



SINNERS IN HEAVEN

BY CLIVE ARDEN

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(Continued)

"I wonder," suggested Barbara, when they strolled together one night, "if we ought to teach them Christianity."

Alan looked down, smiling at these lingering instincts of the parson's daughter; but shook his head.

"If they learn gentleness, kindness and cleanliness, don't you think they are acquiring the spirit of it?" he asked.

"These will permeate, paving the way, if you think it necessary to teach them Christian creeds later. But don't upset their old faiths yet—they are not ready. It's always a dangerous thing. If it's hurried, it's fatal."

She thrust her arm through his. "You're awfully wise, Alan mine! You seem to know just how to manage the natives. Why is it, I wonder?"

"Because I care for them. You can usually understand those you love, if you try. See how well I manage you!" She laughed; then felt his arm. "D'you know, you're getting thin Alan."

"Hard work."

"I have noticed it in your face, too. You mustn't work so incessantly—there's no need."

"Isn't there? Ah, Barbara! I think there is."

She looked up quickly; but he had turned his face seaward; only the grim set mouth was visible. The woman in her thrilled to him, for she understood. Clinging his arm tightly, she laid her face against it.

"Dear!" she murmured.

"I have been here nearly a year," was his only response.

"I know."

They walked on in silence a while, passing near Roova's hut. Just outside the entrance the native and his wife sat close together, the youngest child asleep in the man's arms, both too much absorbed in low-toned conversation to notice their approach. The natives' love may be little above that of an animal for its mate; but it contents them.

Barbara's clasp tightened, as these two outcasts from all laws looked upon the group.

"They are very happy. Alan, I often watch them."

"So do I—my G—d!"

She glanced up in surprise at the passionate tone in his voice.

"I sometimes wish I had never brought them here," he continued. She was silent a moment; then drew his hand swiftly up to her face. With her lips against it, she whispered, so low that he had to bend down to catch her words:

"Do you ever look at—those little ones—and think—supposing—if—only?"

"Barbara! I do."

He turned and drew her into his arms. "I have thought of it all—over and over again! I think of nothing else."

The relief of speaking, for once, about the theme which lay heavy upon their hearts caused discretion to be thrown to the winds. "It haunts me!" she cried passionately, clinging to him. "It haunts me day and night. I can't bear to see them. I've tried—"

"And I, by heaven!"

Loosing her abruptly, he threw himself down upon the rock outside the hut and bowed his head in his hands. What was passing through his mind she could only surmise by the chaos of emotion which, now the barriers were down, surged through her own. All these weeks both had struggled to forget the problems menacing them. But the very straws at which they had caught proved to be, so to speak, serpents in disguise. For nature, crude and unattended, ruled this island. By her inexorable laws these primitive people were guided, unabashed, in all good faith. And among these subtle forces working around them, undermining the very ground beneath their feet, the two were flung together in a solitude, a familiarity, so maddening yet so entrancing, that their senses were inflamed at every turn. Escape was impossible. Wherever they moved they were confronted with their own rising passion. Regarded as man and wife they shrank now from visiting the settlement together. Throughout the days each constantly surprised the other's furtive, hungry, troubled regard. Conversation became often strained, demonstrativeness between them a danger. Throughout the night each lay listening to the other's movements and breathing, through the frail bamboo partition. No longer could they slumber careless, bidden, hold mid-night talks. . . . But, since the building of the palisade, neither had dared put into words the fear rising ever higher in their hearts.

He uncovered his face at last, and

looked up at her, a grim defiance in his eyes.

"We can't go on like this. It's damnable! Barbara—come here."

Hesitating a little, not understanding the unusual expression of his face, she went toward the hand he held out. He caught her roughly by the arm, pulling her down to her knees at his side, gazing into her eyes for several seconds without speaking—searching, proving her in some inexplicable manner.

"How much do you love me?" he demanded, at last.

She looked startled at his peremptory tone. "Why do you ask such questions?" But she collapsed against him.

"With my very life," she whispered passionately. "I should die if I lost you now."

He strained her close, pressing hot lips to hers. "How far would you go with me? How far?" he muttered eagerly.

"To eternity!" she murmured, half faint with the sudden passion sweeping them both away. The arms holding her were trembling.

"If we never get rescued? How far then? How far, Barbara?"

Only a little stifled gasp answered him.

All the soft night odors of the forest were stealing down to the beach, blending with the pungent smell of hot earth, mingling with the languorous murmur of the tide. Close in his arms, a weak craving to surrender, to capitulate before the forces arrayed against them both, swept over her. It was easy to let all else go. . . . Twice she opened her own lips, but no words would come; only her eyes told him that which caused his senses to reel. His grip tightened, so that he hurt her; but the pain was an exquisite joy.

The animal in man, longing fiercely for its mate, had been let loose in Alan, stronger for all these months of temptation and repression. The future at this moment lay in his hands—and he knew it, exulted in the knowledge. . . .

Half unconsciously he rose to his feet, lifting her, unresisting, with him. Her warm young body lay acquiescent, at his mercy. He took a step toward the hut; cast one dazed look round the darkening beach—

From Roova's dwelling the faint cry of a child came to them, wafted upon the soft night breeze down the bay.

The girl heard it, and raised her head. The man heard it, and caught his breath. Their eyes met.

She slipped from his arms with a long quivering sigh. They stood facing each other, struggling with the turbulence of their emotion.

"Reverberations! Do you—remember?" she whispered, at last.

He made no reply, continuing to gaze upon her face, and she went on speaking, almost to herself, standing before him with the darkness closing around her.

"The vast harmony in which each note has unlimited effect upon every other note." You taught me that. Do you remember? Life's harmony, you said. We—we are forgetting."

He turned away and walked to the lagoon, standing there for several minutes, his back toward her, his hands covering his face. When he returned, he had, she could see, regained his self-control. Coming close, he laid his hands upon her shoulders.

"Are we perhaps troubling over what may never happen? Barbara—there might be no—no 'reverberations.' There are not, always."

She smiled at him, a smile that was almost maternal. "That's true. But—" She broke off, a little catch in her breath, her eyes dwelling dreamily upon the face above her own, as if picturing something far off and passing beautiful. . . . "But it wouldn't be fair," she muttered to herself.

A flush mounted to his cheek in meeting and interpreting the look which, momentarily, his own eyes reflected.

"The thought of you troubles me most," he owned. "The question of 'fairness' is an open one. This is a grand free life for anybody who—knows no other. The world might think it unfair. But the world doesn't count with us. We are savages now. But you—you! Oh, my darling. . . . Nature is so hard on women."

Her face was hidden on his breast. He went on diffidently, whispering into the dark hair.

"The question of 'reverberations' shall be yours entirely. Do you understand? If you decide not to face it all—"

"Ah! no, no, no!" She raised her head quickly. "Alan, I love you for that. But I won't shirk! Don't ever think I mean that." She turned her luminous eyes seaward. "Imagine a

little home with just you and me and a dear little nest all our own. . . . Oh! it's cruel, cruel!" Passionately she gripped his shoulders. "I long for it all—I ache inside. Sometimes I dream we have it together; and then—then I wake up—"

"But we can have it, here, now," he interrupted eagerly. "Only the forms would be absent; the spirit would be there. Surely, in these circumstances, we can make our own laws?" He took her clinging hands in his. "Barbara, have you thought over the matter? Faced it squarely?"

"My brain has gone round and round like a whirlpool for months! I don't know what I think."

"Well, think this," he said gently: "Marriage laws and forms vary with every creed, and in every country, to suit temperament or—environment. And everywhere, certain conventions are necessary. For God's sake, don't imagine I'm an advocate of loose morality! But you and I are cast off from all rules save those of our own making. Have you considered that? These natives—or Indians, Turks, Christians—all have some ideal which they embody in certain marriage rites and laws."

She hung upon his words, clasping tightly the hands holding her own. "Yes?" she breathed, when he paused.

"Well—we are adrift from every one which applies to us. We can't obey them in the letter. We only have them in our hearts."

"You mean," she whispered, "you think it would be right to form our own—marriage rites?"

"I do. Before God Barbara, I do. To me, our wedding would be as sacred and lawful here, with the sea for music, the birds for witness, as in a crowded church. I want you always to remember that."

The waves echoed faintly upon the shore; the wind stirred the palm leaves in their enclosure; otherwise the whole world seemed waiting, in a stillness like death, for her reply.

"I believe you, Alan," she murmured at last. "I had not thought of it at all in this light. It would be the same to me, in my heart. But—should we be right? Suppose—afterward—we were rescued?"

"Well? Then we should at once obey the letter. Here we can obey the spirit. But isn't that the greater? In



Lifted Her Bodily and Carried Her.

when you know."

Then he rose to his feet, lingering beside her for a time, a world of almost maternal tenderness in his steady regard. But she made no reply. With a little gesture of helplessness, he turned, and walked back to the lagoon.

Croft, in old days, could not have been called a strongly sexed man. All the vitality of his nature went into other channels. Now, when, for the first time, passion had come to him, it found him bereft of all those other outlets to his abundant energy. It shook him with fierce intensity. In the past, his whole concentration, every ounce of brain and strength, had been given to his work and inventions. Now the same splendid force, welling up and overflowing, was concentrated upon woman—a channel half closed against him. Being half closed caused mortification that if it had been entirely shut and barred.

Fate—God—whatever the Unseen Power was called—had hurled them



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something restrained him from taking the wistful little face in his hands, much as he longed to do so. He turned and strode off up the bay. The omission was significant. They had struck a chord too deep ever to return to the delightful camaraderie of the past. Demonstrativeness held a hidden menace behind all its charm. A new wall, vastly different from the old one, yet no less baffling, formed again between them. Once more, each intuitively hid behind reserve yet hung upon the other's slightest action. Once more, only surface topics were allowed admittance. Once more, Alan spent long hours away. . . .

One day, before their second Christmas, Meana fell sick. Barbara, who of late had shunned too much contact with that happy family, fetched Lalo and his sister to play in the enclosure. Children's merry laughter echoed around their home; and Alan, instead of going off as usual, stayed to play with them.

Barbara watched him, all her heart shining in her eyes. There was nobody to put the fear of tabu into Lalo's frizzy head. The "great white chief" told him marvelous stories of animals never seen upon their island. He became a wonderful horse galloping round the hut, with Lalo upon his back; then a roaring lion, that roared most terribly. There were swings in the hammock, and games of which the little natives had never heard.

And all the time, while joining in their play, Barbara watched her man. Often, too, she found him watching her. . . . How happy these little ones were in their life of freedom, knowing no other. . . . The conventions of previous years seemed very remote now, very unreal. . . . His point of view was, surely, more common sense. . . . As the day wore on, she felt more and more silent, a terrible aching hunger in her heart. . . . Must their two natures age here in barren purposelessness? Never be fulfilled? Why? Because far-off rules of society, which could not reach them, would be broken? How trivial such things seemed here, where the world was still in its beginning. . . .

In the evening, the tiny girl, tired after excitement of the day, grew sleepy and fretful. Alan stopped an uproarious game, sat down upon a rock, and lifted her in his arms. She lay there contentedly, her little black head nestled in his shoulder.

A pain that, in its poignancy, was almost physical, gripped Barbara's heart. Great tears welled up suddenly and ran down her cheeks. Moved by an irresistible impulse she darted forward and snatched the child from him. "No, no, no! I can't bear—that! Let them go home. . . . It is time they went home. . . ."

For a moment he gazed at her, bereft of speech. Then he rose, and called Lalo.

"I will take them home," he said quietly.

When he returned, she had sunk upon the rock he had vacated. With eyes tragic in their intentness, she watched him approach. He came close to her. With one of his old swift movements he raised her chin with his hand, so that she met the penetration of his gaze.

"Barbara!" he muttered, "this will drive us mad. We are human, not gods."

She drew away, hiding her face in her hands. The very touch of his fingers sent an electric current racing through her veins. To continue like this was becoming daily more impossible.

Presently she rose, not daring to speak, and turned from him into the hut.

Blindly, bewildered, Barbara groped her way, step by step, through a maze of uncertainty. The day with the native children had been a revelation.

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the world it is the reverse, often. The spirit is violated."

"Suppose," she began again, with a shudder, "only one of us were rescued?"

"Don't conjure up imaginary horrors."

She drew away, looking around the bay with the same pathetic helplessness that had struck him so poignantly on Christmas eve.

"Oh!" she muttered, "it is a terrible problem! If only there were somebody outside it all, to help! I am so afraid our very love may guide us—wrongly."

"No," he said quickly. "It won't, because it is love—not that other word beginning with the same letter. Besides, it is the motive of the heart which counts, in all problems."

She turned away, covering her face with her hands.

"What can we do? What can we do?" The words came brokenly, pathetically, to the other outcast from all laws. He was conscious tonight, more than ever before, of their growing, dominant need of each other. Had he striven in his old arrogance she would not, he knew, have resisted his appeal. But the great keynote was tuning his nature as well as hers. All the chivalry latent in his being rose to his heart, casting out passion. With infinite delicacy he went to her and put his arms about her.

"We are down among the deep chords together, now," he whispered. "But together—always together."

With a choking cry she turned and flung herself upon his breast, clinging to him, the only bulwark of her life.

"I can't decide yet. Oh! I can't—decide; I can't decide—" And she burst into a passion of tears.

The man, with the divine instinct of understanding now awakened, realized acutely all that the girl was suffering. He held her quivering form close, saying nothing. There was nothing he could say. Her own soul must now fight out this battle between the old instincts of a lifetime and those of a world beyond reach of civilized rule.

Presently, when she grew calmer, he lifted her bodily and carried her into the hut. He placed her upon her bed; then knelt for a moment, and laid his cheek to hers.

"The decision lies in your hands," he whispered. "Come and tell me

Never before had she realized the passion of longing which possessed her. . . . And by her own self-revelation she judged the suffering of the man waiting for her decision. The claims of another's need grew insistent, dominating. . . . More and more did the life of previous years seem pale and unreal. . . . The fears for the future, the burden of its responsibilities, grew fainter, assumed new aspects. . . .

There came a night when Alan, after being away all day returned moody, irritable, impatient of all the trivial subjects with which she endeavored to make conversation.

"Have you been working in the plantation?" she asked, after several unsuccessful attempts during supper.

"No."

(Continued on page 4)

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