The Bandaged Hand

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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Chapter I

The Promise that Haunted.

THE LIVINGSTONE came threshing down the Lulanga River, tacking from bank to bank to avoid the shoals.

With a hand on the telegraph, and the other free to signal the native steersman, the young skipper watched with anxious eyes the ever-changing shades of the treacherous water.

„Loba-ko-lo-kal!“

The sing-song warning of the boy at the bow sent the telegraph over to „astern“ with a jangle.

Of its own accord the big stern-wheeler slowed down as the water shallowed.

Again the boy at the bow stabbed the water with his long, pliant sounding rod.

„Loba-ko-lete-anane,“ he sang reassuringly.

And with a fathom and a-half under her, Mac rung the engines full ahead.

He had come straight down from Baringa, stopping only for fuel; he had contravened the unwritten regulations, and had run his boat through the night with only starlight to show him his course, he had stopped at Basankusu to tell his news, whilst the sweating natives piled logs aboard till there was scarcely room to move. He had not stopped at Bonginda, the headquarters of the mission, but had bawled a message through the megaphone.

Now, as he swung the vessel round into deep water, a young man dressed in white, with the marks of sorrow on his tanned face, walked along the narrow gangway and joined him.

„I heard the engine-bell ring,“ he said, as if to explain his presence.

The youthful captain removed his big sun-hat, and wiped his streaming forehead.

„A sand bank,“ he said briefly; „the river‘s lower than I have ever known it to be before. There is Lulanga“—Mac pointed ahead as the LIVINGSTONE swept round a bend of the river.

„And the waters beyond?“ asked the other.

„The Congo,“ said Mac. He interpreted the question in the younger man‘s eyes, and answered him: „We shall be there to-night, heaven willing,“ he said soberly. „How is your friend?“

The other shook his head sadly.

„He‘s sinking fast,“ he said shortly, and turned away abruptly.

In the big hospital cabin at the stern a man fought for an hour of life. Clean-shaven, grey, and hollow-cheeked, he lay beneath the furled mosquito net, licking his dry lips.

From time to time he shot a glance at the young man who sat by his side waving a palm-leaf fan.

He might have been a man of sixty-five, and there was something in his appearance that was curiously suggestive of the English body-servant. It may have been the little grey side-whiskers that ran down his face, the length of the ears; it may have been the intangible stamp with which Nature classifies humanity.

That Simon Leatherdale was, indeed, of that class of domestic which the fashionable world calls „man“ was true. Trusted servant and friend of the seventh Stanmore baronet—that erratic genius whose adventures and eccentricities were the talk of London in the eighties—Simon Leatherdale had been nurse, tutor, and companion of the boy who had inherited the Stanmore title.

The thud of the LIVINGSTONE‘s engines shook the little room as the boat raced down the broad stream.

The old man beckoned his nurse.

„Tell the captain to slow down.“ He spoke with long pauses between his words, and he reached for the young man‘s hand.

„But, Simon,“ said the boy earnestly, „we must go as fast as this, if we are to reach Bolengi to-night.“

Simon shook his head wearily. „I shall not reach Bolengi,“ he said faintly, „I know it. Do not deceive yourself, Charles; you know it also. I must have quiet now—for now I have something to tell you.“

There was something in the old man‘s face that sent a numb, aching pain to the other‘s heart, and he left the cabin quietly.

The thunder of the wheel died down a little when he returned and took his place by the old servant's side.

„Something you‘ve promised to tell me,“ said the other painfully. „You—you told me, Simon,“ the young man said gently, „the day you were so ill.“

„Did I?“ The sick man closed his eyes, and muttered: „You will live to hate me.“

„No, no, no!“ cried the boy. „I shall always love you, and think of you as though you were my father.“

„Heaven forgive me!“ muttered the old man; „it was my vanity—my wicked pride. If I had only told Sir George!“

Then the great cloud came to his mind. The cloud that is blacker than night, and is fringed with a wondrous radiance. And he was with the old baronet again. „Old“ baronet he had been, but not in years. Old in sorrow for the young wife he had passionately loved, and whom death had taken in the glory of her youth and beauty. Old in his care for the child—his boy and hers.

„I‘ll look after the boy,“ Simon muttered. „Yes, Sir George—French and German, and the sciences. Myself, myself—I will teach him everything myself, Sir George. Heaven, what have I done?“

He tossed from side to side in his delirium.

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ON the deck forward Mac kept his vigil. They were running at full speed again, and the water foamed under her bows. One eye for the chart, and one for the shifting shoals; his ear alert for the warning of the boy with the sounding-stick revolving incessantly. An anxious eye, too, for the sun that was moving with what seemed incredible swiftness to the west—Mac was racing for a life.

The sun went down, and tropical night came swiftly. Strange night birds flapped across the deck, and the lights of the cabins attracted a million, winged creatures. The stars showed him the river, and the keen-sighted steersman helped him with the shallows. He snatched a hasty dinner—with one hand at the telegraph.

They passed strange fires on the bank, and saw, in the fitful red light, naked bodies squatting about them, and heard the shrill laughter of native woman,

and the hoarse guffaws of the men. And they heard the „tic-tac“ of the lokoli—the wonderful drum that beat messages from village to village—and once heard a tom-tom drumming out a native dance, and caught a glimpse of swaying bodies in the forest. Then, ahead of them, there appeared a twinkle of lights that came nearer and near, till Equatorville was abreast and past, and their goal was almost in sight.

Then Mac felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned. He could not see the face of the young man in the darkness, but he heard the pain in his voice.

„Stop, please!“ it said huskily, and Mac‘s hand pulled the telegraph over. „My—my friend is—is—gone!“

The young baronet felt Mac‘s strong grip on his arm.

„You are a missionary,“ said the voice again. „I would like you—to—to say something.“

With the steamer drifting slowly down the dark stream, Mac knelt beside the body of the dead man and prayed.

So, to the prayers of a mechanic, turned missionary, on the broad, mysterious bosom of this great African river passed Simon Leatherdale, sometime valet to the seventh baronet Stanmore, and under the great white stars of the African night they buried him at Bolengi; and the young man who had learnt his secret went home to face the world in terror of its discovery.

At Boma the British Consul bade him good-bye, then noticed the bandages. „You‘ve hurt your hand,“ he said, and the baronet‘s muttered reply was incoherent.

Chapter II

The Unjust Steward.

LINSAY HASTINGS examined his half-sister with a speculative eye. He wondered how far this tall, slim girl, with the smiling grey eyes and delicate mouth, might be cajoled or bullied into supporting his great plan.

He stretched his hand lazily without turning his head, and groped for the cigarette box.

One might, at first glance, describe Linsay Hastings as a handsome young man of the effeminate type, and as bearing some slight resemblance to his sister. But a closer and more searching examination revealed unsuspected weaknesses of chin that a cold straight line of lip did little to compensate. His eyes were too closely set, and there was something lacking in the shape of head that his smoothly brushed hair revealed.

„Is the enemy in sight, Sister Anne?“ he bantered.

She smiled indulgently. „Isn‘t that from Bluebeard, and wasn‘t it succour rather than an enemy that Sister Anne sought?“

The opening was too good to be lost. „Well, succour let it be,“ he drawled lazily, then he suddenly sat up, „and by Jove, succour it is, Agatha, if it is Sir Charles Stanmore you‘re looking for so anxiously.“

She turned from the absent-minded contemplation of the road that was visible from the terrace of High Knoll House, and a faint flush overspread her cheek.

„I was thinking of Sir Charles," she said, steadily, „but I was not looking for him, and—and I do not quite understand your allusion to *succour*, Linsay."

His laugh did not sound as easy as usual. „Oh, I was speakin' parabolically," he said, „our friend is a very rich man." He read the cold enquiry in her eyes, and threw away his cigarette with a frown. „Look here, Agatha," he said sharply, „you and I are not exactly rich. Our dear parents made very little provision for you, and less for me—Oh, yes, I know," he interrupted her, „I get a fairly decent income from the Stanmore estates, and it will probably go on, for Charles is mad enough to chuck away the only life that's worth living to go away again into the wilds."

He paused to select another cigarette. „If he goes away pretty soon," he went on slowly, „nothing matters, and I've no desire to alter existing conditions, but if he stays long enough to go into things—do you see what I mean?"

He had taken the plunge, he was half way to the greater confession, and he stopped a little breathlessly to note the effect of his words. The girl looked at him with a wrinkled brow and a gathering look of wonder in her eyes. „If he stays long enough to—look into things?" she breathed. „Why, what do you mean, Linsay?"

He sprang up impatiently. „Don't be a fool!" he said, roughly, „what do you think I mean? I've had a devil of a lot of bad luck since I've been managing my amiable cousin's property. Nothing has gone right."

„But," said the bewildered girl, „but surely that isn't correct. The crops have been good, the farms have been paying, and rents have gone up. Mr. Tyrwhitt was saying—"

„Crops, rents, farms!" he cried, angrily, „I'm not referring to those. I've had bad luck in other ways. There was *Claudian Cæsar* in the Middle Park Plate, I lost a pot of money over him. I dropped two thousand over the Cambridgeshire."

The girl's face was white, and she held on to the stone balustrade for support. „The money!" she gasped, with her eyes wide open, „it was your money—oh, say it was your own money, Linsay."

He dropped his mask of geniality. „My money!" he said with a harsh laugh. „Where do you imagine I could get three or four thousand pounds to lose, eh?" He met her eyes, and read the pain and the scorn that shone so clearly, and he dropped his insolent stare before them.

„So you stole." She said it quietly enough, but the contempt in her voice stung him like a whip. „I do not know what means you devised to accomplish your end," she went on, „but this I know, that placed in a position of trust by your cousin to manage his estate during his long absence—"

„Let's have no heroics," he said, roughly. He paced the marble-paved terrace with quick, nervous strides. „Charles need know nothing about this. He has no lawyer, no banker, no men of business, as far as I can gather. When he wants money he comes to me and asks for it, and keeps no check on his expenditure. He has never asked me to give an account of my stewardship."

„He trusts you," she flamed.

Linsay Hastings smiled unpleasantly. „Say rather it was old Simon Leatherdale who trusted me," he sneered, „with his mysterious letters from abroad. Look here, Agatha," he schooled his voice to a gentle pleading, „it's no good crying over spilt milk. The money can be replaced—that's one solution, but there's a better way." He paused, and then went on deliberately: „Charles

has only been home three weeks, and in those three weeks he has made it very evident that his susceptible heart—“

„Stop!“ she cried, with flaming cheeks, „before I say something to you for which I may be sorry. There is no solution that way, not even to save you from the punishment you deserve would I throw myself at Sir Charles Stanmore‘s head.“

His hand grasped her wrist, and the latent devil in him glittered in his eyes. „You won‘t, you won‘t,“ he muttered, „you fool, you must; I have promised you!“

„You dared!“

„This moony youth, with his nice notions of honour, has thought it necessary to ask the consent of your brother,“ he said, with a laugh, „and I—“

„Oh, hush!“

A figure turned on to the terrace and came towards them. The young baronet greeted the girl half shyly, and for the first time in her life she found it impossible to meet a pair of honest grey eyes.

„Admiring the view?“ he asked.

He had the quiet voice that comes to men who have lived over-long in solitary places, and the far-away look peculiar to the dwellers in the wilderness.

She collected herself with an effort and gave him her hand.

„Going, Hastings?“ he asked in surprise and with some inward feeling of alarm.

„I‘ve an appointment at the house farm,“ mumbled the other, and reached awkwardly for his cigarette.

„Your brother looks worried, Miss Hastings; he‘s been overworking,“ Sir Charles said when they were alone. „I wish I could persuade him to come with me to Uganda next month; he wants a holiday.“

She looked up. „So you are going?“

The hand that filled the well-worn briar shook a little. „I think so,“ he hesitated, „unless I have reason for staying, a reason I hardly dare hope for.“

With a quickly beating heart, she changed the conversation. „You are very fond of the wilds, Sir Charles?“

He smiled grimly and sadly. „I know no other world,“ he said, „I was with my poor father from the age of four, and when he died, my wanderings were continued with Simon—it was my education.“

„I wonder you managed to get any education at all.“

He stooped to pick up his fallen tobacco pouch. „Oh, I don‘t know,“ he said slowly, „poor Simon was a genius, an extraordinary linguist, with a surprising knowledge of the classics, ancient and modern—he knew Shakespeare by heart—would you like to hear me recite the trial scene from the Merchant of Venice?“ he asked, with his rare smile, „or the quarrel scene between Cassius and Brutus?“

„Spare me!“ she replied laughingly.

He rose to his feet and stood opposite her.

„Miss Hastings,“ he said abruptly, „I want to ask you something.“

She met his eyes unfalteringly now. „Perhaps it would be better if you did not,“ she said in a low voice.

„Suppose,“ he said quietly, „you had a secret—a dreadful secret, that oppressed you day and night—that seemed to come into every action of your daily life—-not a disgraceful secret but, none the less, unbearable, how would you seek relief?“

She breathed more freely. „The simplest way would be to confide it to somebody.“

She stopped short, seeing the innocent trap he had set her.

„That is what I want to do,“ he said gravely. „I have wanted to find that somebody, and I have found her.“

She was silent.

„I do not know enough of this world of yours, this great, mysterious social world to realise what dreadful blunder I may be committing, or what conventional laws I may he outraging, but I love you, Agatha, and I want you to be my wife.“

She felt the world spinning, and, trying to rise, would have fallen, had not his strong arm caught her.

„I‘m sorry—oh, I‘m so sorry!“

His distress was so evident that even in her dazed condition she could not but notice it.

„You have done me a great honour,“ she murmured. She was trembling in every limb; „but—“

A wrangle of angry voices startled her. She heard Linsay‘s voice saying hotly: „You cannot go! I tell you, Rothstein, you mustn‘t—for heaven‘s sake—“

There was a scuffle, and through the open French window that led on to the terrace came a big, thick-set man, purple with rage, his hat on the back of his head, and beads of perspiration standing on his broad face. Linsay, white as death, followed him, and stood biting his lips as the stout man spoke.

„Sir Charles Stanmore, eh?“ roared the stranger; „you‘re ‘im, are yer? Eh? I‘m Rothstein, of Charles Street, an‘—“

The young baronet‘s face was stern, and his smouldering rage at the interruption showed in the compressed mouth and narrowed eyes.

„Will you be so good, Mr. Rothstein, of Charles Street, as to inform me by what right you break in upon my privacy?“

„I‘m a man of business,“ said the other, a little cowed. „Fair and above-board‘s my motto. When I lend money I expect to be paid back—read that.“

He thrust a slip of paper into Sir Charles‘s hand.

The girl, with a sickening premonition of what was to come, saw that he did not even so much as look at the paper.

„Well?“ he asked.

„Read it!“' stormed Rothstein.

„Well?“ He kept his eyes on the moneylender.

„To the order of Charles Stanmore,“ recited Rothstein, „an‘ signed by you. Is that your signature?“

Agatha held her breath as the baronet‘s eyes fell upon the paper.

„Yes,“ he answered quietly, and the reply staggered the moneylender.

„But—but,“ he stammered, „I know it ain‘t. I could guess the man who signed that bill in two guesses. It was—“

„You are mistaken,“ said the baronet coldly, „this is my signature. What do you want?“

The moneylender floundered and stammered.

„If it‘s yours—-if you say it‘s yours,“ he spluttered.

Sir Charles turned to the pallid steward. „Pay this man—whatever it is,“ he said curtly.

„I don‘t want payin‘!“ almost shouted the bewildered usurer. „If it‘s your signature—“

„Pay him—and then throw him out.“

The man turned with a snarl of fury. „Throw me out! Why, you whipper-snapper, there ain‘t two men in this house that could—“

So far he got when a lean, sinewy arm shot out and gripped him by the collar. He struck out scientifically, for Mr. Rothstein had not attained to the dignity of Charles Street, W., without acquiring some necessary accomplishments en route. But the man that held him, young as he was, had handled men before.

The drop from the terrace to the lawn below was little more than five feet, but Mr. Rothstein fell heavily. He got up painfully, and turned an inflamed countenance to the calm young man who was watching him with an unsympathetic smile.

„I‘ll be even with you, master bloomin‘ baronet!“ he bellowed. „You took me unawares.“

Sir Charles watched the slowly-retreating figure, that stopped every now and then to hurl imprecations and threats, then he turned to the girl. Linsay, nervously rubbing his hands, he ignored.

„I‘m sorry this happened before you,“ he said with a faint smile. „Our friend came here without warning. I never had the pleasure of meeting him before.“

„And yet—“ Despite the angry glare from her brother she could not restrain the exclamation, which was half a question.

„And yet I admitted the signature?“ he laughed. „Yes, I suppose it is all right. Poor Simon never consulted me in these matters!“

Linsay choked back an oath. The signature on the forged bill was little more than three weeks old, as he knew. Indeed, it had been given on the very eve of Sir Charles Stanmore‘s unexpected return to England. The baronet could not have failed to see the date. What object had he in shielding him?

Then his eyes fell upon his sister, and he saw more clearly.

„I had better settle this matter,“ he said coolly. „When you have a moment, Sir Charles, you will find me in my office.“

Chapter III

Husband and Wife.

HUSBAND and wife, Sir Charles and Agatha faced one another in the deserted library. He had closed the door as he entered, but the hum of talk and the light laughter of the wedding guests penetrated even there.

The baronet‘s right hand was heavily bandaged. Two days before the wedding he had returned from London with a story of having met with a street accident. It had earned him no little inconvenience, for there were marriage settlements and registers to be signed, but the scrawl that stood for his name in the parish register proclaimed Agatha Margaret Hastings to be his wife.

„You want me, Agatha?“

She nodded; she could not trust herself to speak.

„I—I," she began, falteringly, then came towards him with appealing arms. „Charles—can't you see? Don't you understand?"

„I understand you are worried, dearest!" he said, in a troubled voice, „the ceremony—"

„If I had had the courage to tell you last night," she began, breathing quickly, „if I could have only told you!"

„Told me what?" His face was tense and his voice sharp.

She waited with her head bowed. „I do not love you—I have never loved anyone."

He staggered as though she had struck him. „Do not love me!" he repeated, „then in heaven's name, why did you marry me?"

„Because—oh, you know, Charles. Why do you torture me? Was not my marriage the price of Linsay's freedom? Did you not press me again after you had discovered Linsay had forged your name? Could I consider your action in shielding my brother in any other way?"

„I—shielded—your—brother," he repeated the words like a child repeating a lesson.

He leant against the heavy table, and for a while neither spoke. His face seemed to grow older, and lines, such lines as suffering men take on, appeared about his eyes.

„You have done me a cruel wrong," he said, and there was no bitterness in his voice. Then only an infinite sadness, „this mad quixotic sacrifice of yours has walled up hope." Then he flung out his arms in an excess of passion, and the appearance of imperturbability fell away. „You have married me! You have faced the danger-point for this brother of yours, and now with the purchase accomplished you fear to pay the price! You thought I knew that Linsay Hastings had robbed me—it was his handiwork, the moneylender's bill, was it? You thought I used my knowledge as a lever to force my life on yours." He lowered his voice. Between them was the polished table, with its litter of books. He clutched its edge, the better to control himself, and leant his body forward as he almost hissed the words: „I did not know! Before heaven I did not know that signature was forged; I believed you loved me as I love you!"

She made no answer, and he seemed to expect none.

„I had hoped to find in you—" he stopped with a weary gesture. His head sank forward on his chest, and his nervous fingers beat a soft tattoo on the table. Then: „I shall go abroad to-night," he said, quietly. "You may travel with me as far as the Canaries—then we can part. People need not know. When I have gone on, you may telegraph to your brother to come to you."

She looked at him for a moment with a strange light in her face. „You will go to Africa?" she asked, slowly.

He nodded. „It cannot matter much where I am," he said, bitterly, „not all the thousands of miles of land and sea that come between us can make us further apart than we are at present."

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IN Clubland, where the idlest excuse for gossip is seized upon with avidity, the departure of Sir Charles and Lady Stanmore on their strange honeymoon tour was discussed with relish.

„He's rather a strange chap, eccentric, isn't he?" asked a major of the Imperial Guard. „Enormously wealthy, keeps thousands of pounds in gold about the house, never gives cheques for anything."

„Rummest thing I know about him," replied the Colonel, „was over the Vermont case—you remember a couple of weeks ago all London was talking about the Vermont divorce. Harry Vermont was a brute, swore his wife had been married before and his marriage wasn't legal—you know. Well, I met Stanmore in Pall Mall, and after we'd talked a little about big game (he'd had a nasty accident with a gun, by the way, and his hand was bandaged out of all resemblance), I happened to mention the Vermont case. ‹Haven't you read this evidence?› I said, and he got quite annoyed. My word, his behaviour was so suspicions that I quite expected to hear he was called to give evidence—eh, general?"

It was not one of General Tolmache's happiest days, and he replied, testily, „Don't talk rot, my good fellow, the boy hasn't been home a month, and previous to that hadn't been in England for fourteen years."

The colonel tactfully selected a new audience. „I heard from a man, who's keen on the poor heathen and all that sort of thing, that Stanmore's bought a fine boat on the upper Congo," he said. „It was the property of a Belgian Protestant mission that went broke. It was on the market and was under offer to a London mission when Stanmore heard of it, and bought it over their heads."

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AT that very moment Sir Charles Stanmore's honeymoon was under discussion elsewhere.

The steamer that bore him and his bride was rounding the high cliffs that hide Santa Cruz from the north. Agatha sat in her deck chair, drinking in the beauty of the scene. The vast green uplands, dotted with little white houses, the chequer squares of vineyards and cultivated gardens, and towering above all, the delicate pinnacle point of Teneriffe, tipped with its mantle of everlasting snow. About the point hovered the faintest gossamer of cloud, and over its steep slopes stretched here and there a filmy veil of mist.

A step sounded at her side, and she looked up to meet the grave eyes of her husband.

„We shall be in Santa Cruz in half-an-hour," he said, „but you will have ample time to get your trunks ashore—we coal here."

She made no reply, but took up the book that lay on her lap.

He waited a moment as though expecting some answer, then turned on his heel and strode along the deck towards the saloon. It was the first time he had spoken to her regarding her plans since the voyage had begun. Commonplace conversations they had had; talks of books and of people and places, maintaining, that convention might not be outraged, the polite fiction of companionship. That this pretence succeeded, you might gather from the kindly smiles of their fellow passengers, who, seeing no further than the surface, were ignorant of the blank misery that sat a guest in the breast of the one, or the despair that clouded all thought in the other.

The ship had been in port an hour, when Sir Charles came back to the almost deserted deck to find his wife as he had left her.

„You have very little time," he said, slowly.

She laid aside the book and raised her head. „I have all the time I require," she answered quickly. „I am not going ashore."

Had a bombshell exploded, the simple pronouncement could not have shocked him any more.

„Not going ashore? Agatha, are you mad?“ he said, almost angrily.

She shook her head slowly. „On the contrary, I was never so sane.“

„But you cannot come any farther—our next port is, Sierra Leone, and—“

„I am going with you—I could not give you love—I cannot give you less than service.“

„But I will not have it!“ he cried almost savagely. „We have made sufficiently great a blunder without adding to the sum of our folly. You must go ashore.“

Something in the situation appealed to her sense of humour, for she suddenly laughed, and her amusement was so genuine that, against his will, his lips twitched sympathetically.

„Can‘t you see,“ she said coolly, „how completely you are at the mercy of a girl, on whom your *musts* and *shall* have no more effect than the whistle of that little steam launch?“ The spirit of fun still sparkled in her eyes, and he felt, a little resentfully, that into his tragedy had crept an element of comedy which loosened his grip of the situation. „After all,“ she went on demurely, „you can‘t very well call a gendarme on board and have me removed—we must observe the decencies.“

„But you don‘t realise where I am going,“ he said earnestly. „I am going into the wilderness, into fever-stricken countries, where white women are unknown, and where it would be murder to take you.“

„Then you had better alter your itinerary,“ she replied with amazing self-assurance, „because I am going with you. I have thought it out on board.“

She stopped his expostulations with a gesture, and there was a hint of mischief in her quiet smile. „Our marriage was a mistake; but then, so are ninety per cent. of marriages, only I made this discovery at an inconveniently early hour. Linsay deceived me, as he deceived you, and because I am possessed of a stronger sense of honesty than—than some, I confessed to you, what I might well have kept hidden. But I want to know you—I want“—she faltered, and a faint colour came to her cheeks—„I want to love you. Ah, a woman may say that to her husband? I want to share your secret—that secret“—she watched him closely as she went on—„that causes such a strange injury to your hand at all the critical periods of your life.“

He stepped back a pace, a curious pallor on his face.

She nodded wisely. „Ah, I know,“ she said quietly. „When you came to England you had an injured wrist; when you went to London to settle your affairs the wrist, which had been well the day before, went into hospital again. When we were married you had cut your thumb—though I have looked in vain for the scar since—when we sailed your hand was still injured.“

She spoke with deliberation, for her object was twofold—one to gain time, and this ruse he saw through.

„Agatha, I beg of you to go!“ There was no mistaking his earnestness. „Some other day I may explain what mystery there is about my unfortunate hand. Some day, perhaps, you will know me better, and—and love me better, when all the pain and disappointment has vanished from my memory. But you must give up this plan—I implore you! No, I command you!“

She laughed frankly and undisguisedly into the stern, young face.

„You will not dare to quote the marriage service,“ she taunted. „Not the banal and commonplace reference to *obedience*.“

„Agatha, for heaven‘s sake—“ he began.

„You have time to go ashore," she went on calmly, „and to send a cable to my brother, telling him I have changed my plans."

He leant over her in a torment of exasperation.

„I feel that I could shake you," he said.

„I wish you would," she answered truthfully.

Ten minutes later he went ashore. Over her book she caught a glimpse of him at the gangway, and her pretty forehead was wrinkled in a troubled frown, for his right hand was thrust into the breast of his light Norfolk jacket, and she could see that it was bandaged.

Chapter IV

'Mid Savage Foes.

THERE came from the forest the rhythmical *clop-clop* of the woodmen's axes.

Agatha, grateful for the shade that the interlaced branches of the high trees afforded, sat contentedly on a little mound, fanning her pink cheeks with her light helmet. She was in a little clearing near the river bank, and through the tangle of creepers she could see the two white funnels of the N'KEMA, and to her ears, above the ceaseless chatter of the forest, came the never-ending gurgle of the swift black river.

Charles was in the wood; she had heard the far-away *cloc* of his rifle. She had got past the stage of nervous apprehension and foreboding that came to her with his first disappearance into the forest. On that, the first occasion, she had spent five terrible hours staring into the solemn gloom of the wilderness—five hours, and every hour of sixty minutes and every minute overloaded with imaginations of disasters.

She had sat nervously tense, bolt upright on her canvas chair, with Elbo, the taciturn Kano boy, at her side, wondering, wondering, wondering. And when he had returned, swinging through the undergrowth ahead of his bearers, she had grown hysterical at the sight of his white helmet showing through the trees.

He had found her in a state bordering on collapse, and that had ended what promised to be a magnificent month of shooting.

So the prow of the boat had been turned farther up stream. There had been three weeks of dolce far niente, ceremonial calls at government posts, quiet Sundays amidst the soothing homeliness of mission stations.

That was past, the shooting excursions had begun again, and, as she grew familiar with the wilds, the mysterious forest had lost its terrors.

He had been a revelation to her, this husband of hers. She found him a constant source of interest. The depths of his resourcefulness were unplumbed. He was a doctor, an engineer, a cook, and a leader of men. He had alarming attacks of fever that drove her frantic, but which he treated with outrageous indifference. But one hot night when she lay in her roomy cabin in a vain pursuit of sleep—his form had filled the doorway, and she had sat up in bed with a fluttering heart.

He made no apology for his intrusion.

„I thought you'd be asleep," he said gruffly. „Where is your mosquito curtain?"

„It was so hot," she began.

„Have them put up at once," he said sternly. „Do you think I want you down with the fever. Call your woman," and he left her.

As a result of her escapade fever came, a mild attack, but sufficiently unpleasant. She woke one morning with a bad headache and a disinclination for food.

For three days he tended her, sitting by the side of her bed, dosing her with quinine, forcing food upon her, surprisingly palatable broths, wonderful light dishes, the composition of which she could not even guess. And in the days of her convalescence when the awful depression came, he it was who cheered her with a fund of dry humour, with stories of his life in wild places, and anecdotes of travellers he had met.

When she was well he had relapsed into his polite, distant self. She could have wished for the fever to continue.

She had seen the primitive man in him manifest. The fifty raw natives who comprised the crew needed careful handling. He was, like most Britons, admirable in his treatment of them. Just to a nicety, neither encouraging their confidence, nor repelling it. Once there had been a „woman palaver" on board and a general fight, and with two leaps he had been in the midst of it, striking right and left. The ringleader he discovered, and incontinently threw overboard.

„He can swim," was his cool answer to her agonised appeal.

She thought of all this as she sat in the clearing, and smiled gently.

A dark shadow fell across the ground before her. Elbo, the Kano boy, six feet in height, and as straight as a young tree, stood waiting, hat in hand.

„You fit for go on ship?" he asked.

She looked at him sharply, but his face was expressionless.

„Why should I go to the ship yet?" she demanded; „the master will return soon."

He looked over her head. „Them master he done go into N'gombi country; they chop him one time."

She rose quickly with her hand at her throat. She knew enough coast talk to understand him.

„But the N'gombi people are at peace," she faltered, „my—the master told me."

Elbo turned and spoke rapidly in the Bomongo tongue to some invisible person. A woman came through the undergrowth, shyly and hesitatingly. Her eyes were leaden, and about her shoulders she wore a stained cloth. There were rags about her ankles, and she walked as if in pain.

„Them woman she come by canoe from Lokobangi. N'gombi. He come fighting, burning. Plainty light, savvy?"

The danger came upon her without warning. Had she a more extended acquaintance with savage countries, she would have known that thus danger invariably came in a land where formal ultimatums were unknown, and war was little more than organised murder.

„Let us get back to the boat," she said, with compressed lips, and they crossed the narrow plank to the steel deck of the trim little stern-wheeler.

All the time, amidst the riot and panic of her heart, her cool head was asking and reiterating one question: What would Charles wish her to do? She might send a party of men to meet him, and this she suggested to Elbo.

He shook his head. „Suppose them black fellows stay for ship—they be good. They fit for fight English. Suppose I done take ‘um into bush, they fight N‘gombi.“

„But the N‘gombi people are not here.“ She waved her hand to the inscrutable forest. Elbo nodded his head.

„They be here for sure,“ he said, with conviction.

There were half-a-dozen men of the better class of native on board. Educated mission men, who acted as engineers and steersmen, and these Elbo summoned.

By their faces, the girl gathered the seriousness of the situation—she must not lose her head now, a life that was more precious to her than all the world might depend upon her courage. What would he have wished her to do?

She turned quickly to the chattering group. „Ask Yoga if there is steam,“ she said, quietly.

No, the fires were out, as was the custom when the ship lay idle. She gave an order, and instantly there was a scene of feverish activity. There was wood to be collected from the forest, a party had been engaged all the morning cutting it, and this had to be brought aboard.

Soon a lazy curl of smoke came drifting from the funnels as Yoga and his men worked at breakneck speed to feed the fires. Elbo, from the vantage place of the navigating dock, superintended the sweating gang who piled the ship‘s deck with fuel.

„Oh, N'kema!“ he cried in the sing-song Bomongo dialect. „Oh badly wast thou named the Monkey! Better had they called thee N‘dugi, the tortoise! Hast thou no shame, Nogi? Hast thou the sickness, Mongo? Haste! Haste! What is it with thee, Makala? Thou hast sickness in thy head? Ko! Ko!“

So this taciturn native laughed at them and chid them, and waxed broadly sarcastic, and stood in the blinding white heat of noontide, with the temperature at 105 in the shade, and spoke to them for his master‘s sake.

The last load was aboard, the steam was hissing from the escape-pipe, and the mooring ropes stood shackled for slipping, when Elbo, who had gone into the forest to reconnoitre, came leaping back, ducking and swerving.

Agatha herself stood by the telegraph, and as the Kano boy leapt the space between the bank and the deck she heard him shout warningly to the men at the mooring hawsers. Then he disappeared into her husband‘s cabin. He was out again in a second with a rifle in each hand and a dozen packets of ammunition folded in his arms.

Crack, crack!

She heard the firing now, and the frenzied shouting of the cannibal N‘gombi.

Mechanically she stretched out her hand for one of the rifles. Charles had given her lessons, and she threw open the breech as Elbo raised his rifle and fired.

He loaded and fired again, but she could see nothing, only the shadows of great trees and the fret of sunlight on green saplings.

Again Elbo fired, and there came an answering shot close at hand.

Then she saw her husband, helmet-less, coatless, running swiftly and almost noiselessly, and she saw he was weaponless. Her mind was clear now. She judged the distance, and with her disengaged hand she threw over the handle of the telegraph to „full speed ahead,“ and the steersman whirled his wheel round to port.

As the big stern wheel threshed slowly round, she raised her rifle and fired at the nearest of his pursuers. The little ship swung her nose to midstream. Sir Charles gained the bank. He paused for a moment, leapt, and gained the slippery deck.

One of his pursuers followed him, but Yoga, the Christian engineer, was on the man before he rose to his feet, and in Yoga‘s hand was a steel spanner…

* * * * *

AGATHA opened her eyes. She was lying in her bed. The engines were stopped, and through the open doorway she could hear her husband‘s voice speaking to somebody in the native dialect.

Her head was wet and the collar of hot blouse loosened. Then Charles came in.

„Hullo,“ he said, cheerfully, and there was a look in his eyes that she had seen once before, „feeling better?“

„Where are we?“ she asked faintly, and tried to rise.

But he was down on his knees by her side, his arm about her. „You stay where you are,“ he whispered, and his lips brushed her cheek, „unless you are tired of this wicked world. We are on a sandbank, about a hundred yards from the place we started from, but the current is too swift for the beggars to venture out, so they are trying a little target practice, and,“ he added, thoughtfully, „with my rifle.“

„Is there any danger?“

„None! They surprised me in the wood, and I‘ve lost two poor chaps who were with me—“

„Snap!“ Something hit the side of the cabin, splintering the wood near the roof, and he laughed joyously. „That‘s my rifle,“ he said laconically, then, „dearest, will you do something for me?“

„Anything,“ she murmured.

„Here‘s a pencil and paper. Will you scribble a note to the Commandant at Basankasu? Tell him what has happened and where we are. I‘ll send Elbo in a canoe down the river, and we shall be relieved by nightfall.“

„In French?“ she asked, and he nodded. „I‘ll do it, of course,“ she said. „But why? Don‘t you speak French?“

„Yes,“ he said quietly.

„Then why—“

He was silent for a moment. „I cannot write French,“ he said. „I cannot even write English.“

„Charles!“

He put his head closer to hers. „I can neither read nor write,“ he said simply. „Neither could poor Simon. He lived in mortal terror of the fact being discovered. I, too, have since shared his fear.“

„The bandaged hand!“ she murmured, as a light dawned upon her.

He nodded. „That was my pitiful ruse—with an injured hand I might dictate my telegrams, and any scrawl might be accepted as my signature.“ She wrote the note without a word, and Elbo took it from his hand. Then he came back to her.

„Are you sure there‘s no danger?“ she asked in so low a tone that he was forced to resume his former position. „None,“ he said.

„And if there was danger, would you hold me tightly as you did just now?“ she murmured.

He did not trust himself to speak.

„Will you please remember,“ she whispered, „that in addition to being your future school mistress, I—I am your wife. And will you pretend the danger isn‘t really past?“