PERCIVAL CHRISTOPHER WREN

THE WAGES OF VIRTUE

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"Vivandière du régiment,
C'est Catin qu'on me nomme;
Je vends, je donne, je bois gaiment,
Mon vin et mon rogomme;
J'ai le pied leste et l'oeil mutin,
Tintin, tintin, tintin, r'lin tintin,
Soldats, voilà Catin!
"Je fus chère à tous nos héros;
Hélas! combien j'en pleure,
Ainsi soldats et généraux
Me comblaient à tout heure
D'amour, de gloire et de butin,
Tintin, tintin, tintin, r'lin tintin
D'amour, de gloire et de butin,
Soldats, voilà Catin!"
BÉRANGER.

PROLOGUE

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Lord Huntingten emerged from his little green tent, and strolled over to where Captain Strong, of the Queen's African Rifles, sat in the "drawing-room." The drawing-room was the space under a cedar fir and was furnished with four Roorkee chairs of green canvas and white wood, and a waterproof ground-sheet.

"I do wish the Merlines would roll up," he said. "I want my dinner."

"Not dinner time yet," remarked Captain Strong. "Hungry?"

"No," answered Lord Huntingten almost snappishly. Captain Strong smiled. How old Reggie Huntingten always gave himself away! It was the safe return of Lady Merline that he wanted.

Captain Strong, although a soldier, the conditions of whose life were almost those of perpetual Active Service, was a student--and particularly a student of human nature. Throughout a life of great activity he found, and made, much opportunity for sitting in the stalls of the Theatre of Life and enjoying the Human Comedy. This East African shooting-trip with Lord Huntingten, Sir Montague, and Lady Merline, was affording him great entertainment, inasmuch as Huntingten had fallen in love with Lady Merline and did not know it. Lady Merline was falling in love with Huntingten and knew it only too well, and Merline loved them both. That

there would be no sort or kind of "dénouement," in the vulgar sense, Captain Strong was well and gladly aware--for Huntingten was as honourable a man as ever lived, and Lady Merline just as admirable. No saner, wiser, nor better woman had Strong ever met, nor any as well balanced. Had there been any possibility of "developments," trouble, and the usual fiasco of scandal and the Divorce Court, he would have taken an early opportunity of leaving the party and rejoining his company at Mombasa. For Lord Huntingten was his school, Sandhurst and lifelong friend, while Merline was his brother-in-arms and comrade of many an unrecorded, nameless expedition, foray, skirmish, fight and adventure.

"Merline shouldn't keep her out after dusk like this," continued Lord Huntingten. "After all, Africa's Africa and a woman's a woman."

"And Merline's Merline," added Strong with a faint hint of reproof. Lord Huntingten grunted, arose, and strode up and down. A fine upstanding figure of a man in the exceedingly becoming garb of khaki cord riding-breeches, well-cut high boots, brown flannel shirt and broad-brimmed felt hat. Although his hands were small, the arms exposed by the rolled-up shirtsleeves were those of a navvy, or a blacksmith. The face, though tanned and wrinkled, was finely cut and undeniably handsome, with its high-bridged nose, piercing blue eyes, fair silky moustache and prominent chin. If, as we are sometimes informed, impassivity and immobility of countenance are essential to aspirants for such praise as is contained in the term "aristocratic," Lord Huntingten was not what he himself would have described as a "starter," for never did face more honestly portray

feeling than did that of Lord Huntingten. As a rule it was wreathed in smiles, and brightly reflected the joyous, sunny nature of its owner. On those rare occasions when he was angered, it was convulsed with rage, and, even before he spoke, all and sundry were well aware that his lordship was angry. When he did speak, they were confirmed in the belief without possibility of error. If he were disappointed or chagrined this expressive countenance fell with such suddenness and celerity that the fact of so great a fall being inaudible came as a surprise to the observant witness. At that moment, as he consulted his watch, the face of this big, generous and lovable man was only too indicative of the fact that his soul was filled with anxiety, resentment and annoyance. Captain Strong, watching him with malicious affection, was reminded of a petulant baby and again of a big naughty boy who, having been stood in the corner for half an hour, firmly believes that the half-hour has long ago expired. Yes, he promised himself much quiet and subtle amusement, interest and instruction from the study of his friends and their actions and reactions during the coming weeks. What would Huntingten do when he realised his condition and position? Run for his life, or grin and bear it? If the former, where would he go? If, living in Mayfair and falling in love with your neighbour's wife, the correct thing is to go and shoot lions in East Africa, is it, conversely, the correct thing to go and live in Mayfair if, shooting lions in East Africa, you fall in love with your neighbour's wife? Captain Strong smiled at his whimsicality, and showed his interesting face at its best. A favourite remark of his was to the effect that the world's a queer place, and life a queer,

thing. It is doubtful whether he realised exactly how queer an example of the fact was afforded by his being a soldier in the first place, and an African soldier in the second. When he was so obviously and completely cut out for a philosopher and student (with relaxations in the direction of the writing of Ibsenical-Pinerotic plays and Shavo-Wellsian novels), what did he in that galley of strenuous living and strenuous dying? Further, it is interesting to note that among those brave and hardy men, second to none in keenness, resourcefulness and ability, Captain Strong was noted for these qualities.

A huge Swahili orderly of the Queen's African Rifles, clad in a tall yellow tarboosh, a very long blue jersey, khaki shorts, blue puttees and hobnail boots, approached Captain Strong and saluted. He announced that Merline *Bwana* was approaching, and, on Strong's replying that such things did happen, and even with sufficient frequency to render the widest publication of the fact unnecessary, the man informed him that the *macouba Bwana Simba* (the big Lion Master) had given his bearer orders to have the approach of Merline *Bwana* signalled and announced.

Turning to Huntingten, Strong bade that agitated nobleman to be of good cheer, for Merline was safe--his *askaris* were safe--his pony was safe, and it was even reported that all the dogs were safe.

"Three loud cheers," observed his lordship, as his face beamed ruddily, "but, to tell you the truth, it was of *Lady* Merline I was thinking.... You never know in Africa, you know...."

Captain Strong smiled.

Sir Montague and Lady Merline rode into camp on their Arab ponies a few minutes later, and there was a bustle of Indian and Swahili "boys" and bearers, about the unlacing of tents, preparing of hot baths, the taking of ponies and guns, and the hurrying up of dinner.

While Sir Montague gave orders concerning the *enyama*[#] for the *safari* servants and porters, whose virtue had merited this addition to their *posho*[#] Lady Merline entered the "drawing-room," and once again gladdened the heart of Lord Huntingten with her grace and beauty. He struck an attitude, laid his hand upon his heart, and swept the ground with his slouch hat in a most gracefully executed bow. Lady Merline, albeit clad in brief khaki shooting-costume, puttees, tiny hobnail boots, and brown pith helmet, returned the compliment with a Court curtsey.

[#] Meat.

[#] Food.

Their verbal greeting hardly sustained the dignity of the preliminaries.

"How's Bill the Lamb?" quoth the lady.

"How's Margarine?" was the reply.

Their eyes interested Captain Strong more than their words.

(Lady Merline's eyes were famous; and, beautiful as Strong had always realised those wonderful orbs to be, he was strongly inclined to fancy that they looked even deeper,

even brighter, even more beautiful when regarding the handsome sunny face of Lord Huntingten.)

Sir Montague Merline joined the group.

"Hallo, Bill! Hallo, Strong!" he remarked. "I say, Strong, what's *marodi*, and what's *gisi* in Somali?"

"Same as *tembo* and *mbogo* in Swahili," was the reply.

"Oh! Elephant and buffalo. Well, that one-eyed Somali blighter with the corrugated forehead, whom Abdul brought in, says there are both--close to Bamania over there--about thirteen miles you know."

"He's a liar then," replied Captain Strong.

"Swears the elephants went on the tiles all night in a *shamba*[#] there, the day before yesterday."

[#] Garden. Cultivation.

"Might go that way, anyhow," put in Lord Huntingten. "Take him with us, and rub his nose in it if there's nothing."

"You're nothing if not lucid, Bill," said Lady Merline. "I'm off to change," and added as she turned away, "I vote we go to Bamania anyhow. There may be lemons, or mangoes, or bananas or something in the *shamba*, if there are no elephants or buffaloes."

"Don't imagine you are going upsetting elephants and teasing buffaloes, young woman," cried "Bill" after her as she went to her tent. "The elephants and buffaloes of these parts are the kind that eat English women, and feeding the animals is forbidden...."

It occurred to Captain Strong, that silent and observant man, that Lady Merline's amusement at this typical

specimen of the Huntingten humour was possibly greater than it would have been had he or her husband perpetrated it.

"Dinner in twenty minutes, Monty," said he to Sir Montague Merline and departed to his tent.

"I say, Old Thing, dear," observed Lord Huntingten to the same gentleman, as, with the tip of his little finger, he "wangled" a soda-water bottle with a view to concocting a whiskey-and-soda. "We won't let Marguerite have anything to do with elephant or buffalo, will we?"

"Good Lord, no!" was the reply. "We've promised her one pot at a lion if we can possibly oblige, but that will have to be her limit, and, what's more, you and I will be one each side of her when she does it."

"Yes," agreed the other, and added, "Expect I shall know what nerves are, when it comes off, too."

"Fancy 'nerves' and the *Bwana Simba*," laughed Sir Montague Merline as he held out his glass for the soda.... "Here's to Marguerite's first lion," he continued, and the two men solemnly drank the toast.

Sir Montague Merline struck a match for his pipe, the light illuminating his face in the darkness which had fallen in the last few minutes. The first impression one gathered from the face of Captain Sir Montague Merline, of the Queen's African Rifles, was one of unusual gentleness and kindliness. Without being in any way a weak face, it was an essentially friendly and amiable one--a soldierly face without any hint of that fierce, harsh and ruthless expression which is apparently cultivated as part of their stock-in-trade by the professional soldiers of militarist nations. A physiognomist,

observing him, would not be surprised to learn of quixotic actions and a reputation for being "such an awful good chap--one of the best-hearted fellers that ever helped a lame dog over a stile." So far as such a thing can be said of any strong and honest man who does his duty, it could be said of Sir Montague Merline that he had no enemies. Contrary to the dictum that "He who has no enemies has no friends" was the fact that Sir Montague Merline's friends were all who knew him. Of these, his best and closest friend was his wife, and it had been reserved for Lord Huntingten unconsciously to apprise her of the fact that she was this and nothing more. Until he had left his yacht at Mombasa a few weeks before, on the invitation of Captain Strong (issued with their cordial consent) to join their projected shooting trip, Lady Merline had fondly imagined that she knew what love was, and had thought herself a thoroughly happy and contented woman. In a few days after his joining the party it seemed that she must have loved him all her life, and that there could not possibly be a gulf of some fifteen years between then and the childish days when he was "Bill the Lamb" and she the unconsidered adjunct of the nursery and schoolroom, generally addressed as "Margarine." Why had he gone wandering about the world all these years? Why had their re-discovery of each other had to be postponed until now? Why couldn't he have been at home when Monty came wooing and ... When Lady Merline's thoughts reached this point she resolutely switched them off. She was doing a considerable amount of switching off, these last few days, and realised that when Lord Huntingten awoke to the fact that he too must practise

this exercise, the shooting trip would have to come to an untimely end. As she crouched over the tiny candle-lit mirror on the *soi-disant* dressing-table in her tent, while hastily changing for dinner that evening, she even considered plausible ways and possible means of terminating the trip when the inevitable day arrived.

She was saved the trouble.

As they sat at dinner a few minutes later, beneath the diamond-studded velvet of the African sky--an excellent dinner of clear soup, sardines, bustard, venison, and tinned fruit--Strong's orderly again appeared in the near distance, saluting and holding two official letters in his hand. These, it appeared, had just been brought by messenger from the railway-station some nineteen miles distant.

Captain Strong was the first to gather their import, and his feeling of annoyance and disappointment was more due to the fact of the interruption of his interesting little drama than to the cancellation of his leave and return to harness.

"Battle, Murder and Sudden Death!" he murmured. "I wish people wouldn't kill people, and cause other people to interfere with the arrangements of people.... Our trip's bust."

"What is it?" asked Lady Merline.

"Mutiny and murder down Uganda way," replied her husband, whose letter was a duplicate. "I'm sorry, Huntingten, old chap," he added, turning to his friend. "It's draw stumps and hop it, for Strong and me. We must get to the railway to-morrow--there will be a train through in the afternoon.... Better luck next time."

Lord Huntingten looked at Lady Merline, and Lady Merline looked at her plate.

2

Down the narrowest of narrow jungle-paths marched a small party of the Queen's African Rifles. They marched, perforce, in single file, and at their head was their white officer. A wiser man would have marched in the middle, for the leading man was inevitably bound to "get it" if they came upon the enemy, and, albeit brave and warlike men, negroes of the Queen's African Rifles (like other troops) fight better when commanded by an officer. A "point" of a sergeant and two or three men, a couple of hundred yards in front, is all very well, but the wily foe in ambush knows quite enough to take, as it were, the cash and let the credit go--to let the "point" march on, and to wait for the main body.

Captain Sir Montague Merline was well aware of the unwisdom and military inadvisability of heading the long file, but did it, nevertheless. If called upon to defend his conduct, he would have said that what was gained by the alleged wiser course was more than lost, inasmuch as the confidence of the men in so discreet a leader would not be, to say the least of it, enhanced. The little column moved silently and slowly through the horrible place, a stinking swamp, the atmosphere almost unbreatheable, the narrow winding track almost untreadable, the enclosing walls of densest jungle utterly unpenetrable--a singularly

undesirable spot in which to be attacked by a cunning and blood-thirsty foe of whom this was the "native heath."

Good job the beggars did not run to machine guns, thought Captain Merline; fancy one, well placed and concealed in one of these huge trees, and commanding the track. Stake-pits, poisoned arrows, spiked-log booby-traps, and poisoned needle-pointed snags neatly placed to catch bare knees, and their various other little tricks were quite enough to go on with. What a rotten place for an ambush! The beggars could easily have made a neat clearing a foot or two from the track, and massed a hundred men whose poisoned arrows, guns, and rifles could be presented a few inches from the breasts of passing enemies, without the least fear of discovery. Precautions against that sort of thing were utterly impossible if one were to advance at a higher speed than a mile a day. The only possible way of ensuring against flank attack was to have half the column out in the jungle with axes, hacking their way in line, ahead of the remainder. They couldn't do a mile a day at that rate. That "point" in front was no earthly good, nor would it have been if joined by Daniel Boone Burnham and Buffalo Bill. The jungle on either side might as well have been a thirty-foot brick wall. Unless the enemy chose to squat in the middle of the track, what could the "point" do in the way of warning?--and the enemy wouldn't do that. Of course, an opposing column might be marching toward them along the same path, but, in that case, except at a sudden bend, the column would see them as soon as the "point." Confound all bush fighting--messy, chancy work. Anyhow, he'd have ten minutes' halt and send Ibrahim up a tree for a look round.

Captain Merline put his hand to the breast pocket of his khaki flannel shirt for his whistle, with a faint short blast on which he would signal to his "point" to halt. The whistle never reached his lips. A sudden ragged crash of musketry rang out from the dense vegetation on either side, and from surrounding trees which commanded and enfiladed the path. More than half the little force fell at the first discharge, for it is hard to miss a man with a Snider or a Martini-Henry rifle at three yards' range. For a moment there was confusion, and more than one of those soldiers of the Queen, it must be admitted, fired off his rifle at nothing in particular. A burly sergeant, bringing up the rear, thrust his way to the front shouting an order, and the survivors of the first murderous burst of fire crouched down on either side of the track and endeavoured to force their way into the jungle, form a line on either side, and fire volleys to their left, front and right. Having made his way to the head of the column, Sergeant Isa ibn Yakub found his officer shot through the head, chest and thigh.... A glance was sufficient. With a loud click of his tongue he turned away with a look of murderous hate on his ebony face and the lust of slaughter in his rolling yellow eye. He saw a leafy twig fall from a tree that overhung the path and crouched motionless, staring at the spot. Suddenly he raised his rifle and fired, and gave a hoarse shout of glee as a body fell crashing to the ground. In the same second his tarboosh was spun from his head and the shoulder of his blue jersey torn as by an invisible claw. He too wriggled into the undergrowth and joined the volley-firing, which, sustained long enough and sufficiently generously and impartially

distributed, must assuredly damage a neighbouring foe and hinder his approach. Equally assuredly it must, however, lead to exhaustion of ammunition, and when the volley-firing slackened and died away, it was for this reason. Sergeant Isa ibn Yakub was a man of brains and resource, as well as of dash and courage. Since the enemy had fallen silent too, he would emerge with his men and collect the ammunition from their dead and wounded comrades. He blew a number of short shrill blasts on the whistle which, with the stripes upon his arm, was the proudest of his possessions.

The ammunition was quickly collected and the worthy Sergeant possessed himself of his dead officer's revolver and cartridges.... The next step? ... If he attempted to remove his wounded, his whole effective force would become stretcher-bearers and still be inadequate to the task. If he abandoned his wounded, should he advance or retire? He would rather fight a lion or three Masai than have to answer these conundrums and shoulder these responsibilities.... He was relieved of all necessity in the matter of deciding, for the brooding silence was again suddenly broken by ear-piercing and blood-curdling howls and a second sudden fusillade, as, at some given signal, the enemy burst into the track both before and behind the column. Obviously they were skilfully handled and by one versed in the art of jungle war. The survivors of the little force were completely surrounded--and the rest was rather a massacre than a fight. It is useless to endeavour to dive into dense jungle to form a firing line when a determined person with a broad-bladed spear is literally at your heels.

Sergeant Isa ibn Yakub did his utmost and fought like the lion-hearted warrior he was. It is some satisfaction to know that the one man who escaped and made his way to the temporary base of the little columns to tell the story of the destruction of this particular force, was Sergeant Isa ibn Yakub.

One month later a Lieutenant was promoted to Captain Sir Montague Merline's post, and, twelve months later, Lord Huntingten married his wife.

Captain Strong of the Queen's African Rifles, home on furlough, was best man at the wedding of the handsome and popular Lord Huntingten with the charming and beautiful Lady Merline.

3

At about the same time as the fashionable London press announced to a more or less interested world the more or less important news that Lady Huntingten had presented her lord and master with a son and heir, a small *safari* swung into a tiny African village and came to a halt. The naked Kavarondo porters flung down their loads with grunts and duckings, and sat them down, a huddled mass of smelly humanity. From a litter, borne in the middle of the caravan, stepped the leader of the party, one Doctor John Williams, a great (though unknown) surgeon, a medical missionary who gave his life and unusual talents, skill and knowledge to the alleviation of the miseries of black humanity. There are people who have a lot to say about missionaries in Africa,

and there are people who have nothing to say about Dr. John Williams because words fail them. They have seen him at work and know what his life is--and also what it might be if he chose to set up in Harley Street.

Doctor John Williams looked around at the village to which Fate brought him for the first time, and beheld the usual scene--a collection of huts built of poles and grass, and a few superior dwelling-places with thatched walls and roofs. A couple of women were pounding grain in a wooden mortar; a small group of others was engaged in a kind of rude basket weaving under the porch of a big hut; a man seated by a small fire had apparently "taken up" poker work, for he was decorating a vase-shaped gourd by means of a red-hot iron; a gang of tiny naked piccaninnies, with incredibly distended stomachs, was playing around a...

What?

Dr. John Williams strode over to the spot. A white man, or the ruin of a sort of a white man, was seated on a native stool and leaning against the bole of one of the towering palms that embowered, shaded, concealed and enriched the little village. His hair was very long and grey, his beard and moustache were long and grey, his face was burnt and bronzed, his eyes blue and bright. On his head were the deplorable ruins of a khaki helmet, and, for the rest, he wore the rags and remains of a pair of khaki shorts. Dr. John Williams stood and stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment. He arose and advanced with extended hand. The doctor was too astounded to speak, and the other could not, for he was dumb. In a minute it was obvious to the new-

comer that he was more--that he was in some way "wanting."

From the headman of the villagers, who quickly gathered round, he learned that the white man had been with them for "many nights and days and seasons," that he was afflicted of the gods, very wise, and as a little child. Why "very wise" Dr. John Williams failed to discover, or anything more of the man's history, save that he had simply walked into the village from nowhere in particular and had sat under that tree, all day, ever since. They had given him a hut, milk, corn, cocoanut, and whatever else they had. Also, in addition to this propitiation, they had made a minor god of him, with worship of the milder sorts. Their wisdom and virtue in this particular had been rewarded by him with a period of marked prosperity; and undoubtedly their crops, their cattle, and their married women had benefited by his benevolent presence....

When Doctor John Williams resumed his journey he took the dumb white man with him, and, in due course, reached his own mission, dispensary and wonderful little hospital a few months later. Had he considered that there was any urgency in the case, and the time-factor of any importance, he would have abandoned his sleeping-sickness tour, and gone direct to the hospital to operate upon the skull of his foundling. For this great (and unknown) surgeon, upon examination, had decided that the removal of a bullet which was lodged beneath the scalp and in the solid bone of the top of the man's head was the first, and probably last, step in the direction of the restoration of speech and understanding. Obviously he was in no pain, and he was not

mad, but his brain was that of a child whose age was equal to the time which had elapsed since the wound was caused. Probably this had happened about a couple of years ago, for the brain was about equal to that of a two-year-old child. But why had the child not learned to talk? Possibly the fact that he had lived among negroes, since his last return to consciousness, would account for the fact. Had he been shot in the head and recovered among English people (if he were English) he would probably be now talking as fluently as a two-year-old baby....

The first few days after his return to his headquarters were always exceedingly busy ones for the doctor. The number of things able to "go wrong" in his absence was incredible, and, as he was the only white man resident in a district some ten thousand square miles in area, the accumulation of work and trouble was sufficient to appal most people. But work and trouble were what the good doctor sought and throve on.... One piece of good news there was, however, in the tale of calamities. A pencilled note, scribbled on a leaf of a military pocket-book, informed him that his old friend Strong, of the Queen's African Rifles, had passed through his village three weeks earlier, and would again pass through, on his return, in a week's time. Having made a wide détour to see his friend, Strong was very disappointed to learn of his absence, and would return by the same devious route, in the hope of better luck....

Good! A few days of Strong's company would be worth a lot. A visit from any white man was something; from a man of one's own class and kind was a great thing; but from worldly-wise, widely-read, clever old Strong! ... Excellent! ...

4

Captain Strong, of the Queen's African Rifles, passed from the strong sunlight into the dark coolness of Doctor John Williams' bungalow side by side with his host, who was still shaking him by the hand, in his joy and affection. Laying his riding-whip and helmet on a table he glanced round, stared, turned as white as a sunburnt man may, ejaculated "Oh, my God!" and seized the doctor's arm. His mouth hung open, his eyes were starting from his head, and it was with shaking hand that he pointed to where, in the doctor's living-room, sat the dumb and weak-witted foundling.

Doctor Williams was astounded and mightily interested.

"What's up, Strong?" he asked.

"B--b--b--but he's *dead*!" stammered Strong with a gasp.

"Not a bit of it, man," was the reply, "he's as alive as you or I. He's dumb, and he's dotty, but he's alive all right.... What's wrong with you? You've got a touch of the sun..." and then Captain Strong was himself again. If Captain Sir Montague Merline, late of the Queen's African Rifles, were alive, it should not be Jack Strong who would announce the fact....

Monty Merline? ... Was that vacant-looking person who was rising from a chair and bowing to him, his old pal Merline? ... Most undoubtedly it was. Besides--there on his wrist and forearm was the wonderfully-tattooed snake....

"How do you do?" he said. The other bowed again, smiled stupidly, and fumbled with the buttons of his coat.... Balmy! ...

Strong turned and dragged his host out of the room.

"Where's he come from?" he asked quickly. "Who is he?"

"Where he came from last," replied the doctor, "is a village called, I believe, Bwogo, about a hundred and twenty miles south-east of here. How he got there I can't tell you. The natives said he just walked up unaccompanied, unbounded, unpursued. He's got a bullet or something in the top of his head and I'm going to lug it out. And then, my boy, with any luck at all, he'll very soon be able to answer you any question you like to put him. Speech and memory will return at the moment the pressure on the brain ceases."

"Will he remember up to the time the bullet hit him, or since, or both?" asked Strong.

"All his life, up to the moment the bullet hit him, certainly," was the reply. "What happened since will, at first, be remembered as a dream, probably. If I had to prophesy I should say he'd take up his life from the second in which the bullet hit him, and think, for the moment, that he is still where it happened. By-and-by, he'll realise that there's a gap somewhere, and gradually he'll be able to fill it in with events which will seem half nightmare, half real."

"Anyhow, he'll be certain of his identity and personal history and so forth?" asked Strong.

"Absolutely," said the surgeon. "It will be precisely as though he awoke from an ordinary night's rest.... It'll be awfully interesting to hear him give an account of himself.... All this, of course, if he doesn't die under the operation."

"I hope he will," said Strong.

"What *do* you mean, my dear chap?"

"I hope he'll die under the operation."

"Why?"

"He'll be better dead.... And it will be better for three other people that he should be dead.... Is he likely to die?"

"I should say it's ten to one he'll pull through all right.... What's it all about, Strong?"

"Look here, old chap," was the earnest reply. "If it were anybody else but you I shouldn't know what to say or do. As it's *you*, my course is clear, for you're the last thing in discretion, wisdom and understanding.... But don't ask me his name.... I know him.... Look here, it's like this. His wife's married again.... There's a kid.... They're well known in Society.... Awful business.... Ghastly scandal.... Shockin' position." Captain Strong took Doctor John Williams by the arm. "Look here, old chap," he said once again. "Need you do this? It isn't as though he was 'conscious,' so to speak, and in pain."

"Yes, I must do it," replied the doctor without hesitation, as the other paused.

"But why?" urged Strong. "I'm absolutely certain that if M----, er--that is--this chap--could have his faculties for a minute he would tell you not to do it.... You'll take him from a sort of negative happiness to the most positive and acute unhappiness, and you'll simply blast the lives of his wife and the most excellent chap she's married.... She waited a year after this chap 'died' in--er--that last Polar expedition--as was supposed.... Think of the poor little kid too.... And there's estates and a ti---- so on...."

"No good, Strong. My duty in the matter is perfectly clear, and it is to the sick man, as such."

"Well, you'll do a damned cruel thing ... er--sorry, old chap, I mean *do* think it over a bit and look at it from the point of view of the unfortunate lady, the second husband, and the child.... And of the chap himself.... By God! He won't thank you."

"I look at it from the point of view of the doctor and I'm not out for thanks," was the reply.

"Is that your last word, Williams?"

"It is. I have here a man mentally maimed, mangled and suffering. My first and only duty is to heal him, and I shall do it."

"Right O!" replied Strong, who knew that further words would be useless. He knew that his friend's intelligence was clear as crystal and his will as firm, and that he accepted no other guide than his own conscience....

As the three men sat in the moonlight that night, after dinner, Captain Strong was an uncomfortable man. That tragedy must find a place in the human comedy he was well aware. It had its uses like the comic relief--but for human tragedy, undilute, black, harsh, and dreadful, he had no taste. He shivered. The pretty little comedy of Lord Huntingten and Sir Montague and Lady Merline, of two years ago, had greatly amused and deeply interested him. This tragedy of the same three people was unmitigated horror.... Poor Lady Merline! He conjured up her beautiful face with the wonderful eyes, the rose-leaf complexion, the glorious hair, the tender, lovely mouth--and saw the life and beauty wiped from it as she read, or heard, the ghastly news ... bigamy ... illegitimacy....

The doctor's "bearer" came to take the patient to bed. He was a remarkable man who had started life as a ward-boy in Madras. He it was who had cut the half-witted white man's hair, shaved his beard and dressed him in his master's spare clothes. When the patient was asleep that night, he was going to endeavour to shave the top of his head without waking him, for he was to be operated on, in the morning....

"Yes, I fully understand and I give you my solemn promise, Strong," said the doctor as the two men rose to go in, that night. "The moment the man is sane I will tell him that he is not to tell me his name, nor anything else until he has heard what I have to say. I will then break it to him--using my own discretion as to how and when--that he was reported dead, that his will was proved, that his widow wore mourning for a year and then married again, and had a son a year later.... I undertake that he shall not leave this house, *knowing that*, unless he is in the fullest possession of his faculties and able to realise with the utmost clearness *all* the bearings of the case and *all* the consequences following his resumption of identity. And I'll let him hide here for just as long as he cares to conceal himself--if he wishes to remain 'dead' for a time."

"Yes ... And as I can't possibly stay till he recovers, nor, in fact, over to-morrow without gross dereliction of duty, I will leave a letter for you to give him at the earliest safe moment.... I'll tell him that I am the only living soul who knows his name as well as his secret. He'll understand that no one else will know this--from me."

As he sat on the side of his bed that night, Captain Strong remarked unto his soul, "Well--one thing--if I know

Monty Merline as well as I think, 'Sir Montague Merline' died two years ago, whatever happens.... And yet I can't imagine Monty committing suicide, somehow. He's a chap with a conscience as well as the soul of chivalry.... Poor, poor, old Monty Merline!..."

THE WAGES OF VIRTUE

CHAPTER I

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SOAP AND SIR MONTAGUE MERLINE

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Sir Montague Merline, second-class private soldier of the First Battalion of the Foreign Legion of France, paused to straighten his back, to pass his bronzed forearm across his white forehead, and to put his scrap of soap into his mouth--the only safe receptacle for the precious morsel, the tiny cake issued once a month by Madame La République to the Legionary for all his washing purposes. When one's income is precisely one halfpenny a day (paid when it has totalled up to the sum of twopence halfpenny), one does not waste much, nor risk the loss of valuable property; and to lay a piece of soap upon the concrete of *Le Cercle d'Enfer* reservoir, is not so much to risk the loss of it as to lose it, when one is surrounded by gentlemen of the Foreign Legion. Let me not be misunderstood, nor supposed to be casting aspersions upon the said gentlemen, but their need for soap is urgent, their income is one halfpenny a day, and soap is of the things with which one may "decorate oneself" without contravening the law of the Legion. To steal is to steal, mark you (and to deserve, and probably to get, a bayonet through the offending hand, pinning it to the bench or table), but to borrow certain specified articles permanently and without permission is merely, in the curious slang of the Legion, "to decorate oneself."

Contrary to what the uninitiated might suppose, *Le Cercle d'Enfer*--the Circle of Hell--is not a dry, but a very wet place, it being, in point of fact, the *lavabo* where the Legionaries of the French Foreign Legion stationed in Algeria at Sidi-bel-Abbès, daily wash their white fatigue uniforms and occasionally their underclothing.

Oh, that *Cercle d'Enfer*! I hated it more than I hated the *peloton des hommes punis, salle de police, cellules*, the "Breakfast of the Legion," the awful heat, monotony, flies, Bedouins; the solitude, hunger, and thirst of outpost stations in the south; I hated it more than I hated *astiquage*, *la boîte*, the *chaussettes russes*, hospital, the terrible desert marches, sewer-cleaning fatigues, or that villainous and vindictive ruffian of a *cafard*-smitten *caporal* who systematically did his very able best to kill me. Oh, that accursed *Cercle d'Enfer*, and the heart-breaking labour of washing a filthy alfa-fibre suit (stained perhaps with rifle-oil) in cold water, and without soap!

Only the other day, as I lay somnolent in a long chair in the verandah of the Charmingest Woman (she lives in India), I heard the regular *flop, flop, flop* of wet clothes, beaten by a distant *dhobi* upon a slab of stone, and at the same moment I smelt wet concrete as the *mali* watered the maidenhair fern on the steps leading from Her verandah to the garden. Odours call up memories far more distinctly and readily than do other sense-impressions, and the faint smell of wet concrete, aided as it was by the faintly audible sound of wet blows, brought most vividly before my mind's eye a detailed picture of that well-named Temple of Hygiea, the "Circle of Hell." Sleeping, waking, and partly sleeping, partly waking, I