

# The Captive Woman

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ash-blond hair, her large, pale eyes, the blue-green gown half slipping from her bare, shrugging shoulders. A haggard woman, saved only, by her high position from being exactly what she was. A hungry woman, snatching greedily at new sensations. It was for those that she had to come to the West Coast of Africa—for new sensations. Well, she had had them in plenty, Wilton thought grimly.

"So Mrs. Hugo talked." He nodded again. "And just what did she say in Accrome?"

"Never mind that," the Governor answered. "I am here to-night to listen to you."

WILTON understood now; he was to be given a chance. That was generally the meaning of these unheralded, unattended advents of the Governor Time and again he had been known to slip, just as quietly, into one or another of these third-rate outposts scattered along the steaming coast of the Bight of Benin; and always his coming had meant a chance for somebody. So now it was to be his story against hers: the word of an obscure official against the word of this woman, so powerful, brilliant, and unscrupulous, who never forgot an affront to her vanity; who would never rest until she had avenged the terrible memory that lay between them.

"You must make me understand," went on the Governor. "That is why I am here—to understand. So far, I have heard rumors; for months I have been hearing those. I have heard that scourge of the Coast, the gossip of men. And I have now heard a woman—an excited woman, bitter with the sense of wrong, to be sure; but still, a woman too highly placed to be disregarded. Now I am here to listen to you."

He rose and, with a slight gesture toward that far-off spot of golden light, asked a question:

"By whose authority did Mrs. Hugo Vesey ever enter the House of the Old Mensah?"

From the edge of the lamplight where he hovered, near the ramparts, almost ghostlike in his tropical white, Wilton's answer came back—another question:

"Am I speaking to His Excellency the Governor?"

"You are speaking to one who wishes to understand."

"Then this is not official?" persisted Wilton.

"My trip to Grand Jaek has not been entered in the Government Gazette."

"Very well, then," Wilton began pacing the flag-stones. "This is with the gloves off, I suppose: the raw truth, even if it is about—a woman."

He stood as if lost in thought for a moment. When at last he began to speak, it was in a low, dragging tone, almost as if he were rehearsing something to himself.

"I found Mrs. Hugo here one afternoon when I returned from the bush," he said. "She had come on that day from Half-Pram, and the courtyard down there was a riot with her Kru-boys and baggage. She was sitting here under the arches, still in her traveling costume of boots, breeches, and hunting coat. I thought she was a boy at first, she was so slim and

straight and sprawled out. Then she looked up. It may be the light of later knowledge that makes me think it, but it seems now that the instant I saw her face in the searching light of the afternoon, I knew her. Even before I heard her voice, with that husky-hard sweetness in it, like honey smeared on a nail-file, I knew her; for I had met her type at home.

"Even her greeting told me I was right. 'Oh—how-de-do,' she said, without moving, playing over me with those enormous, pale eyes. 'I suppose you are the local big-wig. We must introduce ourselves. I'm Mrs. Hugo Vesey.'

"I had recognized her type," Wilton went on; "but when I heard her name I knew the woman. Mrs. Hugo Vesey—the famous 'Mrs. Hugo'—the half-great lady, the political *intrigante*, her fingers always tangled in the wires, her portrait always in the illustrated papers, some rising youngster always trailing in her wake, and half a dozen ruined political reputations to her credit. She meant to put me in my place by that greeting; I saw that. What was I, a mere minor official of an obscure colony, to her—the daughter of a Cabinet minister, married to a great name, and always so tremendously in the midst of things?"

"I was nothing to her. If you are going to understand anything you must understand that. To her I was a mere convenience, something to whom there was not even the necessity of being civil, unless it suited her. As a person, a member of society, I was non-existent to her. And yet—queerly enough—even so, she had to feel her power over me as a man. That power over men for which she was so hungry—the exercise of it seemed like a stimulant to her, a daily drug on which she relied.

"That came later on—that evening, in fact. She was a different woman by night, I found: something even of a beauty, in a hard, stunning way. She wore a wonderful gown, or so it seemed to me, flashing suddenly upon me after three years of this place—a trailing sea-green affair, with gleaming sparks caught in it, like the fires of that surf down there. She sat at the table, against those open arches, with her thin, rouged face, her shrugging shoulders, her hard, mirthless wit. And behind her, framed in the arch, the moon shone through the fronds of the cocoanut palms; and from the beach came the throb of the tom-toms where her Kru-boys were dancing.

"SHE was so alien to it all that I could hardly believe in her being there. To me she seemed scarcely real: I had a notion of her as the reflection of a woman in a mirror, she seemed so brilliant, so colorful, and so unsatisfying. I had a queer idea that if I put out my hand to touch her, it would encounter only a smooth hardness, like when one puts out one's hand to an image in a looking-glass. She was like coming on an electric sign in the middle of the bush—the *dernier cri*

of Paris patronizingly surveying a land that might have been fresh from chaos.

"I remember how I kept wondering which would win, if it came to the test: that woman, or that blue-hot night out there and all that I knew lay behind it?"

"A MAN and a woman—there was only one explanation of that to that town down there, seething in the putrid broth of its own imaginings. Of course, Mrs. Hugo did not care what that town might think of her; why should she? She was merely flashing along the Coast like a meteor, and as brilliantly above it all. Her utter detachment was her safeguard."

"And why were you not above it also?" demanded the Governor. "How did those rumors in the town connect with you? How did they—get under your skin, let us say? Whose ears were you afraid they would reach?"

The eyes of both, in a silent mutuality, turned toward that spot of distant light shining from the curve of the beach below them—the light from the House of the Old Mensah.

"Perhaps I was feverish that night," Wilton resumed. "I had traveled hard in the heat of the day. Then again, I had been here for three years—three years of Grand Jaek, the nearest man of my kind forty miles away; the nearest woman—forty hundred, perhaps. Three years practically alone here in the castle. Such times breed strange fancies. I knew it all too well. I seemed to see those rumors, like the rings from a stone cast in the lagoon, spreading on rings of dark space—spreading until they reached that house across the beach."

"Ah—that house," nodded the Governor. "We are beginning now."

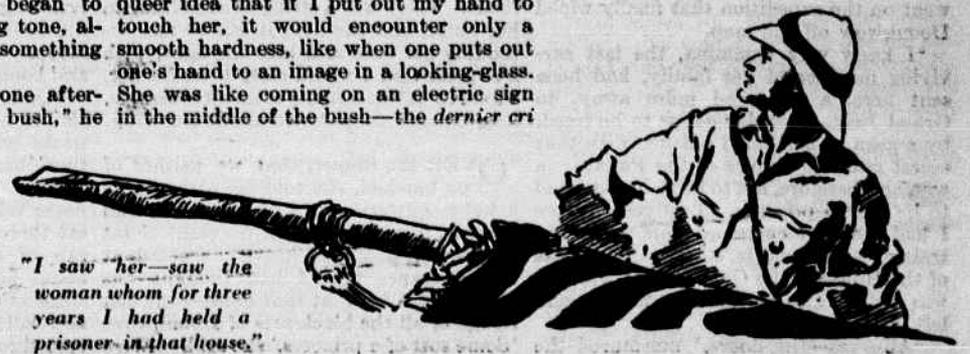
"It had all begun months before," Wilton somberly returned. "You know that house and its history. The House of the Old Mensah, built for a three hundred years dead-and-gone native chief by that band of Portuguese adventurers who raised the castle here.

"For three years, as you know, my greatest impossibility here has been to hold tight the doors of that house. And I have done it. My sentries outside them never know at what hour of day or night I may not appear; and, until the coming of Mrs. Hugo, not a soul had stepped in, or out, across its threshold.

"When I first came here I used to hate to pass the place. There was a silence like that of a brooding storm—a hopeless silence, that still could not give up hope.

"Then once, from somewhere deep in the recesses of that house, I caught the voice of that silence—a woman's voice, deep-throated as a bell, raised in one long cry of utter revolt.

"The doors were always closed and



"I saw her—saw the woman whom for three years I had held a prisoner in that house."

IT was with the dusk that the Governor had come to the castle at Grand Jaek, slipping in at its gate as quietly, but as inexorably, as the shadows that stole across the courtyard.

The dusk had now deepened into night, overcast and sullen. To Wilton, waiting rigidly through dinner for the other to say whatever it might be that he had come to say, it seemed that even Africa had never before produced such a darkness. Town, beach, and bush had all been wiped out; even those massive lower walls beneath them had disappeared, and the top platform, on which his quarters stood, seemed to hang unsupported, like some lantern picture projected on a black screen by the lamps in the dining-room behind them. Only the line of the surf showed a faint gleam of green fire that defined the curve of the beach; then, there showed, at the extreme end of that curve, a single spot of light.

Steady and golden it shone, without flicker or increasing, as if it had been burning a long time behind some shutter whose sudden opening revealed it. To the Governor, sitting silently in his chair, it might have been a signal for which he was waiting; for at the sight of it he turned quietly to the other.

"You may as well speak, Wilton."

"What would you have me say, sir?" asked Wilton wearily.

The Governor glanced keenly at him, taking in the details of his wire-drawn thinness; his face white with the pallor of the tropics; the bright hair and feverishly brilliant eyes, that seemed like the outbreaking of some secret inner flame that he was cherishing to his own consuming.

"Mrs. Hugo talked a great deal when she returned to Accrome," the Governor suggested.

Wilton nodded. He had known that Mrs. Hugo would talk. He glanced involuntarily back through the open arches of the dining-room. He could almost see her still at that table, with her