

ATOMS OF EMPIRE

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Atoms of Empire by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

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C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

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OF EMPIRE**

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BY

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C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

Author of

"Adventures of Captain Kettle," "Mc Todd," "Thompson's Progress,"
etc., etc.

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I

THE BAIT

"WHAT on earth does the Chief have an animal like this Padgett to dine in Government House for?" asked Dayton-Philipps, querulously. "I expected to rough it, of course, when I came out here to the Coast, because they promised us active service, but hang me if ever I expected to rough it at the Governor's dinner-table with a missionary-thing like that. Why, the fellow hadn't got an aitch to his name; he stoked with his knife all the time; and when he got a fresh stock of perspiration on his forehead — O my aunt! he was too awful for anything."

Forbes, the Colonial Secretary, fanned himself in his long-sleeved Madeira chair, and suggested lazily that Dayton-Philipps had been taken out of lavender too soon, and sent out into the warm, wide world too early. "We're a primitive people, we Coasters," said Forbes. "If a man has a white skin and a dress coat, we ask him to dinner. You're too fastidious."

"Rot!" said Dayton-Philipps. "And, besides, the Padgett person hadn't a dress coat."

"Oh, of course, I was speaking figuratively.

Being a padre of sorts — I forget what his fancy religion is called : never heard of it before — being a padre, he naturally wears his official cloth. I saw you didn't like him at dinner. But you were very good ; you swallowed down what you wanted to say ; in fact, you behaved quite nicely."

"I never wanted to kick a man so much in my life. He insulted you ; he said your department was corrupt. He insulted the Governor ; said practically that he was a disgrace to West Africa. And he insulted the other two men skilfully and rudely. As you all sat tight and tried to look as if you liked it, when it came to my turn I just followed your lead."

"He called you a hired butcher of innocents, didn't he ?" asked the Colonial Secretary, with sly malice.

"It was worse than that. Never mind, though — I only got my ordinary share. But what amazes me is, why did we stand it ? Of course I couldn't buck after all you big men had given me a lead ; but what I couldn't understand was, why should the Chief swallow it down, when one good square snub would have shut the boulder up permanently, and let the rest of us do the talking."

"His Excellency the Governor," said Forbes, "has to play to the gallery. Uneasy lies the head that wears a — well, a Governor's helmet. Especially a West African Governor's. If a man wants to make any sort of a mark here, and bag — say — a K.C.M.G., he's got to put on steam and

hurry, or else the climate will step in and bag him first. My faith, though, some fellows have luck! Here's his present Excellency not been back from England a fortnight, and this chance comes slick in his way."

"Let's see," said Dayton-Philipps, "you were Acting Governor, weren't you, whilst he was away at home on leave?"

"I was," said Forbes, "and knew exactly what was needed, but never had a ghost of an opportunity of getting it through. It wasn't from want of enterprise, either. I'm as keen on doing my duty to the Empire—and earning my corresponding step in the Service—as any of my neighbours. Then the Governor comes back, bucked-up and rosy from home, and the thing might have been pre-arranged, it's so handy for him. It's nine to one it comes off, and then he'll get the credit. I've slipped back into my old berth as Colonial Secretary, and all that will come in my way will be a lot of extra work and a lot of exposure, by which I shall certainly scoop a good many extra doses of fever, and it is not improbable that—as I can't be spared for home-leave now—I shall peg out here in harness."

"Oh, rot! you'll not earn a funeral this time."

"Well, I hope not. But anyway, it's a sure thing I don't get any of the plum. There's one and undivided, and it goes to the head of the Colony for the time being, in the ordinary course of routine. Have another whisky-and-soda?"