

Harold Bindloss. Long Odds – From Chapter 10, “Ormsgill Asks a Favor”

A silver lamp burned on the little table where two diminutive cups of bitter coffee were set out, but its indifferent light was scarcely needed in the open-fronted upper room of Dom Clemente's house. A full moon hung above the Atlantic, and the clear radiance that rested on the glittering harbor streamed in between the fretted arches and slender pillars. Throughout tropical Africa all there is of grace and beauty in man's handiwork bears the stamp of the unchanging East, and one finds something faintly suggestive of the art of olden days where the eye rests with pleasure on any of its sweltering towns, which is, however, not often the case. It is incontrovertible that most of the towns are characterized by native squalor and that some of them are unpleasantly filthy, but, after all, filth and squalor are usual in the East, and serve by contrast to enhance the elusive beauty of its cities.

It was almost cool that evening, and Ormsgill, looking down between the slim pillars across the white walls and flat roofs, though some were ridged and tiled, towards the blaze of moonlight on the harbor, was well content to be where he was after his journey through the steamy bush and across the sun-scorched littoral. He had arrived that afternoon, and had spent the last hour with Benicia Figuera, who had shown herself gracious to him. She lay not far away from him in a big Madeira chair, loosely draped in diaphanous white attire which enhanced the violet depths of her eyes and the duskiness of her hair, and her face showed in the moonlight the clear pallor of ivory. Ormsgill fancied that her attendant the Señora Castro sat in the room behind them from which a soft light streamed out through quaintly patterned wooden lattices, though he had seen nothing of the latter lady since the *comida* had been cleared away.

He had said very little about his journey, though he intended to tell Dom Clemente rather more, but he presently became conscious that Benicia was regarding him with a little smile. He also noticed, and was somewhat annoyed with himself for thinking of it, that she had lips like the crimson pulp of the pomegranate, the *granadilla* which figures in the imagery of the Iberian Peninsula as well as in that of parts of Africa, where it is seldom grown. Ormsgill was quite aware of this, and it had its associations of Eastern mysticism and sensuality, for he was a man of education and the outcasts he had lived with had not all been of low degree. Among them there had been a certain green-turbaned Muslim who had taught him things unknown to his kind at home. He felt that it was advisable to put a restraint upon himself.

Define Each Word

diminutive: _____

squalor: _____

elusive: _____

diaphanous: _____

pallor: _____

Write the Correct Word from the Vocabulary

1. Persistent researchers studied the _____ and rarely-seen okapi deep in the Congo’s Virunga National Park.
2. Jacinta, the terminally-ill princess of the Wyoramin, had a pale, sickly _____ to her countenance.
3. A _____ Key Deer, no larger than a dog, grazed on the lawn of Marcy’s house on Big Pine Key.
4. The _____, almost invisible jellyfish posed a grave danger to the divers off Eliot Key.
5. Visitors are often appalled by the apparent _____ of old, broken-down shotgun houses standing next to luxurious mansions.

Comprehension and Discussion: Answer Each Question in Complete Sentences

1. What derogatory or racist language does the narrator use to describe the towns of Tropical Africa. What is the effect of such diction on a modern reader?

2. Why does Ormsgill compare Benicia Figuera’s lips to “the crimson pulp of the pomegranate”? Does it bother him?
