

There was no one to assist Hull at the hotel's reception. Only a dim and small lobby in which two faded armchairs and a table bearing a vase of browning paper flowers gathered dust. A tortoiseshell cat was asleep on one of the chairs, but opened an eye to watch as Hull seated himself on the other. His head ached and the nausea of the past days remained heavy in his stomach and throat. Beneath him the land still appeared to be moving, and he felt at all times about to be upended. He sat with a sigh and allowed his feet to slide forward on the sand-laden carpet. In this posture, crotch thrust upwards, torso shrunk into the seat, he rested with eyes shut.

'Would that be you, Mr Hull?'

He shuffled hastily into a sitting position and looked up at a man in his shirtsleeves. He wore his thinning grey hair scraped back and had a white bush of beard that yellowed around his mouth. His spectacles were so marked with water spots that Hull wondered how he could see through them.

'Ah yes,' Hull answered. 'My luggage is still at the pier. There is a porter, I assume.'

'Indeed, there is,' replied the man as he leaned over the cat and ruffled its fur. 'You won't find him now, however. He will be collecting supplies from the ship. But you needn't worry. This is a small town, as they say, and the porter will know what is yours. He will bring it along in good time.'

'Very well.' Hull paused a minute, waiting for the man to offer to show him to his room, but he continued playing with the cat, which had by now rolled over to show a white belly. 'I have been very ill,' Hull said. 'I should like to lie down.'

'The landlord will be here shortly. He will be supervising down at the pier this minute.'

'You are not he?'

'Ha! Not I, sir. I am your predecessor at Springbokfontein. Reginald Tweed.'

'Oh, Mr Tweed!' Hull jumped up and shook hands with the man. 'I am very pleased to meet you, sir. My apologies; I am not well. I have been ill.'

'Yes, so I've heard,' Tweed said, and the yellow of his beard twitched.

'You have retired, I believe.'

'Yes, blast it! Twenty-five years in this godforsaken country. I'm returning to Southampton, the place of my birth, you know, to live out my last days amongst decent people.'

'I see.'

Tweed grunted lightly and looked around at the reception desk before turning to Hull. 'Mr Baker, the landlord, will be an hour or more yet. I may as well give you a tour of the town.'

Hull paled. 'I've not been well, sir. I cannot go outside. You are very kind, but I've not been well.'

'Nonsense, Mr Hull. You will have to be tougher than that if you plan to stay here. Come along.'

Outside the wind was blowing, sand grains flying into Hull's beard and teeth.

'You learn to like the taste of sand out here,' Tweed said, wiping strands of hair back from his forehead with a flat hand. 'It gets to a point where you don't feel quite right without a grain or two in your mouth. After all, it's what the miners eat, isn't it?'

At the pier a string of partly clad natives was unloading the *Namaqua*. It seemed the whole town had come to watch. They stood waving handkerchiefs and calling out, 'Are there oranges? Have you seen oranges?' 'Did the post come?' A few women were among the group, their children with them. They shielded their eyes with their hands and stood waiting, at times whispering. The children jumped up and down, pointed, laughed. A man as broad as a doorway shouted, 'Where's the blasted Cape Smoke? Where is it? There's people what

needs their liquor.’ Further out to sea two ships loaded with ore to carry to Swansea rolled lightly on the waves, and nearby, on a small black-stoned island, the fat bodies of seals rested, their wet fur dulling under the afternoon sun.

On land, iron-roofed buildings of wood, single storeys all, resembled one another in design and size. Each was as sand-blasted and mouldering as the next. Tweed waved his left hand. ‘Private dwellings there.’ Then he waved his right hand at a row of buildings nestled between mounds of drifting sand. ‘Customs house, CCMC store, workshops, engine shed.’ At the last, five natives with spades were digging the structure out from a sand dune that was beginning to consume it. Little progress was made, the wind lifting the sand off the spades and blowing it back onto the building.

Beyond lay a dreary settlement of huts and shacks fashioned together from sacks and skins and thin pieces of wood. From where he stood, Hull could make out dark figures in the openings of the shacks, some bent over fires, others standing, their heads cut from view. Outside the huts children ran naked.

‘That’s the native settlement,’ Tweed said. ‘Some work here loading ore onto the ships. Mostly they are just loiterers, waiting for work at the Okiep mine.’

‘Why not live at Okiep then?’ Hull asked, sliding and sinking with each step in the loose sand of the street. Beside him Tweed walked lightly, unhindered despite his age.

‘Okiep is CCMC owned. Most of these places are, but Okiep is still a private town. It’s the headquarters, you see, so you have to get Company permission to stay there, even for one night, even you or me. It was the same at Springbokfontein a decade or two ago before the main works moved to Okiep.’

Hull scanned the settlement. Shanties lay in unpatterned heaps, climbing over one another up the heights of the surrounding sand dunes and down the further sides. Home upon home appeared to be absorbed by the sand, breathing brown and black from their submersion. Here a dune grew, there it scattered, shifting and rising, reshaped daily. Natives sat amongst it all, too fatigued by idleness to move. Sand blew over their feet. It covered their hair, filled their ears.

Hull lifted a handkerchief to his nose. Even at this distance the smell of the settlement was rank, its odour brought nearer by the wind. ‘There are so many of them,’ he said. ‘Surely they won’t all get work?’

‘There are many, many more of them waiting for you at Springbokfontein. Ten thousand of them, I’d say. But you will see, they need only wait a while. Replacements are always needed at Okiep. Two to three are buried a week over there.’

‘A week, you say? Surely not?’

‘It’s the smelter. Pollutes it all – air, water, food. There’s no escaping it. Copper must be got and some will die.’ Glancing at his companion’s frown, he added, ‘It’s the way of the mines, Mr Hull. There’s no getting around it, so you may as well accept it and think of it no more. You are a magistrate, remember that, not a visitor from a benevolent society. Leave charitable deeds to spinsters and the clergy, that is my advice to you.’