

THE GAMBLING CHANCE

By MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Drawings by J. N. Marchand

JOHN MORRIS came out upon the veranda of his leaf thatched bungalow, attached to the American Trading Company's station at Tsmbola, on the coast of Madagascar, and looked about him with discontented eyes. It was not a habit with him to quote his Bible, but involuntarily a phrase from the book of the prophet Ezekiel came to his lips. "Desolate as the wilderness towards Siblath." Well," he murmured, "of course I don't know Siblath; but I'd be willing to take a gambling chance and bet that Tsmbola has Siblath beaten a city block when it comes to desolateness. Bah! What a dreary hole!"

And yet it was a brilliant, even magnificent, scene; one of luxuriant and savage beauty. The rain was falling in torrents, lashing at the purple sea, stirring the yellow sand into orange colored mud, streaming from the veranda roofs and the native huts scattered about in solid sheets; yet the rain clouds were crossing a sky of deepest blue, and the sun was shining on the myriads of gorgeous orchids and the riotous tangle of vines heaped from the ground or swinging between the tall plumed palms; a vast rainbow threw its glowing arch across the east. All this was only a sun shower, on the generous tropical scale. The sea was like some immense sheet of opal. White breakers rolled and broke in a league long line of foam on the sand. The sun was sinking, and the whole western sky was a glory of gold and crimson.

And it was only because the megrims were upon John Morris that he allowed himself to disparage the place, where, indeed, he was an exile, but where also it was his keen pride to rule as an overlord, as a procurator of the world wide empire of commerce, as the local agent for the great trading company that covers the Orient with the close web of its stations.

He had ample cause to feel discontented this day. It was the day on which the mail steamer from Tananarivo was due, and it had not yet come. This was the second month it had missed its call, in succession; which meant that for three months Morris had received no letters, no newspapers—"No anything!" he exclaimed. "I am living in a huge circle of nothingness, except work and fever and a fairly well developed chance that my throat will be cut before long."

He banged lustily on a Chinese gong, and a black boy slipped silently through the door of the bungalow. Divining what was wanted, he had brought with him a tray. There followed the click of decanter neck on glass rim, the squirting of soda water. "Well, this helps some," said Morris; "but I wish the boys would come and lift me out of my slough of despond."

He was waiting for his fellow exiles to join him at dinner. He was one of the six white men in Tsmbola, and longed ardently to have those white men near him, to see them, to know that they were within shooting or striking distance; for there was war in the land,—the hideous, treacherous war of the jungle. The Hovas were up in one of their periodical revolts against their French conquerors; and Madagascar was ravaged by a war of forays, massacres, terrible revenges, carried on in the depths of the forests and jungles, where rules of warfare are not considered, where the Red Cross flag does not fly, where death runs on silent naked feet, under its bravo's cloak of night. And as yet, despite all the promises of the military and civil authorities, no soldiers had been sent to Tsmbola. The six white men were alone. They did not greatly fear the Hovas, with whom all traders live on terms of amity; but bands of unattached cutthroat barbarians were also loose in all directions, raiding and thieving, burning and pillaging.

"Ah, here you are at last!" cried Morris rejoicingly, and Emil Kurz the German agent, and Curtis the Englishman clumped up on the veranda, their wet shoes squelching and their ulsters gleaming. "Where are the Frenchmen?"

"Fooling over their telegraph machine," said Curtis. "The wire quit working half an hour ago."

"Cut?" asked Morris quickly.

"What else?" said Kurz, shrugging his elephantine shoulders. "But before it quit it told us that a detachment of soldiers under Lieutenant Renaud should be here by to-morrow."

"Ah, that's good news!" said Morris.

"The deuce it is," began the rubicund Curtis in his deep toned grumbling voice; but Kurz broke in, saying:

"How many men do you suppose will come to us, Jack?"

"I'm sure I can't say what the Frenchmen will do—one hundred, perhaps?"

"Twenty-five men, with a boy officer."

"The everlasting chumps! Why, only enough to whet the appetites of those beggars in the bush! If Renaud falls in with the war party that cleaned out the station at the river, which he is extremely likely to do, it will be all up with him."

"And for us too, by George!" said Curtis.

"Did you ask for more men?"

"Of course," said Curtis; "but the wire went dumb; we are cut off, and we don't know where we stand. Dompierre told us that there is still another detachment of soldiers under a Lieutenant D'Entremont somewhere at large in the district, and he may come to us. But we are sure of nothing. The



He Drew the Last Unbroken Match.

Frenchmen are all up in the air. General Marchand is the only level head among the big guns who are botching this campaign, and in his absence in the north the little clerk men at headquarters have been making a silly mess of the business. Faugh! Now if we had this island, as we ought to have—"

"No doubt the British would conduct affairs admirably, *à la* South Africa and the Sudan," interrupted an even, pleasant voice, that of Etienne Dompierre, the French agent, as with his two assistants, Gastonquay and Leblanc, he joined the group on the veranda. "However, as the French are in control— But do not let us heat ourselves in political discussion and spoil the excellent dinner I know friend Morris has prepared for us. And, Morris, I have a message for you which came just before the wire failed. It has been delayed in transmission, and comes from Tananarivo."

He handed a slip of paper to Morris with a smile that was at once friendly and commiserating. The American read these words:

DEAR JOHN.—I have come. FLORENCE.

His face went gray beneath the tan, and then was crimsoned with a violent rush of blood. "My God!" he cried.

His brother traders looked at him in astonishment. "Gentlemen," he said; "you are aware that I am engaged to marry a young lady. She is in Tananarivo. I thought her to be in New York. I cabled her to stay there, two months ago."

"So, so," boomed the big voice of big Emil Kurz, who had been Morris's friend for life and his father's friend before him. "The big world becomes very little at times. The bonny Florence; the brave heart of her child! I knew her father, Jack, and I dandled her on my knee when she was a baby. *Ach*, so little, and so pretty! But she will be safe in Tananarivo. Do not worry, Jack."

"I only hope—" Morris began, and then broke off. Dompierre had interrupted with something that uttered the thought in Morris's mind. "I trust that you too will be safe in Tsmbola, Monsieur Morris," he said, in his slow, careful English.

"But, my faith, there is a big chance against you, Jack!" said Curtis, with his brutal frankness.

"It's a gambling chance; but I usually win out on my gambles," said Morris brightly; but his smile could not altogether veil the tremor of his lips; and for awhile he was silent and still, gazing northward to the enigmatic, secret jungle, and his face was like the face of a man who questions the Sphinx. His comrades as silently watched him; sympathizing with his distress of mind; aware that he was passing through one of the tragic moments of his life.

Florence in Madagascar! How had it happened? Perhaps the cable message in which he had warned her not to come, as they had decided at last she was to do, had not reached her. But more probably she had disregarded it and come. No doubt she had

written to tell him so; but he had received no letters in three months. He knew the bravery of her nature. He knew, and it was joy to know, that she loved him to the core of her warm heart. For more than a year she had been declaring her intention of joining him. She could know no rest, no peace, she wrote, away from him. She had implored him to let her share his exile; perhaps, she said, she might be able to brighten it. No doubt she had come to him despite his warning, perhaps because of it; and the glory of this love warmed his soul as with flame, the true undying fire of love. And, ah well, she would be safe in Tananarivo; and he must, he should, strive to guard himself, for her sake, for his own sake, for their love's sake, and to reach her. His straining eyes seemed to pierce the darkening jungle, to see through its dark depths to Tananarivo, where she awaited him. He almost visibly evoked her image.

But the clairvoyance of Morris's mood was not complete. He could not image the scene which at that same moment was being enacted in the barracks at Tananarivo. Therein, rubicund General Marchand, returned triumphantly from his punitive expedition in the north, was vitriolically cursing the stupidity of the men who had permitted the American girl who had come on the last steamer to leave the town with Lieutenant Renaud's detachment to go through the jungle to Tsmbola. Their gallantry, he swore, had choked all their senses. And with a last great oath he ordered the officer most responsible, next to the absent Renaud, to follow on the trail with half a regiment.

"Gentlemen," said Morris, briskly shaking off his abstraction, "let's have a drink, and then dinner will be ready."

"That is good talk, Jack," said Emil Kurz. "I am thirsty, and hungry enough to eat a roasted rebel. But, *Gott!* what can the matter be?"

In common with all the traders, he jumped from his chair. There were wild cries hurting through the dusky village. Like bees flowing from violated hives, the natives, the timorous, unwarlike coast blacks, hereditary victims of the wild inland tribes, were pouring from their beehive huts on the shore toward the biggest hut of the community, the Rova house, or place of government, where dwelt the Obona-be (the King's Mouth), who ruled the village under orders from a Hova chieftain. The rain had ceased. Big stars dotted the violet hued sky. The villagers, in their commotion, resembled black ants.

The traders sought revolver butts. Their eyes questioned each other. Friends or foes?

Then they cheered heartily, shook hands; Emil Kurz executed a dance, his obese body shaking the veranda; and they waved their helmets joyously; for a detachment of French soldiers had emerged from the jungle.

Fifteen minutes later, his men quartered in nearby