

"It's an amazing story," said the doctor, "and I don't profess to account for it. Just one of those experiences which come out of the unexplored realms, and leave one utterly at a loss for any explanation. You remember Kipling's story of the man who was haunted by the ghost of the woman he'd lived with and chucked, and who went mad and died with the horror of it. Well, this might have ended the same way.

"We were at Rugby together—Jack Burnham and I. Went there the same term; were put into the same form; and were both at the same house. And there we laid the foundation of a friendship which has lasted till to-day. It was built somewhat on the law of opposites, for our characters and attainments are totally different. And the divergence was perhaps more noticeable at school than in later years. He was a magnificent athlete—a boy who stood out as a games player above the average; whereas I was always a mediocre performer. He was in the eleven and the fifteen before he was sixteen, and his physical strength was phenomenal for a boy of his age. Moreover,

he was intensely matter-of-fact, with the temperament that enabled him to go in to bat at a crucial stage in a cricket match with the same sang-froid as he would have when batting at the nets. It's important—that point; it makes what is to come the more inexplicable.

“ His father died when he was up at Oxford, leaving him quite comfortably off. I suppose Jack had four thousand a year, which relieved him of the necessity of earning his own living. It was just as well perhaps, because I don't think the old chap would ever have set the Thames on fire by his intellectual attainments. Moreover, it enabled him to become what he'd always been at heart—a wanderer.

“ If ever a man had the *wanderlust* developed in him, it was Jack Burnham. He would disappear for years at a time, leaving no address behind him—only to pop up again in London as suddenly as he'd gone. And he was one of those fellows with whom one could pick up the threads just as if they had never been broken.

“ I'd been installed in Harley Street about three years when the story I'm going to tell you began. Jack had been away for eighteen months, in the North of Africa somewhere, and strangely enough, I was thinking of him and wondering where he was when the door opened and in he walked.

"My consulting hours were over, and I got up joyfully to greet him.

"My dear old man," I cried, "this is great."

"And then I saw his face clearly, and stopped short. There was a strained, haggard look in his eyes which I'd never seen before, and I realised at once that something was the matter.

"Bill," he said abruptly as he shook hands, "I want you to dine with me to-night. I think I'm going mad."

"Is that the reason of the invitation, old boy," I said lightly. "You're looking a bit fine drawn. What about dining quietly with me here?"

"Excellent. I'd love to."

"I went over and rang the bell, and I was watching him all the time. He kept glancing into different corners of the room, and once he swung round suddenly and stared over his shoulder. Nerves evidently like fiddle strings, I reflected, and wondered what the devil had happened to reduce Jack Burnham, of all people, to such a condition.

"All through dinner it was the same thing. When he spoke at all his words were jerky and almost incoherent, and by the time the port was on the table I realised that something pretty serious was the matter. In fact, if I hadn't known him to be thoroughly abstemious, I should have attributed it to drink or drugs.

He had to use both hands to lift his port glass which was a bad sign.

"I didn't hurry him; it was better to let him take his fences his own way. And it wasn't until he'd lit a cigar that he took the first with a rush.

" 'Do you know anything about the occult, Bill,' he said suddenly.

" 'Just enough to leave it alone,' I answered. 'Why?'

" 'I wish to God I'd known as much as that,' he cried despairingly. 'Bill—you've seen the condition I'm in. My hands shaking like a man with the palsy; my nerves screaming; my reason tottering. I tell you, I *am* going mad—unless you can help me.'

" 'Steady, Jack,' I said. 'There's generally a cure for most things. Tell me the yarn, old man, and take your time over it.'

"He didn't answer for some time, and I could see he was taking a pull at himself.

" 'See here, Bill,' he said at length, 'what I'm going to tell you is God's truth. It's no hallucination—all the beginning part of it; it's a cold, sober fact that I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. Whether or not the result of what I saw and heard is hallucination; whether or not what I'm tormented with now, is a hideous delusion—or cold sober fact—I'll leave you to judge. I know what I think myself.'

“ ‘ It was a year ago that the thing began. You know I’ve wandered a good deal, and in the course of my wanderings I’ve seen some pretty strange things—things, that if you told ’em in a club smoking-room would be received with smiles of derision. I’ve seen black magic celebrated in age-old temples, where it was death to stir one step outside the circle of safety; where the blood in the great bowl placed on the floor outside the circle swirled and heaved and monstrous shapes rose out of it and hovered round us—waiting. I have seen things which no man would believe second-hand; but until a year ago I had never seen the most dreadful thing of all—the dead restored to life.

“ ‘ I had heard rumours of it, but I had never actually witnessed it. So that when I found myself in the back of beyond in Morocco, as the guest of a chieftain for whom I had been able to do a service, and he asked me whether I would care to see it done, I accepted eagerly. I won’t bore you with a detailed description of what happened: anyway, no spoken word could adequately paint the horror of the scene.

“ ‘ Picture to yourself an Arab burial ground—just a clearing in the scrub. Around us barked the jackals, and in answer the dogs from the village a few hundred yards away gave tongue. The smoke of the camel-dung fires came acrid to the nostrils, and the cemetery

looked ghoulish in the greenish light of the flares carried by some of the men.

“ ‘ It was a woman who was going to do the thing, and while some of the men removed the earth from a recent grave, she started singing some strange incantation.

“ ‘ At last the men uncovered the corpse, and carried it in a piece of sheeting towards the central stone of the burial ground. Then they withdrew, leaving the woman alone. Now, mark you, Bill, that man had been dead over a fortnight. . . . ’

“ He passed his hand over his forehead, and it was wet with perspiration.

“ ‘ The woman, by now, was in a state of frenzy, and the harsh wailing from the other women who were seated in a circle around her seemed to madden her still more. And suddenly she began to shine with a faint radiance ; I suppose she'd rubbed phosphorus on herself. A few seconds passed and she seemed to be on fire, while the chant grew louder and louder, and then abruptly stopped as the woman advanced to the corpse.’

“ Once again he paused and shook himself like a dog.

“ ‘ I'll spare you the revolting details of the next few minutes—you wouldn't believe them if I told you ; but five minutes later she withdrew and the dead man was sitting up—alive. I don't profess to explain it ; I can only tell

you what I saw. What power had entered that corpse to endow it with the capability of speech and movement I know not; whether it came from the woman or whether it was some disembodied spirit—possibly that of the man himself—I can't say. All I do know, is that in the ordinary accepted meaning of words, the dead lived.

“ ‘ Now he had been an ordinary peasant in life—a man of no account; but the instant he sat up the whole circle prostrated itself around him. Grave, dread questions were asked him as to the life to come, and in every case the answer was coherent and sensible. And then my host intimated that I might ask him a question. Without thinking I said the first thing that came into my head.

“ ‘ What does the future hold for me? ’

“ ‘ For a while there was no reply, and, glancing up, I saw that the corpse was shaking uncontrollably. Then it spoke:

“ ‘ Sleeping and waking you will be haunted by horror. Day and night it will be with you until the end. Then it will pass away.’

“ ‘ That was all, and shortly after the ceremony ended. The corpse relaxed and was placed back in its grave, and I accompanied my host back to the village. He was silent and distraught, occasionally looking at me with an expression almost of fear in his deep-set eyes. But he said nothing, and as for me, my

mind was far too occupied with what I had seen to want to talk. Of the answer to my question I barely thought ; it seemed such an insignificant part of such an amazing whole.

“ ‘ I left the next day, and all the leading men of the village assembled to bid me good-bye. With the morning had come an amused scepticism, though I was careful not to show it. Ventriloquism undoubtedly : my eyes tricked by the smoky light. And as for the answer to my question, I forced myself to think of that ridiculous story of Oscar Wilde’s—“ Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime.” ’ ”

“ ‘ But there was no levity on the part of the Arabs : only a grave and dignified concern. I felt that they looked on me already as doomed and as such I was entitled to their commiseration and respect. And two months later I had forgotten all about it except as a strange and interesting experience.’ ”

“ He paused to relight his cigar, and I made no comment. In my own mind I felt tolerably certain that his morning reflections were correct and that he had been tricked, but the point was immaterial. The important part was still to come.

“ ‘ So much is fact,’ he went on after a while— ‘ cold, hard fact. How it was done matters not. All that concerns us is that I saw and heard what I have told you. Now we come to the second chapter. I was in Biskra when it

started—the thing that has gone on ever since. Never a night passes without it, Bill—so that I fight against sleep; and now hardly a day passes without it too. It's a dream at night, always the same in every detail; by day, God knows what it is.

“ ‘ It starts with a kind of luminous cloud which swirls and dances as it retreats before me. Every moment I think I am going to catch it up—only for it to elude me always. But I know what's coming, and I wait—longing for it to happen. Out of the cloud there forms gradually a woman's face—lovely beyond the powers of description. And she beckons me to come to her. I strive madly to reach her, only to be eluded once more. I want to take her in my arms: and I swear she wants me to take her. But—never have I done so. Always just out of reach: always just beyond me. And then—sometimes very soon, sometimes after what seems hours—the horror comes. I know it's coming because I can see the look of frozen terror in her eyes, and I'm powerless to prevent it. And the horror—how shall I describe it? Something comes flapping round my head, buffeting me in the face: something that beats at me like the wing of some hideous bird till I feel smothered and choking: something that leaves behind it still the awful smell of carrion. I tell you, Bill,’ he shouted, ‘ I smell that smell: it's still lingering with me

when I wake up sweating and dripping with fear.'

" Then he pulled himself together, and went on calmly.

" ' The first time it happened I put it down as an ordinary nightmare and thought no more about it. And then two or three nights later I had precisely the same dream. That was a year ago, Bill ; for the last six months I've had that dream every night. The details may vary a little, but it's always the same woman, and it's always the same ghastly horror at the end. I'm fighting for my life against that smothering, fetid terror.'

" ' Do you know the woman, Jack ? ' I said, ' Is she anyone you've ever seen ? ' "

" He shook his head.

" ' No, I've never seen her : I'm certain of that.'

" And even as he spoke his face turned grey, and he stared over my head into the shadows of the room.

" ' My God ! ' he whispered, ' she's just behind you.'

" I swung round in my chair : there was no one there.

" ' You thought you saw her, did you ? ' I said quietly.

" He shook himself, and the grey look slowly left his face.

" ' That's the second part of the terror, Bill'

he muttered. 'She's gone now, but three months ago she started to come to me by day as well. I've seen her on board ship, in restaurants, in the street—always beckoning and imploring me to come to her. The first few times, so vivid was the hallucination that I thought she was really flesh and blood. I followed her—madly ; to find she'd disappeared. She'd never been there at all. "Day and night it will be with you to the end." That's what that foul corpse said, and, dear heavens ! it's true. It's true, Bill—I tell you : true. It's with me day and night, for even when it isn't actually there the thought that it may come at any moment haunts me. Do you wonder I said I was going mad ? '

"He leaned forward, resting his head on his hands, and I did some pretty powerful thinking. Remember I knew Jack's character, and his almost aggressive stolidity. He was the last man in the world to give way to hysterical fears : this thing that he had told me was as real to him as I was. You might call it a delusion, an hallucination—what you liked : there's no virtue in a name. To him it was reality, and as such it had to be treated. And it seemed to me that the cure would have to come largely from himself. And it would have to come soon. Otherwise, in very truth he might go mad.

" 'Well, Bill ? ' he said, looking at me with haggard eyes. 'What think you ? '

“ ‘ It’s difficult to say, Jack,’ I answered. ‘ I would like a little longer to think it over. But there are a few things that seem to me to stick out as obvious. In the first place, take what you see by day. Now you *know*, you’ve *proved* that what you see is non-existent. *The woman is not there.* Therefore you know that she is merely a figment of your imagination. Don’t misunderstand me : she seems very real. But she isn’t—and with one side of your mind you know it. Now, have you tried fighting with that side of your mind ? Have you tried throwing a loaf of bread at this vision : kicking it hard : telling it to go to hell : forcing yourself to believe that you see nothing. Or have you been content to acquiesce in what you imagine you see, and not help the rational side of your mind to fight ? Salvation, Jack, has got to come from you yourself. I’ll help to the limit of my weight : but it’s you, and you alone, who have got to come to final grips with this thing ! ’

“ ‘ I get you,’ he said quietly. ‘ But what about the dream ? What about that ghastly end when she has vanished ? ’

“ ‘ I believe, Jack, that the first thing to tackle is the daylight manifestation. If you can get rid of that, it will strengthen your subconscious mind to fight the dream. And I think ’—it was a sudden inspiration that came to me— ‘ that I can give you an explanation of the

terror at the end. The clue lies in the fetid smell you imagine. Now, in that atrocious experiment you saw carried out, didn't the same smell of carrion hang round the grave yard?'

" 'Why, yes!' he cried eagerly, 'it did.'

" 'Precisely,' I answered. 'Now, nothing will make me believe that what you described to me *really* happened that night. But you were in a state of partial hypnosis, induced by the chanting and the lighting effect, and you imagined it. And I know enough about such matters to realise your intense danger in being in such a condition in the circumstances. Your mind was a partial blank, ready to sop up impressions like blotting-paper sops up liquid. And one of the most vivid impressions that it absorbed was the fundamental one of the foul smell around you. And that impression comes back to you now each night. What the connection between it and the woman is, I don't profess to say. Don't forget that in the subconscious mind we have a jumble of disconnected thoughts, unlinked by any reason or argument. And for some strange reason the vision of this woman, and this beating, suffocating stench are joined together. Get rid of one, and you'll get rid of the other.'

" He was impressed, I could see, by my purposely materialistic arguments. And when two hours later he went to bed—I insisted on

his stopping with me that night—he seemed a good deal calmer. I gave him a sleeping draught and waited until he'd gone off: then I got a book and settled myself down in his room for an all-night vigil.

“It was three-thirty when it began, and I woke with a start from a doze. And by the light of my reading-lamp I watched the terror come. Jack was sitting up in bed, his face convulsed with horror, beating with his hands at the empty air in front of him. He was croaking at it hoarsely, and his great fists were dealing savage blows at—nothing. I went over and stood beside him, and then there happened the thing which to this day I can't recall without a pricking at the back of my scalp. As distinctly as I can smell this cigar, did I smell the sickly stench of putrid carrion by his bed. And then it was gone, and Jack, wild-eyed and desperate, was staring up at me from the pillows.

“‘Again,’ he said in a shaking voice—‘I've just been through it again, Bill.’

“‘I know you have, old man,’ I answered quietly. ‘I've been with you the whole time.’

“He got up unsteadily and peeled off his pyjamas, and you could have wrung the sweat out of them on to the floor. Without a word he rubbed himself down with a bath towel; then, putting on a dressing-gown, he lit a cigarette.

“ ‘Every night, Bill. I can’t go on. For God’s sake, man, do something.’

“ And that was the devil of it—what to do. I didn’t tell him so, of course, but that one staggering thing—the fact that I had noticed the smell—had knocked every idea of mine to smithereens. I realised that I was up against something beyond ordinary medical skill. And—what to do. . . .

“ ‘Gad! how he fought during the next week. I kept him with me, and one night he nearly caused my butler to give notice. He bunged a glass full of whisky and soda straight at him, and then cried triumphantly, ‘It went clean through her, Bill.’ Unfortunately the butler was not equally transparent, and objected to receiving heavy cut glasses full of liquid in the chest.

“ But the dreams went on, and at length I insisted on him seeing a brain specialist. But it was no use, and ultimately I began to despair. So did he.

“ ‘To the end, Bill,’ he said one day. ‘To the end. Pray God it comes soon.’

“ ‘Then it will pass away,’ I reminded him. ‘Don’t forget that, Jack.’

“ But he only shrugged his shoulders: I think he had very nearly given up hope.

“ And then one night came the staggering *dénouement*. We were dining at Claridge’s—just the two of us alone. I used to make him

go to restaurants and theatres in the hope of taking his mind off it, and as we were finishing our fish I happened to look up. A man and a woman had just come in, and the woman was quite one of the most lovely things I've ever seen. She was dressed in pale green, and my eyes followed her as she went to the table reserved for them. Head waiters were bowing obsequiously, so they were evidently not unknown. And I began wondering who they were.

“ ‘Devilish good-looking woman just come in, Jack,’ I said idly. ‘Three tables away on your right, in pale green. Don’t turn round for a moment: she’s looking this way.’

“ I saw him glance at her a few moments later, and the next instant I thought he’d gone mad. He was staring at me with his eyes blazing and his face a chalky white.

“ ‘You see her, Bill?’ he gasped. ‘She’s real? You saw her come in?’

“ ‘Of course I saw her come in,’ I cried in amazement.

“ ‘She is the woman of my dream,’ he said stupidly. ‘The woman who haunts me.’

“ ‘Steady, old man,’ I stammered urgently, while I tried to grasp this vast essential fact. ‘People are looking at you. You say that woman is the woman of your dream. You’re sure?’

"He laughed shortly.

"Don't be a damned fool. Do you think I could make a mistake over *that*?"

"And you've never seen her before?"

"Never in my life. But one thing I'm certain of: I'm never going to lose sight of her again. To the end, Bill—to the end. And she and I have got to go there together."

"It was useless to argue, and anyway the situation had gone beyond me. Half dazedly I heard him send for a head waiter, and ask who they were.

"'Kreseltein' he said to me slowly after the waiter had gone. 'One of the South African diamond kings. Returning in the *Arundel Castle* next Friday week. To-morrow, Bill, I go to the Union Castle office in Fenchurch Street. I also travel by the *Arundel Castle* next Friday week.'

"He was like a man bereft of his senses for the next ten days. The Kreselteins were staying at the Ritz, and Jack haunted the place like a detective. He lunched there, he dined there, he very nearly breakfasted there, and as the date of sailing drew nearer he grew more and more excited. And there was another strange development: from the night when he saw her first at Claridge's the dream and the daylight hallucinations completely ceased.

"I dined with him at the Ritz on the night before he sailed, and the Kreselteins were a

few tables away. And he was his old self again.

“ ‘It’s flesh and blood, Bill, now’ he said, ‘and flesh and blood I can cope with.’

“ ‘Tell me, Jack’ I asked, ‘as a matter of interest, has Mrs. Kreseltein ever seemed as if your face was familiar to her.’

“ ‘Never’ he answered decisively. ‘On the occasions when I’ve happened to catch her eye, she has always given me the blank look of a perfect stranger.’

“ ‘I wonder who she was?’ I remarked.

“ ‘Well, I’ve been making a few inquiries, if you want to know,’ he said. ‘She’s English, and she married Kreseltein when she was quite a girl. He’s a German Jew, and I gather from what I’ve heard a pretty foul swine. He flies into the most maniacal rages if she even looks at another man. There’s some story apparently about his having piugged someone in Kimberley with a revolver, who, he thought, was making love to his wife.’

“ ‘You’d better watch it, Jack,’ I said gravely.

“ ‘My dear old Bill,’ he answered, ‘I’m no particular slouch with a gun myself. But even if I couldn’t hit a haystack at five yards, it would make no difference. That woman is all that stands between me and insanity, and so I’ve got to go through with it. If I didn’t go in the *Arundel Castle* to-morrow, as sure as I am

sitting here now the dream would start again. For some strange inscrutable reason Mrs. Kreseltein is going to be mixed up in my life. Her destiny and mine are going to meet—at the end. After that—God alone knows. But it will pass away; the horror will be gone.’

“ He stared at me gravely.

“ ‘ I’m under no delusion, Bill. I’ve got to go through the horror in reality, and I’ve got to come out on the other side. Only then will its power be dead ! ’

“ The next day I saw him off in the boat train at Waterloo. He wrung my hand hard as he thanked me for the little I’d been able to do, and from my heart I wished him good luck. Then the train steamed out, and in almost the last carriage I saw the Kreselteins. He was deep in the morning paper; she was staring out of the window at the people on the platform. And her face was the face of a woman who was tired unto death. But lovely—Lord! how lovely—in spite of its weariness.”

The Doctor paused and mixed himself a whisky and soda.

“ And with that ended the first part of the story of Jack Burnham,” he continued after a while. “ Weeks turned into months, and I heard nothing more.’ Jack was always a bad letter writer, and even this time he proved no exception. He had vanished into the blue as

usual, and I had nothing for it but to bottle up my intense curiosity as well as I could.

“ And then, one day came the first news, and, knowing what I did, it was grave enough in all conscience. It was in the morning paper with head-lines all complete :

“ MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF SOUTH AFRICAN
DIAMOND KING
STILL NO TRACE OF MR. OTTO
KRESELTEIN.

“ ‘ The disappearance of Mr. Otto Kreseltein, the well-known owner of race-horses, and one of South Africa’s wealthiest millionaires, grows more mysterious daily. It will be recalled that he left his house in Johannesburg somewhat suddenly about a fortnight ago, stating that he was going north into Rhodesia. From that day no further news has been heard of him. The station-master at Bulawayo states that he believes a gentleman answering to Mr. Kreseltein’s description was on board the train bound for the Victoria Falls, but there were so many tourists travelling that he is unable to be certain. In the meantime an active search is being organised. It is thought possible that Mr. Kreseltein may be suffering from temporary loss of memory.’

“ Three weeks later came another announcement.

“ ‘The gravest fears must now, we regret to state, be entertained concerning Mr. Otto Kreseltein. No trace has been found of him; no word has been received for over five weeks, and in view of the fact that he was in the middle of a big scheme of amalgamation when he left Johannesburg, and told his managing director that he only proposed to be absent for four days, it is impossible to avoid fearing that something very serious has happened.’

“ Once again weeks passed by, and at last it was generally assumed that he was dead. Legally, of course, the assumption could not be entertained as yet; but from every other point of view his death was regarded as certain. And still I had no line from Jack to assuage my curiosity. For, inwardly, I was convinced that he could throw some light on the matter, though no mention of his name had ever been made in the papers connecting him with Kreseltein in any way.

“ And then, six months later, he walked into my consulting-room. He looked a bit pale, and fine drawn, but his eye was clear and his smile was the smile of the Jack Burnham of old.

“ ‘I’ve been to the end, Bill,’ he cried. ‘I’ve come out on the other side. And it has passed away.’

“ ‘Why the devil haven’t you dropped me a line, Jack,’ I demanded.

“ ‘Because, old man,’ he said gravely, ‘there are certain things it is better not to put in writing. Have you seen the papers this morning?’

“ He held out a copy of *The Times* to me, and indicated a paragraph.

“ ‘The mystery of the disappearance of Mr. Otto Kreseltein has at last been solved. Two Englishmen, while shooting in the district north of Bulawayo, discovered the remnants of a skeleton lying behind a big rock. Vultures and other beasts of prey had long since rendered any chance of identification impossible, but some fragments of cloth and part of an envelope supplied the necessary clues. There is no doubt that the skeleton is all that remains of the unfortunate diamond magnate, whose sudden disappearance caused such a stir some months ago. What Mr. Kreseltein was doing there will probably remain an unsolved problem.’

“ I put down the paper and glanced at Jack.

“ ‘An unsolved problem,’ he said with a faint smile. ‘Except to me, Bill, and one other. And now to you. I shot him.’

“ ‘The devil you dig!’ I said. ‘Is it indiscreet to ask why?’

“ ‘Largely because of the fact that of all

the devils in human form I have ever met, Otto Kreseltein was the worst,' he answered grimly. 'He lived like a swine, and he died like one, and you can take it from me that he's no loss.'

"He flung himself into a chair and lit a cigarette.

"'I'll tell you the yarn, Bill,' he said. 'I guess you've a right to know. It was after we left Madeira that I made Joan's acquaintance—his wife, I mean. He was mad keen on bridge, and with three others of the same kidney he spent the whole day in the smoking-room. And I talked to her. It was a case of love right from the very beginning—with both of us, I think. Even if it hadn't been for the special reason which actuated me; even if I'd never been haunted by the horror, things would have come to a head. I'm going to marry her, you know. . . . She's in London . . .

"'However—to get back to it. After I'd known her for a few days I told her everything. I felt absolutely certain that something was going to happen some time, and I wanted her to be prepared. At first she hardly took it seriously, but after a while I convinced her that I wasn't fooling. And I think the thing that impressed her most was when I told her how I'd hit your butler in the chest with a whisky and soda.

"'Towards the end of the voyage we grew

a bit careless, I suppose. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was with her from after breakfast until we went to bed. And we danced a good deal together. Off and on in the intervals of bridge her husband had joined us, and I saw enough of him to fill in the gaps left by Joan. A thin-lipped, domineering swine, Bill; a man of the most colossal conceit—and a cad. A clever cad, and an able cad; but once or twice when he spoke to his wife my hands tingled to get at him. She might have been a junior clerk getting told off.

“ ‘ ‘ He’d said nothing to me about being so much with his wife, and he’d said nothing to her. So it came as rather a surprise when, the night before we arrived in Cape Town, he came up to me as I was strolling up and down the deck waiting for the dinner bugle.

“ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ I have just been—ah—speaking to my wife, Mr. Burnham, ’ ’ he said softly. “ ‘ ‘ And she quite understands that her acquaintanceship with you must cease forthwith. Should you take any steps to renew it, I shall have to deal with you in a way you may not like ! ”

“ ‘ ‘ And it was the way he said it, Bill, that finished me. Foolish perhaps, but I lost my temper—badly.

“ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ When your wife tells me the same thing, Mr. Kreseltein, I shall obey immediately. Until then I would be vastly obliged if you would go to hell and remain there. Your general appear-

ance is not conducive to an appetite for dinner."

" "And then, Bill, the primitive man came out in him. His face was red with passion, and he shot out a great hairy hand and caught me by the wrist. He was strong—but I was stronger. I removed his hand, and I held him powerless for a few seconds.

" " "No, Mr. Kreseltein, I win on those lines," I said. "You'd better treat your wife better in future or I may have to give you a caning."

" "Foolish, I frankly admit—but I was seeing red, old man. And the next morning as we got off the boat it wasn't red—it was scarlet. For on Joan's arms I saw two bruises, and I realised how he had spoken to her the night before. And for a moment or two I went mad.

" "I went straight up to him in the Customs, and I got his arm in a grip I knew of old. I swung him round, and he faced me livid with fury.

" " "If I see another bruise on your wife's arm like that, you damned swine," I muttered, "I'll first break your arm—so," and, by Gad! Bill, as near as makes no odds I broke it then, so that he let out a squawk of pain—"and then I'll flog you till you scream for mercy."

" "There was murder in his face when I left him, and I cursed myself for a fool. His

fury was bound to be vented on Joan. And on the way up in the boat train I made up my mind: I'd take her away. I felt pretty certain that she'd come. And when she rang me up at the Carlton Hotel in Jo'burg I wasn't surprised.

" " " I can't stand it, Jack," she said. " He's become a devil incarnate. He—he thrashed me last night."

" " God! old man—that finished it.

" " " Pack what you want, dear," I said, " and come to the Carlton. We leave for Durban to-night. I'm going to see your husband now."

" " I rang off before she could say anything, and went round to his office. There was some meeting on, but I went straight into his private office. I suppose I looked a bit wild, for he rose to his feet and started opening a drawer in his desk. And I got to him just before he drew his gun.

" " " Shall we discuss this matter with or without an audience? " I remarked.

" " The audience settled that and left rapidly.

" " " You thrashed your wife last night, Kreseltein," I said quietly. " We will now have a hair of the dog that bit her."

" " Well, Bill, I broke the stick on him, and it was a stoutish weapon. And when I'd finished with him I told him I was taking her to Durban that night. He lay there huddled

up in his chair with the malevolence of all hell in his eyes.

“ “ “ I shall not divorce her,” he croaked. “ And in addition to that I shall make it my business to have you followed wherever you go, so that your relationship may be known.”

“ “ I was on the point of starting in on him again, when he suddenly sat up and stared at me.

“ “ “ I admit that you are stronger than I am, Mr. Burnham,” he said, “ but there are other ways of settling affairs of this sort. Unless you’re afraid.”

“ “ “ Get on with it,” I snapped at him.

“ “ “ I suggest revolvers,” he remarked. “ A shooting trip in Rhodesia—from which one of us will not return.”

“ “ “ I agree,” I said instantly. “ And we start at once.”

“ “ A sardonic smile twitched round his lips.

“ “ “ To-night,” he answered, and with that I left him.

“ “ It was Joan who interpreted that smile.

“ “ “ My dear,” she said; “ it’s murder. Otto is supposed to be one of the half-dozen best revolver shots in the world.”

“ “ “ I guessed he’d probably shot before when he suggested it,” I laughed. “ But, don’t you see, dear heart, that it’s the only way. You know I’m not a complete dud myself.”

“ “ And so I pacified her as best I could,

though, to tell you the truth, I wasn't feeling too easy myself. I *am* a good revolver shot, but I lay no claim to being an expert.'

" He lit another cigarette, and his face was grim.

" ' We staged it well, Bill ; no one suspected. And four days later we met in a belt of scrub and desert about fifty miles north of Bulawayo. We were to stand back to back at thirty paces, and at the word " Fire " we were to swing round and shoot. We tossed for who was to speak—he won. And I, like a fool, trusted him. He plugged me through the back before he spoke. I heard the report ; felt the sharp, searing pain go through me, and even as my knees gave from under me and I crashed, for the second time I cursed myself for a fool. I thought it was the end, Bill ; I couldn't see clearly, though he was standing over me shaking with laughter. And then there occurred the most amazing thing. The scene seemed to fade out from my mind, and I was back again in that Arab graveyard. But this time I was the corpse. I tell you, I could see the ring of natives around me, and that dreadful woman coming at me. I could see her shining and luminous ; I could hear the chanting ; I could feel her as she threw herself on me. And suddenly—it's incredible, I know, but it is so—I felt strength come into my arms which had previously been numb and powerless. I felt my right arm lift,

until it pointed at the woman's heart. And dimly, as if from a great distance, I heard a report. Then everything faded out, though the last act had still to come.

“ ‘The dream came back. I saw Joan beckoning to me, with that same dear elusive smile, and then she faded away and I knew the horror was coming. Something came flapping round my head, buffeting me in the face, and I beat at it as always. The stench of carrion was ghastly; the smothering feeling more overpowering than ever before. On and on it went, that dream, and I couldn't wake up. Until at last my eyes forced themselves open and I was awake. Vultures, Bill—dozens of them. One great brute on my chest, and others flapping around me. And a few yards away was something that lay on the ground covered with them.

“ ‘And then everything grew hazy again. I have a dim recollection of the filthy brutes suddenly hopping away—of seeing the thing they had left behind them—of realising it was what was left of Kreseltein. I saw Joan's face too: imagined she was leaning over me. And Bill—she was. That wasn't a dream, as I found out later. She'd followed us, and she saved my life.

“ ‘Somehow she got me to a native kraal—the men carried me, and there I lay for three months. As soon as I was fit to be left

she went back to Johannesburg, and there later on I joined her. For she'd been with me to the end, and the horror had passed away.

“ ‘ Can you account for it, Bill ? ’ ”

“ I couldn't—and to this day I can't. He married her, of course, and there has never been any return of the horror. But what was the strange power that entered the arm of a man wellnigh dead, and directed the aim of his revolver at the heart of Otto Kreseltein ? ”