you must go there at once,

Stop, I will give you a note for him; that will be best. I am sure he will come."

She dashed off the note, and—the messenger despatched—drew a breath of half relief. Since her meeting with him last week among the ruins, she had scarcely given a thought to Dr. Brulôt; and never had she supposed that her acquaintance with him could come in so conveniently. Of course he would come, with too great alacrity, if anything.

An hour later, Dr. Brulôt, with the step of a dancing-master and the bow of a courtier, crossed the threshold of the Villa Meena.

Martha awaited him in the drawing-room.

"I had to send for you, Doctor," she began a little nervously.

In reply he stooped and lightly kissed her hand.

"Of course you had to send for me, madame! Ever since we met under the protection of the goddess Durga, I have been waiting for this summons."

"What on earth do you mean?" she flashed out, for a moment forgetting her anxieties in indignation at this audacity.

"Nothing that need offend madame. But why should I be the only doctor in the town who has not tried his hand upon the coffee-planter's widow? I had been told that Dr. Goess has visited here for close upon a year, so it was only natural to suppose that he would not last much longer—and—considering the dearth of reserves, why should I not be the fortunate man to step into his shoes? Behold me at your service!"

"Oh, not at mine," said Martha, disarmed by his tone, and rather ashamed, as she had so often been on board ship, at having taken Dr. Brulôt too seriously. "I

have no need of your services—thank goodness! You will serve me enough if you can relieve Mevrouw Van Kempen.”

Another flourishing bow was the response, after which, upon tiptoe, the Frenchman followed Martha into the sick-chamber.

The reception was scarcely encouraging.

“What do you want?” growled the patient, glaring at the unfamiliar and audaciously ugly face of the intruder.

“To feel your pulse, among other things, Mevrouw.”

Another glare. Then: “Oh, you’re a doctor, are you? I thought you were one of the clowns escaped from the circus. Well, there’s my pulse! Try your wit upon it. You’re welcome to make as great a fool of yourself over it as have your colleagues!”

“Dr. Brulôt practises at the hospital,” Martha put in, by way of explanation, just before retiring, in answer to a signal from her mistress.

When Dr. Brulôt presently came out he was holding a strip of paper between his finger-tips, as one holds a flower.

“This is the recipe for the new medicine,” he explained, smiling. “You will be so good as to have it made at once, and administered according to the directions.”

“How is she, Doctor? Is the pain better?”

“There is no pain for the moment. I have made an injection.”

“But she is very ill, is she not? She is getting worse?”

Before replying, Dr. Brulôt looked at Martha for a moment, with his head slightly cocked to one side, and his black eyes almost squeezed shut.

"I cannot tell you exactly how ill she is until I have examined her, which I hope to do to-morrow; to-day the exhaustion is too great. I am glad to say that I have been accepted as medical attendant, an advantage which I owe entirely to you, madame, though I confess I do not quite understand how you could reconcile this summons with your conscience."

"With my conscience?"

"*C'est cela!*—or do you not remember telling me on the ship that you would never dare to take my prescriptions because it would seem to you a toss-up what I might put into them?"

"I may have said that. I don't remember."

Dr. Brulôt sighed audibly. "Again that mortifying shortness of memory! When will you consider me deep enough in the dust? But *n'importe!* I am content to rest there—at your feet; and, thanks to this blessed summons, I shall be there again to-morrow. So it is *à demain*, madame!"

He kissed her hand and was gone, leaving Martha half amused and half perplexed, and more than half regretting her own action. She had sent for him as a helper in an emergency, whereas he now threatened to become a feature of her daily life. This was a contingency with which she had not reckoned.

"That Frenchman will do, I think," pronounced Mevrouw Van Kempen, whom Martha found in an almost calm frame of mind. "I like the shape of his nose. That sort of nose wouldn't be afraid of anything, I fancy. And, by-the-bye, I seem to remember saying some things that were—not exactly compliments. Are any of your bones broken? Though I've heard say that hard words don't break them. If you look in that second drawer to

the left, you'll find a box of French plums. Yes, that's it. Take it and begone. I believe I'm going to sleep."

CHAPTER XV.

THE ALOEN-ALOEN.

It was only a few days after Dr. Brulôt's first visit to the Villa Meena that Martha's illusive security collapsed with the completeness of a house of cards.

The thing happened upon the *Aloen-Aloen*, that vast open space which lies at the heart of every Javanese town, and plays the part of the European promenade or esplanade. Shaded by bread-fruit and mango-trees and surrounded by the chief municipal buildings, the *Aloen-Aloen*, together with falling darkness, gathers to its grassy bosom most of the life of the town. There, under tattered tents and frail bamboo erections, such popular delicacies as stewed rice wrapped in banana leaves, bits of roast meat or of smoked fish strung upon skewers, and cooling drinks of the most manifold description are offered for sale; while before booths innumerable, drums are being beaten, and the gorgeousness of the sights within monotonously chanted in the ears of yearning and curious natives.

But it is not the natives alone who swarm here of an evening. To the charms of the *Aloen-Aloen*, Europeans are as vulnerable as Javanese. As though by tacit consent, a certain outer strip of the green square is respected as the meeting-ground of the *Orang-Blanda*. Here, when not occupied in sipping lemonade or coffee upon each other's verandahs, the cream of Darakowa society—on moonlight nights by preference—loves to drink in the

perfumed air, on whose wings the tones of the inevitable *gamelang* rarely fail to be carried, together with the gossip of the town.

Martha, too, her modest position notwithstanding, had made acquaintance with the *Aloen-Aloen*. It was to the patronage of Mevrouw Verbrugge that she owed this, the deprecating lady with the prodigal son who looked like a clergyman and behaved like a Lothario. Whether it was Niklas who had tyrannised his mother into offering to chaperon Aunt Meena's "companion," or whether the mother herself—in view of the favour in which the up-start stood—was acting from some complicated motive of diplomacy, was never precisely known; the result in either case being that Martha had come in for one or two evening walks upon which she had not counted.

"She is looking pale; I am sure a turn on the *Aloen-Aloen* will do her good," the worthy lady had said to-day on the occasion of an evening call. "Will you lend her to me for half-an-hour? I will bring her back in plenty of time for doing the hair."

Upon which Mevrouw Van Kempen had growled acquiescence, all the easier to give as the sleeplessness which had lately been added to her trials had had the effect of postponing the bedtime hour.

Martha was feeling frankly grateful to Mevrouw Verbrugge. Niklas' solemn style of love-making—consisting chiefly in putting his soul into his rather fine dark eyes—was in itself a nuisance, but could not quite spoil the relief of a temporary escape from her duties. Ever since that bad attack of her mistress's, Martha's nerves had been feeling a trifle shaky. Thanks to the injections, with which Dr. Brulôt was so much more liberal than his predecessor, the attack had not been repeated; but, never-

theless, Martha had the feeling that the patient was constantly trembling on the edge of one. The terror of it was to be read in her small sunken eyes, as in the eyes of a hunted animal. To what extent her condition had worsened, Martha had not been able to find out from Dr. Brulôt, who turned off the most earnest questions with the lightest and least committal of jokes, as with a rapier-point. The coffee evenings had, for the present, ceased, but single visitors were admitted, even readily, Mevrouw Van Kempen evidently finding a grim satisfaction in the sight of all these palpitating would-be heirs, anxiously scrutinising her symptoms. In the zest of disappointing their hopes she seemed to find new funds of strength.

"Oh, I am not done for yet," she had said this very day, in answer to Mevrouw Kettelmakker's earnest enquiries. "I've got a new doctor who has promised me wonders. You'll have to lay in a fresh dose of patience—all of you; and it still remains to be seen whether it will be rewarded in the end!"

Despite these brave words the wealthy widow's health could not fail, in these days, and in her own particular circle, to be an ever-recurring subject of conversation. In especial did curiosity flutter round the point as to whether any new testamentary dispositions had lately been framed. A new will a year was about the average with Mevrouw Van Kempen. Her last composition in this line was understood to be almost twelve months old. The question as to whether or not it had got a successor was, therefore, of vital interest.

The hope of finding out something definite on this point had not been without its motive power in Mevrouw Verbrugge's invitation to Martha to-day. Inmate of the

villa as she was, it seemed clear that the companion must be aware of what went on within its walls.

"Dear Cousin Meena does not receive many visits, does she?" enquired the good lady, in a gently solicitous tone. "Of course I am not speaking of old friends like myself, but some people talk so much and become so fatiguing."

Martha, perfectly aware of the motive behind the solicitude, replied, with ill-concealed amusement, that, on the contrary, a good many visitors were admitted.

"Everyone has been enquiring lately," she explained, not without zest. "Mevrouw Van Kempen seems to grow more popular as she grows more ill."

"Ah!" The deprecating smile became slightly distorted. "Then I suppose that Ella Rosemaer is among the enquirers? She has nothing to do, after all, but to pay visits and to run after people."

The increased sharpness of tone spoke loudly for Ella Rosemaer's chances. Not only did she stand closest in relationship to the widow, being the daughter of a step-sister, but she had always enjoyed a certain measure of favour, perhaps because she talked less than the others, and chiefly confined herself to gazing ecstatically at her aunt's *chevelure*, with those green eyes of hers, which, set in another face, might have been those of a sea-nymph. There really seemed serious chances of the bulk of the Van Kempen money going to Ella. If only Niklas had been reasonable, Mevrouw Verbrugge would have had no objection to the arrangement, for the state of Ella's feelings was an open secret. But there was nothing to be done with Niklas—witness this new flirtation, which the unfortunate mother even found herself compelled to further.

Under these circumstances, Ella's chances of fortune could only bring bitterness.

"Yes, Freule Ella comes at least every second day," said Martha.

"I thought so! But—but I suppose dear Cousin Meena is not well enough to do business, is she?"

"Business?"

"I mean—Mynheer Havelingh has not happened to call lately, has he?"

Mynheer Havelingh was the chief notary, whose name Martha happened to have heard.

"No; she has not been signing any documents that I know of," she said, with difficulty repressing a smile.

"Ah!"

It was an "Ah!" of disappointment rather than of relief. For that meant that the last year's will held good, and at that time Ella had distinctly been in favour. Ah, if Niklas had but wanted to listen to reason!

Reproachfully the much-worried mother glanced towards her son, stalking along wordless by Martha's side.

"I wonder if she is there now?" mused Mevrouw Verbrugge, aloud, meaning Ella and the villa, where she might be supposed to be improving her chances. "I don't see her anywhere here."

"I think I do," said Martha, whose younger eyes had espied a familiar figure at some little distance. "Is that not Freule Ella, over there—with her father? And someone else; someone in black; but who——"

"Yes; that's her with her guest. Such a sad case! Married only three months ago and already a widow. She is stopping with Ella on her way to some relations, for a change. They were at school together, you know.

A very fine young person, though I haven't seen her close yet."

"Not to my taste," remarked Niklas, in the tone of a connoisseur. "Look at her feet!"

The last words were necessarily said in an undertone, for the Rosemaer party had already drawn near.

Martha, paralysed into silence, was looking not at the feet, but at the face of the person in black. Could it be—no, it surely could not—but yes it was——

In another moment the two groups had met and come to a simultaneous standstill, and the last of Martha's doubts been destroyed. Her eyes had not deceived her. It was Leenebet Klaas with whom she found herself face to face—Leenebet, whom she had last seen triumphantly leading forth the captive Henrik from the parlour of the Hotel Coghen. She was indeed less pink and less plump than she had then been, but she was unmistakably Henrik's wife—no, what was that which she had just heard—*his widow?*

From Leenebet's face Martha's eyes went to Leenebet's gown, almost stupidly, as though striving to connect two independent thoughts. Though the logical deduction was clear, her brain had not yet succeeded in assimilating the fact of Henrik's death.

To judge from the angle at which the crude blue eyes were goggling—in danger, it would almost appear, of dropping out of her head—it seemed clear that Leenebet's brain was working with at least equal difficulty. For about a minute these two stood opposite to each other, speechless, while greetings—seemingly warm—were exchanged between the Verbrugges and the Rosemaers. As for Martha, the sea-green eyes passed over her as though she had not been; for Ella belonged to the party of those

who made a point of treating Martha as a lady's maid—at any rate behind Aunt Meena's back, while Mevrouw Verbrugge had perforce embraced the companion theory.

There came the moment when Ella, remembering social duties, turned to her former schoolfellow.

“Let me introduce you to Mevrouw Verbrugge, my dear. Aunt Tine, this is my friend Leenebet Klaas, who is stopping with me, alas, for only one day more. You have heard of her misfortune, I think. Perhaps you are surprised to see her here; but it was I who persuaded her to come for a little air. In spite of the depth of her mourning, I cannot let her fall ill.”

Mevrouw Verbrugge murmured something between an acquiescence and a condolence, and then abruptly remembered that she too had a presentation to make.

“And this,” she said nervously, well aware of Ella's antagonism, “is the lady who is kind enough to look after dear Cousin Meena. Allow me to introduce her: Mevrouw—to be sure, how strange!—it is the same name. I have got to introduce one Mevrouw Klaas to another. Really very strange!”

And she laughed with an increase of nervousness.

But it was to her alone that the humour of the situation seemed to appeal. Neither of the two Mevrouws Klaas appeared to be in the least touched by it. Nor did either of the right hands move out, nor either of the heads make any sign of acknowledging the introduction. Wide-eyed and rigid they stared at each other in a silence so strange that it could not fail to awaken the alarmed attention of the standers-by, even of Niklas and of Mynheer Rosemaer, which latter personage—belonging to the very heaviest order of fathers—had green eyes like

his daughter, but reminiscent of boiled gooseberries rather than of sea-nymphs.

It was Leenebet who, at the end of a pause which all felt to be ominous, broke silence.

"You are mistaken," she said, with ponderous distinctness; "this is no Mevrouw Klaas. This is Miss Grant. I know her."

Instantly Martha became aware of the gaze of four more pairs of eyes upon her, as palpable as though they were a material weight. For a moment she thought that she was going to sink under it; but in the next her natural stamina had given back to her at least a portion of her presence of mind. She was aware of Ella's eyes dilating in her putty-like face, as though with the sense of something coming which might be very welcome, and the sight helped the instinct of self-preservation to assert itself. Under its spur she achieved a smile—not a particularly successful smile—but anyway a smile.

"You are quite right," she said, in an astonishingly even voice. "You knew me as Miss Grant. But I am no longer Miss Grant now, I am Mevrouw Klaas."

There was a flourish of defiance in the tone in which she said it, looking straight into the goggling eyes the while.

Struck dumb by this audacity, Leenebet got no further than a gape and something like a gurgle. A second and more painful pause ensued, marked by general perplexity, which, on the part of Mevrouw Verbrugge, was diversified by intense flurry. What would next have happened it was hard to say, had not, quite unexpectedly, Niklas stepped into the breach. Without in the least understanding what it was all about, he had grasped the fact that something unpleasant was happening—unpleasant,

that is to say, to Aunt Meena's pretty companion, and had been visited by the idea that to put an end to the situation would have every chance of earning her gratitude. Accordingly, he cleared his throat.

"My dearest mother," he began, in the voice of a preacher giving out the text, "you will observe that we are stopping the passage. Allow me to propose a move forwards. I am sure these ladies are anxious to get home. Good night, Freule Ella," and he put out his hand in an unmistakable farewell gesture.

Within another moment, in some astonishing way, the two groups had got separated, Niklas hurrying off his mother in one direction, while Ella Rosemaer, bursting with new-born curiosity, was doing the same by the still speechless Leenebet in another. What she wanted now was a full explanation of the mystery, and for that privacy was requisite.

"What—what did she mean?" gasped Mevrouw Verbrugge, when they were barely out of earshot. "Is it true that she knew you?"

"Yes; that is quite true," said Martha abstractedly.

"And what is there astonishing in her having known Mevrouw Klaas before her marriage?" demanded Niklas gravely, in pursuance of his rôle of saviour.

"But the same name—it is so strange!"

"Coincidences are generally considered strange," was his didactic pronouncement.

The glance which Martha sent him seemed like the first instalment of the hoped-for gratitude.

During the quarter of an hour that followed, he continued to feed this sense of gratitude by keeping up, almost single-handed, the lamentably drooping conversa-

tion. Martha herself scarcely contributed a word, being occupied in thinking fast and furiously.

As the upshot of her reflections she stood still abruptly:

"I think I shall go home now, Mevrouw Verbrugge, if you don't mind. I may be wanted."

"Very well, very well!" murmured Niklas's mother, obviously welcoming the end of an awkward situation. "Shall we take you back?"

"No, thank you. I shall have a *sado*. I want to be quick."

It was Niklas who put her into the *sado* requisitioned, and who, on the strength of the evening's events, felt himself justified in kissing her hand at parting.

"Drive fast!" said Martha, to the man on the box.

Despite the shortness of the time she had had for reflection, she already felt the need of hurry. Her scattered senses were pretty well gathered together by this time, and her plan formed. It consisted simply in making a virtue of necessity, by throwing herself upon Mevrouw Van Kempen's mercy. She was irretrievably unmasked—no doubt of that; and, unless her mistress's mind was to be poisoned against her, it was from her own lips that the old lady must hear the truth. But for this she must lose no time, else she would find herself forestalled. Ever since that first coffee evening, during which Niklas was so assiduous an adjutant with the cups, Ella had been her enemy—she knew it well. And now an unexpected weapon had been laid into the enemy's hand. Was it likely that she would delay, for even one hour, in using it?

At a street corner there was a slight delay caused by a derelict strap in the harness. Martha trembled with

impatience while the harm was being repaired. Had the man taken one minute longer over it she would have jumped to the ground and pursued her way on foot, in defiance of all propriety. But just as she was gathering together her skirts for the descent he whipped up his small horse once more.

As they turned into the leafy street, Martha bent forward eagerly; then made a movement of exasperation. Sure enough, there, at the gates of the Villa Meena, stood a second *sado*. She knew what that meant; it meant that she was too late, that she had been fore-stalled, after all!

"Freule Rosemaer is here, is she not?" she said to Saidjah, the butler, whom she met in the entrance; and was nowise astonished by his replying that yes, Freule Ella had come a few minutes ago, and was at present paying her respects to Mevrouw.

She had known that it could not be otherwise.

With a feeling of impotent anger, Martha turned away, to await in her own room the departure of the visitor.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ANARCHIST.

WHAT had passed between Ella and her guest after the separation of the two groups on the *Aloen-Aloen* was, in the main, as follows:—

"My dear—what is it? Do you really know her? What do you know about her? Tell me quickly! quickly!"

Ella's arm, as she spoke, was thrust behind that of Leenebet, drawing her away from the crowd—not over gently.

“Papa,” she added, with commendable presence of mind, remembering a possibly inconvenient listener's presence, “you needn't trouble about us further, we're going home.”

Then—the obedient parent having taken the hint—Ella turned again to her guest:

“What are you waiting for, Leenebet? Don't you see that I'm on needles? Do you know anything about her? Anything *bad*? Oh, why don't you speak?”

In her impatience, Ella, whom a new-born hope had transformed from her usually impassive self, gave an eloquent shake to her friend's arm.

“Because I'm too much astonished,” Leenebet succeeded at last in saying. “Has one ever heard of such impertinence!—such—such shamelessness!”

“Then you do know something?”

“I should think I do!”

The tone was charged with such promise that Ella felt inclined to hug both herself and her friend.

“Tell me, Leenie dearest! Who is she? What is she?”

“An adventuress of the very worst sort—that's what I'm persuaded that she is—in spite of all that my poor Henrik said.”

“Ah! so Henrik knew her too?”

“To his misfortune, he did. He met her at that health-resort in Europe, and very nearly fell into her toils. Will you believe it that she actually had the effrontery to follow him out here, and to want to dispute him to me—to *me*, his lawful wife!”

"Tell me more! Tell me how it all came about!" urged Ella, whose green eyes could be seen gleaming through the shadows, more like those of a cat than of a nymph for the time being.

Generously—the paralysis of amazement being passed—did Leenebet respond to the appeal.

In the story which was told in hushed and hurried accents, while the two friends moved along the outskirts of the crowd, Martha figured not only as a full-fledged adventuress, but likewise as a siren of the most virulent sort—a point of view which particularly commended itself to Ella's mind.

"I always said she was a shameless flirt. To turn men's heads seems to be her one idea in life."

It was said with honest conviction. After all, was not exactly the same thing happening to Niklas which had happened to Henrik?

"And now," proceeded Leenebet, waxing warmer and warmer with the immensity of her subject, "this insolent creature puts the crown upon everything by usurping my name, and with its help giving herself out as a respectable person!"

"And thus gaining admittance to a respectable house and ensnaring poor Aunt Meena. She pretends to be a widow, you know, since, of course, she can't produce a husband."

"Widow?"

Leenebet snorted with the rage of a person who, on his own premises, finds himself face to face with a poacher, while somewhat self-consciously throwing back her long widow's veil.

"She is no more a widow than she has ever been a wife. Her game is clear. 'Mevrouw' sounds more

respectable than 'Freule,' so she makes herself into 'Mevrouw!' But why need she have taken my name? My name?"

"Perhaps because it's a convenient one, being so general, or perhaps because she has got her linen marked with it! I've seen it myself on her handkerchiefs. Oh, she's an artful one! And to think that Aunt Meena is the victim! But she sha'n't go on being duped, not one minute longer! Leenebet," said Ella, standing still, and speaking with sudden decision; "I am going to put you into a *sado* and send you home, and I am going to get into another *sado* and drive to Aunt Meena. It's my plain duty to open her eyes. And I must go at once, or she'll be there before me, and—and spoil the effect. You'll tell me more when I come home; and meanwhile I know enough to go on with."

The *sado* which bore off Ella had nothing wrong with its harness; consequently it was she who won the race to the Villa Meena.

Whether she had won anything else might be open to question.

Even to gain admittance had required some negotiation. The hour was not a decent one for visits, as Mevrouw explained to her niece through the medium of the coloured butler, to which Ella sent back the message that this was no ordinary visit. If she had come to assure herself of her aunt's condition, the answer was returned in Saidjah's broken Dutch, then she might spare herself the pains. Mevrouw was exactly as ill and exactly as well as she had been yesterday. To which Ella: "It was not a question of enquiry, but of information. She had an important piece of news to communicate, one which touched her revered relative's good most closely."

To this direct appeal to curiosity the citadel at length yielded.

It was sitting upright in her cushioned chair that Ella found her aunt, blinking her eyes hard, but evidently inquisitively, at the belated visitor.

"I suppose you've come to tell me that there's a mine under the house or a bomb in my bedroom? If it's anything less than that I'll have you turned out of the door for spoiling my chances of sleep upon insufficient grounds."

"Dearest Aunt Meena, it may be a mine, for anything I know. Indeed, it would not be surprising, considering the antecedents of the person you are harbouring under your roof. I really think it quite possible that she may be an anarchist."

It was an idea which had visited Ella on the spur of the moment, suggested by the mention of bombs, yet it seemed like an inspiration. Darakowa papers had lately been very busy with the anarchical plots in Europe and their possible spread to these regions.

"By 'she' you mean my companion, of course," said Mevrouw, not looking half as terrified as Ella had expected. "I know you always hated her."

"It is not a question of likes or dislikes, Aunt Meena, but of your own interests and of my duty."

Ella spoke with a very fair assumption of dignity. "The fact is that I have just heard some particulars—most disgraceful particulars—concerning the person who calls herself Mevrouw Klaas, but who evidently has no right whatever to that name."

At this point, throwing dignity to the winds, Ella burst into Leenebet's version of Martha's story—a version which lost nothing in the telling; and to which Mevrouw Van

Kempen listened attentively, ensconced in her chair, her leathery countenance betraying neither emotion nor surprise.

When Ella, a little discountenanced by her aunt's steady and quite good-humoured look, stopped speaking, there was nothing heard for a moment but Mevrouw's asthmatic breathing. Then she said approvingly:

"A real pity that Niklas Verbrugge can't see you now. It's wonderful how excitement becomes you. Your eyes are always good, of course, but a woman can't live by eyes alone, as little as a man by bread."

"But, auntie dearest," retorted Ella, whose putty-like face was indeed looking like flesh and blood, "that is not an answer to what I tell you. You must surely have some remarks to make. Have you not told me yourself that you took her without references and without papers? So what is to prevent her being anything—even an anarchist?"

"Nothing that I know of."

Ella drew a freer breath.

"I knew you would agree with me! And I am sure you see, too, that, under these circumstances, I had no choice but to warn you."

"Oh, no choice, of course! How could you possibly be expected to keep the story to yourself, even for one night? You would probably have choked upon it before to-morrow."

"But, darling Aunt Meena—have you not understood?"

"One thing I have understood very thoroughly; that this Henrik Klaas you speak of—God rest his soul—has carried on with two women at once, of which only one—in the nature of things—could have him."

"But it was she who carried on with him."

"So says the widow, of course. If there had been no promise of marriage, do you suppose she would have had her linen marked with his initial? Eh? Have a little commonsense, Ella!"

"That is exactly what shows her cunning," put in Ella triumphantly. "She meant to use that as a proof."

"Another thing I have thoroughly understood," proceeded Mevrouw Van Kempen, unmoved, "is that this young person—whatever her real name is, and whether she be maid, wife or widow—has been ill-used by Fate—cruelly ill-used. This in itself ensures her my sympathies, since I too have been ill-used by Fate—in another way. As you know, I have never been able to feel very tender towards people who are both healthy and lucky. This girl hasn't even always been healthy—else what was she doing at a health resort? And she has been most distinctly unlucky. I really must see what I can do for her."

Ella felt herself turning pale, though in truth her pasty complexion had only grown a little pastier.

"But, Aunt Meena—the deceitfulness of it all! Why could she not introduce herself to you under her real name? Why all this comedy?"

"That is a question I cannot answer until I have spoken to her. It's to be supposed that she had her reasons."

"Then you are still going to speak to her? To admit her to your room? You are not going to turn her out of doors on the spot?"

"Turn her out of doors? What are you thinking of? Who would do my hair to-night, I wonder, if I was so mad, and so unjust? Can you possibly suppose that I

would condemn unheard a hairdresser of her calibre? Even if she confessed herself an anarchist, I'm not sure that I wouldn't keep her on. It's her fingers that interest me, not her political principles!"

Having stared for another moment, Ella rose with a fair show of composure.

"Well, I have done my duty, Aunt Meena, it is for you to act upon my warning or not. Good night!"

Mevrouw chuckled hoarsely.

"No need to look so desperate, my dear! Sorry I can't oblige you by giving her the sack on the spot; but it won't make any difference in the end. Even though Niklas were to propose to her to-morrow I give you my word for it that she wouldn't take him."

With disdainfully closed lips, Ella made her way out. It was on the other side of the door only that she permitted the corners of her mouth to droop. No doubt about it, her attempt had been a failure.

Before her *sado* had reached the end of the street, the electric bell summoned Martha to the bedroom, whither Anna's stout arm had assisted Mevrouw, who already sat enthroned before the toilet-table.

So it was here that the critical explanation was to take place. So much the better! The comb in her hand would be as a backbone to self-confidence, which, during the long wait, had drooped considerably. How could she forget that only quite recently her mistress had called her a beggar picked off the street? had snarled out the words: "How do I know who you are?" The mistrust there expressed could not fail to have found food in Ella's report.

In trepidation Martha scanned the vast, brown countenance in the mirror, and was almost startled to meet a pair of unmistakably twinkling eyes.

Then, before she had opened her lips, Mevrouw Van Kempen said in her deepest bass tones:

"I know all about it. No need for preambles. Ella has cleared the way."

"What—what did she tell you?" stammered Martha.

"That you are an adventuress—no, anarchist, is her theory; and that probably there is a bomb under the dressing-table. Also that you're not a widow—which, for the matter of that, I never myself quite believed—and are not called Klaas, although you tried hard to get Henrik Klaas to marry you. I forget what she said your real name was—though, of course, that mayn't be your real name either—if you're an anarchist."

"And you believed her?"

"Not about the bomb, or I shouldn't be sitting here, without having even looked under the table; you can ask Anna if I did. And as for the rest, I should like to hear your version before deciding."

And then Martha gave her version—unvarnished, well aware that in a free confession lay her only chance of a free pardon.

She was listened to as attentively and as silently as Ella had been.

"And you cared for this man?" was the first thing which Mevrouw growled out in reply.

"I cared for him—madly, but I am able to see now that it was mad. You see, he——"

"Undertook to cure you, and succeeded—quite so. Men are often wonderfully successful in that way, far more so than a whole antagonistic family. Well—let him rest in peace! It's not with him I'm concerned. And so, finding yourself planted there, so to say, you decided to brave it out. I rather like that. And what

would you have done, I wonder, if I hadn't happened to throw the brush at Elise exactly on that day and in that place?"

"I don't know. Perhaps scrubbed floors for Muder Coghen."

"H-m, h-m! And you had no money at all?"

"Only a few pounds remaining."

"H-m! No mistake about your having had a bad time of it. I understand now why your papers went astray. Also I see the necessity of the false name, because of the address of the letters, but not that of telling *me* lies as well as the others. Why not have made a clean breast of it, eh?"

"Because I didn't know you yet. I couldn't be sure——"

"How I would take it? There's something in that. But you know now, don't you?"

"Not exactly. You haven't told me yet what you are going to do. Are you going to send me away?"

"I'm not sure yet what I am going to do. I have to think it out. To-morrow you shall know. Now, please suppress your excitement, else you'll be pulling my hair, and that would be much harder to forgive than the widow masquerade."

Understanding that the subject was closed, Martha did the same by her own lips, though tingling with anxious curiosity touching Mevrouw's ultimate intentions. Certain symptoms pointed to the situation having tickled her fancy. Was the free pardon really in sight?

The question was throbbing in Martha's mind when, the rites at the toilet-table being concluded and the sleeping-draught prepared, she withdrew for the night.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PARAGRAPH FOUR.

EARLIER than usual Martha was summoned to her mistress next morning. But though she entered the room on the tiptoe of expectation, she only received an order at once to send a message to Mynheer Havelingh, requesting his presence at the villa for ten o'clock precisely. Not a word as to the incident of yesterday, nor any resumption of last night's talk. It was in a silence that Martha dared not break that the *coiffure* was to-day accomplished. She could only suppose that the impending business with the notary—most likely the framing of one of the periodical testaments—was engrossing Mevrouw's thoughts to the exclusion of other things.

One small incident only seemed to show that she had not entirely forgotten Martha's private affairs.

"Take a piece of paper," said Mevrouw, as she rose from the toilet-table, and write down your real name, but distinctly, please!"

And Martha had obeyed, wondering.

The notary came punctually, and for a full hour disappeared into his client's private room. Towards the end of the hour, Saidjah was despatched to two gentlemen in the neighbourhood, requesting their presence for a short space.

"The witnesses," decided Martha, who was hanging impatiently about the entrance, in the hope of seeing them depart, and thus knowing the coast to be clear for her own affair. When they came out at last, two elderly *paterfamilias* whom she knew by sight, it struck Martha that they looked at her curiously and bowed far more deferentially than was at all necessary.

Even now she could not yet gain Mevrouw's ear, Mynheer Havelingh being still in possession. Then, just as she was arming herself with a fresh buckler of patience, the electric bell rang shrilly, and Martha found herself summoned to her mistress's presence.

Had the notary perhaps departed unperceived? Her first glance within the door showed that he had not. Mynheer Havelingh was, on the contrary, very much to the fore, sitting opposite to Mevrouw, with a small table between them, upon which, beside an inkstand, was spread a sheet of paper.

To this sheet Mevrouw pointed as she said to the notary:

"Tell her!"

Martha, though bewildered, felt unexpectedly reassured by the familiar twinkle of the eyes.

Mynheer Havelingh, sitting very upright, began by coughing behind his hand, across which he took a critical view of Martha. He was a gaunt man, with a long, stiff face marked by two deep perpendicular folds at the sides of his mouth and running up almost to his eyes.

Still across his hand he looked doubtfully at Mevrouw.

"You are really of opinion that this—this announcement is advisable?"

"I have told you that I am."

The notary coughed once more before dropping his hand.

"My dear young lady," he began, in a voice which creaked like a badly oiled hinge, "I find myself commissioned to impart to you a piece of news which will no doubt astonish, as much as it will—er—rejoice, or, at anyrate—satisfy you. I, myself, am of opinion that the announcement is—er—superfluous; but my revered client here——"

"He thinks you might want to poison me, having heard the contents of the will," Mevrouw Van Kempen put in, with her eyes twinkling hard.

"—wishes you to be informed, and to her desire I naturally bow. Putting aside superfluous explanations, I have to tell you that Mevrouw Van Kempen, being satisfied with your services, has, in her generosity, decided to leave you a portion of her fortune, a very considerable portion," emphasised the notary, keeping his eyes carefully and a little anxiously upon Martha's face, for he had but a poor opinion of women's nerves, and was well aware that good news, if administered too suddenly, may prove quite as disastrous as bad!

Having said the words "a considerable portion," he made a pause, as though to give her time to recover. But Martha only stared in a quite expressionless fashion.

"In fact, to be quite plain, since my client so wishes it, it is no less than one half of her very considerable capital which Mevrouw Van Kempen has decided to leave you for your sole and undivided property, the other half—minus some legacies to the servants—being portioned out between her various relatives of different degrees."

Here Mynheer Havelingh sat well forward in his

chair, making ready to catch Martha in case she should faint.

Martha, however, showed no sign of fainting, scarcely even of understanding.

"I—I don't quite believe that," she remarked at last, having first looked towards Mevrouw, as though for enlightenment and met only the humorous eyes, which seemed to be enjoying her perplexity.

"Show her the passage," said Mevrouw. "Nothing like seeing for oneself."

With a deepening of the perpendicular folds in which his mouth was framed, Mynheer Havelingh took up the sheet and, holding it before Martha's eyes, pointed with a bony finger at a paragraph which bore the number four in the freshly signed document.

Though the letters danced before Martha's eyes, they were too strictly caligraphic to be easily mistaken. To grasp all details was not possible on the instant; but her own name stared her in the face, her real name, such as she had written it down this morning at Mevrouw's request: "Martha Mary Grant, hitherto known as Mevrouw Klaas," that was how she found herself described in this paragraph, and coupled with the mention of sums whose size made her brain reel, since, even with the evidences of wealth about her, she had never supposed that the half of Mevrouw Van Kempen's fortune would require five figures to express it. Altogether, she saw enough to understand that this was not a huge joke, but a serious transaction.

When, therefore, Mevrouw asked, a little impatiently, whether she believed at last, Martha's reply, though dazed, was unhesitating.

"Yes; I believe, but I don't understand. Why? How? What have I done to deserve this?"

"Nothing particular. Or rather, two things. Firstly, you've done my hair better and pulled it less than anyone has done before; and secondly, you've had a bad time of it. Fate has played you one shabby trick; why shouldn't she make up for it by a good one, and why shouldn't I have the playing of it?"

"But your relations?"

"I've thrown a bit to each of them; and they don't need it, any of them, as much as you do. For them it means butter to their bread, for you it means the bread itself—though I've provided for the butter too, and even for the jam, I think."

The hoarse chuckle was once more heard.

Martha made an impulsive step forward, to kneel down beside the invalid's chair.

"You are very good to me," she said, with a catch in her breath.

"No, I'm not good, I'm selfish. I wanted to see a happy face beside me. But where is it? Mercy! Tears? That's not what I bargained for. Away with them! I'm only sorry I sha'n't see the faces of my dear cousins when this document is read out. That promises to be a sight."

"I hope it will be long—very long—before it is read out," whispered Martha, as she pressed her lips impetuously upon one of the big, brown hands.

Mevrouw looked deep into her eyes.

"I almost believe you mean it. And yet Mynheer Havelingh did not want me to tell you! So like a man's shortsightedness!"

With the last words she sank back in her chair, her face suddenly convulsed.

"Ah, what's that? *It's coming again! It's coming again!*"

Martha had no need to ask what was coming again. She knew that this meant a new attack of pain, provoked, maybe, by the mental strain of the last hour.

Mynheer Havelingh having fled, Dr. Brulôt arrived, syringe in pocket; but, to judge from the length of the time he remained closeted with the patient, the fiend proved even harder to wrestle with than usual.

"You will come back before the evening?" Martha questioned him anxiously, when, relief having come, he was on the point of withdrawing.

She had to repeat her question, which he did not seem to have heard.

"I may be back—that depends. If anything occurs, send for me, of course; but I don't think I shall be wanted."

"And, if you don't come, is she to have the sleeping-draught as usual?"

"As usual—yes."

Only later on it struck Martha that Dr. Brulôt was not speaking in his usually airy fashion. At the moment it only occurred to her to think that she had never seen him look less like a dancing-master and more like a real doctor. It was one of the rare occasions on which she had thought to catch sight of another man behind the one she believed she knew so well.

Upon the agitated morning there followed, for the Villa Meena, an afternoon marked by the calm of exhaustion. While Mevrouw rested upon her sofa, with Anna within call, Martha sat in her own room, thinking hard. It was now only that she could seriously attack the chaos which had been wrought in her mind by the

meeting of last night, and by all that had followed it. Up to this moment, the preoccupation of her own immediate future had pressed other things into the background, but with the lifting of that preoccupation they sprang forward imperiously.

So Henrik was dead. She had known it since last night, had been subconsciously aware of the fact right through all the agitations of the last twenty hours, yet it was only now that full realisation came. In theory she would have thought that this would bring her no shock at all, since it brought her nothing new. Virtually Henrik had been dead to her since that terribly long night in the Hotel Coghén, during which she had buried the memory of her lover with tears. And yet, to her astonishment, she felt that she was shaken—not exactly by pain, but by a sort of self-contemptuous pity for the poor, sick-looking wretch, as which he lived in her memory. After all, it was to him that she had given the treasure of her first pure love, and, unworthy receiver though he had proved himself, the mere fact of his having held it in his hand seemed in some way to have hallowed his person.

So he was dead. But how? When? Upon pity came inevitable curiosity. The old ill, no doubt, came back again. Had she not read the signs in his face when she saw him in Batavia? But she would like to know many things. Had he suffered, or had he just gone to sleep, as so many of them did? For the sake of gathering a few details, she felt able even to speak to Leenebet. Yes—she must speak to Leenebet, if only in order to wipe away the bitterness which had poisoned the interview at the Hotel Coghén. The bitterness was so completely gone now that she actually felt sorry for her rival. There was no doubt that she, too, had loved Henrik, and with a love

that had endured far beyond Martha's own. And now she was unhappy. Yes, she must speak to Leenebet. But how? When?

All at once Martha remembered how Ella had spoken of her friend's stay with her as of the briefest—"for only one day more, alas," she had said—or something to that effect. Obviously there was no time to lose. If the meeting with Leenebet was to come off, Martha must act at once.

The thought had scarcely gained consistence when already she sat at the writing-table penning a note to Henrik's widow. In conciliatory and almost humble accents it asked Mevrouw Klaas kindly to say at what hour she could receive Miss Grant, who was sincerely anxious to leave upon her mind a better impression than she had been able to do in Batavia.

With the note in her hand Martha went out into the passage in search of a messenger. Almost in the same moment Anna was closing Mevrouw Van Kempen's door softly behind her. She, too, had something in her hand—two letters.

"Do you mean to say that Mevrouw has been writing?" asked Martha, astonished.

"Yes; upon the sofa. She asked for the blotting-book, and I gave it her. And now she wants these two letters posted. I am to give them to Saidjah." As she held them towards Martha, the latter's eyes could not fail to catch the names upon the two envelopes—Freule Ella Rosemaer and Dr. Brulôt—and it just crossed her mind to wonder what Mevrouw could be writing to the doctor about, considering that he had been there once already to-day, and might be coming again.

"I too have a letter—but it cannot go by the post,

that would make it too late. I must send it by messenger. I wonder if Saidjah——”

She stopped short, reflecting.

“What is Mevrouw doing now, Anna?”

“I think she is asleep. I had to let down the blinds.”

“Good; then the best thing will be for you to take my letter to Mynheer Rosemaer’s house; it is for a lady who is stopping there. I need a safe messenger who can bring me back an answer. I know Saidjah will not go on my order alone, and none of the others are to be trusted. You will go, Anna, will you not? I shall stay with Mevrouw while you are away.”

“But will she not be angry with me?”

“I shall see that she is not angry. By the time she wants to go to bed you will be back, and even if you should not be back I can settle her myself, and give her the sleep-draught. I know exactly how it is administered. Please go, Anna dear!” urged Martha, pressing the letter into the girl’s hand, oblivious in her eagerness of everything except the goal of her anxiety. “And if you bring me back the answer all right, I will give you something to put into your stocking,” she added, upon an inspiration, knowing well that the savings bank represented by that worsted stocking was the dominating influence in Anna’s life.

The square face immediately relaxed into curves.

“Very well, I will go, if you want it. And I shall only put one letter into the post-box, since this one, too, is for the Rosemaer house.”

Nodding her thanks, Martha vanished into Mevrouw’s room, invaded already by the shadows of evening.

Anna was not yet back when the sick woman, opening her eyes, said suddenly:

“It is time for the hair. Anna, where are you?”

"I have sent her on an errand," said Martha, approaching the sofa in some trepidation. "I hope you don't mind?"

She was half prepared for an explosion, but it did not come. Instead, Mevrouw only looked at her rather intensely.

"So it is you who are going to put me to bed? So much the better. Help me up!"

It was only towards the end of the ceremony at the toilet-table that she again opened her lips to ask abruptly:

"It *is* splendid, is it not?"

"What is splendid, Mevrouw?"

"The hair, of course."

Then—Martha having assented in suitable fashion—she added enigmatically:

"What a waste, to be sure!"

Not knowing what to make of the remark, Martha held her tongue; and, having helped Mevrouw to bed, she dropped out the sleeping-draught. It was annoying to find that, owing to the unsteadiness of her hand, the first attempt was a failure—still more annoying that, having replaced the bottle on the table, an unguarded movement should sweep it to the ground, where it landed with a crash. Again she looked apprehensively towards Mevrouw, and again Mevrouw took no notice.

Then Martha sat down to await Anna's return.

After a time there was a movement on the pillow, and looking in that direction Martha, by the flickering rays of the nightlight, could distinguish the gleam of the open eyes fixed upon her. She rose from her seat.

"What is it, Mevrouw?"

"Have the beasts had their supper?"

"Yes; of course they have."

"That's right."

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" asked Martha, puzzled.

"Yes, there is; you can give me a kiss. I haven't had one for a long time. So, if your lips are not afraid of touching my face——"

"Oh, Mevrouw!"

Already Martha's lips were upon the leathery cheek, while a return of this morning's emotion brought the quick tears to her eyes.

"That tastes good," said Mevrouw, drawing a deep and painfully audible breath. "Good night."

It was not till half-an-hour later that Anna returned, bringing Martha's note back with her, as well as the information that the lady to whom it was addressed had left that afternoon, together with Freule Rosemaer, who was expected back in a day or two.

"And does Mevrouw Klaas come with her?" asked Martha, deeply annoyed.

But Anna had no further information to give. That was all she knew.

"How could you take so long, Anna, if there was no answer to bring?" questioned Martha, in her irritation.

"It was because I could not at once find a post-box for posting the other letter," said Anna, having reflected for a moment.

The transparency of the excuse was such that Martha immediately suspected her messenger not of not finding a post-box, but rather of finding a certain athletic carpenter whom she had more than once seen waiting beside the garden gate, evidently in hopes of a glimpse of the much-admired square face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HEIRESS.

HER face flooded with the light of dawn, Martha awoke refreshed. She had missed her yesterday's walk, and, although she could not venture far from the villa, she did not want to miss to-day's. Fortunately, the garden in itself was field enough.

Very soon she was pacing its leafy alleys, still dripping with the night's dew, traversing the bamboo bridges which looked so like children's toys and yet could bear a man's weight, nodding good morning to the elephant-headed deities which confronted her at every corner. From out of a paper bag filled with crumbs she scattered handfuls to the birds who peopled this miniature edition of the Garden of Eden—such a medley of brilliant patches, with here and there a sober note among them—soberest of all, the familiar brown sparrow of Europe, whose first sight had been to her as that of an old acquaintance. Successfully imported, and triumphantly naturalised, Jack Sparrow strutted here upon this Javanese lawn precisely as self-confident and precisely as pert as he had ever done in the High Street of Ballenweem. It was to Ballenweem that the sight of him regularly bore back Martha's thoughts, with something of the same sort of pang occasioned by the grind of the musical box. Would she

ever again look upon its familiar and once detested features? She caught herself hoping that she would, if only for the sake of having somebody who would listen when she talked. There were such astonishing things to be talked over at this moment, and nobody to talk to. Really, it was very stupid of George Fettes not to be able to waft himself over from one hemisphere to the other, just for half-an-hour at a time. Her erstwhile pal's potentialities as a listener were unlimited. How patiently he had lent an ear to those standing complaints of hers—for instance on that day when they had sat on the bank together, while she plucked at the blue-bells in the grass.

“Ah—what was that?”

Martha turned her head just in time to see a flap-winged lizard soaring down from a tree branch to the lawn. Among the bushes in the background there was an eruption as of fiery sparks, as a flame-coloured fly-catcher darted past, and overhead the huge waxen cups of a flowering creeper clustered—sights enough to remind her that this was not the country of blue-bells.

Martha looked at her watch, and then towards the house. She had told Anna to send for her as soon as Mevrouw awoke, and was beginning to wonder at the delay of the summons.

She tried another turn, but the sun's growing strength was beginning to be felt even in the shaded alleys. Reluctantly she walked back towards the house.

Anna was sitting in the room next to Mevrouw's with the door ajar.

“Still asleep?” questioned Martha, in a whisper.

Anna nodded.

“She's having a good sleep, poor dear,” thought Martha, as she glanced at the clock and noted the late-

ness of the hour. The sleeping-draught seemed to have worked unusually well.

“Was she quiet in the night?”

“Very quiet. I never heard her move.”

Side by side the two girls sat on in silence, while the room grew hotter and the clock ticked beside them, waiting for a summons that did not come.

Martha could not have said when exactly it was that something struck her in the quality of the silence and of the small noises that tempered it, but it came quite suddenly. There was a blank somewhere, a sound which should have been there was not, though she could not at once account to herself for this. In another moment she knew; it was the asthmatic breathing that she missed, and that was inseparable from her idea of *Mevrouw Van Kempen*.

With a feeling of discomfort, which was not yet alarm, she rose and on tiptoe entered the bedroom. There she stopped at some distance from the bed, straining her eyes towards it. Despite the height at which the sun stood, the room was dim with the dimness of lowered blinds. Her eyes had to get used to the gloom before she could distinguish the mountain of flesh beneath the bedclothes. Then gradually she made out the face, fully exposed, for *Mevrouw* lay upon her back, and as she did so a shiver touched Martha, for neither eyes nor mouth were closed, each showed a gleam of white, of teeth here, of eyeballs there.

With two bounds Martha was by the window and had pulled up the blind. Then turned again, in terror, towards the bed. Was that the face of a living woman? She would have to touch her in order to be quite certain, but a strong inner repulsion held her back. Besides, it was

almost superfluous, the cloud of flies about the bed spoke too plainly.

"Anna!" she called out shrilly. "The doctor! Quick! Tell Saidjah to send for the doctor! There is something wrong with Mevrouw."

"How could it happen so quickly?" Martha was asking of Dr. Brulôt half-an-hour later, with affrighted eyes. "She did not seem worse last night."

"It's a thing which is apt to happen quickly quite as easily as slowly," answered the doctor, in that new manner of his which she had noted yesterday. "You must not forget that these violent attacks of pain are a heavy tax upon the heart."

"Then it is the heart that failed?"

"I put it down at that."

"But it seems so extraordinary and so improbable."

He looked at her closely.

"To me it seems much more improbable that she should have lived as long as she did. She had three distinct diseases, each one of which was bound to prove fatal in the end."

"And which of them killed her?"

"None of them, and all together. It was the general machinery that struck work."

"At any rate it must have been an easy end," sobbed Martha unrestrainedly. "I suppose she just went to sleep?"

"Yes; that's exactly what she did."

Suddenly Martha dried her eyes and looked up at him.

"Do you know, I think she must have had a presentiment."

"A presentiment?"

There was a new note in the doctor's voice, a new sharpness of accent.

"Yes. She asked me to kiss her before going to sleep; she had never done that before; and she enquired so anxiously about the animals. Wasn't that strange?"

Dr. Brulôt laughed rather abruptly, indulging in one of his vivacious and almost fantastic gestures, hitherto curbed by the gravity of the occasion.

"Is that all you require for concocting a presentiment? That, feeling better for the moment, as very likely was the case, she should remember her pets, seems to me a far simpler explanation. And as for the kiss"—the roguish light leaped up in the black eyes—"the only thing I wonder at is that she did not ask for it long ago—with her opportunities!"

Martha looked at him with displeased astonishment. This relapse into superficial gallantry was made particularly distasteful by the presence in the next room.

It was in his best dancing-master style that the doctor retired, in order to make the necessary notifications to the authorities.

The rest of the day was a mixture of paralysis and turmoil, of frightened servants cowering in corners, softly wailing, and of impassive officials, stolidly directing the removal of the body and settling the details of the funeral, which, according to the law of the land, was to take place before night.

But it was not to the villa that agitation was confined, as Saidjah, kept busy answering the door, knew to his cost, for the report, which had flown round the town faster than any flying-fox could have circled it, had raised a host of anxious enquirers, who, in their eagerness to obtain details, would have forced the entrance but for

Saidjah's fidelity to the orders received from Martha. To face an interrogatory was beyond her strength for the moment. Even to herself it seemed extraordinary that she should feel so much more shaken by this death than she had felt by that of Henrik's; and yet there was nothing extraordinary about it, since she had seen Henrik lying dead only with her mind's eye, not with the eyes of the body.

A series of gloomy pictures filled this day, which she passed between amazement and horror which had not yet left her. In the last of these black-edged pictures, on which evening shadows were rapidly darkening, she found herself seated, together with the sobbing Anna, in a carriage, which was only one in a long file of carriages, a winding black worm with a hearse for its head and a flower-laden vehicle putting a gay tuft to its tail.

That was the end of the series for to-day; but to-morrow was to open another. Before the sun had had time to climb high, Martha was sitting in a corner of the big drawing-room, in the centre of which throned Mynheer Havelingh, surrounded by a palpitating semicircle of men and women in mourning robes and brand-new *crêpe* veils. Mevrouw Kettelmakker was there, her creamy, inky face more striking than ever under the black hat, her husband in the background as usual, but to-day quite wide awake. The mother of the Three Graces was there too—without the Graces—and trying not to look too hopeful, and Mevrouw Verbrugge, alternately smiling nervously and remembering that to smile at this juncture was indecorous, and Niklas in his most ultra-clerical attire and manner, and every other aspirant, even to the sixth degree of relationship, with only the exception of Ella Rosemaer, who had not yet returned from her journey. While

pressing each other's right hands, the left being occupied by a clean pocket-handkerchief ready for use, they looked furtively and mistrustfully into each other's faces, wondering whether their neighbours could be better informed than themselves; and then more furtively and more mistrustfully towards the corner where the "companion" sat, alone and unapproached. Certain hints dropped by one of the gentlemen who had figured as witness two days back had had a disquieting effect upon public opinion.

In due time—skirts and eyeglasses having alike been settled—there came the moment when Mynheer Havelingh coughed behind his hand and, with a sheet of paper held before him, set his badly oiled voice a-going. Not only a pin, even a dead mosquito, might have been heard drop while he read. To Martha alone suspense was spared; and yet, as the paragraph four was creaked out in the notary's rasping tones, its contents struck her anew with so much astonishment that she seemed to be hearing them for the first time.

It was when the notary stopped short that the moment came which Mevrouw Van Kempen had wanted to see. Martha, as she raised her eyes amid the sudden silence, realised this, but she had not realised how torturing it would be. Upon her person were concentrated all the glances of the room, transfixing her, as it were, with poison-tipped arrows. For a moment she bore it, ready to sink through the floor; then, as the only alternative, rose and slipped from the room, feeling like a child in disgrace.

Behind her she could hear the storm breaking with a burst which in one moment tore to shreds the decency of the mourning atmosphere.

It was Mevrouw Kettelmakker who opened the attack.

"I call that iniquitous!" she announced, twitching her eyebrows at Martha's vanishing figure as energetically as though they were the bowstrings from which the arrows sped. "Twenty thousand pounds! As much as we all get together—and to a vagabond like that!"

"And wheedled out of her, of course," put in the mother of the Graces. "I always said she was an adventuress, even before we found out about the false name. That slight stamp of woman is never to be trusted" (which remark spoke volumes for the trustworthiness of the Graces).

"Are you sure there is no room for a mistake in the wording?" pompously asked Mynheer Rosemaer, who represented his absent daughter's interests.

"Let's see for ourselves!"

And an unceremonious person snatched up the document, over which a cluster of heads was immediately bent.

"It can't be legal!"

"We'll dispute it!"

"Yes, yes, let's dispute it!" clamoured a chorus.

The only people who did not join in it were Niklas Verbrugge and his mother, of whom the former was looking extremely pensive and the latter had recommenced to smile less deprecatingly but more nervously than usual. For both mother and son the transformation of the "companion" into an heiress held agreeable possibilities.

"Don't you yourself think it is an open case of undue pressure?" asked Mevrouw Kettelmakker of the notary, who, beyond a deepening of the perpendicular folds about his mouth, showed no signs of interest in the talk.

"My business is not to think, but to carry out the wishes of my clients, Mevrouw. And as regards 'wheedling' and 'undue pressure' I feel bound to remind the

honourable company that such expressions are occasionally actionable."

A scornful look from all eyes, male and female alike, swept him. To all minds it was clear at once that there was nothing more to be done with Mynheer Havelingh. He had ranged himself on the side of the heiress, gone over with bag and baggage to the successful enemy.

Again it was Mevrouw Kettelmakker who took the initiative, by tossing her head and walking out of the room, followed by the others in an angrily muttering flock.

Outside, as they waited for their carriages, the talk broke out again. Instinctively they drew together, as though to join forces, all except the Verbrugges, who had already retired. Here questions, answers, suggestions, surmises buzzed as thickly as a cloud of flies.

"Did she know it, I wonder?"

"Of course she knew it, since she's been plotting for it. You must have noticed that she didn't look a bit surprised."

"When was the will made? Did you catch the date?"

"Yes, the fifteenth, the very day before the catastrophe."

"That's very strange. Such a close shave!"

"Did Cousin Meena know she was dying, I wonder?"

"She wasn't dying when she made it. It's heart failure that is given in the medical certificate as the cause of death. That comes on quite suddenly, you know."

"It certainly was sudden this time—if it was heart failure."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," said Mevrouw Kettelmakker, with artificial airiness. "After all, why shouldn't coincidences occur?"

"You don't mean to say that you think——"

"Catch me thinking anything—aloud, anyway, with Mynheer Havelingh's warning still in my ears!"

"Well, despite Mynheer Havelingh, I am thinking something," put in the mother of the Graces, with decision. "I am thinking that to tell her companion that her death would make her rich would be just like Cousin Meena. People have suffered ere this for similar imprudences."

The buzzing stopped abruptly, succeeded by a pause of almost startled reflection.

"But if she died of heart failure?" ventured one of the timid spirits of the party, which, needless to say, belonged to a member of the strong sex.

"Who is it that says she died of heart failure? That French doctor, who makes eyes openly at the adventuress. Of course he would do his best to shield her—for a consideration, no doubt."

"But how could she——"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose she had the handling of the medicine bottles, and one has heard of such things being tampered with. But, of course, I'm not saying that they have been tampered with here—I'm just airing an idea that passed through my head."

Another pause fell, longer and deeper than the first; and while the tongues rested, several pairs of eyes showed the beginning of a gleam kindled, it would seem, by some inner expectancy.

Then, all at once they hurriedly dispersed, barely touching each other's hands and avoiding each other's eyes, perhaps because they had become aware that this was as far as they dared go—in public—and felt that the moment had come for thinking the thing out in private.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHANGE OF QUARTERS.

THE mourners in front of the villa had not stood together for more than five minutes, but during those five minutes much fruitful seed had fallen—and upon fruitful soil. Within twenty-four hours it grew with such truly tropical rapidity that by next day a full-grown report—for it was really more than a rumour—stood there, almost complete in details, and heavily overshadowing Martha's good name.

An amateur public prosecutor had successfully cross-questioned Mynheer Havelingh, managing to extract from him the fact of the communication to the "companion," and even his own protest against the imprudence of the proceeding; another amateur—in the detective line, this one—had found out that it was Martha who had put Mevrouw Van Kempen to bed on the fatal night. No more than this was wanted clearly to establish her guilt in the eyes of all the disappointed relatives. It was, of course, equally clear that that infatuated French doctor was trying to shield her.

The morning of that day was spent by each family in hushed but excited conversations behind closed doors; the evening in carrying the results of these private discussions into other families and delightedly finding one's own suspicions corroborated. Before night already the

word "exhumation" had been pronounced, tentatively at first, but soon with bold aggression.

Martha, meanwhile, unaware of the gathering storm, moved about the desolate villa, passive and still a little dazed by the recent torrent of events. The house itself had not fallen to her share, but she had the free use of it for three months, and therefore time enough before her to form a plan of life. As yet she had scarcely begun to form it. She was still too busy sincerely mourning her poor "asthmatic rhinoceros." The toilet-table with its silver-topped ornaments touched her with a sense almost of reverence; and the sick beasts—objects of so much solicitude—spoke straight to her heart. With almost religious fidelity she ministered to their wants—dividing her time between the animal hospital and the garden, where she wandered in the cool of morning and evening, and always with a well-filled bag in her hand.

It was during these wanderings that she occasionally looked into her future—trying to shape it, but never quite succeeding. She was rich enough now to live where she liked. No obstacle existed to spending the rest of her life in these paradisaical surroundings, to indulging her passion for exoticism to its topmost bent. Was she going to do so? So far she had not come to any understanding with herself on this subject, nor yet on the other and vaster subject as to what she was to do with her life. It was a curious fact that whenever she tried to look into the future it was not palm-trees she saw moving, but Scotch firs and rowan branches, while, instead of the abrupt outlines of volcanic mountains, the soft roll of low hills bounded the horizon. To go back to Ballenweem, at least for a time, just to see how they all were, had—thanks to that mighty paragraph four—again be-

come a possibility. Even the collapse of the fable of her marriage would, under the circumstances, be shorn of its sting.

But these considerations were no more than a jumble in her mind. The one thing she knew for certain was that her mother need never again worry over either the butcher's or the baker's bill, that Andy could go to Harrow and Molly get the most superior governess on the market.

Pending these things, she scattered the crumbs broadcast, as usual favouring the sparrows, for whom, in defiance of all sense of impartiality, the fattest bits were reserved.

Since the funeral she had not been outside the grounds of the villa, and had seen nobody except Mynheer Havenlingh and a few official personages come to take an inventory of the furniture and jewels—and even of these she had had but a passing glimpse. That Dr. Brulôt should not have shown himself astonished her a little, but likewise relieved her. To take advantage of her solitude in order to obtrude upon her unwelcome consolation was what she would have expected of him, and once more was forced to acknowledge that she had undervalued his tact.

It was on the fourth day after the funeral that the first visitor was announced—an unknown visitor too, since the name upon the calling-card brought in to her was quite new to Martha. Together with the card Saidjah delivered a message, to the effect that the gentleman's business was pressing.

Something about the inheritance, no doubt, thought Martha, as she complied with the summons.

In the big drawing-room she found a very correct,

very polite and very frigid stranger, who introduced himself as a member of the police force (a circumstance which had not been mentioned on his card), and civilly invited her to accompany him to the police-station, in order to answer a few questions touching the late Mevrouw Van Kempen's death.

"It is desirable that you should come with me at once," he concluded. "I have a carriage outside."

"Of course I will come at once if it is necessary," said Martha readily, though a little astonished.

At the station an equally polite elderly person, sitting behind a table, put her through a series of questions, whose point remained dark to her.

Having questioned her regarding her name, age, station, and half regretfully observed that it would be the painful duty of the authorities to take up that matter about the fictitious name borne, this personage asked abruptly:

"What was it that Dr. Brulôt told you was the cause of Mevrouw Van Kempen's death?"

"He said the heart had failed in consequence of the attacks of pain."

"And you think he was speaking the truth?"

"Certainly. Why should he not?"

"Even after the exhumation?"

"What exhumation?"

"Is it possible you are not aware that an exhumation has taken place?"

"I know nothing at all. I have not spoken to anyone since the funeral."

"Is that so? Then no doubt it will astonish you to hear that at the desire of the relatives the body has been exhumed, and an examination made, with the result——"

He paused, dramatically, and across the littered, ink-spotted table fixed his spectacled eyes upon Martha, intent upon not letting even a shade of her expression escape him.

"With the result of convincing the medical experts that Mevrouw Van Kempen has not died a natural death."

He stopped again; and this time not only his glassy gaze but the eyes of the other officials present rested expectantly upon Martha. They did not even need to stare very hard in order to mark how pale she had turned.

"Not died a natural death?" she repeated, aghast. "That means that she——"

"Unmistakable traces of poison were found in the body."

"Poisoned? Oh, how dreadful! But who——"

"That is what we were hoping that you would help us to find out. Can you really throw no light upon the matter?—think of no explanation?"

Martha shook her head vaguely.

"None at all. I cannot imagine how this could have happened."

"That is a pity," said the questioner slowly; "since the present state of affairs cannot fail to entail for you certain—let us say—inconveniences."

Martha scarcely heard him. Her thoughts were circling round this new and so abruptly presented idea. "Poisoned!" she repeated to herself, with a shudder which all could see.

"Would you like a fan?" suggested the head official, noting her increasing pallor. "You seem to be feeling the heat."

"I should like best to go home, please, if you have no more questions to ask."

"I have no doubt you would," said the spectacled

man, more politely than ever; "and am truly sorry not to be able to accede to your wishes; but I am afraid you will have to spend the night here."

"Here?" asked Martha, looking with startled eyes about her.

"Oh, not in this room exactly; we have other—apartments."

"But why can't I go away? I don't understand."

There was a moment of almost embarrassed silence. Then the spectacled man rose and, bending across the table, laid his hand upon Martha's arm.

"You cannot go away," he said, speaking in a quite new voice, "because it is my duty, in the name of the Crown, to arrest you on the charge of murder."

On the evening of the day on which Martha had made that surprising change of quarters, Ella Rosemaer, returning from the trip she had undertaken not so much for the sake of accompanying Leenebet as for that of settling down her own nerves after the interview with Aunt Meena, was met at the station by Mevrouw Kettelmakker. This black-browed lady was literally bursting with the latest news. Of her aunt's death Ella had been informed through the papers, and had on this account hastened her return, without waiting for further details to reach her. These she learnt now from Mevrouw Kettelmakker's lips, poured out in a torrent of abuse and accusation, to the accompaniment of nervously twitching eyebrows. As she listened Ella's green eyes gleamed in their own peculiar way.

"And she is actually arrested?"

"Yes; safe behind bars and gratings. Karel had it from the police inspector himself. Her guilt is as good

as proved, which means, of course, that the clause of the will referring to her will be cancelled—the booty snatched from her clutches.”

Ella said nothing at once; but within herself she was considering that not the booty alone, but other things—or people—could not fail likewise to be snatched from the adventuress.

To her the chronology of events seemed perfectly clear. After that unfortunate evening visit to the villa, Aunt Meena had actually been mad enough to change her will in her companion's favour, and fool enough to tell her that she had done so, promptly falling a victim to the adventuress's—or anarchist's—wickedness.

“I'm not a bit surprised,” said Ella, almost calmly. “I had expected it to be a bomb, and it's been poison instead; that's all the difference. You will come in with me, Maria, will you not?”

For the Rosemaers' house was reached by this time.

Mevrouw Kettelmakker came in gladly, not having yet nearly exhausted the subject in hand.

Upon a table in the sitting-room a small pile of letters lay awaiting Ella's return, the uncertainty of her movements having precluded the idea of forwarding. As she turned them over Mevrouw Kettelmakker heard an exclamation.

“From Aunt Meena!” said Ella, holding out a closed envelope towards her visitor and eyeing it the while with a look well-nigh of alarm. This message from the grave, penned by a hand which had only found final rest by way of the dissecting-table, touched her with a sense of repulsion which was almost horror.

“This must have been written on the very eve of her death. What can she have had to say to me still?”

"Perhaps apologise for having been so nasty to you that evening?"

"Yes; I daresay that's it," agreed Ella.

For a moment longer she continued to eye the letter mistrustfully, then reluctantly opened it.

Mevrouw Kettelmakker, watching her as she read, saw the green eyes opening wide and the putty-coloured face change abruptly under what was evidently the influence of violent astonishment.

"What is it?" she asked sharply, unable to restrain her curiosity.

Without a word, Ella handed her the sheet.

It was Mevrouw Kettelmakker's face which changed now as she read.

"What are you going to do?" she added, at last, after a pause which in reality was one of consternation.

Ella, who had sat down, evidently had no reply ready.

"You will produce this at once, I suppose?"

"I suppose so; and she will be liberated."

"Is it not rather late for going to the police-station to-night?"

"I think it is. It will be time enough to-morrow. What harm will it do her to spend one night under lock and key? And, besides, they wouldn't let her out at once. There are sure to be all sorts of formalities to go through."

Mevrouw Kettelmakker agreed as to the formalities, and, having made a few more remarks upon the strangeness of the contents of the letter, withdrew in a somewhat depressed frame of mind, for those contents, viewed in the light of hopes entertained, were not cheering.

She was at the door when Ella called her back in order to ask her not to mention the letter to anyone—meanwhile.

"I should not like it to become public through anyone but myself," she explained. "I am sure you will understand this."

Mevrouw Kettelmakker quite understood.

On the following morning she had not yet left her bedroom when Ella was announced.

"If this isn't being an early bird, then I don't know what is?" was her greeting to the matutinal visitor. "On your way back from the police-station already?"

"No," said Ella more awkwardly than was her wont.

"On the way there, then?"

"Not exactly. The fact is," said Ella, poking with her sunshade at a dead butterfly upon the floor, "I have been thinking over it, and I don't see why I should be in such a hurry. Aunt Meena didn't write the letter on account of *her*. Of course I shall produce it if matters go against that—that creature; but maybe she can clear herself without it; and meanwhile she is safe behind lock and key, which is far better for us all, and for society in general, for I haven't given up believing that she is an anarchist."

"Better for Niklas Verbrugge, amongst others," suggested Mevrouw Kettelmakker, with a disconcerting smile.

Ella reddened, poking harder at the butterfly. She had not meant to lay bare the innermost motives of her action—or want of action—but Mevrouw Kettelmakker had undoubtedly hit the nail upon the head. The thought of the weeks—perhaps months—which the preparation of the trial would take and during which time the field would be cleared of a dangerous rival, had been too much for Ella's sense of justice. Before Martha left the prison with her good fame re-established there was at least a possibility of having gained back the faithless man.

Of all this Ella said not a word to Mevrouw Kettelmakker, which could not prevent the astute Maria from being exactly as well informed as herself.

It was quite good-humouredly that the latter now said:

"All right, Ella, I'm with you! I quite agree that a little confinement and a touch of fright will be most wholesome to that creature's constitution, and perhaps take down some of her pertness. When the time comes, you'll have to concoct some reason for the belated appearance of the letter, but I fancy we'll manage that between us. Meanwhile, you needn't be afraid of me. I sha'n't blab! I never could stand the minx any more than you could!"

CHAPTER XX.

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

"YOUR name?"

"Martha Grant."

"Speak louder! We cannot hear you. Are you the person lately known as Mevrouw Klaas?"

"I am."

"And yet you admit being unmarried?"

"Yes."

"Eh? What is that you are saying? Yes? And you claim being a British subject?"

"Yes."

"Have you any profession or occupation?"

"I was companion to Mevrouw Van Kempen."

"Yes—we know that," said the President, shooting an almost jocular glance at the other judges.

Martha, as she stood behind the bar, steadying herself with her two hands upon it, looked hard into the clean-

shaven face, intent upon discovering there some signs of the quality of mercy, but the President's countenance was as irresponsible as a brick wall, which it also greatly resembled in tint. Above his large and monotonously red face his white hair bristled as stiffly and as forbiddingly as might a frieze of nails on the top of the wall. Upon this man and upon the four judges who, wrapped in their long robes, sat ensconced behind a big table, her fate depended, trial by jury not being known to Dutch law.

Martha's frightened eyes passed to the others, still in search of possible sympathy. There was a comparatively young man among them, and at him she looked with instinctive hope, since youth is rarely inexorable. But nothing but the absence of wrinkles spoke of youth here. Austere, pale and fair-haired, this Benjamin among the judges sat looking straight in front of him, as people do—or ought to do—in church. After one cursory glance at the prisoner he did not look again, as though in stern repression of any possible temptation to leniency.

Next to him sat a big heavy man, a sort of swollen and elderly edition of George Fettes, who, by reason of this very likeness, caused Martha's heart to give one leap of hope. But, having met his turbid-looking eyes, the hope died speedily, so very different were they from George's shrewd and kindly gaze.

The other two arbiters differed chiefly inasmuch as one was distinctly more bald and also looked more bored than the other.

As she stood, leaning heavily against the bar, Martha's knees and voice shook so pitifully as to render the President's admonition by no means superfluous. To herself the wonder was not that she spoke inaudibly, but that she was able to speak at all, that she had not yet fallen

to the ground under the weight of those hundreds of pairs of eyes fixed upon her.

"Must I go in there?" she had asked in a sudden panic, stopping short on the threshold of the narrow door which opened beside the judges' dais, and through which criminals innumerable had passed to their trial. It was an idiotic question. Of course she knew that she must go in there, had known it all along. It was the sudden sight of the close-packed court, the sea of faces turned in her direction, the mingled hum and hiss of controlled whisperings that had struck terror to her heart, and for the moment robbed her of commonsense. Like a child shivering on the edge of a pool of cold water, she had asked instinctively: "Must I go in there?"

"Come on!" was all that the escorting policeman said, just touching her arm by way of admonition.

The contact was enough to put her Scotch independence in arms. Pulling herself together, she walked on, not even forgetting to keep her head erect, though strange lights danced before her eyes and she was trembling literally in every limb. She had remembered that her enemies of the "Coffee Evenings" were doubtless here assembled in full force, and she would not give them the delight of looking upon a broken creature.

In fact, she was not broken, though momentarily disconcerted. Not that even a total collapse would have been an improbable ending to the nightmare of these last six weeks.

The beginning had been comparatively easy to bear, since, having recovered from the stupefaction of her arrest, it had been difficult to take the thing quite seriously. It could only be a stupid mistake, of course, which would be cleared up by next day. Nobody could really believe that she had poisoned *Mevrouw Van Kempen*. On that

first evening there had even been an inclination on Martha's side to treat the episode as something between an exciting adventure and a huge joke.

But when next day passed and yet another next day without bringing any change in the situation, uneasiness began to stir. She had so much time for thinking, that necessarily pessimistic thoughts—suggested by her surroundings—had their turn. The mere nature of the meals served to her in her solitary cell, and the fact of some articles of toilet and a fresh supply of linen having been brought from the villa, seemed to put their seal upon the situation. The cynical indifference with which her protestations of innocence were received began by filling her with indignation and finally with alarm. Slowly it was borne in upon her that the accusation was neither a joke nor a mistake, but a grim fact that would have to be faced with all the fortitude and all the wit at her command. The interrogatories she was submitted to did the rest. For a weary week they trailed out, with no advance that she could see, and yet with the very tangible result of her finding herself committed for trial on the charge of murder.

This brought a new shock of amazement, followed by black but not lasting despondency. Once having steadied herself sufficiently to look the situation in the face, she discovered the possibility of accepting it. Considering the coincidence of the altered will and the sudden death, it was not so very extraordinary that she should be suspected. Had not Mevrouw herself made a joke on the subject of her own imprudence? Probably nothing but a public trial would clear her from suspicion, that was what trials were for, surely, to bring the truth to light. And whatever the truth might be, here it could not harm her, since she was innocent. Thus argued Martha, being still

at the happy age when doubt in the infallibility of the goddess of Justice seems sacrilege. It was an awful experience to go through, of course, but it just had to be gone through, and gone through with head erect. Here was another of those occasions in which a moral collapse must prove as fatal as would a physical one in the Valley of Death.

And then had begun the dreary time of waiting, while the case was being prepared. Mental discomfort was enhanced by physical, for although the little whitewashed cell was mercifully clean, and not conspicuously different in essential features from the room she had inhabited in the Hotel Coghén, there was all the unlikeness between them that lies between an open door and a closed one. For the first time since she had come to Java the heat became a burden, and the ignominious walks in the prison yard, how different were they from her beloved morning rambles! Stone walls instead of the waving liberty of palm and fern, and the forbidding or indifferent faces of the warders in place of the pleasant natives she had so often amused herself by accosting, in order to examine their curious wares and, chiefly by means of pantomimic gestures, conclude some small bargain with them.

The monotony of present existence was broken only by fresh interrogatories and by interviews with the advocate who had undertaken the defence. Once also by the appearance of the English consul, a well-meaning individual, who, had he not been much engrossed by business connected with the foundation of a new English Syndicate for the exploitation of indigo, would probably have taken more interest in the case. As it was he came up to the strict letter of his duty towards this rather inconvenient young lady who had so inopportunately been unmasked as a British subject.

He began by expressing his sincerest sympathy and firm belief in her "innocence" if only for the honour of the British nation, and went on to ask whether she had any relatives to whom she wished the news of her plight communicated.

But at this Martha had started up with a look of horror.

"No! There is nobody whom I wish informed. It is not at all necessary that anybody should know. Please don't write to anybody. Do you hear? Not to anybody!"

"I couldn't write without having some directions, could I?" observed Mr. Wilson soothingly. "But if your parents are living I do think they ought to be informed of your situation. And if you object to writing yourself I am quite ready——"

"No! No! No!" said Martha vehemently, with chin significantly protruded. And at that she stuck, despite all arguments.

At the end of ten further fruitless minutes Mr. Wilson left her, baffled and somewhat scandalised by her attitude; and with a conscience lightened by the conviction of having done his duty—he had likewise promised to procure her an advocate—returned to the more congenial atmosphere of the Indigo Syndicate.

Martha breathed more freely when he was gone. From the first her one idea had been to keep her "people" in ignorance of the disgrace that had befallen her. That she should be acquitted seemed to her a certainty; why, therefore, put her mother through the anguish of suspense? Besides, it would be unbearable to think of Ballenweem ventilating the event—of George Fettes reflecting grimly upon these ulterior consequences of her adventurous departure. It was this thought that kept her lips so obstinately locked in face of all questions touching her home and parentage.

Even towards her advocate she maintained the same reserve.

The consul had kept his promise, in the face of some difficulty—since the wheels within wheels of provincial life made the leading lights of the profession shy of putting themselves in opposition to so many possible clients.

It was a mere beginner who finally decided to take the risk, but only after having seen Martha.

He was a slight young man with dark liquid eyes which seemed at least a size too large for his sallow face. Though he bore no real resemblance to Henrik, there was, nevertheless, something—perhaps only the colour of his eyes—that was reminiscent of Henrik. Having made this note Martha, despite his impeccably Dutch name, instantly began to suspect his ancestry, and simultaneously felt her confidence sink.

He began by earnestly and eloquently imploring Martha to tell him the truth, and she began by almost laughing in his face, and then proceeded to lose her temper.

“Do you mean to say that you think me guilty, and yet are willing to defend me? I call that dishonest.”

“Not in our profession. It is our business to white-wash even black criminals.”

“Then it ought to be child’s play for you to keep me as white as I actually am.”

“Only if you are quite open with me,” said Mynheer Dekken, with a doubtful look out of his big eyes.

He was evidently only half convinced, though not in the least horror-stricken, and it crossed Martha’s mind to think that that suspected drop of dark blood was possibly responsible for his leniency towards the use of poisons.

“But I am quite open. If I tell you nothing it is because I have nothing to say.”

"But you must at least have some theory regarding Mevrouw Van Kempen's death. Once the presence of poison was proved you must have thought of explaining it."

Martha reflected for a moment, then shook her head:

"I can't attempt to explain it. I was completely taken by surprise. I have no theory."

This last statement was not strictly true; Martha actually had a theory, though a wavering one. At the first mention of poison she could not help remembering what Dr. Brulôt had told her about the native poisons; and as little had been able not to reflect upon the ease with which some revengeful servant—and the doctor had characterised these meek-looking people as "silently revengeful"—might have tampered with the food. There were too many individuals to choose from, too many men and women at whose heads both insults and more substantial objects had been flung, to let her suspicion fasten upon any single person; it was but a general mistrust, yet a persistent one.

But Martha, conscious that all this was but surmises, kept these thoughts to herself. She had suffered too much from unjust suspicion to want to extend it to others perhaps as innocent as herself.

During the long-drawn-out torment of waiting, one solitary sign of genuine sympathy penetrated to her from the outer world.

Although neither visitors nor correspondence were allowed, one letter contrived to get smuggled in by means of a well-bribed wardress. Both the bribe and the letter came from Dr. Brulôt. Within the same envelope was enclosed a home missive arrived since her arrest, and still addressed to "Mevrouw Klaas."

“MADEMOISELLE! (since, after all, it seems that ‘made-moiselle’ is the right appellation),” wrote the doctor, in queer zigzag characters, as jerky and eccentric as his habitual demeanour,—“I take the liberty of sending you a letter, newly arrived, which perhaps may help to cheer your hours of confinement. Be careful of your precious health, I implore you! Once I was offered the post of prison doctor. How I regret now not having accepted it! Then would it have been my privilege to view your pulse and feel your tongue—*mille pardons!* I meant it vice versa, of course—then would it have been my sacred right to put to you the classical question, ‘Art thou inclined to eat rice?’ which, as perhaps you know, is the orthodox mode of enquiring after the appetites of our patients in this country. Failing this, I can only recommend you to try and tame a spider, or, better still, a lizard: such occupations, inasmuch as they keep the spirits from drooping, are an excellent nerve tonic. Whatever you do, do not let your courage sink. It is not only murder that will out but also innocence. Count upon your humble servant. He is working in your interest. *En avant, mademoiselle! Tout finira bien!*”

So precious had sympathy become to Martha that the last sentence was blurred by a mist of tears. Behind the half-jocular tone of the letter she divined a kindly purpose. These antics upon paper were evidently intended to make her smile. Certainly Dr. Brulôt himself would never have guessed that they could come so near to making her weep.

The tears were still in her eyes as she turned to the enclosed letter. From her mother.

The eight pages were filled chiefly with the usual small happenings. Andy had started a new stamp-

album; Molly had got a new frock and Mr. McGillies a new clerk. Also the household rejoiced in a new cook. There followed a selection of Ballenweem gossip, including the mention of the latest picture post-card received from Mrs. Jobwell, at present accomplishing a world tour in the newly purchased yacht.

The selection culminated in the latest thing that was exercising the mind of Ballenweem—viz. the abrupt disappearance of George Fettes.

“He seems to have gone off quite suddenly, nobody knows where to, without saying good-bye to anybody, and without making any previous arrangements. The servants at Bannacuik declare that they have been given no address for forwarding letters. It must have been something both important and sudden, for he had been here only the day before and didn't drop a word about any journey in prospect, though, to be sure, the words he drops are fewer than ever nowadays. You can imagine the stories that are afloat. Some people began by theorising an elopement, only that there isn't a single girl amissing in the neighbourhood. Others assert that he has taken his aunt with him, Mrs. Wold having simultaneously vanished from Edinburgh, which surely squashes the idea of the elopement. Mrs. Russel is literally green with anger. She has been trying very hard to get him for Maggie, without any success, however. Nobody knows what to think. Anyway, Mr. Fettes has, for the present, vanished into space.”

Martha laid down the letter and reflected. So Mrs. Russell had been trying to get him for Maggie? She wondered why the effort had not been crowned. Probably because a person of George's cast of mind would take a

considerable time to transfer his affections, even from an unworthy object to a worthy one.

It was this point in the letter which chiefly engaged Martha's attention, far more so than the mysterious journey. It was so like Ballenweem to make a mountain out of a molehill, and to exercise itself over what was probably a quite ordinary trip.

"And now for the spider or the lizard!" she thought almost gaily as she carefully hid the precious letters under her mattress. Even this slight contact with the outer world had sufficed to raise her elastic spirits. The thought that Dr. Brulôt was working in her interest was comforting, though a little incomprehensible. It was not easy to see what opportunities lay open to him, since she supposed that judges were not as easily bribed as wardresses.

And yet Dr. Brulôt was actually working, though in a peculiar and apparently pointless way. His activity seemed to consist solely in accosting those among the circle of the late Mevrouw Van Kempen's relatives with whom he was personally acquainted, with abrupt questions, or rather with variations of the same question.

Thus he had stopped two elderly gentlemen in the street in order to ask them when exactly they had last heard from the deceased lady. "I don't mean *since* her death, of course," he added, with a brilliant grin, "for I don't suspect you of spiritism."

It was evidently a great disappointment to him to be told that neither of the elderly gentlemen had been in correspondence with their late relative.

Another time Dr. Brulôt had astonished Niklas' mother by earnestly enquiring whether she was quite sure that Mevrouw Van Kempen had not communicated with her

immediately before her death; a question which led only to another disappointment.

When pressed as to the reasons for these enquiries, the doctor shrugged his shoulders in his most fantastic manner and turned off the matter with a joke.

Only two days before the trial came on the same question was put to Mevrouw Kettelmakker, whom Dr. Brulôt encountered in the house of a patient.

"No; I got no letter from my aunt," she declared categorically and twitching her eyebrows at a tremendous rate. "What makes you think so?"

"Not even the smallest note? You are sure?"

"Quite sure. Why should she have written to me?"

The doctor drew up his shoulders to his ears.

"*Que sais-je?* Perhaps she had a presentiment of her death and wished to take leave of you."

"She may have had a presentiment, but she did not take leave of me," said Mevrouw Kettelmakker, turning her back upon him.

But she thought it wiser to mention the matter to Ella.

When she had done so the two looked at each other with slightly scared eyes.

"He can't know anything, surely?" said Ella, after a pause.

"He certainly doesn't know everything, or he would have come straight to you; but he does seem to guess something."

As a result of this conversation Ella resolved to take the letter with her on the day of the trial, which she was going to attend under the escort of Niklas Verbrugge; for the owner of the green eyes had made good use of the six weeks gained, and though no betrothal ring yet shone on her finger, she had good reason to suppose that one

was actually ordered. Of course the trial would not be the treat which it might have been without that letter in her pocket, but still to see the "anarchist" standing in the dock was worth something, as she was not alone in feeling.

It was the instinctive perception of this atmosphere of animosity which caused Martha to falter upon the threshold.

The night just passed had, in its anguish of mind, borne some resemblance to a certain long and wakeful night in the Hotel Coghen, only that this one had been longer still. Even some of the same noises were there, the squeak of a lizard, the howl of a prowling dog. During the earlier hours the roll of the drums and the wail of a *gamelang* reached her from the *Aloen-Aloen*. But later on the lizards, the dogs and the mosquitoes had it all to themselves. It was to their music that the shivers of expectancy and the glows of shame chased each other over the cowering form upon the bed; for, despite her confidence in the ultimate verdict, Martha knew well that there were seas both of trouble and ignominy to wade through before that verdict was reached.

What wonder that, at the supreme moment, she should have shrunk back, asking:

"Must I go in there?"

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH.

THE reading of the Act of Accusation — long and monotonous — served as a sort of respite, inasmuch as it gave Martha's nerves time to settle down to the work before them. Listening with strained attention — since the complications of Dutch law terms were not easy to

follow—she gathered that she was being prosecuted for two things: Firstly, for having lived under a false name; secondly, for having poisoned Mevrouw Van Kempen. Even in this crisis her fancy could not help feeling tickled by these two offences being run in double harness, so to say, under the common designation of crime!

What alarmed Martha almost more than the accusation itself was the harshness of its tone. That same animosity which she had guessed at in the audience invaded the document, and astonished her exceedingly, unaware as she was that the rule in Dutch law—the reverse of that in English—is to consider a prisoner guilty until his innocence is proved.

With every sentence that she heard, her heart seemed to grow more like lead. How was her advocate ever to whitewash her of this layer of black that was being rubbed in so fiercely? She looked towards him deprecatingly, but without finding comfort—for his large, dark eyes seemed filled with a reflection of her own anxiety.

From him, her gaze passed on to the Advocate General—only to drop in alarm; for the Public Prosecutor was a rather terrifying personage, if only by reason of his size, of his big round eyes and his large, square teeth, which helped to give him the appearance of an ogre, to whom the crunching up of criminals must be mere child's play.

A passing feeling of faintness invaded Martha, but was gone again, as her eyes, reaching the bench on which sat the witnesses, met those of Dr. Brulôt, brimful of encouragement. "*Tout finira bien!*" they were saying quite as plainly as had been said in the letter. Automatically Martha's backbone stiffened. She had perceived other people besides Dr. Brulôt amongst the audience there: Ella Rosemaer, and Mevrouw Kettelmakker, and

others. Not one frequenter of the "Coffee Evenings" seemed to be missing. They had all come here to gloat over her disgrace—no, to be witnesses of her vindication! For, of course, her innocence must come to light!

Thus said Martha to herself, her access of weakness passed.

The monotonous reading having come to an end, she heard herself called upon to stand up for her examination—by the President—another peculiarity of Dutch law, since the usual cross-examination by prosecutor and advocate finds no place here.

After the preliminary questions, and toying with the gold pencil-case in his hand, the President proceeded to draw the circle closer.

"How long had you been in Mevrouw Van Kempen's service?"

"About two months."

"By whose recommendation did you enter the house?"

"Nobody recommended me."

"Then how did you secure the place?"

"I was staying in the same hotel in Batavia where Mevrouw Van Kempen was staying. When her maid left her abruptly I offered to do her hair for her; and she, being satisfied with my services, engaged me."

"Had you been a lady's-maid before?"

"No."

"Then what caused you to accept the post?"

"I—I was looking out for a situation. I had no money remaining."

"What were you doing in a Batavia hotel—alone and without money?" asked the President sharply. "It doesn't sound a respectable arrangement—at your age."

"I had just arrived from Europe."

"With what object?"

"I can't tell you with what object," said Martha, very low.

"Eh? You can't tell us? Then we shall just have to form our own conclusions."

His hard blue eyes exchanged looks with the other judges. In response the two bald heads were ominously shaken, while the youthfully austere man looked straighter than ever in front of him. Clearly her reticence was telling against her. Martha recognised it, yet could not make up her mind to tell the story of Henrik's betrayal and her disappointed hopes.

"What made you enter on your situation under a false name? To give yourself out as married when you were not?"

"I—I found it more convenient," stammered Martha.

"Really?" sneered the President. "I should not have thought so. Come, tell us your real reason! You must have had one."

But in reply Martha only shook her head; and with chin well protruded and in wilful oblivion of the distressful signals emitted by her advocate, remained absolutely silent.

Upon the dais more glances were exchanged and more heads shaken. To judges as well as audience, it seemed by this time clear that they had before them a dangerous adventuress, possibly of the political brand.

"You knew that the deceased was a person of means?"

"I heard so from the landlady at Batavia."

"Did you not likewise hear it mentioned that she was given to altering her will periodically?"

"No; I don't think I ever heard that."

"I should advise you to think again! It is not likely

that in two months so well known a circumstance should not have reached your ears."

"No. I am sure I never heard that."

"H—m! If your memory is so weak, then perhaps you have likewise forgotten the efforts you made to gain the favour of Mevrouw Van Kempen?"

"The only efforts I made were to do my duty," said Martha, flushing hotly.

"Do you deny that you did things that were not, strictly speaking, your duty—such as doctoring sick animals, in order to please your mistress?"

"No, I don't deny that."

"What made you do that?"

"I did it because I like animals, and also because I liked Mevrouw Van Kempen."

"You want us to believe that you had an affection for her?"

"I had an affection," said Martha stoutly.

This time the President looked round the packed court, as though calling the public to witness whether the existence of a sentimental attachment to the virago they had all known was a credible theory. And all the cousins and nieces and nephews of various degrees, who had grovelled before "dear Aunt Meena," now scornfully smiled.

"But you knew of the final alteration of the will, and of the fortune it secured to you?" asked the President abruptly, fixing Martha with a gaze which dared her to deny.

"Yes; I knew that."

"Ah, you admit it? Your wisest course, no doubt, since Mynheer Havelingh has been retained by the Prosecution in order to prove your cognisance of the fact. And now tell us what your feelings were when the will was read aloud to you?"

"I was immensely surprised."

"Really?"

All the five judges—even the bloated edition of George Fettes, who had seemed half asleep till now—smiled sceptically here.

"But not displeased, I suppose?"

"I was too bewildered to feel pleased."

"Ah! And now pray give us an account of the further events of that day. What happened after Mynheer Havelingh's departure?"

Under frequent admonitions to speak distinctly, Martha now told the story of the attack which had come on after the reading of the will, of the advent of Dr. Brulôt, of the solitary afternoon in her room, finally of her putting her mistress to bed.

"Was putting your mistress to bed part of your regular duty?"

"No; it was not."

"Who did it usually?"

"The girl Anna, who also slept with her."

"And where was she on that evening?"

"She had gone out with a letter."

"Who had sent her out?"

"I did," faltered Martha, aware of the gravity of the admission.

"Ah! And what moved you to send away the person who acted as sick-nurse, on the very day on which the patient had had an attack?"

"The letter was a pressing one, and I required a safe messenger. Besides, I knew that I could replace her."

"Yes; you seem to have been particularly anxious to replace her," interpolated the President, with emphasis. "And to whom, pray, was this pressing letter addressed?"

"To a lady staying in the house of Mynheer Rosemaer."

"And these pressing contents—of what did they consist?"

"I can't tell you that," said Martha, after a moment's hesitation.

"Extraordinary how many things you can't tell us!" observed the President, still playing with the gold pencil-case. "Well, the circumstance is not important. But here is something which perhaps you can tell us: whether it was you who, after putting Mevrouw Van Kempen to bed, gave her the sleeping-draught?"

"Yes; it was I."

"Had you ever done so before?"

"Once or twice when Anna was absent."

"Exactly. And she was absent to-day—by your orders—"

He looked round for approval at the other judges, who smiled with different degrees of obsequiousness.

"Prisoner, you can sit down."

The bench of witnesses now began to grow alive—witnesses for the prosecution, all of them, since those for the defence were conspicuously absent.

The two doctors who had dissected the exhumed body opened the prosecution. Their brief and business-like statements were identical, and established the presence of prussic acid in the digestive organs of the deceased woman. They likewise agreed as to the lightning-like rapidity with which death must have ensued.

"Dr. Brulôt!" came the next call.

Hopefully Martha looked towards him, as he stood erect in the witness-box, with his fantastically big nose cocked as aggressively as ever, but with a strangely white face, out of which the black eyes glowed, watchful and alert, as though on guard against some approaching peril.

He too, having been put through his catechism, admitted the presence of poison in the exhumed body. Being next severely questioned as to how, under these circumstances, he had come to certify heart failure as the cause of death, he freely confessed to having been superficial in his examination.

"Cardiac failure being very common in such cases, and there being no reason to suspect foul play, I concluded for such failure—too hastily, as it now appears."

"A good deal too hastily," emphasised the President. "Your reputation as a conscientious practitioner is not likely to gain by this incident."

"I know it," said Dr. Brulôt, with an unconvincing appearance of contrition.

"In fact, your certificate strongly suggests a bias in favour of making the death appear natural, possibly from a motive of—let us say—friendship."

"I can only repeat that I have my own negligence to accuse," said Dr. Brulôt, with mock humility.

"I suppose it did not occur to you to examine the remains of the sleeping-draught?"

"Naturally not, since I had no suspicions."

"Was the bottle standing beside the bed when you were called to the dead woman?"

"Not that I remember."

"What do you suppose became of it?"

"I really cannot say."

"Then perhaps the prisoner can," remarked the President, with the air of a player producing a trump card. "Prisoner, stand up, and tell us what you did with the bottle after giving the deceased her potion?"

"It was broken. I knocked it over by mistake."

"H—m! Are you given to knocking over things?"

"No; but I was nervous and excited that day."

"Because of the contents of the will, no doubt?"

"No; there were other things."

"H—m! H—m! the things that you don't want to tell us about, I suppose? And this made an examination of the contents impossible, of course. What a strange accident! Convenient, too, maybe."

Martha stared, speechless. She had the sensation of having stumbled into a hole which had been dug across her path. At the moment the incident of the broken bottle had seemed so unimportant that she had almost forgotten it.

"And, since you do not suspect foul play, how do you explain the presence of prussic acid?" asked the President, resuming the examination of the witness. "After all, it can't have got into the body of itself."

"Its presence could mean suicide as well as murder."

In the midst of the commotion which these words sent through the court, Ella Rosemaer and Mevrouw Kettelmakker might have been seen exchanging agitated glances.

"What reasons have you for supposing that the deceased entertained the idea of suicide?"

"I take my reasons from remarks made by her at various times on the unendurable pain she was suffering, and of her desire for a speedy release."

The witness spoke steadily, but so slowly that he gave the impression of choosing his words with extreme circumspection, looking the while at the President as though in tense expectation of the next question.

The President, with a dissatisfied expression, was running his pencil through his forbidding crest of hair. Evidently he felt no inclination towards this new theory which so inconveniently upset the one already adopted, and into which all the circumstances fitted so neatly.

"Even supposing she had entertained any such idea, how do you suppose she could have procured the poison?"

The tense look left Dr. Brulôt's face on the instant.

"In a land where the natives are such recognised adepts in toxicology, prussic acid is not hard to procure," he asserted, with all his audacity revived.

The President first grunted, and then acidly remarked:

"Let me remind you that you are a witness for the prosecution, not for the defence. It is the advocate's business to shield the accused—not that of the witnesses. You can stand down."

Whereupon Dr. Brulôt, unabashed, made a beautiful bow, and retired with visible alacrity, followed by Martha's disappointed eyes. Was this all that he could do for her?

Dr. Goess as well as various of Mevrouw Van Kempen's former medical advisers were now called up, in order to attest that the deceased had never even distantly hinted at suicide in their hearing.

"As though she was not discriminating enough to choose her man!" Dr. Brulôt murmured between his teeth, unheard.

Now it was Anna's square face that surged up in the witness-box, and Anna's somewhat thick voice that—amid breathless attention—told the story of the letter which the "companion" had ordered her to take at once to Mynheer Rosemaer's house for a lady who was staying there. She had been told to bring an answer, but brought back the letter instead, because the lady had already left.

"Did it not strike you as strange that you should be sent away when your mistress was so ill?"

"Yes. I did not want to go; but Mevrouw Klaas——"

"Freule Grant," corrected the President sharply.

“Freule Grant was very urgent. She said she would put Mevrouw to bed herself.”

“Did she not perhaps offer you money in order to induce you to go?”

Anna admitted that she had. Something had certainly been said about an addition to the savings in the worsted stocking.

The President sent another triumphant look round the court, and Martha's heart sank by another degree.

At this point, out of the very hopelessness of the situation, Martha's advocate took courage to suggest a question to the President—always a very delicate matter, because of the danger of ruffling professional vanity. Even though poison might be no unattainable commodity in this country, how should the prisoner have procured it within so short a time? The will had been written in the forenoon, the death had taken place during the following night. Witnesses could be produced who would attest that Freule Grant had not left the house during the whole of that day.

Before the President could speak, the Advocate General started up to ward off this attack by means of a whispered explanation to the judge nearest to him, who passed on the matter to his chief.

“The Prosecution maintains,” announced the President, “that the poison had been lying ready, waiting for the opportunity. The witness who will now be called up will attest that several weeks before the catastrophe, the prisoner had, on a transparent pretext, attempted to procure poison from her.”

Amid renewed sensation an old native woman was now put into the witness-box. Martha recognised her without difficulty as one of the numerous kitchen helps

who had been turned out during her stay in the villa. Questions worded as for a child now drew from her the fact that the lady whom she saw in the dock had come to her one day—"in a secret manner"—and asked whether she could not give her something that killed quickly and without pain.

"What did she say that she wanted it for?"

"For killing one of the sick beasts."

"Did you give it her?"

"No. I told her that the poison-making has never been in our family."

Martha listened aghast. All this was perfectly true in the main; another of those forgotten incidents which were now ranging themselves to her destruction. It was for a poor suffering monkey in the animals' hospital, to whom she wished to provide a merciful end, that she had wanted the poison. Pursued by its tortured gaze, and remembering Dr. Brulôt's remark concerning native poisons, she had applied to this woman, partly because she was old, and probably experienced, and partly because she "possessed" the requisite Dutch.

Called upon to explain the incident, she told the story, but, even as she told it, was struck by its apparent improbability.

"If it was only for the monkey you wanted the stuff, then what was the reason of the secrecy? Or do you deny that you asked the witness to hold her tongue about the matter?"

"No; I don't deny it. I wanted to keep the thing from reaching my mistress's ears. She was very much attached to her beasts."

"And not having got the poison in this quarter, I suppose you applied elsewhere?"

"No. The monkey died that same day, so I had no more need of poison."

"What then was your motive in accosting other natives? There are plenty of witnesses to attest that it was your habit to stop women on their way to market, and to discourse with them, as far as language permitted."

"It amused me to examine their wares. I used to buy fruit from them, and sometimes a scrap of embroidery."

Martha's voice had grown more uncertain under the increasing feeling of hopelessness.

After a brief discussion and reference to watches, it was decided that the Advocate General's address to the judges could just be absolved before the midday pause. As the big man rose, in his voluminous black robes, everyone felt that the supreme moment had come.

Amid breathless silence he proceeded to paint a picture of the accused as black as judiciously selected adjectives could make it. Going back to the enigmatical circumstances attending the prisoner's appearance in this town, and having lightly demolished by means of ridicule her own fantastic explanations, he found no difficulty in proving, to his own satisfaction as well as to that of his audience, that the crime had been one of the most cold-blooded premeditation. To anyone with a grain of astuteness—and of course everyone in this court possessed that—it must be clear that the situation in Mevrouw Van Kempen's household had been entered on with a fixed purpose. Going through the circumstances, one by one, the obvious efforts to curry favour—the attempts to procure poison, the bribe by means of which the second attendant had been kept away from the house on the evening of the very day on which the testament had been written, the suspicious accident to the medicine

bottle, the Public Prosecutor applied himself to forging a chain of evidence, whose completeness Martha herself could scarcely escape admiring. Had that medicine bottle not been broken—so the accuser maintained—the last missing proof would have been found; for it was clear that the sleeping-draught had been used as the most convenient instrument of the crime—the sleeping-draught tampered with by means of poison procured from some native on which it had unfortunately not been possible to lay a hand. Doubtless the deadly potion had lain ready for days, while the prisoner worked towards her object. That object once gained, the blow had been struck without so much as one day's delay—for fear, no doubt, of some new alteration of the will, which the deceased's well-known caprice rendered probable.

At this point the Advocate General underwent an attack of emotion. The memory of the old, invalid woman who had so rashly nursed a serpent in her bosom threatened for a moment to deprive him of his very resounding voice. Having, by means of several audible gulps, recovered enough of it to observe that, as a man and as a father, it cut him to the heart to see so much youth and so much depravity joined in one person, he gave further vent to his feelings by raising his large, fleshy-looking hands and wringing them in the face of the deeply moved audience.

Martha, cold with horror, listened, trembling, and with the sensation of a net closing around her. For the first time the thought of a condemnation presented itself to her mind, not as a distant possibility, but as a near and threatening fact. Her teeth were set, her fingers tightly closed. Once more she seemed to be walking through the Valley of Death. "I must not fall! I must

not fall!" the thought moved in the back of her mind, "or the gases will choke me."

The murmur of approval which greeted the final words of the address mingled with the sounds of chairs being pushed back and skirts shaking out.

Martha alone did not move until the policeman beside her jogged her arm and told her that the midday pause had come.

There was food prepared in a room adjoining the court, but she felt no desire even to look at it. Immediately after the pause her advocate was to plead. The thought brought no comfort. What could he possibly say to refute the terrible indictment just heard?

There was another person who left her luncheon untouched that day: Ella Rosemaer, who, still escorted by Niklas Verbrugge, had gone to her near home for rest and refreshment.

"She is as good as condemned," said Niklas, by way of making agreeable conversation.

"Do you think so?" asked Ella nervously, and not looking half as pleased as he would have expected.

"And she's gone off her looks too. Prison fare, I suppose."

A remark which served to throw some light on the transference of Niklas' allegiance.

Ella said nothing, but felt for the letter in her pocket. There would be no escape now from producing it, she supposed, and really, considering all things—the last remark included—she thought she could do so safely now. In fact, if the ring had been on her finger, instead of only ordered, she would have done so ere this, without waiting for the trial, for its possession had actually begun to be a weight upon her conscience.

CHAPTER XXII.

SELF-SACRIFICE.

MARTHA'S advocate was another of those people who ate no luncheon that day. He had spent the time in making notes for his speech and then tearing them up again, and now sat with his eyes upon the President, miserably awaiting the signal to rise. It should have come by now, yet appeared to be delayed by some unlooked-for incident, whose symptoms were whisperings and putting together of heads.

Then, abruptly, the President announced that one of the witnesses already examined desired to make a further statement, and that the court had decided to hear it before the pleading was resumed. Simultaneously Dr. Brulôt was perceived to be occupying the witness box. He was as pale as before—perhaps a little paler; but the tense anxiety of his bearing had vanished, leaving him far calmer, in appearance, at any rate, than he had probably been in his whole life.

“What is it you want to tell us?” asked the President a trifle testily. “Have you remembered something to add to your former statements?”

“No. What I have to say now is no continuation of my testimony. I desire to be heard as a person only now entering into the case.”

“Well, well—say what you have to say! I suppose

you are aware that the time of the court is precious. The advocate for the defence is waiting at this moment to commence his speech."

"He can spare himself the trouble. After the statement I wish to make, his speech will be superfluous. When I have spoken he will have no one more to defend."

"And the prisoner?"

"The prisoner is as innocent as the advocate himself of the crime imputed to her. The criminal, if indeed there be a criminal in the matter, is the person now addressing your lordship."

"*You?*"

"Even I, myself."

The inclination accompanying the words was in so far theatrical as it betrayed a certain appreciation of the dramatic nature of the situation.

If no murmur of excitement had yet arisen, it was only because people were holding their breath for fear of losing one word being spoken; but all necks within the hall seemed to have lengthened by at least an inch, and all faces, tense with attention, were eagerly thrust forward. Martha herself had not moved, but kept her eyes, blank with amazement, upon the man in the witness box.

"Explain yourself!" said the President severely.

"I am here to do so. Your lordship will remember asking me how I supposed that the deceased could have procured the poison. I answered that question truthfully, but not fully. Had your lordship worded it otherwise, and, for instance, asked me whether I knew where the poison had actually been got, I should have been forced to answer that she had got it from me."

This time the murmur broke loose for a space, while the judges exchanged startled glances.

"Several weeks before her death," continued Dr. Brulôt, in obedience to a sign from the speechless President, "Mevrouw Van Kempen appealed to me, telling me that she had resolved to cut short her own tortures, and asking me for a rapidly working poison. I began by refusing; I ended by yielding, aware as I was of the incurable nature of her disease, which yet might not prove fatal for another year or two. Finally it was settled between us that, at the next attack of pain, I should bring her the poison. When, therefore, on the forenoon of the critical day, I was hastily summoned, I had in my pocket the pill which was to end her sufferings. She intended to swallow it that same night—and she did. When I was called next morning, I knew I should find her dead."

The doctor spoke quite deliberately and steadily, looking the President in the face.

"In other words, you denounce yourself as a murderer?"

"If your lordship chooses to use that term. To myself I appear a deliverer."

"If you denounce yourself at all, why so late?"

"I had hoped that the prosecution would break down for want of evidence; and naturally"—the abnormal gravity of his face was disturbed by one of his characteristic grimaces—"I was not yearning for prison air."

All around him the excited murmur was swelling; it seemed to have invaded even the judges' dais. The five men in robes were consulting vivaciously and with marks of irritation. To have the whole case upset at the last moment was distinctly aggravating.

Martha's wide eyes were still upon the doctor. Her first feeling on hearing his confession had been one of horror mixed with indignation. A murderer, then? And because of his crime she had had to sit behind prison

walls for six weeks! But quickly there followed another thought; to be sure, he had spoken late, but he need not have spoken at all. It was to him that she would owe her liberty, perhaps her life. And his punishment would be hard—harder than the motive really justified. No doubt he would be arrested on the spot.

So thought others among the audience, and craned their necks, almost more than seemed anatomically possible, in order not to miss the interesting moment. What were they delaying about? What was this new disturbance—upon one of the front benches this time, occupied by the relatives of the late Mevrouw Van Kempen? Had somebody fainted?

Just then the solemn figure of Niklas Verbrugge surged up beside the seat of the advocate for the defence. He could be seen putting something into his hand—something that looked like a letter. The advocate, now the picture of bewilderment, glanced over the paper, got up, sat down again, and finally passed it up to the President.

There was another perplexing pause, during which the letter went from hand to hand upon the dais. Finally, after a rapid consultation, the President announced that he had received a document which he intended to make public.

He further explained that this was a letter addressed by the late Mevrouw Van Kempen to Freule Ella Rosemaer, and dated on the eve of her death. Then, amid the silence which had fallen again as though by magic, he cleared his throat and took the sheet in his hand.

“MY DEAR ELLA,—By the time you get this, I shall have no need to trouble about further injections. You’ll soon know why.

“As it has occurred to me that my medical adviser

might easily fall under the suspicion of having procured the poison, I think it only fair towards him solemnly to declare that he has had no hand in the matter. I brought the stuff from Batavia with me on the occasion of my last visit. I wanted to have it handy, you see, and yet not to compromise any Darakowa chemist, things being too easily ferreted out in our beloved city.

"I did think of leaving the explanatory note beside my bed; but, considering how easily it might go astray during the first flurry, I decided for the post.

"If I choose you as my confidant it is chiefly because I fancy I was rather cross to you when last you called, and should like to say that I am sorry.

"I hope the will won't be too great a disappointment; but I've made your slice somewhat bigger than those of the others. Your affectionate aunt,

"WILHELMINA VAN KEMPEN."

When the general agitation had somewhat subsided, the President called upon Freule Rosemaer to answer a few questions.

She could only do so sitting, being apparently on the verge of a dead faint. Asked by the President, in a much milder voice than the one used for Martha, whether she recognised this letter as being in her deceased aunt's handwriting, she replied in the affirmative. Questioned as to why it had not been earlier produced, she explained haltingly and a little incoherently that the letter had arrived during her absence from Darakowa, had got mislaid, and only been discovered by her, by the merest chance, during the last hour, when she had gone home to luncheon.

"And of course you lost no time in bringing it under

the notice of the court," said the President approvingly, and preferring to glide over the probabilities of the case.

Ella nodded dumbly and was graciously dismissed.

From her retiring figure the President now turned his eyes back upon that of the man still standing in the witness box, and upon whose face the pallor of a few minutes back had been replaced by a vivid flush.

"And the meaning of this?" he snapped, with all his stiff hairs standing straight on end. "Is it to your amiable desire to entertain the court that we owe this farce of self-denunciation? Eh?"

In the silence that followed, though Dr. Brulôt's lips did not move, the roguish look might have been observed to creep back into his black eyes.

"Answer!" commanded the President, striking the table with the gold pencil-case. "What made you tell us that cock-and-bull story about having procured the poison?"

"My innate objection to seeing a young lady in so unpleasant and unjustified a predicament as that in which Freule Grant found herself."

"A case of self-sacrifice, then?" sneered the brick-red President. "And are you aware of having committed perjury?"

"I think not," said the doctor politely. "I particularly called your lordship's attention to the fact that my latest statement was no part of my testimony, from which it follows that I was not speaking upon oath."

To this the answer was only a glare, intended, presumably, to screen professional perplexity. There followed the announcement that the court would now retire, in order to consider the altered situation, upon which the five black robes disappeared through a door at the back, and excited comment burst out on all sides.

Martha, in the little waiting-room into which she had been led, held her bewildered head between her hands. The turn of events had been so rapid as almost to engender physical giddiness. Seldom in her life had she felt so deeply touched. To confess his crime would have been brave enough on the part of the doctor; but to accuse himself, while innocent, for the sake of saving her, this was devotion indeed. Faithful soul! How she had wronged him in her estimate hitherto! To be sure, everything about Dr. Brulôt always was unexpected, but he had never been quite as unexpected as to-day.

When, after a comparatively short interval, the judge returned, it was to announce that the Advocate General would now speak. With the air of an ogre disappointed of his meal, this gentleman withdrew the accusation of murder, maintaining only that of the use of a false name. A fine was to be the punishment of this last misdemeanour, and the sum being immediately produced—nobody quite knew out of whose pocket—Martha's release was formally pronounced.

The next half-hour—filled with formalities—remained somewhat blurred in her memory. It was not until she found herself seated in a closed vehicle, with the person who had helped her into it sitting beside her, that the clouds of agitation began to clear. She had vaguely supposed that it was her advocate who was managing things, but, looking towards her companion, met the gaze of a pair of dancing black eyes, whose identity was unmistakable.

"Don't speak!" said the doctor, seeing that her lips moved nervously. "Nothing like a little silence for settling the nerves; and yours have had enough to do for one day. Wait till we've reached the villa."

Then he crowded himself back into his corner, discreet and dumbly protective.

It was not until the amazed and grinning Saidjah had left them alone in the big drawing-room that Dr. Brulôt began by feeling Martha's pulse, and—satisfied apparently that her nerves could stand it—ended by falling at her feet. Though his lips did not speak, his eyes did so for him, while he covered her hot hand with kisses.

Martha, with no thought of resistance, looked down upon him, troubled and more deeply touched than she had been in her life.

When at last he spoke it was to say humbly, almost diffidently:

“May I keep it?”

“What?” she stupidly asked.

“Your hand. I know well that nothing can deserve it; but——”

For a moment longer Martha looked down upon her kneeling suitor. Did he not deserve it after all? In the first swell of her gratitude it seemed to her that he did. And at least it would be something to do with her life.

“Yes; you can keep it,” she said almost wearily.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TREASURE BOX.

WHILE Martha still languished behind prison walls, events were not standing still at Ballenweem any more than at Darakowa.

The fact being notorious that small causes are apt to produce big effects, it will not be astonishing to hear that a certain cold in the head caught by Molly in the first chill of autumn was fruitful of weighty consequences,

For this cold in the head led—amongst other things—to a solitary Sunday afternoon spent in the school-room, and, not unnaturally, to an acute attack of boredom. It is true that Mrs. McGillies, before starting for “the kirk” between her spouse and her son, had furnished the invalid with a selection of “Sunday books,” but it is likewise true that Molly knew them by heart, without having learnt to appreciate their contents. Like the first leaves of autumn they now lay strewn around her, while she sprawled on the hearthrug in the warmth of a blazing fire, alternately sniffing, sneezing and yawning, while making a generous use of her pocket-handkerchief.

Although the only iron bars visible were those of the high safety fender, Molly was virtually as much a prisoner as was, at that moment, far-away Martha. To be sure, the cough lozenges, of which Mrs. McGillies had left a supply, together with the books, formed a mitigating circumstance, unpartaken of by Martha.

Just now Molly was weighing the rival advantages of going to sleep on the hearthrug until the return of the family from church, which would coincide with tea-time, or of building a church of bricks—this being the only form of architecture tolerated by Mr. McGillies on the Sabbath. There was not much choice besides picture-books, all profane toys having been carefully locked away, according to custom. On the whole the snooze on the hearthrug offered most inducements, especially in view of the fact that the cough lozenges had run out. But for this a pillow—of sorts—was requisite. A bundle of doll’s clothes would serve the purpose. There were plenty of them over there in the basket in the corner; and towards it Molly, too lazy to get up, now proceeded to crawl upon all fours.

It was at this precise moment that Fate stepped in; for, in order to reach the basket, Molly had to pass by the long-suffering deal box in which Andy hoarded his most private possessions. As she reached it she stopped short. Despite her watery eyes, she had perceived that the key was sticking in the lock. The thing was almost without precedent, and accountable for only by the hurried start for the kirk, for Andy guarded his treasures fiercely, long after they had ceased to be treasures in the real sense of the word. Very rarely had Molly even caught a glimpse of the inside of the museum. All the more precious the opportunity now offering itself, and presenting superior attractions even to the *siesta* upon the hearthrug. The family devotions were good for another hour; there would be ample time for revelling in the miscellaneous contents of the treasure-box.

As, sitting upon her heels and with all her drowsiness gone, Molly lifted the battered wooden lid, she was aware of the taste of forbidden fruit upon her moral palate.

And yet none of the things inside the box were absolutely new to her; she had known them all in the day of their glory. It was from their seclusion that they gained this new glamour. How much more interesting had the birds' eggs become now that they were broken and dusty than when they had been new and intact! How much more fascinatingly mysterious were the bits of fretwork wrapped in paper and stuffed away in dark corners than had been these same things presented as ordinary facts in broad daylight! This magic-lantern slide she remembered quite well; it was one which Andy had tried to paint himself according to directions in *The Boys' Own Paper*, and had then caused hurriedly to disappear into the box. It had reminded Molly then of

spilt marmalade, and it did so now. This scrap of brown leather—or was it paper?—could that be the frog which Andy had skinned with his own hands, despite her protesting shrieks? They were all old friends. And this letter—dear me, yes—the letter was an old friend too. Although Molly had almost forgotten its existence, she had only to decipher the address in order to recognise it. It was the letter which had arrived for Martha after her departure—the same letter from which Andy had purloined the stamp, and which by the rest of the family was supposed to have gone astray in the post.

As Molly crouched there with the closed envelope in her hand she felt her excitement rising. It had been a bitter disappointment when Andy had locked it away unopened, saying such cutting things about girls and fair play. In the days that followed she had often speculated upon the probable epithets applied to Martha by the young man with the brown eyes that had made her think so yearningly of chocolate drops (Molly's similes usually turned upon edibles). With the letter in her hand, extinct curiosity leaped into new and obstreperous life. What or who was to prevent her satisfying it now? Not Andy, who was safe within kirk walls. Of course she would have to cut open the envelope; having already ascertained that the window formed by the removal of the stamp did not offer anything like a satisfactory view of the interior; but was it likely that Andy would ever notice the violation? Not if she took the necessary precautions.

"And I don't need to read it all," reflected Molly, skirmishing with the faint resistance of a rudimentary conscience. "I only just want to see whether he calls her 'Duckie Darling.'"

Having made this mental compromise, Molly deliberately

cut open the envelope with one of the discarded carving tools.

But, despite the compromise, she did not miss one word of the long letter which was written in a smooth, caligraphic hand, well within the scope of her educational attainments.

It was about ten minutes later that George Fettes, having dropped in under the ostentatious pretext of enquiring after Molly's cold, but whose real object was the gleaning of the latest news from Java, and finding the lower regions deserted, wandered into the schoolroom.

Molly was still sitting beside the open treasure-box with the likewise open letter in her hand. Her eyes were staring and her mouth gaping, partly because of obstructions to breathing and partly from sheer amazement.

"Nobody at home, I see," said George, who since spring had developed an unsuspected talent for getting on with "kids," or, at any rate, with the particular kids who happened to be connected with his former pal. "How's the cold?"

Upon which Molly turned up her watery eyes to his face, and from the depths of her new-born perplexity, and in accents which the condition of her vocal organs grotesquely thickened, blurted out:

"But then—did he barry her adfer all?"

"Depends whom you're talking of," said George, with his usual conciseness.

"Of Bartha, of gorse, and of Mr. Glaas—her husb'd—that's to say if he *is* her husb'd," corrected Molly, drawing her puzzled brows together over the bewildering conundrum.

"What in the name of thunder do you mean?" asked

George, with sudden sternness, and in complete disregard both of the tenderness of Molly's ears and of the sanctity of the day.

"That's what I doht know—at least I doht know what Mr. Glaas beans, but he says here in this lettah that he gan't barry Bartha because he's goi'g to barry subbody else."

"Where did you get that letter from?" asked George, who had suddenly grown very red in the face.

"Out of A'ddy's box."

"And where did Andy get it from?"

"He—he put it away there after he'd gut out the stamp; he was afraid he'd gatch it for doin' so."

"Who was it meant for, then?"

"For Bartha, of gorse; but it game after she was gone, and so we thought it didn't batter, and A'ddy wa'tted the stamp, and I wa'tted to read it, but A'ddy wouldn't let be; but to-day I fou'd it, and I just could't help readi'g it. But please do't tell A'ddy! He said it was't a game thi'g to do. Are you goi'g to scold be too?"

Before George's heavy frown, Molly cowered away in a fright.

"And in this letter Mr. Klaas says that he is going to marry somebody else?"

"Yes; it's all written here. You gan see fo' yourse'f." She waved the sheet at him.

The struggle in George's mind was sharp but short. Presumably he shared Andy's opinion as to the sanctity of alien correspondence; but there were considerations here, in especial there were certain anxious suspicions concerning the reality of Martha's happiness which were calculated to upset even lifelong principles.

Without the waste of a further word, he put out his hand for the letter.

It was dated from Batavia, on a late day in April.

“MY ADORED,—How little did I ever think to write these words with tears in my eyes and with a breaking heart, and yet this is what I do to-day. Let me speak swiftly, ere my courage fails.

“Martha—ah, unhappy wretch that I am, whence can I take the words to tell you? I see myself forced to renounce the happiness of becoming your husband—than which the world holds none greater. It is no fickleness of heart that has brought me to this conclusion, but reason, stern and cruel reason, which began to stir during the long weeks of the voyage, and which events here have matured to a resolution.

“During those long hours of reflection it has been borne in upon me, etc., etc.”

Instinctively George's eyes flew to the next paragraph.

“And another thing, my worshipped Martha; I am doing more than merely setting you free; I am binding myself with other fetters. So long as an insurmountable barrier does not stand between us, I shall not feel as though your future were secured. It is for this reason that I have decided to accept an offer which my employer Mynheer Van Hagen has made to me—the offer of his daughter's hand.

“Ah, Martha——”

Again George skipped a paragraph—redolent of self-justification, and went for the concluding sentence:

“This letter will reach you in plenty of time to prevent your start. Most deeply do I now regret not having sooner yielded to reason. Let me comfort myself and you with the truth that it is better late than never.

"By the time this is in your hands I shall have led Leenebet Van Hagen to the altar. I prefer this hurry; it puts an end to my doubts. How thankful I am that you should not yet have quitted the protection of your parents' roof!

"Forgive me the pain I inflict, and whose object is to spare future anguish. And do not doubt my loyalty. Leenebet will bear my name, but none other than you will reign for ever in the heart of your faithful,

"HENRIK."

Having reached the signature, George turned back to the first page, and read the letter through again—the neglected paragraphs included.

Molly, who had discovered one more lozenge, and was sucking it lustily, as though she hoped to extract enlightenment from it, could observe no change upon his features, except the still heightened colour, which suggested that the ship's figurehead had received a new coat of paint. It was something about the very rigidity of that flushed face which kept her from asking questions.

At last he looked down at her.

"And so Martha—and so your sister—never saw this letter?"

"Nebber. She was gone when it gabe."

"Has nobody else read it?"

"Nobuddy. It was I who open'd it to-day."

George looked round for a chair, and, deliberately sitting down upon it, proceeded to reflect.

"He gan't have barried both of them, gan he?" ventured Molly, after a pause. "And yet he bust have barried Bartha, or she wouldn't be called Bevrouw Glaas, would she?"

From George, who was intensely studying his boots, came no answer.

When he looked up at last it was to ask abruptly:

"Can you hold your tongue?"

"Of gorse!" said Molly, with the scornful conviction of her age and sex. "Did't I hold by tongue about the letter having gome?—though of course it was A'ddy who bade me do so."

"Very well. It is I who am going to make you do so now—about the contents of the letter. If you don't tell anybody what there is in it, I'll give you the biggest box of sweets you ever dreamed of."

"Filled chog'lates?" asked Molly, not too perplexed to improve the occasion.

"Filled chocolates, if you like. But mind, you mustn't even tell Andy."

"Oh, I don't want to tell A'ddy! I'd be buch too afraid of his cuffin' me because of havin' open'd the treasure-box. You won't go and tell him, will you?"

"Not if you hold your tongue," said the wily George. "But if you drop a word to anybody else, then the bargain's up, both about telling Andy and about the chocolates."

"A'd you'll give me the letter to put back in the box, so that A'ddy shouldn't notice? Blease be quick! I hear them gomin' back."

A few minutes later, Molly, looking the picture of innocence, was once more sprawling on the hearthrug, while George Fettes shook Mrs. McGillies' hand encased in Sabbatarian kid.

"Just dropped in to see how the cold was," he sheepishly explained.

"And you've been keeping Molly company? How kind of you! You'll stop to tea, won't you?"

But George, in as few words as possible, declared himself quite unable to stop for tea. He had things to look after which absolutely could brook no delay. With a significant look at Molly which she had no difficulty in construing into "mum's the word!" he was gone.

It was a few days later that Mrs. McGillies wrote the letter in which the sensational disappearance of George Fettes was mentioned.

The departure from Bannacuik had taken place no later than the Monday morning, after a night spent in exactly the same way that another memorable night of the preceding winter had been spent—that is, in smoking and thinking.

"Did he marry her, after all?"

This question of Molly's it was which stood in the centre of his reflections. For it was to this that the whole situation reduced itself. Either Martha had arrived in time to prevent that other marriage proposed and had enforced her claims in the teeth of the "faithful Henrik's" own opposition, or she had not arrived in time, which meant that she was only playing at being married. To George, who knew Martha far better than her mother did, the thing did not appear half so unlikely as it would to the latter. It was, in fact, exactly the sort of thing that he could imagine her doing. Various circumstances were there to corroborate his suspicions: the abrupt change of address, the reticence regarding her happiness, which he had gathered from Mrs. McGillies' account of the Java letters, and yet more from the mother's anxious and puzzled face.

It seemed impossible to understand what exactly was happening over there. The one thing clear was that Martha's affairs were in an awful muddle, since, even if

the "soft chap" had ended by marrying her, he would have done so against the grain, so to say. It seemed equally clear that somebody must put matters right, and George could think of no one more appropriate than himself, since neither Mr. nor Mrs. McGillies could possibly start for Java at a moment's notice, nor would be of the slightest use when they got there.

The second vigil ended in exactly the same way that the first had done—that is, an early start for Edinburgh and a call upon Mrs. Wold.

By a more than fortunate chance, George's aunt was once more slowly recovering from one of her periodical attacks of influenza, which greatly simplified matters. It took George only about ten minutes to prove to her that a sea voyage and a taste of the tropics was the one reasonable prescription for the case.

"But you told me last winter that the doctors are all for Alpine resorts nowadays?" objected the bewildered sufferer.

But she had no chance against George, who imperturbably declared that since last winter science had once more shifted its ground.

"Things move so fast, nowadays, you know," he told her, with a reassuring smile. "Come, Aunt Sophy! I'll take you myself. You'll never have such a chance again. We'll have no end of a good time together."

"You do get a lot of fun on board ship," wistfully observed the merry widow. "If you are *quite* sure it will be good for me."

George was quite sure, this certainty being chiefly inspired by the thought of the part for which he had "cast" his aunt.

"Whether she's married or not it will make things

easier for her if there's another woman to the fore," it was thus that the argument in George's mind ran. "And if she isn't married there's got to be another woman in it, since, of course, she wouldn't like to come off with me alone."

So complete was Mrs. Wold's surrender that within twenty-four hours she was ready to start for London, in first line, where the necessary tropical equipment was to be laid in. According to George, expedition was of the utmost importance in the treatment of this particular sort of case.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HOME-COMING.

THE prescription worked admirably.

By the time Batavia was reached the "flu" had become no more than a far-off memory, and, what between deck dances and cabin games, Mrs. Wold had enjoyed so excellent a time, and was in so radiant a humour with life in general, that George felt he was risking nothing by unmasking his batteries. After all, now that he had got her safely on board, she could not well back out of the adventure.

Nor did she attempt to do so. The discovery that she was being imported, not as a convalescent but as a chaperon, immensely tickled her frisky fancy; nor could the rose-coloured glasses through which she was viewing the world just then fail to shed their becoming light upon this so out-of-the-way sort of romance, for as a romance she naturally recognised it, despite George's own careful use of such words as "pal," "comradeship," and his re-

marks as to the duty of pulling a compatriot "out of a hole." She had always liked George best of all her nephews, the others having a tiresome habit of getting into money straits, and she had liked Martha too, being in general given more to liking than to disliking. Neither had she been quite without qualms of conscience touching the result of the many *tête-à-têtes* which had taken place upon the Schneeliberg verandah while the supposed chaperon was sliding ecstatically down snowy slopes. In lending George a hand now, might she not be partially condoning the past?

The sea air did its part in invigorating the incurable good nature which even money had not been quite able to get under, so that before Batavia was sighted she had arrived at fervently hoping that George's theory as to an elaborate comedy was correct, and Martha really been jilted by the "nigger" and consequently free.

With this hope in her mind, the "merry widow" positively bounced ashore.

George was, of course, for pushing on at once—that is to say, by next morning, this being the earliest start allowed by the peculiarities of Javanese trains; but the hotel at Batavia, not the Hotel Coghén, but a far more pretentious and highly civilised establishment, with palm-shaded terraces and a gorgeous table d'hôte, proved so enticing that she pleaded fervently for one day's grace. One day could not really make any difference to Martha, whether she were wife or maid. For the sake of keeping his aunt in good humour, George would have yielded had it not been for a few words of English conversation overheard while smoking his after-dinner cigar upon the verandah.

"Wonder if they'll finish up that trial to-morrow?"

one of the voices said, with an unmistakably Scotch accent, and through a cloud of tobacco smoke. "Bad lookout for the girl, I'm afraid."

"Very bad. But what makes her get into such messes as that? Whether or not she dosed the old lady, she must be a bit of an adventuress."

"I can't admit that she did it, for the good name of old Scotland. Grant *is* a Scotch name, you know."

At this point George's cigar, half-way to his lips, was arrested in mid-air, while his reclining figure stiffened all over.

"I wasn't aware that the pages of Scotch history were quite as spotless as all that. What was the sense of masquerading as a married woman if she was an above-board person?"

"Oh, one never knows. We'll see what she has to say for herself, in Wednesday's papers. I don't know her from Adam, and yet I'd feel regularly mad if they found her guilty."

"So should I, for the matter of that, but not from quite such righteous grounds. I'm told she's a regular beauty, red-gold hair and A 1 complexion, and all the rest of it. That sort of girl isn't intended by Nature to be found guilty of anything but making fools of us."

The cloud of tobacco smoke was disturbed by a light and cynical laugh.

Hurling away the stump of his cigar, George rose and crossed the verandah.

"Excuse the interruption," he said, with massive politeness. "But about this trial you were speaking of just now, and a Miss Grant, I should like the thing explained."

The two men stared a little, and then one of them—the Scotchman—asked;

"You're new, I suppose?"

"Disembarked this morning."

"Ah, that explains. It's a trial for murder which is coming on to-morrow at Darakowa. Been the talk of the town for weeks past, not at Darakowa alone. Young girl—Scotch—spends two months in house of rich old Dutch-woman. Old lady dies suddenly, poison found in the remains. The girl, in whose favour she had made a new will the day before, is arrested on charge of murder."

"And you say her name is Grant?"

"That's what she says—Martha Grant. But she seems to have an assortment of names. Began by passing as a widow under some Dutch label or other."

"And the trial takes place to-morrow?"

"Just so. It's the event of the day."

"Thank you," said George, with the same massive politeness, and having stood for a moment frowning at the floor he turned on his heel.

It was to his aunt's room that he made his way straight, in order to knock violently at the door.

Mrs. Wold's startled face, which, owing to a frame of patent hair-curlers, bore great resemblance to that of a porcupine, showed itself in the chink.

"George, I'm in my dressing-gown——"

But, putting her aside, George entered unasked, and closed the door behind him.

"We can't stop over to-morrow," he announced dictatorially. "Have to take the morning-train to Darakowa."

"But, my dear George, you promised——"

"I know; but I've heard something since I promised."

— Having received a brief summary of the talk upon the verandah, Mrs. Wold collapsed onto the sofa, staring

at her nephew with affrighted eyes, and looking now very much like a porcupine in distress.

"Can it be her?" she quavered, at the end of a pause of sheer stupefaction.

"Unless there is a second Martha Grant upon the island, it must be her. Anyway, I'm going to find that out to-morrow. Are you coming with me or not, Aunt Sophy?"

The "merry widow" bounced off the sofa.

"Of course I'm coming with you! *To-morrow*, you say? And it's a twelve hours' journey? Then by the time we arrive she may be—— Oh, George, have you ever heard of a place where trains don't run in the night?"

George did not say whether he had heard of it or not, but, foreseeing that sympathy was going to become inconveniently articulate, promptly withdrew.

Next morning aunt and nephew were among the earliest passengers upon the platform; and during the whole of that day, spent by Martha in the dock at Darakowa, were speeding along among wonders of scenery for which George at least had neither eyes nor ears.

Reaching Darakowa after dark, the first news that met them was the collapse of the prosecution and the discharge of the accused, at which tidings Mrs. Wold, for the first time in her life, fell into her nephew's arms and, to his extreme discomfort, wept upon his shoulder. Having ascertained the whereabouts of the Villa Meena she was for starting for it at once, despite the lateness of the hour; but here some sudden shyness on the part of George interfered. Now that he knew her safe and free, he shrank from the thought of breaking in upon Martha at this unseemly hour, perhaps giving her a fresh shock after the many she must have suffered to-day.

The visit was therefore postponed till next morning.

Under the curving branches Martha stood with a bag of crumbs, throwing large handfuls to the birds, the sparrows being, as usual, barefacedly favoured. It was long since they had received their breakfast from her hands. The mere action helped her to taste that newly recovered liberty which she seemed to be inhaling at every pore.

And yet—was she actually free?

Materially, yes; but, awaking this morning after a long and refreshing sleep, she had with a shock remembered the new fetters forged for herself since yesterday. Dr. Brulôt, her *fiancé*—yes, she must get used to the coupling of these two conceptions—had announced an early visit, which would be that of a lover as much as of a doctor. At this very moment she was awaiting him, with a dread of which she was a little ashamed. It was out of gratitude that she had yielded to him, and why should gratitude look paler by daylight than by lamplight? Could the mere fact of her having had a good night's rest and thereby recovered self-confidence take anything off his real merit? Strange that it should be necessary to remind herself of the heroic sacrifice which he had been ready to make for her sake!

She was still occupied with thus reminding herself when a footstep on the gravel caused her to start so violently as to spill half the crumbs. That was *he*, no doubt, her future lord and master. Oh, how impossible to think of the funny little doctor in that light! And yet she must train herself to do so.

Forcing her lips to smile, Martha turned resolutely— to see a stout lady in white advancing briskly along the shaded path. The lights and shadows chasing each other

across her circular face prevented immediate recognition, so that she was only three paces off when Martha, flinging away the paper bag, made one spring at her well-padded neck, and hung there, between laughing and sobbing.

"Mrs. Wold! Oh, Mrs. Wold! You *are* yourself, aren't you? But how? But why? And"—with a rush of words and swift bending back of the neck in order to look her better in the face—"where is George?"

"Behind that elephant-headed thing, I believe," said Mrs. Wold, as articulately as suffocation would allow, and waving her sunshade at the nearest of the erstwhile deities. "He wasn't sure whether you'd enjoy seeing him, so he sent me on as a sort of boy scout, don't you see."

Without a word Martha made for the deity, and grabbed blindly at a linen sleeve protruding beyond an angle of the pedestal.

"Oh, George, take me home! Take me home!" she panted, dragging him to the light of day.

For one irrational moment Martha seemed on the point of doing by the nephew what she had done by the aunt; but, just as George, reading her face aright, was opening a pair of huge and hungry arms, Martha put her hand to her head and drew back as sharply as though a bullet had struck her on that particular spot.

What was this? Where were her senses? She, the affianced bride of Dr. Brulôt, to make these advances to another?

"No, no, that's nonsense of course!" she uttered vaguely, with her hand still to her head. "Of course I can't go home with you, I've made that impossible myself. I've cut off my own retreat."

And now her hand left her forehead to join the other in covering her face.

But this George, who had seen happiness within his grasp, was not quite the same George who had so meekly accepted his first defeat in the Ballenweem parlour.

"Why can't you come with me, Martha? How can you have cut off your own retreat?" he asked, taking possession of the hands which hid her face, his own the while looking anything but wooden. "Let's have done with mysteries, please! Why can't you come home with me?"

"Because—boo!—I'm engaged to be m-married," sobbed Martha. "I got engaged only y-yesterday—bo-o!—out of desperation, I think. B-but if I'd only known—oh, how funny!"

And the sobs were abruptly transformed into shrilly hysterical laughter.

"Mademoiselle will permit me to feel her pulse?"

At the sound of a new voice George and Mrs. Wold turned. A small, fantastically ugly man with an enormous nose was standing in the middle of the path at a few paces' distance.

He took off his straw hat politely, first to the ladies, and then to the gentleman.

"Only a slight attack of the nerves," he exclaimed, with professional *détachement*. "Two grammes of chloride of brom. will meet the case, I think."

Martha, who had wrenched her hands out of George's, was gasping for breath.

"Dr. Brulôt, I—I assure you——"

The doctor put up his hand deprecatingly, his teeth flashing out in a rather weird sort of smile.

"Quite superfluous, mademoiselle! I require no assurances. My ears, it is true, are not quite so big as my nose, but they are very good at catching sounds, and the

words caught just now leave nothing to be desired—in the matter of enlightenment. Allow me only one question: Is it your humble servant alone who is the obstacle to the journey just proposed to you?”

In guilty silence Martha stared back at him. Her lips, indeed, moved, but without achieving a sound.

Once more the doctor put up his hand.

“Thank you! *Cela suffit*. This also leaves nothing to be desired in clearness. *Eh bien*, will you accept my help in the packing of your boxes?”

Martha’s eyes grew big with bewilderment.

“You—you renounce me?”

“I renounce the chance of being married out of ‘desperation.’ It’s an arrangement I have no fancy for.”

“It was really out of gratitude,” stammered Martha remorsefully.

“Gratitude for what?”

“For what you did yesterday; for your noble conduct in accusing yourself of a crime which you never committed, in order to save me.”

“Oh, that? To be sure! But it was uncalled-for interference, as you saw, since you would have been saved without it.”

“You couldn’t know that. The intention remains the same. Dr. Brulôt, I—I feel so mean in accepting nothing but sacrifices from you, for I suppose it *is* a sacrifice to give me up?” she asked a little shyly.

“*A qui le dites vous?*” said the doctor, darting at her one look from out of his black eyes.

It was a look which once more quickened remorse.

Still wavering between inclination and what she considered to be duty, Martha gazed from one man to the other. She was not herself aware of imperceptibly draw-

ing nearer to George, who, with folded arms and small, blazing eyes, having made no attempt to resume the mask of impassibility so recently dropped—was trying to possess his soul in patience. In the background, Mrs. Wold, who loved a “scene” almost as much as a “good time,” stood with hands clasped on the handle of her sunshade, an ecstatic if somewhat bewildered spectator.

“I—I wish I thought I was not doing you too great a wrong.”

The doctor laughed abruptly.

“What! *Des remords de conscience?* I have a prescription for that. Wait a bit!”

Whipping out a bulky pocket-book, and, after a short search, producing a letter, he handed it to Martha.

“When you have read this you will see that you are not doing me so great a wrong as you suppose. Also that my little flourish of yesterday was not quite so heroic as maybe it appeared.”

Blankly Martha took the letter, and, in the dead Mevrouw Van Kempen’s familiar hand, read as follows:—

“MY DEAR DOCTOR,—Since our talk this morning it has occurred to me that, under the circumstances, you can scarcely escape suspicion. I am therefore taking precautions by writing to one of my relatives in a manner which ought certainly to ‘cover’ you. The law is so narrow in these things. What you really deserve is a decoration for unlocking for me the door out of this hell of pain; but what you would probably get would be ten years’ detention. No jewel I possess has ever been to me so precious as that little pill which you brought me this morning. Your grateful ex-patient,

“WILHELMINA VAN KEMPEN,”

Still blankly Martha looked up at the doctor.

"But then—it *was* you, after all, who gave her the poison?"

He bowed with even more than his customary touch of exaggeration.

"*C'est cela!* So, as you see, remorse is uncalled for. I wasn't accusing myself yesterday of anything I hadn't done; and I wouldn't have accused myself at all if that 'covering' letter had been produced a little earlier. It was an excellent idea of Mevrouw's, only it was a pity she didn't indicate the recipient more particularly. I never thought of that green-eyed girl. If I was as heroic as you suppose, I would have come forward as soon as you were arrested, would I not? On whose side, pray, should the *remords de conscience* be now, eh? All the same, my manners are too good to have allowed a young lady to go to the galleys—or possibly the gallows—because of that little pill which I, with my own hands, prepared."

Martha stood pondering.

Those two letters which Anna had been given to post—she remembered them quite well, and remembered, too, that one had been addressed to Ella Rosemaer and the other to Dr. Brulôt. She had wondered at the time why Mevrouw should be writing to the doctor whom she saw almost daily. Now she understood.

It was his voice which broke in upon her reflections.

"Have I put mademoiselle's mind at rest?" he asked a little wistfully.

"Yes—you have. I—I thank you. Oh, I wish I could do something for you!" said Martha, with a burst of irrepressible gratitude.

"You can do one thing. You can let me feel your pulse—once more."

Martha understood; and though she had not forgotten that the hand was the same which had prepared the deadly pill, she put her own into it—confidently.

He did not feel her pulse, but instead put his lips upon the place where it was, then once upon the back of her hand, then, with a beautifully accomplished bow, turned and walked away.

Just before the corner he stood still. Seen from this distance it struck Martha that he was looking almost as pale as yesterday in the witness box.

“*Bon voyage, mademoiselle!* I still advise the two grammes of chloride of brom. And I also suggest that the ceremony take place before the departure. It simplifies matters on the voyage.”

He whisked round the corner, his face rather white, but his nose carried bravely, and apparently still intent upon boring holes into space.

And Martha stared after him, as uncertain as ever as to whether he was to be taken seriously or not.

About six weeks after the day on which the birds' breakfast had been so strangely interrupted, Mrs. McGillies, stiff with amazement, sat, in her sitting-room opposite to Mrs. Jobwell, who, from a prolonged trip in the new yacht, had brought back a fine layer of sunburn to deepen the dye of her magenta countenance, as well as one huge sensation.

“And so, as I was telling you,” she pursued emphatically, “we drove out to the place—it's only a few miles from Batavia—and asked for *Mevrouw Klaas*. And presently there comes in a young woman no more like your Martha than I am to a—a beetroot,” declared the narrator, not very fortunate in her simile. “We began by

gaping, and ended by retreating, supposing we had come to the wrong place; but from subsequent enquiries it seems to have been the right place, after all. I *did* think of writing to you about it—this was more than four months ago, you know—but then again I thought it might be better to wait till I was back and do it verbally. There seems to be a mystery somewhere, but perhaps you know all about it and can explain?”

“No, I can’t explain,” admitted Martha’s mother, looking scared. “There certainly *is* a mystery, but it can’t be anything very bad; for look here!”

She rose up swiftly to take a used telegraph form from a drawer of her writing-table.

“Just sailing for home. Am well and happy. MARTHA.”

This Mrs. Jobwell read, round-eyed. The message was dated five weeks back, from Batavia.

“We had been very anxious,” Mrs. McGillies explained, “not having heard from her for so long. And then this came—reassuring, but so vague. She doesn’t even say whether she is coming alone or not. And she might almost be landed by this time.”

“What’s that?” said Mrs. Jobwell, sharply raising her head.

Mrs. McGillies put her hand to her throat, while the withered roses in her cheeks first paled and then flushed up, much in the way they had done on the evening when she had sat in this same room listening for the wheels that were to bring Martha back from the station and from Schneeliberg.

“A cab? It can’t be her—no, I don’t think it can——”

There were steps and voices in the entrance, then a pause, and then the red-handed housemaid flung open the door and bellowed:

"Please, ma'am—~~Mr.~~ and Mrs. George Fettes!"



THE END.

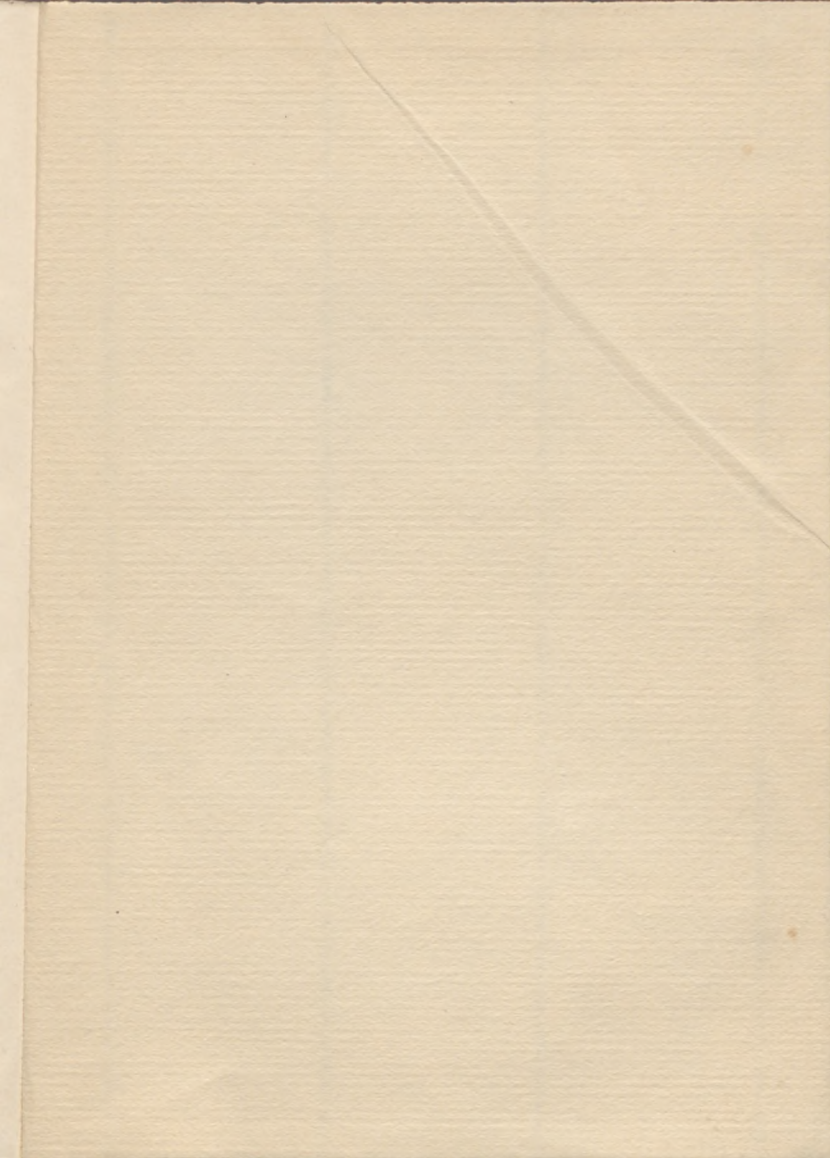
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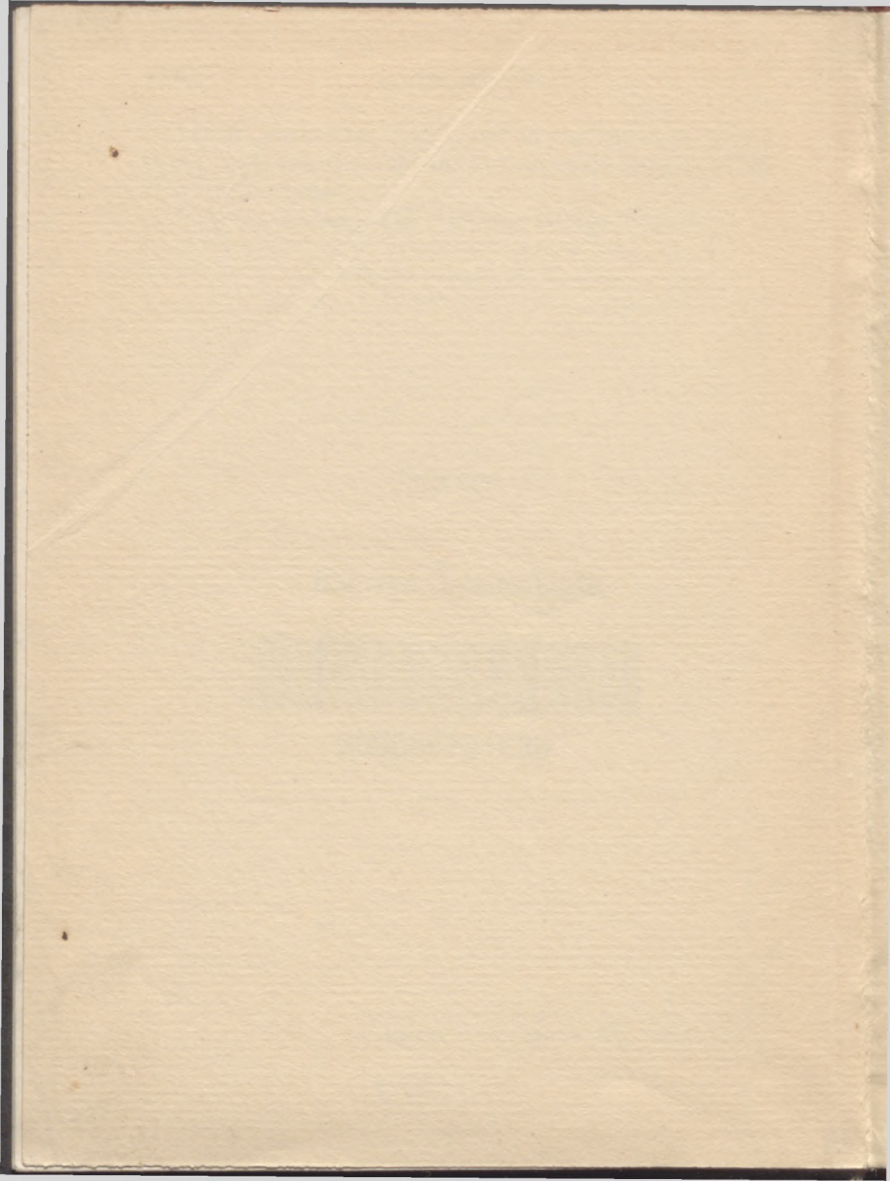


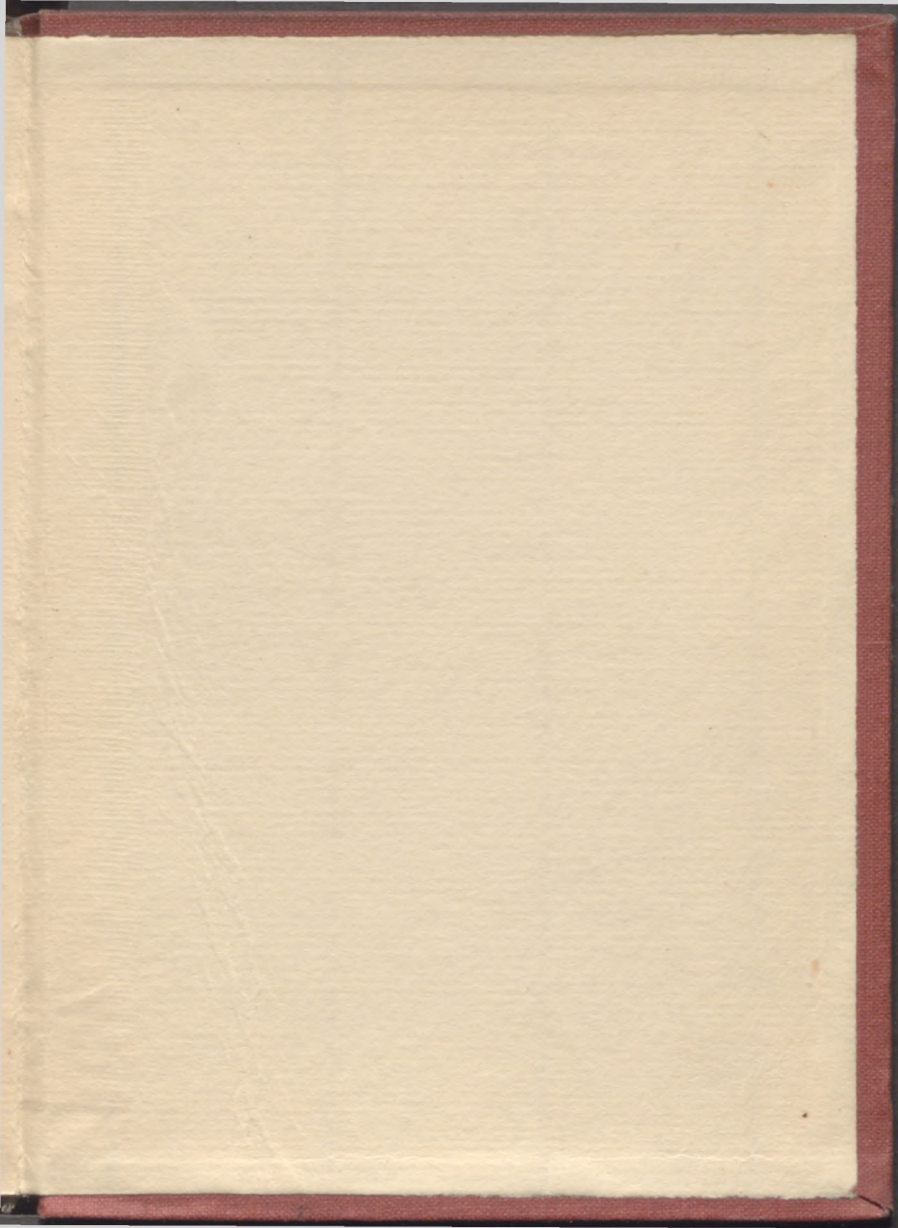
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