



# SINNERS IN HEAVEN

BY CLIVE ARDEN  
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(Continued)

VI

Hand in hand they descended the hill, full of this fresh wonder. After supper they sat on the shore in the moonlight, talking in low tones of the future, making wonderful plans. . . .

Both possessed that curious sensitiveness to nature which compels one, in any crisis, to make for open spaces, limitless horizons of ocean. . . . It was after midnight when at last they went to bed. The night breeze had died down, and a peculiar sense of airlessness pervaded the island; the water became calm to stillness.

Barbara was restless, and lay long awake. The strange stillness with its sensation of false calm heralding approaching tempest, revived her premonitions of disaster. When at last she fell asleep, it was only to be tortured with the same premonitions magnified into nightmare realities. She awoke gasping and sobbing in Alan's arms, and clung to him feverishly.

"I dreamed you had disappeared," she cried, in bewildered explanation.

"How could that happen?" He soothed her. "How could my bulk disappear? Don't talk nonsense!"

They breakfasted later than usual, and had barely finished when the noise of many agitated voices reached their ears.

Glancing apprehensively at each other, they hurried out of the hut.

The sky was leaden, hues of angry orange suffusing the horizon, the air oppressive. From the direction of the palm grove streamed a hurrying, chattering crowd of black figures—men, women and children.

Croft's brow contracted, and his lips set. The mine had evidently exploded even sooner than he expected.

Seeing him, a wailing cry arose from the advancing crowd. Weary and terrified, they stumbled forward to the palisade, where the women fell upon the ground, moaning, weeping, waving wild arms, sometimes adding their voices to the unintelligible babble of the men. To comprehend their meaning was at present impossible.

Presently their talk grew more coherent; he was able to make out its drift.

"We will serve thee, O Great White Chief! . . . Thou art merciful! Thou art wise beyond the wisdom of our men! . . . We will work for thee, O Chief! Thou carest not to torture and kill. . . . A-aa! A-aa! . . . Thou hast done much for our tribe. Under thee it will become strong. If thou wilt be our chief. The fruits of the earth will grow, the fish leap up from the water! . . . We love thee, O Mighty Friend of the Gods! We will serve thee! . . ." Thus, and much more with a similar burden, did they babble in their eagerness.

Commanding silence, he bade one of them explain the cause of this visitation.

Babooma, it transpired, soon after Croft's departure the previous evening, had worked himself into a passion. Expressing contempt for the white man and his gods, he raised the tabu. Encouraged by his own adherents, he then declared war upon the white chief with instant death to all who thwarted his designs. This set the fuse alight. An outburst of murmuring disloyalty to Babooma warred with the usual superstitious fear of him as their god-ordained chief; while their genuine affection for Croft flared up to white heat. To prove his words, maddened by opposition, Babooma seized and strangled one of the men who dared openly to rebel.

This was too much for the peaceful faction. Secretly and swiftly, they conspired together, under cover of night. While the rest of the tribe slept, they stole out—some eighty-odd, including women and children—and sped through the woods to the north.

This drastic move meant a tremendous decision, bound around as they were with age-old superstitions. It was a forlorn, terror-stricken little band which Croft presently addressed. He spoke kindly, trying to allay their fear, feeling a certain relief that the anticipated trouble had occurred so soon. Most of the men, he noticed, were fully armed; therefore it should not be impossible to overthrow Babooma and, once for all, quell the savage element.

"Whether I can be your chief or not is in the hands of my gods," he concluded with prudent piety; "but rest assured of my protection. Your women and children are tired from the long walk through the forest. Let them come inside our garden for safety and food."

He opened the entrance in the palisade. Awestruck into silence, they filed through, their minds full of the "little blue devils," experienced here by their menfolk. Might these not spring up and burn them even now at the great white chief's command? They squatted in one close group, hungry and grateful for all they received, following Barbara's movements with adoring, wondering eyes, as she distributed food. Their faith in Croft equaled their faith in their god, Babooma; once within the palisade, their fears of Babooma sank. Then men, resting outside, kept a sharp watch for any daylight attack. Roowa was sent to attend to his store of native weapons. . . . Presently the excited visitors in the garden, tired and satisfied, fell asleep.

Croft deemed it expedient to wait for Babooma to attack. To attempt a return with these tired men risked meeting the enemy in the interstices of the forest, where open fighting would be impossible. Given at last the excuse, he determined to take no avoidable chances in attempting the extermination of the growing menace to the prosperity of the tribe. He therefore inspected their weapons, arming those who had forgotten sword, spear or arrow; afterward, with Roowa as adjutant, he posted part of his little army round the tent, and issued directions. A few men were sent in search of fresh fruits along the north of the forest. Alan busying himself with the remainder in strengthening the hut and palisade. With the revolver, loaded with its one remaining bullet, in her belt, Barbara found her time fully occupied with the problem of preparing sufficient food for these uninvited guests. Suddenly she started from her peaceful employment, and her cheeks blanched. A shrill cry of fear had sounded beyond the garden. . . . Another "arose, yet another. . . . She hurried out of the hut, meeting Alan running from the landward end of the palisade, where he had been working. Outside the seaward entrance, a group of natives clustered together, chattering excitedly, staring at some far point in the sky. At sight of Croft, their agitation increased.

"A-aa! a-aa! Great Chief, behold!" they cried, pointing upward. "See! A great bird approacheth. Harken to the sound of his wings, the cry of his wrath! A-aa! A bird of ill omen, O Mighty Chief!" They began to wail and moan, striking their breasts. Others joined them, taking up the cry: "A bird of ill omen! A-aa! a-aa! A bird of ill omen, O Mighty Chief!" He shaded his eyes with his hands, searching the dazzling blue.

Suddenly his arms fell to his sides; and he turned to the girl.

He called to Roowa. "Go, Roowa! run! Take fire to the beacon upon the hill! Make it to blaze fast and high! Go—swift as the lightning flash!"

Far off, the noise of her engines but faintly audible, the unmistakable outline of an airplane showed at a great height, flying toward the island from the north.

The natives, forgetting all instructions, clustered together, full of superstitious terror. The women and children left the garden and huddled near their men, a few moaning, the rest silent from fear of this new Unknown.

Alan's fingers gripped Barbara's arm, and they ran down to the shore. With faces pale and tense, they stood there motionless, their hearts racing chaotically, their eyes fixed upon the speck growing ever larger, looming nearer and nearer. . . . The distant drone of the engines became louder. . . . From the hilltop a column of smoke rose into the clear air; soon a leaping flame mingled with it. . . . another shot up higher. . . . As the machine whirred, loudly and swiftly, to within a few hundred yards, still flying high, the pile of sticks and leaves, branches and undergrowth—quickly dried in the afternoon sun—burned, and roared, and leaped, the red tongues of fire and billowing smoke showing clear against the blue of sea and sky.

"Will they see it?" muttered Alan.

He waved wildly; but the airplane flew serenely on, skirting the island, toward the west.

Barbara held her breath, every nerve taut. But as the strain seemed to reach breaking point, the machine slackened speed. With sudden cessation of noise, her engines were shut off, and she came swiftly down in large circles until low over the water; then she turned and flew slowly back outside the barrier reef. Turning

again, she rose a little, flying up toward the beacon—then round again, and back to the reef.

Alan could recognize her now for a seaplane. Seeing two figures upon her, once more he waved, shouting vociferously. . . . With a graceful swoop down, again she turned, sinking lower and lower; until at last she rested upon the calm waters of the lagoon, and came skimming lightly toward the shore.

A silence of horror had fallen upon the natives. Some dropped on their knees or flung themselves on their faces, not daring to look seaward; others stood still as death, their glittering eyes never wavering from the figure of their white chief, their hands grasping their weapons—ready at a word to dash forward, with their blood-curdling yells, to his aid.

Then one or two rubbed their eyes, as if unable to see aright. . . . The white chief was wading out, unarmed, into the rippling wavelets, to meet the awful bird of ill omen. . . . They looked fearfully at one another; then held their breath. . . . He had returned to land. . . . Two queer figures enveloped in much clothing, with feroceous goggles protruding from their heads, were descending from between the vast wings. . . . The white chief and his wife were talking, laughing, wringing their hands again and again. . . . But lo! the huge eyes fell from those faces. . . . The natives lifted up their voices in a howl of fear.

Down by the water, a babel of English and French voices, torrents of questions pouring forth in both languages, the replies unheeded in the mutual relief, surprise and excitement! The two Frenchmen mixed both tongues indiscriminately, shaking the Englishman's hands again and again, kissing those of the girl in their demonstrative exuberance.

They had, it transpired, been swept from their bearings in a thunder storm, having accepted a bet to fly from America to Honolulu, thence to Australia, in their small seaplane. While endeavoring to recapture their route between the two latter places, faced with engine trouble, they had perceived the beacon flaring below.

They introduced themselves—Philippe and Louis de Borceau, thirsting for adventure to enliven the monotony of post-war existence.

Advancing a few steps Croft addressed the bewildered natives in words whose utter unintelligibility caused the two strangers to gaze at him, then at the girl, an uneasy suspicion rising in their minds that the Englishman's brain had softened. However, a relief was obvious among the group of blacks, and a murmur of voices broke forth.

Croft returned, and further explanations were given. Bit by bit the excited Frenchmen grasped the main facts of this extraordinary situation.

"Votre nom?" cried the elder. "En route to l'Australie, you tell us? But I remember—dites-moi—quick—your name, M'sieu?"

Upon hearing it, the little Frenchman danced.

"Ciel! I remember!" cried Louis. "All de world was interested! It was thought you all perish. But you and—" He paused. He glanced at Barbara, at the hand which, instinctively, she had clasped round Alan's arm. . . .

And in that pause, something cold and clammy seemed to clutch the girl's heart, causing her to grip closer the arm she held.

Alan put his hand over hers.

"My wife," he said very clearly.

Something seemed to contract in Barbara's throat, rendering speech impossible.

The world had thrown a shadow across the perfect blue.

Proud of their home, they led their guests thither for food, when the seaplane had been safely beached. There during the meal, they explained the native trouble. The idea of fighting anything or anybody thrilled both these adventurous young men.

"Vat guns have you?" they asked, "vat ammuntions?"

When informed of the lack of firearms, and shown the bows, arrows, spears and crossed wooden swords, they sat and gasped. The weapons, no less than the hut, with its many ingenious devices for use and comfort, aroused their keenest interest.

"Eh! But it is a leetle paradise!" cried Philippe. "Vat you call 'cosay'? All ze chairs! And a table! And ze flowers!" He turned to Barbara, when Alan went out to restore order among the natives. "You have turned ze wilderness into home, Madame! It is dat

you will not like to leave it! Ouf!" She looked around the familiar room she loved so well, out through the doorway to the black figures in the garden, which had been such a pride—and again she felt her heart contract.

The shadowy outside world had once more become a tangible reality.

VII

The engine trouble proved more serious than the Frenchmen had anticipated. Any idea of a dash to civilization for succor was abandoned. Until the sun had set and the moon risen the three men worked upon it. Croft with the delight of a child over the return of some long-lost toy. When a short trial trip was made, he took the pilot's seat.

Another sharp spasm of pain shot through Barbara's heart, as she looked round upon the faces she knew so well. Much as rescue would mean to them both, the thought of renouncing their free life here filled her with grief. The prospect of bowing again to all the little rules making a maze of civilization chilled her. The analogy presented itself to her mind of being slowly caught up into some huge net spread over the universe, beyond which lay this little wilderness where she had dwelt and learned to love.

Croft's instinct was to send her away to immediate safety; but that proved impossible. He conferred lengthily with the two brothers, under cover of their work together. Afterward, leaving Louis to finish, he and Philippe went indoors to pore over charts, discuss routes and conclude arrangements. When, later, the two aviators, dead tired after their adventures, were rolled in their huge coats upon the floor, he drew Barbara into their bedroom and unfolded the plans.

Should Babooma attack in the night, the Frenchmen, however zealous, would obviously fail to distinguish friends from foe. Their responsibility, therefore, would be the safeguarding of the women and children in the hut—Barbara's welfare being their special consideration.

"Should things go badly, and Babooma manage to do me in," he continued hurriedly, "trust yourself entirely to them; they know what to do and where to go. If, after all, he doesn't attack, but waits for us to move, Philippe de Borceau will take you away at daybreak and send help. His brother will stay with me."

She demurred hotly to this, unwilling to leave him in danger, protesting against being compelled to desert her post among the frightened women. The argument waxed long and heated between them. But, when Croft's mind was finally and irrevocably made up, anger and tears proved unavailing. Only by reminding her of the debt owed to another; by prevailing upon all her rising motherhood, did he at last break down her resistance.

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his ears alert to every sound, as they had been on that other bright night ago. . . .

Presently, as before, he leaned quickly forward. For again the faint sound of breaking twigs had reached him. . . . Again, near the outskirts of the palm grove, he had caught sight of a shadowy form.

Barbara rose with him, aware without words that the moment of desperate action was upon them; glad of it, since now she could face the danger with her man.

"I must go," he murmured.

For a moment she clung to him. "Take care!" she whispered passionately. "Oh, my dearest, do take care!" Gently he disengaged himself, and kissed her.

"I shall be all right. Go to the women, Barbara, and keep them indoors." He hurried to the entrance; then turned back again. "Don't forget, if—Trust yourself to De Borceau if—Not finishing the sentence she dreaded to hear, he once more turned to go.

A tiny choked exclamation escaped her lips. He looked quickly round. Swiftly, with a sudden passionate movement, he seized her in his arms, straining her fiercely to him; then, as swiftly, he released her, and she found herself alone.

The battle waged long and furious. For a time the men hidden on the hillside, after surprising the little army wriggling down the bay, kept it fiercely engaged, away from the hut. But gradually, the girl's strained ears, the wild struggle seemed to draw nearer. . . . Presently, as she could tell by the excited yells close by, those men guarding the hut itself were attacked.

The fighting blood of the Frenchmen tingled within them; they fingered their extraordinary, clumsy weapons, impatient to hurl themselves out into the fray—yet instinctively submitting to their orders, realizing the wisdom of the leader who had appointed each man his task with supreme insight into detail.

Soon the uproar raged round the palisade. Every now and then, a crashing, ripping sound was heard, proving portions to have been burst through and trampled down. The snuffing feet, snorting breath, muttered cries, blood-curdling shouts and yells, were close. . . . Penetrating the bamboo walls came venomous spear-points and sharp arrow-heads, sometimes piercing the shoulders of those standing near. . . . The women grew demoralized. . . . Barbara tried, unsuccessfully, to keep as many as possible in the central hut, where only the two end walls were exposed to the weapons; these points the Frenchmen guarded, ready for any onslaught.

Simultaneously, with dramatic suddenness, three things happened to end the terrible period of waiting.

With a startling crash, the outer wall of the sleeping hut gave way, and in surged a fighting medley of black figures. . . . From the other side, or kitchen, a cloud of smoke and crackling flame arose. . . . The hut was on fire!

All power of restraining the women was past. As the Frenchmen dashed forward to meet the intruders on one side, and the black smoke belled in from the other, they turned with one accord, struggled madly in their stampede for the main entrance, then streamed out—wild with terror—into the cold gray of the early dawn. . . .

At the same time, from without, amid the general hubbub, one loud wailing cry arose, in a mixture of native and broken English tongues—a frightened, agonized cry: "The white chief! A-aa! a-aa! The white chief! . . . The white chief! . . ."



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