



When of a sudden he was confronted with a rifle muzzle.

married out of hand. Let's see, what part's due? I've hardly got your timetable in my head; one gets rusty at Malla-Nulla."

"It's the M'poso, George. She's straight out from home. Just think, you may really have K... descending on you in half an hour's time."

"No such luck. It will be Cattie Image-lad, with his green umbrella and his best thirst, and that hearty ruffian Balgarnie, who'll rob every corpse in the clearing if he thinks he can collect one Aggy head and a good slave dagger. By Gad, I wonder if I can screw some money out of Balgarnie. I sent at least eighty sovereigns' worth of most carefully made curios home with him. Last time the M'poso tried to roll herself over off our beach at Malla-Nulla."

"I think," said the girl, "I'll just go to my room for a minute."

Cartier pointed the finger of derision at her. "O vanity," said he, "you're going to tidy your hair, and smarten your frock just for the sake of Old Cattie Image and the plump Balgarnie. By the way, now that you are engaged young woman are you going to let those genial old ruffians take you on their knees and kiss you, just in the old sweet way?"

"Of course, don't mind me if you'd like it so."

"Pouf!" said Laura, "they've both known me ever since I was a baby, but I'll be as distant with them as you like, if you feel jealous, sir."

"I think I'll wash off some of the battle scars myself," said Cartier. "One looks a bit melodramatic in this filthy, smelly mess, not to mention uncomfortable. I suppose, by the way, somebody will turn up to pay a polite call. They'll judge that something's wrong when they see that all the factory boats and canoes have been cleared out of the creek."

Even White-Man's-Trouble stole palm oil and attended to his toilette in honor of the expected visit, and it was a very gleaming and oily Krooboy in some clean (stolen) Baljama trousers of Slade's that showed Captain Image, and his passenger and purser up the stair.

Laura and Cartier were there, spruce and smart, to receive them, and Laura said, "Kate! I knew you'd come," and ran forward and shook the passenger by the hand. "There, you see, George," she said over her shoulder, "how accurately I can keep a secret."

"Hullo, Cartier, me lad!" said Captain Image. "Glad to see you looking so fit. You're a fine advertisement for those pills of mine, and I'm sure you're glad now you kept away from old Swizzle-Stick Smith's nostrums. You seem to have been having a bit of a scrap round the factory here. However, we'll hear about that, and have your tally of the cargo you want to ship from her and Malla-Nulla afterwards. But for the present I want to introduce my passenger and your boss, Miss O'Neill."

Cartier swallowed with a dry throat. "Mr. K. O'Neill's sister?"

"Miss Kate O'Neill, who is head of O'Neill and Craven."

a hand to him—a neat, plump hand that looked white, and firm, and cool, and capable, and which, somehow or other, he found in his own.

"Laura calls you George, I notice," he heard her say.

"Yes, of course she would. We are engaged, you know."

He felt his hand dropped with suddenness, and up till then he had never known how thoroughly objectionable a laugh could be when it came from the lips of Mr. Balgarnie. Everything swam before him, and he lurched against the messroom wall. But with an effort he pulled himself together. "Miss Slade and I are engaged. We are to be married as soon as we can afford it. When you look round, and see how we've saved the factory from the Okky-men, we hope you'll raise my salary."

"Yes, I think I can promise to do that," said Kate O'Neill. "I had my eyes open when I came across the clearing. But do you think you are wise to marry?"

"Hah! Cartier, old fellow," laughed little Captain Image, "got you there! Get dollars first. Find connubial bliss later."

"But," continued Miss O'Neill, "you and I and Laura will talk over that later when we are alone."

CHAPTER VIII.

PRESENTS THE HEAD OF THE FIRM.

"I don't care what you say, Purser, me lad," Captain Image repeated, "but I call Miss O'Neill pretty."

"Well," admitted Mr. Balgarnie, who prided himself on being a bit of a judge, "she may be that as well, but I still stick to it that her face is what I call strong."

"I hate the word 'strong.' When a shemissionary is too homely looking to be anything else, she prides herself on wearing a strong face."

"No, sir, 'intense' for lady missionary," Mr. Balgarnie corrected.

"Strong," snapped his superior officer, Captain Image was of Welsh extraction and disliked contradiction.

The purser shifted his ground. "Well, at any rate, sir, you'll own she's mighty stand-offish. I used to call good old Godfrey O'Neill, Godfrey, and therefore naturally I called his daughter Kate, and told her why. She didn't seem to hear me."

"She wasn't Godfrey's daughter, anyway. Godfrey never married, but I believe he'd need. Probably Miss Kate is one of them. The old man must have left her the business. Thing that amazes me is the way she's taken her grip of the concern, and made it hum."

"And kept it dark even in Liverpool that she was a woman. That old head clerk of hers, that people thought was the manager, must be a rare close-lipped one."

"He is, blight him!" said Captain Image with emphasis. "I called in there two or three times after I'd got some of those please-back-up letters from O'Neill and Craven, that I didn't care about, and the cauliflower-headed old humbug clean took me in. He was Mr. Crowdon, to be sure; no, he was not Mr. K. O'Neill; no, I couldn't see Mr. K. just then; no, he couldn't make an appointment for me with the gentleman; anything I wanted he would attend to personally. If I reread the letters he was sure I should find that they were not unreasonable, but, on the other hand, would be paid in the way of earning, extra commission on cargo for myself. So it ended in my being civil to him, and he was really nothing more than a clerk. You can just picture to yourself, Purser, what I felt when I found out that I'd been civil to a clerk by mistake."

"It was pretty hard lines, sir."

"Of course, a West African merchant's business is a rum contract for a young girl to catch hold of, and I don't say Miss Kate was wrong in keeping in the background to start with. In fact, I'll own up straight that she was right, and the proof's plain in the way that firm's come back to life. Why, Purser, I'll bet you a bottle of Eno that O'Neill and Craven are doing just double the turnover now they did twelve months ago."

"You'll know best about that, sir," said Mr. Balgarnie with a sigh, as he remembered that only Captain Image touched commission on the cargo which the M'poso collected on the Coast. "But I will own up that she has got the knack of making all the smarter men in the firm, both on the Coast and at Liverpool, keen on her when they thought she was a man. Of course it was a bit unlikely that the old-timer palm-oil ruffians like Swizzle-Stick Smith and Owe-it-Slade would take to new ways that meant more work, all at once, though for that matter I'll bet Slade put off making up his mind for so long as to whether he liked hustling or he didn't, that finally he dropped into the new ways without knowing it."

"Slade's gone off up-country to find the firm a rubber property, Purser, me lad. Laura told me about it last night. She hasn't heard of him once since he pulled out of Smooth River, and she's very anxious about him. I hope none of those up-country bushmen have chopped Slade. I should be sorry to lose that man. He owes me a matter of three sovereigns, and that old Holland gun of mine that he borrowed for half an hour eighteen months ago has gone up-country with him. I believe he's in the fo'c'sle shop, too, for the thick end of a fiver."

"Four-seventeen-nine. I've given both Chips and the bo's'n a rare dressing down about it. They've no business to let any one with Slade's reputation have as much tick as that. The bo's'n's new to the Coast—our bo's'n's always do seem to die, sir—but old Chips ought to know that's no way to run a fo'c'sle shop. They can chuck away their own money as they choose, but I told them both plainly that I can't afford to drop my share in a sum like that."

"Nor can I," said the other sleeping partner. "You can let both Chips and the bo's'n understand that unless I see a good round sum in hard cash as my share of profits when we get back to Liverpool, they don't ride in the old M'poso next trip. They can put their books down when the monkey puts the nuts. They don't pay me out with those. No, by Crumbs!"

"Miss Kate, by the way, was mighty anxious to know what profits there were in fo'c'sle shops. Of course I said I'd heard of them on other boats, but we'd never allow such a thing on the M'poso."

"Um," said Captain Image thoughtfully, "that tale's all right for most passengers, but I don't think I'd have risked it with Miss Kate. She strikes me as being a young woman who likes to hear one's opinion on things, but generally has her own information on the matter already out and packed beforehand. I told her last night how sorry I was to see all that cargo waiting at the factor, with no Krooboy to work it out of their creek to the steamboat. By Crumbs! Balgarnie, me lad, she'd slipped off back to the M'poso here, and had hired our own blessed passenger boys for the job before you could say 'gin.' You know what an independent lot they are, going home with money in their pockets. I bet you a box of oranges you couldn't name me two white men on the Coast who could have persuaded them. But she did it, one time, and only paid regular wages, too. Dressed for dinner in the evening when she'd finished, just as if she was merely a tripper going home from the islands, and hadn't an object in life outside trying to tickle the boys with her looks. I tell you, Miss Kate's a very remarkable young woman, Balgarnie, me lad, and if she doesn't peg out here on the Coast, or go broke over floating a rubber swindle, or get married and chuck it, I shall feather my nest very nicely over the cargo she gets shipped."

"I say, Captain, what's between her and Laura? They seem to know one another pretty well."

"Met in Las Palmas when they were kiddies. Pass me the compasses off the chart table. My pipe's jammed. Thank you, me lad. Owe-it-Slade got two years' tick at that convent school out on the Telde road for Laura, and Miss Kate was running about the islands a good deal then with old Godfrey. Godfrey had a tomato farm out past Santa Brigida, and they used to have Laura up there for all her holidays. By Crumbs, Purser, me lad, how that little girl's shot up. It's a dashed pity she's a nigger."

"D'you suppose Cartier knows it?"

"If he doesn't I shan't tell him, and don't you; for two reasons. First, there's Miss Kate to be thought of. I watched the way that girl eyed him, and, by Crumbs, I tell you, me lad, I was glad he was booked. She's going to stay out here on the Coast for a good spell, and he'll be close and handy, and somehow I've got the opinion that red-headed chap is just the sort of man she'll marry. He's not a beauty, but he's a good, tough, wholesome face on him; he's a lot struck on her; and he's a gentleman. I can do with her bossing; she's a nice way of wrapping up her pill and ramming it home with a smile. But I'd not like to see a red-haired young'un pegged out here as a clerk eighteen months ago, head of the O'Neill and Craven concern and expecting me to knuckle under. I'd do it, of course;

I'd be civil to old Harry himself, me lad, if he could bring cargo to the M'poso; but I'll not deny to you it would stink if I had to start lading out champagne in this chart house to Cartier, and sit and listen whilst he strutted out his views on the decay of British influence in West Africa."

"It would be pretty tough," Mr. Balgarnie admitted, "but you said there was another reason you wanted him to marry Laura."

"Well, I do. I like that girl. I knew her when first came down the Coast as mate. I remember the first time I saw her as if it was yesterday. I was standing up against the tully desk (jer-side number three hatch, looking off the cargo list as they hoist stuff up and dropped it in the surf-boats. It was on the old Fernando Po, that beat her bottom out afterwards when Williams tried to drive her over Monk bar at half ebb. There was a case marked with double-diamond that was O'Neill and Craven's consigning all right, but with no name of factory. I know old Swizzle-Stick Smith and Malla-Nulla well enough already, and I didn't know Slade, and so naturally I thought Smith should have it, and ordered the case back again into the hold. But just then up came a little nipper of about eight or ten years old, as self-possessed as you like, and says, 'Are you Mr. Image?' 'That's me,' says I. 'What's the message?' 'Oh! no message,' says she, 'only daddy says that if I can find you and stand by your heels and not bother I may stay aboard, but if not I'm to go ashore by the next boat and get on with my lessons.' Well, it didn't take much seeing through what was meant there."

"No, sir," said Mr. Balgarnie heartily. "By all accounts old Cattie Williams was the hardest case they ever knew even on the West Coast, and that's saying a lot. I only knew him for a year, and I wasn't particular in those days; but he was more than even I could stand."

"He was the limit. Well, me lad, that was the first time I saw Laura, and she stood beside me half the day at the tully desk there, and thanked me for the entertainment when Slade sent off a boy to take her ashore. She gave me a kiss when she turned to go down the side—well, you see, I've—I've never quite forgotten that kiss, Balgarnie, me lad."

"I know, skipper," said Mr. Balgarnie rather thickly. "A kid once kissed me, of her own blessed accord, too, like that. It sort of burnt in. I beg your pardon, sir, for interrupting."

"Not at all, me lad. Here you, steward. Hi, Brass-Pan."

A Krooboy ran up. "We fit for two cocktail, plenty-long ones. Well, as I was saying, Balgarnie, me lad, I've always had a bit of soft place for Laura, though I suppose she rightly is snuff and butter; by Crumbs, you'd never guess it from her looks unless you went over her with a lens, and I'd just felt all broken up if she was to go the way that lot usually do go. So if this young Cartier, who seems a nice, clean-run sort of lad, will marry her with a ring, I'm going to weigh in with at least a best silver-plate teapot for a wedding present."

"You can put me down for the ditto sugar and cream," said the purser with emotion. "It was a kiddie just like Laura I was fond of myself. Only—only—well, skipper, I suppose a good many of us are blackguards down here on the Coast. Why the sulphur doesn't your boy bring those cocktails?"

But at this point Captain Image broke off the conversation. "By Crumbs!" said he, "here's Miss Kate. And then he did a thing that made Mr. Balgarnie whistle with sheer surprise. He went down the ladder to help his passenger on board."

"Now, if I had done that," the purser mused to himself, "it would have meant a lot. But, my whiskers! I never thought I should live to see old Cattie Image trotting down onto the front door-steps to receive a mere female passenger. The old man must see enough solid dollars in that girl to buy himself that hon farm outside Cardiff he hopes to retire upon."

Captain Image stood on the grating at the foot of the ladder, and waved his panama in respectful salutation. The beer-colored river swirled along the steamer's rusty flank a foot beneath him, and the pungent smell of crushed marigolds which it carried made him cough. The sun shimmered exactly overhead in a sky of the most extravagant blue, and the greenery which fenced in the slimy mud banks hung in the breathless heat without so much as a wicker.

Miss Kate O'Neill was seated in a Madeira chair which stood on the floor of a big green surf boat, and the gleaming Krooboy's perch on the gunwales padded with more than their usual industry. The headman, who straddled at the steering oar in the stern, wore a tall-coat of an extremely sporting cut and pattern, and a woven grass skull-cap in honor of the occasion. And all this pomp and circumstance was uninvited. But, somehow, people had the knack of offering special service and deference to Miss O'Neill.

The only other woman on the M'poso, the austere wife of a Benin trader, looked over the steamer's rail in gloomy disapproval. These were no modes for Coast wear. A billowy grass-green muslin dress that no Krooboy handymen could wash twice without spilling; neat, narrow pipe-clayed shoes with no thickness of sole, and ridiculous heels; a pale green felt hat, actually laddled by a feather in its band, and finally absurdity of all, a parasol, a flimsy thing of silk and ribbon and effervescent chiffon, which would be absolutely ruined by a splash of rain. Instead of the big, sensible white cotton affair, with the dark green lining, which all ordinary people know is the standard wear on that torrid Coast.

"Faugh!" said the trader's wife, "and Captain Image says she's one of the smartest business women in the world to-day, and that fat, greedy purser would propose to her in the next five minutes if he thought he'd a cat's chance of being accepted. They think her good looking, too, I'll be bound, just because she wears those unsuitable clothes and has pink color in her cheeks. Well, the clothes will be whips of rag by this day week, and—the poor woman sighed here—"the Coast will get the color and the plumpness out of her face, and make her as lean and yellow as the rest of us in a month."

"You're a good, kind man," Miss