

IDOL WORSHIP

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Idol worship by E. W. Savi

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By
E. W. SAVI

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CHAPTER I

THE PURSUIT

THE service at the Cenotaph was over and the crowds dispersing when Peter Dunbar, caught in the midst of a particularly dense throng of jostling humanity at the junction of Parliament Street and Bridge Street, was brought suddenly to a halt by a struggle just under his nose, so to speak. Till that moment his mind had been absorbed in the moving spectacle—moving, in both senses of the word—as he thrilled to the thought that such a vast multitude should, so many years after the war, still be eager to do homage to the fallen dead. All at once the need to maintain his equilibrium in the face of a struggle at such close quarters, brought his eyes down to fix themselves on a coarse, grimy wrist in the grip of a delicate, gloved hand. The two battled fiercely, the gloved hand showing that it was muscular and vigorous by the determined way it held on despite the vicious resistance offered.

The episode lasted only a few seconds, during which an agitated feminine voice belonging to the owner of the delicate hand, cried:

“He’s got your wallet! I saw him take it——”

And then all was over. Few showed any concern, being otherwise engaged. Peter had recovered his property from the grimy fist and allowed the culprit to escape, for other things were of greater moment. He knew that the wallet contained nothing of importance to himself or a thief, but he was greatly intrigued by the initiative and pluck of a very young girl—so she seemed. She would have slipped behind and been lost to view had he not hooked his hand within her elbow and kept her beside him.

"I am ever so much obliged to you. What can I say to thank you for saving me from unutterable loss?" said he, determined not to discount her meritorious act.

"Say nothing. I acted on an impulse—I always do, and not so fortunately. But that's me," she returned, flushing and endeavouring to escape.

"Let me see you through the crowd," said he, in matter-of-fact tones, sensing that any appearance of familiarity would be unfavourably received. "You are losing your poppies."

"Thanks," pinning on the flaming tokens of Remembrance that had become dislodged. "I am not afraid of crowds."

"They are nasty things. One hears of so many accidents. If I had a little sister, I'd never let her get mixed up in crowds."

"I'm used to them. I always see the Lord Mayor's Show, and the opening of Parliament. It's great fun."

"Nevertheless, I mean to take care of you till you are out of this one."

"Thank you," grudgingly.

He thought she was such a little thing to venture into such a heavy scrum, and wondered how she dared. But he guessed she was plucky and spirited, seeing how she had just behaved, and he glanced down at what he could see of her face—a small, snub nose of the devil-may-care variety which was specially attractive to men, and a mouth given to laughter at the corners. Nothing beautiful in so much of the face, but when she looked up at him for a moment to refute an argument he purposely put forward, he forgot the shape of her nose in wonder at her eyes. They were—"gorgeous" was the only word applicable at the moment. Nondescript in colour, black lashed and vigorously expressive.

They came in sight of refreshment rooms and Peter suggested coffee as the day was damp and chilly; but the girl refused firmly, and he was inclined to think it was more because he was a stranger and she obviously a lady, than any disinclination she might have had for refreshment. However, she added something like an after-thought

that was calculated to soften the snub and comfort his feelings.

"I have to go on to my job and cannot waste any more time." She did not want him to think her suspicious and silly. She had done him a service and he had naturally wanted to be friendly. Peter thought he understood. Nice girl!

She was making for the Underground and, as the crowd thinned, disengaging herself from his hold.

"Do you take your train here? So do I," said he, and seeing that she was producing a pass, he lost no time in taking his ticket to East Ham, glad that the noise was too great for her to hear him name the unlikely destination. He breathed more comfortably as he seated himself beside her in her compartment, for, at least, he could observe her better and try to learn something about her, which he felt impelled to do, she being a distinctly attractive personality and worth cultivating. He liked the proud carriage of her head and erect back, her quick, decided movements which told that she was one who knew her own mind and lost no time in hesitation. She had admitted to impulsiveness, and he liked her the better for that. People about them in that oscillating carriage might have imagined them acquaintances, for they conversed naturally. Only Peter noticed that there was no coquetry or encouragement in the steady glance of her eyes or the tones of her cool, composed voice. He had met with coquetry and encouragement daily in his tours around London and had been repelled.

He wondered who she was, her name, her family connections? Why should they not make friends, even if the manner of it was unorthodox? He believed she would make a delightful companion once the artificial restraint that held her aloof and reserved, melted away. But conventions were strong and girls were taught, very rightly, to be suspicious of strange men. How was he to convince her that he was not a wolf in sheep's clothing?

"London is a very queer place," said he, rather pathetically.

"Why do you say that?" she was curious enough to ask.

"Because you can be as lonely in London as on a desert island. I have returned from the East after six years' absence, and I find I am absolutely alone and friendless."

He could not have pitched upon anything more calculated to intrigue her interest in him, and saw her head jerk round and her eyes inspect him while he studiously read the advertisement concerning Amami opposite.

"Haven't you friends in London?" He enjoyed listening to her clear, fresh voice, full of *timbre* and sweetness. It was a cultured voice and required no backing.

"I used to have—heaps. But they have all scattered to different parts of the globe. Fellows who used to be at school with me are either married or dead, if not lost to all ken."

"But—surely——"

"Eh?"

"I can't imagine such a case. Surely there is someone in this country who wants to be hospitable to you—someone you used to know—even friends home, like yourself, from the East—by which I suppose you mean India?"

"Malaya," said he.

She blinked in puzzlement. "Isn't that India?"

"Not—quite. It's a peninsula——"

"Where rubber is grown," she interrupted triumphantly. "I know that, for I hear so much about rubber slumping and the share market being depressed——"

"Bravo! I am also depressed accordingly, for I am up to my neck in rubber."

"Poor you! And now you are in London for a holiday?"

"That's right. A much-needed holiday; but unfortunately I have no one to play with." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye in hopes of encouragement. Her lips curved slightly more upward than was natural to them and a dimple was sternly repressed.

"You must be desperately fed up. I expect you will be thinking of going on the continent. You won't do badly, for you'll meet heaps of English people wintering abroad; and the Alps, round about Christmas, are very attractive. We used to winter abroad regularly till—last year," her voice dropped and her face fell.