

**THE  
SPLENDID QUEST**

By  
**EDISON MARSHALL**

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*BOOKS BY EDISON MARSHALL*



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THE LIGHT IN THE JUNGLE  
FORLORN ISLAND  
THE DEPUTY AT SNOW MOUNTAIN  
THE DOCTOR OF LONESOME RIVER  
THE MISSIONARY  
THE FISH HAWK  
THE FAR CALL  
THE DEADFALL  
CHILD OF THE WILD  
SEWARD'S FOLLY  
THE SLEEPER OF THE MOONLIT  
RANGES  
THE LAND OF FORGOTTEN MEN  
THE ISLE OF RETRIBUTION  
THE SKY LINE OF SPRUCE

**SHEPHERDS OF THE WILD  
THE STRENGTH OF THE PINES**

# THE SPLENDID QUEST

By  
EDISON MARSHALL



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*New York Chicago*

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THE  
SPLENDID QUEST



# I

**THE** last whistle had blown. Gangplanks were in, ship visitors ashore, and the cables were being loosed from the snubbing blocks. The noisy crowd on the dock was stilled in the momentary grip of awe and nameless sadness, drama they could sense but not quite see. Another ship was about to sail for the Far East.

The *Buchanan* was a fine, big liner, fearless of rough weather. She had a gyro compass, a steering robot, a powerful wireless outfit, and every modern protection against disaster on the high seas. She would follow well-charted lanes, always in touch with her sturdy sisters beyond the horizons. Yet none of these things could belittle the gallantry of her adventure or dull the romance of her leave-taking outward-bound. Just past the mooring buoys and the harbor lights rolled the gray deserts of the Pacific, and beyond those wastes rang the temple bells of another world.

Lining the rail was almost every kind of human being, on almost every imaginable human quest. Some were seeking old loves, some new. Some were banished, some going home. There were army and navy officers bound for remote posts in the Philippines, bright-eyed missionaries, with dreams of thronged tabernacles under the palms, invalids seeking new health in the salt air, business men, sightseers. But two young men standing side by side had the oldest, most stirring quest of all. They were going to the Orient to seek their fortunes.

It was all as it should be; the tradition was fulfilled. They were fresh from college. Their funds were low, but their hopes high. They had no special destination in mind, no jobs

in sight, no letters of introduction to smooth their way. Stoutly they had tossed a coin to see whether they would seek their careers abroad or wait their turns in the long, slow-moving lines at home. Blindfolded they had gaily stuck a pin in a map of the eastern hemisphere to find a point to steer for, and it had come Shanghai. Best of all, they were friends with the unbribed, whole-souled friendship of youth.

The larger of the two, Joe Baxter, was a Montanan and a chemical engineer. He had hunted and fished over the Saw-Tooth Range, washed gold in white water, turned soil and fed stock on his father's large desert ranch; so he had gained the quiet confidence of a man of action. Sunlight, open air, and wholesome pursuits had lent charm to his plain face; the good signs of clean living and thinking were in his straight blue eyes and slow smile. His friend, Charley Hudson, was a medical graduate and had stood two years internship in a California hospital, but it was yet hard to think of him as a doctor. He had a jaunty walk, made light-hearted gestures, and looked at his apple, the world, with sparkling eyes.

Just now Joe's smile felt a little strained, and his lips dry, but Charley must not know.

"I don't notice any delegations down to see us off," he said.

"No, but there aren't any public-welfare committees making sure we don't miss the boat," Charley answered. "That's something." His fingers trembled a little as he lighted a smoke, so he put them out of sight.

"I wish I could see Dad's good gray head in that crowd," Joe went on, not quite so staunchly now. "He'd have come, except for the cussed alfalfa."



“You know what my mother’s doing right now?” Charley asked. “She’s putting biscuits in the stove for lunch. She makes the grandest biscuits. She’ll have a smudge of flour on her cheek——”

Just then the ship’s orchestra broke forth with “Good-night, Ladies.” There was a shower of paper ribbons—the crowd roared—the dock began to glide slowly, miraculously, aside. Joe and Charley waved with all their might and main at any one who would wave back. But soon the rows of individual faces became one white blur—the shore shouting thinned and whisked out as though it were caught in the wind—and the blue stretched wide between.

Charley went to his stateroom to reread his farewell letters. Joe stood alone on the sports deck, the wind in his rough black hair, watching the towers of Seattle drop down and fade away. Vanishing, too, were his homesick pangs and his vague fears. He did not know where he was going, but he was on his way!

The very blindness of his quest was exhilarating. His friend Charley had a semblance of a plan—he meant to get a doctor’s commission with a roving Chinese army and gain a life-time’s skill in surgery in the course of a year or two. But Joe, the steadier of the pair and the guiding spirit of the expedition, was simply throwing himself on the lap of the gods.

True, there were said to be new gold fields opening up in Indo-China. As a chemical engineer—a jack of all professions—he should be able to land some kind of berth. But this was more of an excuse than a reason for the trip. The far horizons had beckoned him ever since his childhood.

Riches? Adventure? Romance? None of these was the right word to fit his quest. The right word—for suddenly he saw through all his pretensions—was just *life*. It was *life* he was running out to meet with open arms; not its rewards but its very essence. It would bludgeon him, shatter his illusions, break him perhaps, but he yearned to possess it to the full.

And why should he wait for Shanghai's swarming quays to begin his search? There was a new tang to the salt sea air, a joy in the sunlight on the water, and a good omen in the white gull that skimmed and soared so blithely over his head.

Charley, his gay young self once more, brought him the welcome news that lunch was ready. They took their seats in the big dining saloon cheerful with sea light; they renewed their old sport of baiting each other with barbed shafts of ridicule. But between one volley and another Joe's gaze roamed over the room.

Presently it sharpened—brightened—fixed. There was sitting, two tables away, a girl whose heart-shaped, dusky face seemed to stand out from the crowd. Joe's heart gave a pleasant little leap. The odds were all against his striking it rich so soon, but the signs were fair, and how did a man know? Unguessed by most of the other passengers, Good Luck was aboard this ship.

He answered Charley's banter out of one corner of his mind. The rest was busy filling in what proved to be a most satisfying picture. She had dark wavy hair bobbed long and drawn back; arched dark brows over eyes that looked coal black at this distance, but might be deep blue on close inspection. A small head set proudly on a lovely throat—a straight gaze—a quick childish smile—a most determined

little chin—and dash and spirit no end. Yes, he had better investigate this matter, and as soon as possible.

She was sitting at the ship's doctor's table with a muscular-looking handsome woman, a little gray but decidedly under fifty. Mother and daughter, Joe decided.... And there remained two vacant chairs.

Joe turned back to his neglected friend.

“Charley, let's move over to the doctor's table tonight. You might get some pointers on Oriental maladies.”

Charley took in the situation at one glance. “No, you don't, my lad! Beware of entangling alliances. We're going out to China to cut up people and dig gold.”

“But Charley, I want to know that girl. I've got kind of a premonition——”

“And I suppose I'm to entertain her mother while you've got her out in the moonlight. But you're my buddy, and I'll stand by.”

Joe did not see the girl again until she and the older woman came in to dinner. He and Charley were already at their table. And at this, his first intimate glimpse of her face, all his good auguries came true.

Luck *was* aboard the ship—and something more than luck. He had never before met anyone whose mere look and presence—perhaps the instantaneous interchange of some unknown life force—gave him such a quickened sense of living. He was superbly conscious not only of her, but the whole scene presenting her: it was photographed on his memory as though by a calcium flare.

He had never felt so wide awake, seen so clearly, heard and felt so keenly. The orchestra music, half-heard before,

streamed into his ears with haunting sweetness—or so his wakened fancies told him. The vista of the white tables under lamp-light—until then hardly registering in his mind—seemed bright and cheery and beautiful, and dramatic, too, with the pale-blue circles of the open port-holes behind, and the white-robed Chinese mess boys standing at attention. He knew himself for a level-headed, almost stolid young man, but these strange things were happening, and plainly they were part of the life that he so hungrily sought.

Why, she was the jolliest, friendliest, nicest kind of girl. About twenty-two, if he were any judge. There was not much of her, but what there was had symmetry and strength; she had romped and hiked and batted balls from her babyhood till now. She wore a backless, dark-red dinner dress that brought out the dusky glow of her skin and the deep blue of her eyes. The curve at her temple was especially lovely.

Now Charley was attending to the formalities in his own blithe and informal way. “I’m Doctor Hudson, known as Charley to my friends and shipmates,” he said. “My pal is Joe Baxter.”

“This is my mother, Mrs. Randall,” the girl answered in a clear, low voice. “I’m Donna Randall.” Just then Joe noticed a beautiful diamond on the third finger of her left hand, but since no summer magic could conjure it away, there was nothing to do but ignore it. After all, it was nothing to him. He had just now met the girl, and until noon today had hot even known she existed; he must pin this hard fact firmly in his mind.

Yet ignoring the diamond was not quite so simple as it seemed. It flashed to his eyes every time she moved her hand, blue for flitting happiness, red for danger. Its vicious spurts of

light kept waking him from the most strange, delicious day dreams. Yes, he wished it was overboard in Tuscarora Deep. He could pin that fact up, too, for better or worse.

But now the orchestra swung into a dreamy waltz. Donna looked up—with a luster in her eyes. Joe sprang up. And then they were dancing, with the surge and sweep of the waves under their feet.

They spoke but little. That could come later. Now they were taking older, straighter means to plumb each other. Her hand in his, her soft hair against his chin, the vague yielding of her firm breast against him, her body rhythms in harmony with his ... Distant lightnings flashed in Joe's sky.

"It seems strange to be dancing with the sea under us," Donna murmured.

"You dance like the foam on the sea," Joe answered, trying to speak calmly.

"It's almost an impertinence to the old Pacific," she went on, her dark eyes alight.

"He's too big and tough to care about your little feet. He knows he has only to give one little yawn and swallow the whole ship."

Then—so soon—the music stopped.

But just to linger at the table with the excuse of sipping coffee—Donna at one side and Charley across from him—proved happiness. He saw everything, felt everything. The port-holes slowly turned black. It was night out there, and dark waves rolling. The ship had passed the Straits of Juan de Fuca and headed into the open sea. But here were shaded lamps glossing Donna's bare arms—music swelling—young laughter ringing.

He looked at the captain, a stolid Swede with kind eyes but a firm jaw. He looked at the ship's doctor, who administered bromide to seasick passengers or cholera serum to steerage Filipinos with equal calm. He looked at the impassive Chinese mess boys, who saw the passengers and the ports come and go, but never forgot their dream of a temple in Canton.

The orchestra played "My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice." Donna listened, her deep eyes dreamy, her lips faintly curved, her fingers rolling and unrolling her napkin. Charley was silenced. Joe felt as though his heart would jump out of his body.

It was the second night. After dinner, Joe and Donna found a seat on the sport deck, winds blowing, stars burning, and gray seas rushing by. The moon rocked through tattered clouds.

Their talk was full and free tonight, seeking and revealing. Joe soon learned that Donna was no exotic stranger, but belonged to his own world. Her background was about what he had guessed and most desired. She had never gone to a seminary in France, but had toured Europe with some girl friends, tourist class. She had been a captain of girl scouts, a counsellor at a summer camp, and woman's tennis champion of her college. She could drive a car, had a movie hero, and occasionally wrote a bit of poetry for her own satisfaction and mental stimulation. Her ideals were just as fine, her conduct as scrupulous, as her mother's before her.

Joe saw her hand in the moonlight and took it in his. She made no attempt to draw it away; the caress was warm and pleasant and acceptable from a friend. But when the moon

worked stronger magic, and his heart leaped, and he tried to draw her into his arms, her silky muscles hardened, and she wriggled aside.

“It’s moonlight—shipboard—and summer time,” she said, as much to herself as to him. “But it can’t be done.”

Joe drew a long steadying breath. “Not even once? Just to find out——”

“I haven’t kissed a man for more than a year,” she went on with the simple frankness of her generation.

“Then you’re waiting for some one?”

“Waiting to get to him,” she said, and there was a hint of tremor in her voice. “He’s in Shanghai. I’m going out there to marry him.”

Even as she spoke, they felt the kick of the screw and the lurch of the hull as the ship battled westward.

“I wonder if he knows his luck,” Joe said, after a long pause.

“I’m the lucky one. You’ll think so, too, when you meet him.” But Donna’s tone told more than her words: it had by now become a little song of joy. “He’s a civil engineer—his name’s Keith Elliot—and he was sent out there by one of the big American firms two years ago.”

“And he came back for a visit last year,” Joe continued the story, “with a big diamond for his sweetheart—and she got engaged to him.”

“Yes. How did you know that?”

“It’s not hard to figure out. You must be infernally in love with him, or it wouldn’t have lasted through a year’s separation.”

“Dreadfully,” Donna agreed simply.

“Just one more question, if you don’t mind answering.” Joe steadied his voice successfully. “Are you going to marry him the minute you get off the boat, or are you—going to look around a little first?”

“I’m through looking around, as far as men are concerned. Keith wants to have the marriage right away. But mother would like to have us wait at least two weeks, to make sure of ourselves and each other.”

The moon came out, bold and bright, and put a glossy polish on the blue-steel sea. “Intelligent woman, your mother,” he observed cheerfully.

They talked on intimately and happily, now the air was cleared, but there was very little more Joe needed to know. All the signs and warnings were plain to read. He had found the girl he could love.

Nor would it be a mere shipboard romance to remember with a smile and a glimmer in the eyes under other moons. Joe was not the kind who could love lightly and forget. He was not just playing with fire, but challenging the lightning. If it struck at all, it would illumine all his sky, crackling and flashing, with thunder in his ears. And every touch of his hand on hers set a current flowing that might draw the bolt.

His imagination vaulted with new power. Perhaps there was a vein of rugged poetry running through the homely humor that his friends knew. He fancied a voyage within a voyage. If he turned back now, he could reach a safe port, his sails unrent and his flag flying. If he surged on, blind to the red lights and the deep clang of the bell buoys, he might easily break up on the reefs. But beyond those reefs were the Happy Isles: even now he could raise their sunlit headlands



through the haze of distance, palms waving, fountains playing.

It was for him alone to decide; he was a free agent. Kismet, brooding over the islands to the west, laid no hand on his helm. But he had gone out to find life....

At midnight he left Donna at the door of her cabin, went to his own room, and sat for a time on the edge of Charley's berth, watching his boyish sleep. At last he shook him gently.

Charley saw the glitter in his friend's eyes and was instantly wide awake.

“Ship going down?” he asked quickly.

“No,” Joe answered in an exalted tone his friend had never heard before, “but my ship is coming in.”

## II

**JOE** told his comrade just how it was. He was going to neglect him the rest of the voyage. Yes, perhaps he had made a good start in that direction, but from now on he was going to eat, drink, live, and dream Donna Randall. Only seventeen days remained of the voyage, and he meant to make the most of them. She was the loveliest, most desirable girl he had ever met, fulfilling an ideal he had hardly known he possessed. He had everything to gain, nothing to lose.

“In plain words,” Charley said disgustedly when the outburst was over, “you’ve gone and fallen in love.”

“Not yet, but I may soon. How can I help it—a girl like that?”

“And when you do fall, you’ll fall hard. You do everything hard, not with one foot in the door, like me. Then where will you be? You had it just reversed—you’ve nothing to gain and everything to lose.”

Joe only smiled. “It will be worth it, just the same.”

“Of all the fools!” Charley jumped up and sat down again. “I thought you were going to Indo-China to look for gold.”

“What’s gold, compared to her? I may never find anybody like her again. I’m going to be with her all I can.”

“But you won’t get her. You haven’t a dog’s chance. Good Lord, man, look at the facts staring you in the face! You’ve hardly any money, no job, and mighty sketchy prospects. She’s got a diamond on her finger worth more than you’ll make in a year. And you say she’s on her way to marry some fellow right now.”

“His name is Keith Elliot. He and the minister are out in Shanghai.”

“You’d steal, too, would you? How’d you like it if the tables were turned, and you were the poor chap waiting out there for his sweetheart?”

Plainly this shot went home. Joe’s eyes rounded, and his jaw dropped.

“Just picture the fellow, counting the minutes, grinding away at his job in the daytime, spending his nights watching for a ship at sea?” Charley went on with his usual flight of fancy.

“Chuck it, Charley. Don’t you see I’ve got to go ahead just the same?” Joe began to rally, and his head went up. “Anyway, he’s a man, isn’t he, able to fight for himself? Until he can slip a wedding ring on her finger it’s a fair field.”

Tried beyond endurance, Charley hopped up and stamped about the room. “How about your career as a chemical engineer?” he shouted. “Don’t you know it’s overboard if you tie yourself to a wife?”

“I don’t know it. A girl like Donna won’t hold any man back. She’ll make him climb!” Joe was flushed, and his eyes snapped.

Suddenly Charley relaxed, lighted a smoke, and deftly flicked the spent match out the port-hole. “All right, big boy. You’re looking for trouble, and you’ll get it. But you’ll never get that girl. It just isn’t in the cards.”

But whether he won or whether he lost, the quest was still worth while. It was self-quest, too—to know the glory of his own waking love in such glorious behalf.

Meanwhile he was enjoying Donna's company for its own sake, man and maid together. They talked and laughed and danced. They watched and wondered at the drama of ship life, the quick loves, sudden hates, plots and counterplots, among their fellow passengers. They played games on the windy sport deck. They looked for whales, ran to the rail to see passing ships, listened to yarns from the crew. They kept track of the pencil markings on the chart in the smoking room that every day told Donna she was some three hundred miles nearer her waiting love. They watched the young moon wax to the full and begin to wane.

They had their fair share of adventures. Two days out from Yokohama the Pacific stirred in his sleep. His quiet breathing gave way to fevered pantings. The ship had cut across one of the outer whorls of a typhoon. Every port was locked; the tablecloths were dampened to hold the dishes in place. Then came a gesture of the raw powers they would never forget.

The big ship seemed helpless, hurled up like a thrown bottle and driven down like a spear. Great seas buoyed her, slow and inexorable, until she could rise no more; then burst over her with a roar. Mountains of wrath chased her and erupted white lava on her stern. Sea and sky were yelling chaos, in which bobbed and pitched and rolled one little white chip.

The passengers gathered in the smoking room, held on to what they might, and watched through the windows. Joe found a seat in a corner behind one of the stationary card tables and beckoned Donna to join him. She came with a little cry. He had never seen her move so quickly. Her dark-blue eyes were wide, her lips parted. He steadied her chair

with one big foot, and out of sight behind the table her hand slipped into his.

But this was not the only good that the ill wind blew Joe.

By twilight the heavier seas had dropped behind. Because she had learned to pitch her voice above the low howlings outside the storm glass, Donna thought the wind had gone down. After dinner she forgot it entirely and went topside to one of the de luxe cabins where an affluent young couple were giving a party.

It proved the kind of shipboard affair that can completely drown out a storm, but Joe had not come yet to smile it away by her side, and she was soon longing for open air. Without a word to any one she slipped out the side door, intending to go forward along the boat-deck and down the stairs to the smoking room.

As she emerged from the lee of the cabin, something like a walking wall ran into her from behind. It was only the wind, but it seemed to have stony hardness, crushing weight.

She deplored going back. It was a strength approaching an infirmity in her that she so hated giving up any of her undertakings. Bracing herself, she edged on ten—twenty—perhaps fifty feet.

But she had only gone farther into the full sweep of the wind. The deck was wet from overbreaking seas; her little evening slippers would no longer hold. It took all her strength to cling to the sides of the lifeboats and not be spun down the deck, and sometimes there was no place to cling, only smooth boards and battened holds. And now the gleam from the cabin windows no longer glinted on the wet boards to guide her steps, and she and the wind wrestled in utter darkness.

Suddenly it was quite impossible to go on, but the act of turning back almost upset her balance. And then, although there should have been streaks and cracks of light about the curtained windows of the cabin, she could not see them. She could not open her eyes to the lash of the wind: it was as though she were struck blind.

In that blindness fear caught her. It had been trailing her all the time on this storm-swept deck, but she had evaded it until now. She knew she was in no real danger—she had only to cling to a davit till some one came—but its cold hand was on her heart, just the same. She stood in roaring darkness, in darkness that walked.

An inquisitive wave, shooting high above its fellows, looked over the edge of the deck and coiled a wet arm about her ankles.

It was not an hour that she waited; it only seemed so. Actually it was less than five minutes. Then through her battered eyelids she saw a rectangle of light.

It was the door of the party room. Framed in it was a seemingly enormous bulk. And at once an enormous sound burst out of it to be hurled by the wind straight to her ears.

*“Donna!”* It was Joe, shouting with all his breath. He had failed to find her at the party and was coming to look for her.

*“Here I am, Joe.”*

But he could not hear her at first. He was almost beside her, his hand on the davit, before her voice could cut back through the blast. And then she let go everything and fairly leaped into his arms.

Before either of them knew what had happened, their lips were pressed together. Her arms were about his neck, and she

was almost crying. Presently her lips stilled, as though in surprise.

“This won’t do,” she told him good-naturedly. Quickly she wriggled out of his arms. “My year’s record has been knocked into a cocked hat.”

“How about knocking it clean overboard?” There was a joyous boom in Joe’s voice.

It seemed perfectly natural to be standing in a full-reef gale, shouting in each other’s ears. But suddenly remembering Donna’s flimsy dress, the cold spray, and the angry sea, Joe began to lead her toward the stairs. His fine strength made nothing of the wind. In his young pride and exultation he would defy a tornado. This was no wave-wet deck, but the roof of the world.

He stopped her in the alcove at the foot of the stairs.

“I’ve got something to tell you, Donna,” he said quietly.

But he had told her twice already, once in his kisses, again in the splendor lighting his plain face.

“I know what it is, Joe,” she answered.

“But won’t you let me say it—in plain words?”

She shook her head—smiled dimly—and sped away.

Yokohama! Rickshaws and painted streets. Shop signs more decorative than banners for a carnival. Brawny porters with naked brown thighs. Girls’ faces like bright flowers. Color and laughter and romance; and tall ships in the harbor.

In two rickshaws Donna and Joe drove into the city. They shopped with deeply-bowing tradesmen; they lunched on the cool veranda of a cosmopolitan hotel. In the afternoon they

saw their first great Buddha dreaming away the centuries in the bliss of Nirvana.

Kobe was the next stop—that roaring city of New Japan—and then the ship glided among the haunted islands of the Inland Sea. Through the Korean Strait, across Hwang Hai, they found themselves in the mouth of the great Yangtze-kiang, not a river but a god; and only the night's ride from Shanghai.

Joe and Donna stood alone on the dimly-lighted deck, their thoughts moving with the yellow waters down the unnumbered centuries. This was the Father of Rivers. Kublai Khan had built pleasure palaces on its banks. Its waters had run red in forgotten wars. The aged Marco Polo, resting from his journeys under Italian skies, had told tales of its wonders—and his hearers had winked and tapped their foreheads.

Kingdoms had spread and receded like lazy tides. Cities had grown great, roared, and were now a few broken stones on a desert. Conquering armies had flung their pontoon bridges across its yellow waters: their clamor had died away in the distance, and naught was ever heard of them again. Strange gods had risen, and in time their temples fallen. But the River God remained. He fed or starved or drowned his millions at his whim. And still the sampan lights dimmed and brightened and danced like fireflies in the gloom.

The Yangtze was the heart artery of fabulous China. The ships of all nations passed in the night; and the men-of-war, British and French and Yankee, were chained like surly watchdogs to its piers. Hundreds of junks, each with an eye painted on her bow so she could find her way across the shoals, plied from dock to dock. And in the countless small craft dwelt a whole race of water things, unimaginable beings



who looked like men and women, but who were born and bred and died under the same patched and tattered sail.

Once a sampan light gleamed just under the bow, then quickly winked out. At the same instant Joe felt a slight shock. A few seconds later he thought he saw something white streak by in the murky waters.

He did not speak of these incidents to Donna.... But presently one of the sailors leaned over the rail with a lantern.

“Bit of ’ard luck for them blighters,” he said with a grin.

“What was it?” Donna demanded.

“Nothing but a sampan. They’re like blarsted ’ens, always trying to cross the ’ighway the wrong time. We cut her in two like a bit of cheese.”

“Were—were—there any people——”

“Not less than three. Likely not more’n a dozen. Populous packets, them sampans.”

“Then turn back—this instant! We might get some of them yet.”

The cockney’s grin died quickly, and he touched his cap. “No good to fret, my lidy. We’ve tried going back before—but we never catch any. The blighters just throw up their arms and go down, and blooming well lucky to get out of the mess they’re in. They couldn’t swim in that yellow mud if they tried. Anyhow, there’s forty billion more.”

He shrugged his shoulders and walked on.

“China!” Joe muttered after a long silence.

“I hate it,” the girl answered.

“I’d hate to leave you here.”

“Those men and women—children, too, perhaps—human beings like ourselves, going about their little lives, seeing this monster bearing down on them—and then their whole world smashed and winking out.... I wish Keith had stayed in America.”

At last the water tragedy receded in the distance. “What time do we dock?” Joe asked.

“Ten o’clock tomorrow.”

“And then”—and Joe looked hard at the stars—“you’ll be in Keith’s arms.”

She slipped her hand in his. “You won’t begrudge me my happiness, old sport.”

“I won’t begrudge you any happiness in the world.” She saw his wonderful smile, dearer to her every day, break slowly and light his face. “But I’d like a little for myself, right now.”

“Well, considering it’s good-by—and you are my best pal.”

His arms went out hungrily and gathered her in. She kissed him lightly, tenderly, and he thanked his old stars and the new ones burning over him that he had dared.

“By the way, you made a little mistake a while ago,” he mentioned cheerfully at last. “You said something about good-by.”

Unwarned, she continued star-gazing. “Yes?”

“I didn’t correct you at the time—thinking of other things—but I haven’t the slightest idea of parting from you, just because we’re getting into Shanghai. I’m going to stay right on hand.”

She turned squarely to him. “Then what was that kiss?”

“The triumph of my young life. Not to mention the sweetest——”

“Then you swindled me out of it on false pretenses.”

“I swear I didn’t say a word about leaving you. Anyway, you’re not sorry—are you? If you are, I’ll give it back——”

“You don’t work that on me. No, I’m not sorry. Now”—— she waved her finger in the air——“it’s all forgotten.”

But it could not be forgotten, ever.

### III

*THE Buchanan* tied up at the jetties, and a tender was waiting to take off the passengers. Quite foolishly—so she told herself—Donna had expected to meet Keith here. A number of officials stalked up the gang-plank, and porters and native pedlers were already infesting the ship, but there was no tall young man with hazel eyes and sunny, wavy hair.

“I suppose it’s against the rules,” she told herself.

But also she could not help thinking, much against her wishes, how much such rules would have counted were Joe the one to be waiting for his sweetheart. If necessary, he would have come as a coolie, bare legs and all, and wooden slabs, with a knob thrust up between his toes, on his big white feet.

“I do think he should have,” her mother said aloud as the tender started.

Donna turned almost in anger. “Should have what?”

“Got out here somehow.”

“Nonsense! Hardly any one is here. The idea would have never occurred to me.”

As they rode landward, she kept her eyes turned staunchly toward the open river. She watched the sampans weave in and out, and talked about them in animated fashion. It was Mrs. Randall whose remarks had begun to chop and change, as she stole glances toward the waiting crowd on the dock. She did not mind acting as lookout for her daughter; she understood perfectly. She, too, had known the delicate high pride of young love.

“There he is!” Mrs. Randall suddenly exclaimed.

And there he was, in the front of the crowd, laughing and waving his hand.

The gang-plank was thrown out. Donna ran to him, half-tripping over baggage. How finely handsome he was, standing there so perfectly groomed, perfectly self-assured! And now she was in his arms.

His lips were pressing hers—ardent, jubilant—and there was bliss in her heart.

“It’s great,” he was saying. “It’s too marvelous. And how perfectly corking you look!”

Whispering, he hardly listened to her own little foolish words. Now, his arm half about her waist, he was shaking hands with Mrs. Randall.

“Good trip?”

“Wonderful,” Donna told him.

“Well, we can’t stand here and hug, with half Shanghai looking on. What about moving over to the Cathay Hotel?”

“We’ve got to clear our baggage.”

“Leave it to an agent. You’re in China now, honey—and the only work you’ll ever do is sign a chit. That’s the ideal, but I’ve been working like a coolie. I meant to get over to the jetties to meet you, but some big mining news came in from Indo-China——”

“Oh, I didn’t expect that.”

“You won’t get any more neglect. My friends can’t wait to meet you, and they’re going to paint the town red for Keith’s girl. There’s to be a wonderful party tonight—all in your honor.”

The little silver bells ringing in Donna’s heart stopped for one beat, then tinkled gaily on. “I’d rather hoped we’d have

this first evening, just us.”

“I’d like that, too, but you don’t know Shanghai. Anyway, this is a special friend, and she’s so eager to do something for you. But I’m sure we can slip away early——”

Just then she saw Joe and Charley wandering vaguely about in the middle distance. To share with them her happiness, she raised her hand and beckoned.

Apparently Joe was looking sturdily to one side, but he saw her just the same. At that moment he would have seen the slightest crook of her finger. He and his friend came up smiling.

“Keith, I want you to meet two of my fellow passengers.”

She introduced the men, so jubilant that they could know one another, her lover and her friends—so proud to show them off. Yet it seemed to her that Joe’s and Keith’s glance was a little prolonged.

“Trust I’ll see you chaps later,” Keith said. “Now, Donna, we must run.”

“Oh, Keith!” Donna’s eyes were new-born stars, and her cheeks were glowing. “I want to have Joe and the doctor at my party tonight, so I won’t be among all strangers. I *know* you can manage it, if the hostess is an old friend.”

Keith stood still a brief second. “It’s rather late, but——” Then, with a nod and smile: “I’m sure the Baroness will be delighted. You can consider yourselves invited.”

He raised his hand, and instantly there was a crowd of rickshaws. “I’ll pick up you fellows in the lobby at ten o’clock.”

“We won’t be staying at the Cathay,” Joe said, smiling.

“Not unless they let us sing for our supper,” Charley added. “But we’ll be there at ten.”

The coolies trotted off. Joe watched Donna out of sight, but she did not wave back.

Presently Keith was ushering her and her mother into what many travelers say is the finest hotel in the world. He got them a beautiful room at an unbelievably low rate, and shortly Donna joined him in the lobby.

High color glimmered up through her bronzed skin. Her eyes were intensely bright. This was the day she had dreamed of three hundred nights. Here was the rendezvous she had kept in blissful fancy, a magic ship with sunlit sails that brought precious cargoes in the twinkling of an eye and never met a storm. And now the wide seas had roared and washed in vain.

“Think of having little Donna ’way out here,” Keith said. “I guess you find it different from Moline, Illinois.”

“It would be a little appalling—without you.”

“Wait till you get acquainted. It’s a truly cosmopolitan city. There are three millions now, and if conditions in China ever settle down, so we can trade away from the treaty ports, it will actually be the first city of the world, bigger than London or New York. And I mean to grow with it.”

“I want to hear how you’ve been getting along.”

“Even better than I hoped. I’m in with the right crowd. There’s only one penalty. I’m slaving so hard—have to do so much contract work besides—that I can’t spend every minute with you, as I want to.”

“I won’t mind that. I want to be your partner as well as your sweetheart.”

“But my friends will see that you’re never bored. They’re planning all kinds of nice things in honor of the coming big event.” He became a little ill at ease. “They—they stretch over the next month.”

The blissful little tune in her heart missed another beat, then ran on blithely. “It will be a wonderful month, I know.”

He had drawn back a little in his chair, but now he leaned over the table, talking eagerly. “We’ve plenty to see to—a house, and so on—and good ones, in good neighborhoods, are hard to pick up. Yet the delay may prove a good thing. There’s that mining excitement in Indo-China, and I may be sent any day. I wouldn’t want to leave my bride the first month.”

One of Keith’s friends came in and joined them.

“My fiancée,” Keith declared proudly, and his handsome eyes lighted as the man bowed low over her hand.

Soon others of the colony drew chairs to their table. There were many cocktails, much laughter, and an exchange of sophisticated wit far removed from Joe’s and Charley’s primitive banter.

Not once all day did she get a chance to be alone with Keith. She longed for his arms and his kisses—so that little heart-tune would never stop again—but all day friends were coming up, shaking hands, laughing, and making room for others. The late-luncheon coffee was hardly sipped before it was time to go to one of the clubs for tea.

“When must you go to the office?” she asked Keith.

“Innocence abroad,” one of the guests laughed. “She thinks Shanghai men go to offices!”



After tea she changed her frock, pretended to rest for an hour, then she and her mother accompanied Keith to the French Club. It was a famous place—the celebrities of Shanghai were there—and to Donna it seemed a new world.

In easy view of her table sat an Italian count, a famous Austrian surgeon who had fled his country in disgrace, an international spy, and the illegitimate son of a Balkan king. A dark-eyed handsome youth whose shoulder nearly touched hers was the son of a French mother and a Chinese father, and one of the twenty richest men in the world. A slim, blonde woman against the wall had been Alaska's most famous adventuress, but she had married a British admiral and now held a salon likened to London's best.

It was after eight when they left the club—Shanghai evidently dined late. Donna did not dine at all save from a tray in her room, after Keith had kissed her and left her there. But he had promised to call for her promptly at ten, to take her to the supper party given in her honor.

Her hands fluttered and thrilled through the soft gay silks and dainty laces of her trousseau. "I can't decide what to wear tonight," she said, turning lustrous eyes on her mother.

Mrs. Randall glanced up with a smile. "Wear the prettiest evening dress you own—to celebrate your first night in Shanghai."

At a quarter-past ten Keith had not yet rung her room, but Donna busied herself at little things and forced her eyes from the clock. No one, Keith had told her, was ever on time in carefree Shanghai.

"No use of your waiting here," Mrs. Randall said gently. "Go down in the lobby and see if you can find Joe and Charley."

Joe and Charley proved not hard to find. They saw her across the lobby and waved and sped to meet her. Their broad smiles were good to see.

At half-past ten, Keith came for them in his car. He drove to the French Quarter, and a liveried door-keeper ushered them into an apartment house. An old, dark, foreign-looking maid in a white cap admitted them to a luxurious drawing room.

The first thing Donna noticed was a tall candle burning before an ikon in a corner of the room. The next was a tall girl that was herself a golden flame. She came floating from an inner door—and she was the most beautiful living creature Donna had ever seen.

“Sonia, I want to present my fiancée and her friends,” Keith’s voice seemed to come from far away. “Donna—this is the Baroness Sarichef.”

Presently the introductions were over. Sonia was speaking in a deep, throaty voice rich with innate emotionalism. “So very happy and proud to has you here. And Keith, dear little one, it has been so long—so years, it seem—since I has seen you.”

With a faint, wistful smile she held out her hand. Keith bowed and kissed it gaily.

It was only old-world courtesy fitting to the scene. Donna should be proud that her lover could do the honors so well. But suddenly the little bells in her heart clanged out of tune.

She did not know why. The light in Sonia’s long eyes had somehow flashed to Keith’s—both stood radiant, as though invisible lamps were over them, golden as sunlight on their heads—but this was good to see in old, dear friends. And at once she was ashamed of her childish, senseless jealousy. It

was not true, only her silly imaginings, that the lamps over her own head flickered and grew dim, and the room turned chill as though a door had been left open to the east wind.

So ring on, silver bells! This was the night of Donna's home-coming, the overture of her wedding feast. And although she could not quite recapture the ecstatic little tune, soon she flung back her shoulders, raised her glossy head, and searched for Keith's eyes across the room. When she found them, she gave him all the love and glory of her smile.

But somehow she was glad, now, that she had worn her loveliest gown.

## IV

*AS* her courage mounted, Donna began a cool study of her lover's friend. Her clear and honest eyes soon conveyed the whole glorious picture. Sonia Sarichef's beauty did not flicker under close scrutiny, but still burned golden as the tall candle beside the ikon. If a lingering pang of jealousy made Donna search for its flaw, she could not find it.

She had heard much of golden hair but she knew now she had never really seen it before. This had all the soft shine and richness of spun gold. Sonia wore it in coils on the sides of her head, a coiffure that looked simple and ingenuous to Keith, but which any girl could tell was carefully studied. Her eyes were soft blue, and long and pointed by the Russian heritage—that suggestion of a slant that recalls the raids of Ghengis Khan with his Mongol hordes through the valleys of the Volga. Her nose was classic; her mouth delicate and wistful; her throat, shoulders, and arms were milk-white. She wore a close-fitting gown of shimmering white silk. The crowning touch was her carriage, at once regal and light. She was no fake baroness. Generations of luxurious breeding had gone into her long, delicate bones and finely-molded flesh.

Other guests came in, to whom Donna must give the surface of her attention. There was a little French woman in a daring gown, a rather handsome hard-voiced girl of remote American origin, two sleek-haired young men with beautiful clothes and a pseudo-British accent, and a gray, middle-aged, fine-figured man, strikingly handsome save for the flesh purses under his eyes and his sensual mouth.

As Keith had promised, they all made much of his girl. The two well-combed youths paid her extravagant compliments, saved from bad taste only by their wit. The middle-aged man, Carter, took his post by her side and set out to charm her. And it was the attack of an able and seasoned veteran.

Men like this had never come into her town and college circles; he was an entirely new experience. His talk was fascinating—gay, witty, erudite, with a vein of the most graceful intimacy running through it. He never touched her hand, but at every glance he tried to hold her eyes with a long, knowing, secret-telling look, signaling what even he could not refine in words: a look to call to mind all the delights of stolen sweets and the adventure of intrigue.

Possibly he was merely playing an idle game for his own vanity. She gave him the benefit of the doubt and for a little while was tempted to play back. Soft voices and caressing laughter from across the room tended to make her reckless. But good sense and good taste saved her. She had never met such a man—at least, so finished a specimen of his genus—but she saw through the glamor and the rosy clouds that his art conjured up to the muddy theme beneath.

“Smoke-screen,” she thought grimly, and some fastidious and virginal spirit within her cringed.

But this made her only more alluring to him. She was fresh—fragrant—unsullied. When she looked him frankly in the eyes, unafraid, uncharmed, and pricked his pretty bubbles with a sharp pin of ridicule, it only challenged him the more.

His finished performance overawed the sleek-haired young men. In the presence of the master, their own little bubble-blowing made a poor show. Sonia being unavailable, they

devoted themselves to the little French woman. But they would learn—so Donna thought with a new grimness. With enough brains they would one day acquire all of Carter's arts, when Carter, himself would be the silly old laughing stock of the town. And these were Keith's new friends! This was the life to which he had flown, like a moth to the flame.

She glanced at him and winced at his curly hair and eager gray eyes. Heartsick, she watched the gay, boyish expressions that she loved. Sonia was smiling up at him, a wistful smile, and often her hand impulsively touched his. That she had turned on him the full arc-light of her charm every other person in the room had seen. And now Donna saw it, too. Her fool's paradise was tumbling down—careening, spinning to the hard earth—and she would deny the sight no more.

But how little—or how much—did it mean? Nothing, perhaps—in Shanghai. With Carter and his ilk, love-making was only a game. Perhaps Sonia, too, was merely amusing herself in an idle hour.

But other impressions now came crowding, imperious, remorseless—the upcroppings of Donna's instincts, quickened by the rigor of the hour. Sonia was not playing. Her only resemblance to Carter was something almost too vague to shape in thought. Perhaps she, too, was drawn to freshness—youth—a kind of immaculacy Keith had not yet lost.

Donna squared her little shoulders and faced the truth. Sonia was not her friend, but her rival, fighting desperately for her deepest heart's desire. She loved Keith: every glimmer in her eyes and overtone in her voice told the whole world.

And if he ... but no, she would not even concede the possibility. Brave heart though she was, she did not dare.

Carter stepped out of the room on a telephone call, and Marge, the other American girl, came up with an acrid smile. Donna knew that smile and feared it. It was the introspective smile of a cat stalking a bird. Marge had received no attention from her friends. Joe, although stiffly polite, had been absent-minded and spoke in monosyllables. Plainly she meant to take this out on some one.

“My *dear!*” So she began. “You don’t know what a hit you’re making, what a sensation you are.”

All right, so far, Donna thought, waiting for what would come next. Aloud she said, “Thank you.”

“Yes, you are. Isn’t it marvelous, coming to Shanghai for the first time? A new face—a new voice—and they’re like hungry wolves. Imagine!”

It was coming now, but Donna did not cringe. “I can’t imagine.”

“You don’t know what a scalp you’ve taken in old Carter. He’s terribly in demand. Getting nearly white, yes—but it only makes him look more distinguished—a trifle jaded, but he can still bloom like a rose when he sees a lovely face like yours. Oh, he’s a conquest. He’s really—or at least he was, until a few weeks ago—the most sought-after man in Shanghai.”

Donna’s eyes narrowed. The attack was circuitous, and she could not yet make out on what flank it would fall.

“He’s had a setback or two lately, but he’ll recover,” Marge went on. “You may not know it, but your fiancé gave him his first shove off his perch. Keith is the king bee now.”

She paused, hoping to hear a question about Keith. But Donna only said,

“I’m glad he’s so popular.”

“No word for it, my dear.” Marge smiled, too, but her eyes glittered with malice, and what little finesse she had fell with a thud. “You know, Carter and Sonia were thick as pickpockets. One of the most talked of affairs in the town, and mind you, Shanghai never wastes its words! It is hard to startle, I can most solemnly affirm. He happened to have a wife parked away somewhere, but, of course, that was a mere detail. And then, would you believe it, Sonia dropped him like a hot oyster.”

The inference was plain, now: Marge hungrily watched Donna’s eyes. But bravely, gamely, those eyes only smiled. Didn’t the little fool get it? Marge almost slavered.

“The minute your Keith comes along—and one, two, three, out goes Carter, in steps Keith. But, of course, you can’t blame *her*. He rings the bell, that lad! A most charming boy, your Keith. And, of course, you can’t blame him, either. After all, she *is* attractive—she knows her caviar—and you couldn’t expect him to live like a monk all the time he was waiting for you?”

“I don’t blame him in the least. I admire his good taste. She’s not just attractive, but perfectly beautiful.”

“How broad-minded! You’ll fit into Shanghai, sweet. But make the most of it, while you can. Take that from a dog that’s had her day.”

Carter appeared; Marge gave him a mocking smile and strolled away.



“What has that catamount been telling you!” he asked Donna in sudden anger.

“Nothing especially interesting.”

“She’s the worst woman in one of the worst and best cities in the world. I’m bad enough, God knows, but compared to her I sprout wings. Why Sonia should ask her here, I can’t imagine—but please don’t suspect it was so she could talk to you. Sonia is good-hearted, naturally kind like most of the Russian girls, and wouldn’t descend to that for a dozen Keiths. She’s given me the high and handsome gate, but I’ll say that for her, anyway.”

His sudden unquestioned sincerity left Donna stunned. She stared at him with wide eyes. She would always wonder what had unmasked him. He was only an episode in her Shanghai experience, and she would never know. Perhaps the telephone had brought him some bad news that had toppled him down to the lowly earth they both shared. Perhaps it was pity for her, on seeing her with Marge.

“I know what you are,” he went on, his fine eyes glowing. “I saw it the instant I came into the room, but it only woke the devil in me. You no more belong with this filth—except your friends and Keith and Sonia—than with a pack of rats. I hope you’ll forgive all that rotten mess I’ve been trying. As for Keith—you can have him yet, if you want him. He may be a fool, but I don’t think he’s a big enough fool to let you pass.”

She was too dazed to answer. Only one fact rang cruelly clear in her swimming head—that Marge had told only a blackened version of the truth. That Carter and all Shanghai knew was a trifle now; that he had spoken it so frankly was

not worth a second's question. It was not only her pride at hazard now, but her hope, her heart, her inmost life.

Carter beckoned to Joe, who with a hasty excuse left Marge in the middle of a sentence.

"Entertain this young lady, please. I'm going to see if I can't hurry up that midnight supper. I think she's starved, and I know I am."

"Do you like that chap?" Joe demanded.

Donna heard him in a dream. "Yes."

"He's a pretty bad old egg, they tell me."

"Yes, but I like him just the same. I think, if I live long enough, I'll learn to like all people, no matter how bad they are. Maybe that's what life is for, to teach us to like every one." Her eyes were wide and bright.

At that moment a maid came in with a tray of *hors d'œuvres*, in Joe's eyes a welcome interlude in a situation far beyond his depth. To amuse Donna, he made a great to-do over the caviar all the way from the Amur River, the little Russian biscuits, and the cloudy-white liqueur served in tiny glasses.

He gave the liquid a tentative sip. "*Whew!*"

Donna was startled out of her dreams. "Goodness——"

"Don't light a match near me. Windows would be broken as far as Hongkong."

Her laugh rang out. Such nonsense was just the tonic she needed. The scene, distorted and blurred by her jealousy and rage, grew sharp and clear. She could meet it as it was.

"That's the first time I've really heard you laugh tonight," Joe went on. "The other times you just made a noise."

“You’re so silly. I couldn’t help it. Look at the baroness—she’s drinking it. It’s only vodka.”

“Too bad some of our old Montana cattlemen can’t see her. But they’d never lift their heads again.”

Other food appeared, to which Joe attended in his own purposeful fashion. Donna could not eat, but her companion seemed not to notice.

Keith came up and sat beside her, talking with great charm and gaiety. He stayed a full hour. But he tried so hard to show that it was no effort to stay—that he was not even tempted to return to Sonia—that Donna was relieved when the show was over and he returned.

“Striking-looking girl, the baroness,” Joe observed, after a long silence.

“She’s the most beautiful girl I ever saw.”

Slowly Joe turned and searched Donna’s face. She saw the good red hue mount to his temples.

“She’s not the most beautiful girl I ever saw.”

“Don’t be like the others, Joe.” Donna spoke in low tones. “Somehow I don’t expect it from you, and it would disappoint me more than you realize.”

He waited patiently till she had finished. “I say,” he repeated firmly, “she is not the most beautiful girl I ever saw.”

“Then you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“She is a superb example of her type,” Joe blundered on. “But I happen to like your type best, the kind we raise in America.”

“It’s fine of you to say so. But they win in a walk!”

“They know how to charm and capture men, all right. The continental girl of Sonia’s type is born and bred for that very thing.”

“And I suppose the American girl is born and bred to wash her man’s clothes and darn his socks and nurse his babies?” Donna spoke bitterly.

“Usually that’s the case. But he is her man—don’t forget that—as much as she is his woman. It’s a full partnership, not a one-sided affair. That’s the American idea.”

“I thought we were talking about beauty.”

“We are. There are all kinds of beauty. There’s a kind that tells a man she’s going to make him, not break him—slave beside him when times grow hard—have resources of her own when he’s in trouble. That’s the kind of beauty we’ve bred in America, and a new rating for women. It may fail, and the mistress principle conquer yet, but I don’t think so.”

“That’s all very well, but it can’t make up for sheer looks.”

“The kind of beauty I’m talking about makes for looks, and don’t you forget it. Bright eyes, alive. Healthy, active minds that brighten faces. Good bones and good muscles. Spirit, and quick pick-up, and dash. And Donna, you’ve got ’em all.”

She looked at his earnest face, his kind eyes alight, and presently the bitter line at her lips wavered and curled into a smile. “You’re a real friend, Joe,” she said at last. “A friend—in need.”

“I love you, if that’s what you mean,” he answered in hushed tones. “I’ll always love you, Donna.”

“You’ve thought only of my happiness tonight—and I’m more grateful than you know,” she went on, as though she

had not heard. “You’ve helped me, too—again more than you know. You are probably mistaken about that other thing—but I may give it a trial.”

“I don’t understand, Donna.”

She laid her hand on his. “If the situation is still worth saving—I don’t know yet—you are the one who has given me heart to fight it through. If it’s too late—if I must go back home and compete with other girls raised to darn socks and wash clothes and nurse babies—you’ll still be the dearest, truest friend I’ve ever had. Is that cold comfort to you, Joe?”

“Nothing that gives you help and happiness is cold comfort to me.”

Her eyes filled, and a moment later she turned and crossed the room to Sonia.

The men rose. Keith took her hand and drew it half around his waist.

“It’s been a wonderful party,” Donna said. “It was so sweet of you to think of it.”

“But do you go so quick?” Sonia asked. “It is only the leg—what you say?—the shank of the night.”

“I haven’t got my land-shanks yet, and I’m a little tired. We must see each other soon.”

“I would be so happy. And your friends you bring, they is too charming. This one here—Char-lee he calls himself—have made me laugh till the ribs, the sides, pain. But you are tired, so. Keith, little one, see that she goes straight to bed. I know how Shanghai seem when I is first come from Harbin.”

“You are very sweet, as well as beautiful,” Donna said soberly.

“You, my little darling, is a dream. If I was Keith, I would never let you be out of his eyes. I speak English so very little, you must forgive. I do not blame him for call you all the way from America.”

“Can you tie that?” Charley asked himself. Yet he knew that this love-feast was by no means forced—that both girls believed they were speaking the truth, although, of course, not all the truth.

Presently Sonia was standing, a tall white candle with a golden flame, in the doorway, and they were waving good-night.

## V

*RIDING* home from the party in the gloom and hush of midnight, the four young people chatted gaily, and bright laughter streamed behind. But of their secret thoughts there was not one word or sign.

Even when two old friends were left alone, in their modest quarters in the American Club, they still felt strangely repressed. Charley whistled with a cheerfulness obviously forced, and out of tune. Joe slumped in a chair, staring at the wall but saying nothing.

“Well, speak up,” Joe growled at last.

“An old story, my boy,” Charley answered in his own lavish way. “Adam and his apple. Samson and his hair. That boy Paris and his pretty blonde girl who spoke Trojan with a bewitching accent——”

“But Donna surely carried it off, didn’t she?”

“Did she! I was mighty proud of good old U. S. A.”

Joe’s gloomy face lighted up. “And wasn’t she beautiful!”

“Yes, but she had company in that respect.” Charley’s young eyes kindled.

Joe glanced up quickly. “Watch out, Charley. Remember you’ve decided to leave Shanghai and look for a surgeon’s job with a Chinese army.”

“That job can wait. There are always openings, so one of those trained seals at the party told me—new wars coming along all the time, each more sanguinary than the last. I’ve decided to stay on in Shanghai.”

“Just to be with me, and back me up?”

Charley got into his pajamas and sat on the edge of his bed. When he spoke again, it was in a serious tone. “That’s just the trouble. I wouldn’t be backing you up. Suppose I go ahead and use my fatal charm on Sonia. Then Keith and Donna will live happily ever after, while my pal loses out on the biggest deal of his life.”

Joe considered this a full minute. “Don’t let that hold you back.”

Charley was now quite grave. “See here, old chap. This is mighty serious business to you, and just another blonde scalp to me.”

“Don’t I know it? When the time comes, you’ll grow up, and not before. In this case, I’m simply playing square with Donna. I don’t like the situation one iota. If there’s a chance of Sonia leaving Keith alone, for you or any other reason, I’m certainly not going to interfere.”

“There’s something more to it. What is it?”

“I’d like a chance to try to beat Keith’s time. Any conscience I might have felt about it went dead on me tonight. But I don’t propose to use a Russian baroness, directly or indirectly. And that’s that.”

Alone with Donna in his car, Keith drove with one hand. The other stole out and drew her head against his shoulder. They had ridden so a year ago, on the country roads of Illinois on the opposite side of the world.

Because they had ridden so then—and because she did not want to show how well she knew that everything had changed—she slipped down into the hollow of his arm. Because she was so conscious how long ago and far away those other moons had shone, she tried all the harder to



pretend they were shining still. She sat smiling, and when she spoke, her voice was low and sweet.

But it was a desperately long way to the hotel, and Keith drove slowly. She sang the song that had been their favorite —“My little Gypsy sweetheart”—but still she could not keep him from talking, or save herself from answering.

“I was so proud of you tonight,” he told her.

“I was proud of you too. I love having you so popular.” She managed to say this without a false note in her voice.

“You made a great hit, especially with Sonia. She’s a girl of wonderful character. Been through the mill, I tell you—her parents slaughtered by the Reds—got the family jewels across to Harbin by the skin of her teeth—has had all kinds of ups and downs, and persecuted besides because of her beauty. But she’s never bowed her head. I’m mighty proud we’re going to have her for a friend.”

“I think it’s wonderful. Keith, do you still remember ‘Madelon?’ If you do, I wish you’d sing it.”

“I don’t want to sing now. I want to talk. It seems I haven’t had a quiet word with you all day—and your first day in Shanghai at that. I wish we hadn’t had to go to the party—yet it was such fun to show you off. And it was a shame I didn’t get to devote more time to you.”

“I got more of your time than I expected. I realize you mustn’t neglect your friends.”

“That wasn’t it. But Shanghai customs are so queer—so sophisticated. It’s always a sort of trade-around—you’re expected to be generous with your girl, especially if she’s a new-comer from America, and a peach at that.”

“I know. We’re in Rome now.”

“But we’re supposed to make up for lost time when we’re alone. How about taking a spin?”

“Not tonight, if you don’t mind, Keith. You can’t imagine how tired I am. I’m going straight to bed.”

“Well, that was Sonia’s order—and as another girl, I guess she understands. There’ll be other nights coming, plenty of them.”

Reluctantly, he drew up at the hotel. As he led her past the desk, the half-caste night clerk called his name.

“Telephone call for you, sir. The party’s called three times in the last half hour.”

Keith changed color. “I’ll call in a few minutes.”

“Party’s on the line right now, sir,” the clerk insisted, holding out the receiver of the desk-phone.

“Take it now,” Donna urged, in friendly tones. “It may be something important.”

Keith faltered—gave one yearning glance toward the private booths at the end of the lobby—cursed the clerk under his breath for the witless tyro he was—and took the call.

“*My Keith?*” How clear the voice came over the wire!

“Yes, this is Keith Elliot.” He meant it to seem calm, casual, but it sounded damning in his own ears.

“*You must come to me now. I cannot wait till morning.*”

“Well, if something important has broken, of course I’ll come. You can expect me in a few minutes.”

He hung up quickly, drew a long, steadying breath, and was smiling apologetically when he rejoined Donna.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, sweet,” he told her. “Something has come up that has to be attended to, tonight.”

He was prepared to lie, if he must, but he would rather evade if he could.

“You should go at once, if it’s important business.” Even her eyes were smiling. “I don’t mind going up the elevator alone.”

“No, you don’t. I’m going to take you to your door. It’s not so important as all that.”

“I wonder how the man knew where to reach you?”

“Every one knows where to reach me, now you’ve come.”

They chatted happily all the way to her door. The hall-boy came running to meet them, bowing, but Keith waved him off.

“Good sleep, Mistel and Missy,” he called, retreating.

“Not yet, but it will be soon, thank heaven,” Keith told Donna, with the young smile she loved. The hall was shadowy and deserted, so he drew her into his arms.

His kiss was so sweet on her lips! But it did not ease, only sharpened, the dull pain in her heart.

“I love you, Donna,” he whispered.

She smiled, and started to turn away, but he caught her hand.

“Tell me before you go,” he begged. “The same that I told you.”

“I love you, Keith.”

And the worst of it was, it was true. The damned-up tears rushed and flooded her eyes as she sped into the dim light and haven of her room.

Her mother did not speak, and her eyes were closed. But Donna knew she was not asleep.

At the end of the corridor, Keith rang impatiently for the elevator. It seemed hours in coming; he could have saved time by running down the stairs.

There was another delay to buy gasoline. There were night-wandering Chinese that suddenly loomed in the shadowy street and made him jam his brakes. The French quarter had never seemed so far.

But at last he stood in the familiar hall. His heart leaped and ceased as he waited the answer to his knock.... And then Sonia, burning, pale golden fire, in the doorway. Her hands were out—her lips curled in a wistful smile—her long pointed eyes were glimmering with dreams, just as he had known.

The door closed behind them. The other guests had gone; the room was warm, faintly scented, intimate. Of the hiving swarm that is Shanghai, there was no one left alive but himself and Sonia. Of the myriad temples raised to pagan gods, all but one had fallen.

She did not come straight into his arms. This was not her way. At first she gave him only the tips of her fingers. If he should try to take more, to make haste, she would turn into a cold statue of ivory, with sapphire eyes and hair of beaten gold. Or, she would slip away to some unscaled distance, to come back in her own good time. But her fingers were silken, and they seemed to kiss his hands.

“You is annoy that I call you back so late?” she asked.

“Annoyed? Good heavens.”

“Then why you not ask me, yourself. ‘Sonia, let me come to you when Donna sleeps?’”

“I didn’t dare ask you. You know I wanted to! You’ve never let me come so late before——”

“You did not hear me say, ‘take her straight home, Keith, so tire she are.’ You is deaf, maybe.”

“No, dumb. I thought you were in earnest.”

“I was so. Little thing, she was all out, all in. I remember *my* first day in Shanghai, from Harbin. But cannot I mean two things at once? You do not ask me because you does not want to come, very like, eh? Maybe you think, ‘it is all over with Sonia.’ ”

He smiled the smile that Donna had once thought belonged only to her. “Of course. All over with Sonia.” And he tugged gently at her hands.

“You must not joke now. It is happen very serious now. You have seen your Donna. All day long you have seen her. You is sure you still love Sonia?”

“You don’t have to ask that. I think all you need do is look in my face.”

“It is sweet and the eyes burn, but still I is not sure.” She stepped close to him, until her breast almost touched him, but she held his hands at his sides. “Now look to me and say it plain. ‘I love you, Sonia.’ ”

“I love you, Sonia. Forever.”

“Sonia—Donna—the names is much alike. Only a little time ago—not even an hour—you say, ‘I love you, Donna.’ Is it not so?”

His lips moved to say no. It would hardly be a lie, so far away, so dim, the truth seemed. Donna’s ghost did not follow him here. There was no one in the world but he and this gold-

white girl with hands in his. Then he remembered—and his face turned dark red.

“I won’t answer that.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Of course you told her, little one—maybe in the car, maybe in the hall by her door. I do not blame you. It is so. You do love her.”

Keith recoiled, staring.

“Do not speak yet. It is because you love her that I must talk tonight, say many things.”

“But you are not going to ask me to give you up?” Keith’s tone shook. “I tell you I won’t!”

“Wait!” She charmed him to silence with her sibilant whisper. “You kissed her so tenderly, and she kissed you too. Oh, I know! Was it like this?”

She swayed to him and pressed her lips to his.

“No.” He could hardly speak. “It was not like that.” And this at least was the truth.

“But you love her, just the same. I saw it all tonight. You love her, but you want me. Is it not?”

“I want you, Sonia. I love you. I won’t give you up.”

“So we must talk, many things. Everything is change, now I see her, and see you with her. You did not tell me the truth ahead of time. You did not say how lovely is she, how beautiful, like a dark rose, how fine, how much alive. Otherwise, I would not care. If you love her only like a habit, like sometimes American men love their wives, it would not matter. Then you can marry her—and soon you come to me, just the same—and soon, who knows, we has all of each other, we belong to each other, truly, and it is beautiful and good.”

“And now?”

“Now I am afraid. She is so very lovely. A little at a time, she take you away. She hold your heart in her little hand.”

“But no one can take me from you! Don’t you know that?”

“I do know. You do not. Girls like Donna, they has something. I do not know quite what it is, but it is very strong. Before her coming, I can think to see her be your wife, at your house, in your arms. It is all empty, I think then; it mean nothing. But now I cannot think of it. When you go with her just now, I twist my handkerchief; I could not keep from the telephone. No, little one, I cannot let you keep her. Donna must go back to America.”

Keith turned white. “You mustn’t say that, Sonia. She has come all the way out here to marry me. It will be just the same between you and me.”

He tried to reach her lips, but she drew away. “No. It will not be the same.”

“But you mustn’t ask me to break our engagement. It wouldn’t be so bad, if we were at home. But out here—in a foreign country——”

“I know. I has thought. For her sake, I am of the mind to let you go, to make you good-by. If you say me to, I will. But unless you say to, I cannot. I am not strong enough. And anyhow, why should my heart break to save hers? We is both women, but we was enemies since the stars began; we come of dif ferent worlds; when it is for a man’s love we must show no mercy.”

“But I’m thinking of her pride. Don’t you see that?”

“What is pride compared to this?” Her arms went about him, and she kissed him with leaping fire. But when that fire

swept through his frame, and he sought to crush her breast to his, she whirled away.

Now she was facing him across a little table. Her long eyes were glittering; she was breathing hard.

“Pride, it will recover,” she told him, her voice low and resonant. “When she come home, she will say to her friends, ‘I throw him aside—I did not want him.’ And in a little while she is believe it, too. But love that goes hungry, it will not recover. Other food comes, but not *that* food; the soul yearns for ever, this life and the next. The heart is scarred.”

Then, wrapping herself in an impenetrable dignity: “Let some man have her who cannot have Sonia!”

He could not speak, but only gaze in wonder.

At last her wistful smile came back. Floating about the table, she took his hand and led him to the sofa. Seating him, she relaxed in his arms. For a time she gave him the full sweetness and red magic of her lips.

Her eyelids drooped. “You want me, Keith?”

He could not speak.

“I want you too, but not yet. You do not love me yet with the whole heart. When you show me it is so——”

“What can I do, to show you?”

“You will tell Donna—tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow, Sonia! Don’t ask me to do that.”

“The sooner it is, it is better. The longer it is, it is harder. Say to her, ‘I am not worthy of you, Donna.’ Tell any lie to save some of the hurt of the heart. And then——”

“But I can’t do it tomorrow. It wouldn’t be decent. Just give me a little time. I’ll handle it—I promise I will.”



“Then I leave it to your hand. But remember——”

“Yes?”

“For her, it is only pride. Oh, yes—and what the American girls think is love. For me, it is the heart and the soul and the body. To lose you, Donna will cry a little, and look for another man for a suitable marriage. But to lose you, Keith little one—Sonia will only die.”

## VI

*THE* tears that Sonia has fortold were not flowing yet. Donna lay taut in her bed, her eyes wide open and dry. The sleep of utter fatigue stole again and again into her brain, but it could not still her driving thoughts, and only twisted and distorted their edges, so that they cast monstrous shadows, evil shapes, on the mirror of her consciousness. She groped in the dimness between sleep and waking. When she slept, she was still herself, hedged about with reality; and she dreamed horribly while she was awake.

She saw the first glimmer of dawn through the crack in her window-drapes. Far below, in the street, she heard the murmur of the waking hive. And then, suddenly, darkness swept over her.

When she wakened it was with a twinge of pain in her heart. She gazed about her. For a few seconds, she could not orient herself. But there was her mother, fully dressed, reading in a chair by the window. And then she knew all. The answer she had sought so desperately last night had been left like a sad dream-gift in her hand.

“I’m awake,” she called.

“It’s high time, I must say. After eleven. You must have come in at an unholy hour.”

“You know when I came in. Why pretend you don’t? Let’s swear off fibbing to each other.” Donna put on a negligée and slippers, and took the big chair opposite her mother.

“I’ll agree if you will. Honor bright from now on, troubles and all.” Mrs. Randall reached and took Donna’s hand.

“Troubles are often like mice that you hear at night—they sound awfully big until you turn on the light.”

“I suppose you know everything, anyway ... You always do.”

“Mothers always know more than they let on. It’s this silly fear of hurting each other’s pride.” Mrs. Randall’s fine brown eyes lighted. “I bore you and nursed you at my breast and saw you grow. How pride crept in between your skin and mine I can’t imagine. But let’s keep it for outside consumption.”

“Right!” Donna bent and kissed her mother’s cheek.

“Every time you went to a dance—and failed to be popular—I knew it,” Mrs. Randall went on. “Those pitiful little lies you told, and the smiles you tried to smile,—probably I made a mistake when I pretended to believe them. But I was so sure they’d come out all right in the end——”

“Do you think this thing now will come out all right?”

“Of course it will, somehow.”

“It may be so. I must say I take it with a big grain of salt. If you ask me, I think that life is one hell of a mess.”

“I’ve thought so too, at various times. Cuss a little more, if it relieves you; if I can understand and forgive it, the Lord certainly ought to. Do you want to tell me about it now, or wait till you feel the comfort of a little breakfast?”

“I’d rather tell you now. Then maybe I can eat something... I’m going back to America.”

She said so with a casualness that cut Mrs. Randall more than the words themselves.

“Is it as bad as that?” Meanwhile she reached for her embroidery.

“Just as bad as bad can be.”

“But you are still wearing his ring?”

“It is going back to him in ten minutes—by mail.” She took it off, and laid it on the table.

Mrs. Randall carefully threaded a needle. “The young Russian baroness, who gave the party?”

“Yes. A beautiful girl, and not at all what I expected. Much nicer than I expected. Keith’s in love with her, and I don’t blame him.”

“Did he tell you so?”

“Of course not. He didn’t have the nerve, when I’ve just come ten thousand miles to marry him. But he would if he dared.”

“What did he tell you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“He told me he loved *me*.”

“And you didn’t believe him?”

“How could I believe him, when I saw how he acted?”

“You really think he’d be happy to have the engagement broken?”

This question proved not so easy to answer as she first thought. Her eyes opened in a queer, startled way.

“Perhaps not at first. Though it seems silly—since he’s in love with another girl—I think it might be quite a blow to him. But that’s just my own vanity, I suppose. A man can’t love two girls at once.”

“Don’t be so sure of that last. If you look up the word in the dictionary, you’ll find half a dozen different meanings. I don’t think it’s your own vanity, Donna. I think it would be a much harder blow than you can imagine.”

“Well, he’ll get over it. He wants Sonia, and he can have her, and she can have him.” Donna’s dark eyes glittered. “I’m going home.”

Mrs. Randall sewed with steady hands. At last came her answer, in quiet tones.

“White feather, eh?”

Donna jumped. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just what I said. You’re going to show the white feather. Let this Russian baroness take your man, like a spoonful of warm butter—while you whimper and turn tail and crawl home.”

At first Donna was too shocked to answer. And her mother went on sewing.

“Do you realize what you’re saying?” the girl cried.

“Don’t I usually realize what I say?”

“But you can’t know how raw it sounds?”

“If it does, I don’t give one whoop. This is a very raw earth, my daughter, and a very real one. Few of us live in the clouds. If we try to, we soon find that we’ve got self-manufactured wings, and nothing else. Real dignity is very fine, but not when it turns out to be only a pretty little mask for cowardice.”

“You don’t know how dreadful you are.” Donna’s eyes were smarting.

“If there’s anything more useless than self-appointed wings, I don’t know what it is,” Mrs. Randall went on, “unless it’s tears.” Yet she had not even looked up. “One thing I envy about men. They cuss when things go wrong, but they don’t smear their faces all up with salt-water.”

“I’m not going to cry. Don’t be afraid.” Donna’s voice shook with rage. “As for cowardice—I don’t think that’s the word. Keith has been in that girl’s arms; even last night, after he brought me here. How far he’s gone with her I don’t know, and don’t want to know, but plenty far.”

“He’ll be in plenty of other women’s arms before he’s through, or I miss my guess.”

“And you’d have me stand for it?”

“You’ll have to, if you take a man of Keith’s temperament. He may be worth keeping in spite of it—some men are. He won’t be in love with all of them—quite possibly with none of them but you.”

“If that’s the kind of man he is, I don’t want him.”

“It may turn out so. But I’d make sure of it, with no heart-break to come, before I’d let a beautiful Russian baroness walk right off with him under my nose.”

“How can I stop her?” Donna jumped up, took an angry turn about the room, and flung herself down again. “She’s got something I haven’t—and that’s what Keith wants.”

“And you have something she hasn’t, too. Donna, you used to play tennis in college. When you were matched up with a girl with a swifter serve than yours—I remember you used to complain about your serve—I suppose you threw down your racket and walked off the court.”

“I did nothing of the kind, and you know it. I played all the harder.”

*“Then play all the harder now.”*

Donna sat still so long that it gave the effect of a start. Mrs. Randall spread her embroidery on her knee, and admired it. “Nice flower, that I’ve just finished,” she said.

In her daughter's being there was a curious ferment working. Racially and personally she was a fighter. This was an American heritage from women who braved new worlds beside their men; who had their babies in the beds of prairie-schooners; whose hard fingers raced at the ramrods and powder-horns, to pass up to trusting hands the loaded flintlocks, while painted demons howled around the cabin.

Those new worlds were now conquered. The trail where the covered-wagons rocked and rumbled was a paved highway between glittering cities. The red men raided no more, but sold grass baskets to tourists on the reservations. But the steel of the spirit had not yet all rusted; the soul, trained down and lean and battle-trying, had not yet grown fat.

That grim tradition not only endured, but actuated deeds. It was not a romantic tale, but an active reality throughout the American woman's world. It had raised her to personal equality with men. It was the beginning of a new deal for all the women of the earth. It had made the American girl a force in business, politics, and the arts: the first woman ever to sit in England's Parliament was American-born. It spelled extinction for the clinging-vine. It still shamed surrender, whether her battle was for a Governor's chair or a stenographer's pay-check, whether for some great social betterment or the father of her babes.

It was this spirit, shining down the generations, that Joe had seen in Donna's face. It was her strength, not her weakness, that had challenged him so. And that strength, reflected and transfigured in her clean-cut beauty, now put iron into her heart.

Mrs. Randall noted the glint in her eye, but she waited the girl's own good time.

“It seems unworthy—sort of muddy—to fight for a man,” she said quietly at last.

“I don’t see why it should. The right man is almost a necessary factor in the life of a woman.”

“I don’t want to start with that idea.”

“Might as well start out with it, as have it forced upon you later. You won’t be establishing a precedent, my child. Women have fought for men before, the best of ’em. It is one war that never ends.”

“Have you?”

“Have I? Like a she-tiger!” Mrs. Randall put in a neat stitch. “Only at long intervals, thank God, and in emergencies—it wouldn’t have been worth it, as a steady thing. But there are always women, and not mud-fences either, waiting around with open arms for a stray man. Sometimes they don’t wait, but come a-running.”

“But I know that Dad——”

“What you didn’t know about your Dad would fill a book. A very attractive male, he was; I realized that when I married him, but I didn’t know what it would mean. I thought I had lost him once or twice, but I kept my head, had no hysterics, and played and prayed. And I’ve never been sorry.”

Donna rose and looked out the window. Mrs. Randall was careful not to glance at her. Presently the girl touched a bell.

“I’m ready for some breakfast,” she announced.

While she was eating, the telephone rang stridently. A look of panic flashed across Donna’s face. “Answer it, please,” she gasped. “And if it’s Keith, tell him I’m not——”

“Tell him yourself,” Mrs. Randall put down her sewing and swept to the telephone. “Hello! Yes, she’s here.... Come



along, Donna.”

“Who is it?” Donna whispered, wide-eyed.

“Who do you expect it to be?”

“I can’t talk to him—yet.”

“Fiddlesticks.”

Donna snatched her ring from the table, slipped it on, and ran to the ’phone. But it was not Keith’s voice.

Over the wire, Keith always spoke crisply, in level tones. This fellow almost howled. Keith always had a clever greeting the instant she took down the receiver. This party only barked like a Saint Bernard: “Hello, hello, is that you, Donna? It’s sure great to hear your voice. This is Joe, talking.”

Yelling, he meant. As if she could possibly mistake him for any one else! A wave of relief swept over her. In this moment of doubt and fear, Joe’s booming endearments were just the comfort she needed. He was behind her, thick and thin. Suddenly she knew she could fight for Keith with a high heart.

“Morning, Joe,” she said calmly.

“Morning, my eye. It’s noon. See here, Donna, I’m aching to see you. Is there any chance?”

“A little bit of a chance, I think.”

“So you’re not going to walk out on your old matie of the sea? I knew you wouldn’t! When can I steal you for a few minutes?”

“When would you like to perpetrate this theft?”

Her cordiality took his breath. “How about this afternoon, between tiffin and tea, as it were?” She could see him turning

red. “I suppose I don’t dare ask you for a man-size date—like—like tonight?”

She thought rapidly. “You might try, Joe.”

“Great guns, Donna, will you? Tonight? Dinner and everything?”

“I’ll be delighted. Suppose you come about eight.”

Her dark-blue eyes were glowing as she returned to her chair. Mrs. Randall seemed highly pleased with her needlework.

At the other end of the wire, at the American Club, Joe hung up the receiver with a shaking hand. Charley looked with palpable disgust at the solemn glory in his face.

“I got the date,” he boomed.

“And do you know why?”

“I don’t care why. I got the date.”

“If you had the brain of a horseshoe crab, you’d see she’s just using you to make Keith jealous.”

“I know it, but what’s that to me? Didn’t I get the date?”

And when the telephone rang again in Donna’s room, she was not afraid to answer. Her heart was flying, but her voice was low and calm, and pride and confidence shone in her face.

It was Keith. He had not called before for fear of waking her. Was she up? Could she have a spot of lunch with him, when he got away from his office at two o’clock? That was corking. And then of course they could plan something extra special for tonight.

“For tomorrow night,” she corrected. Her voice was the voice he had grown used to hearing, intimate, soft, and warm, but the words were strange. “That is, if you’re free then.”

“Why not tonight?”

“I promised to go out with Joe. But you won’t mind—we can have lunch together, and maybe tea, if you leave your office in time——”

“But I do mind. I didn’t ask you before, because I assumed of course you’d save the nights for the man you’re engaged to.”

“I’m so sorry. But please don’t assume any more things, dear. We Yankee girls just hate to be assumed about. But do come as soon as you can, so we can have a long time together at lunch.”

He rang off rather quickly. Donna hummed “My little Gypsy sweetheart” as she bathed and dressed. Mrs. Randall embroidered briskly.

## VII

*At* lunch with Keith, Donna looked cool and sweet and utterly herself. She talked of the good time last night. Not too often, she spoke of Sonia's charm and beauty; and once, as she felt her power, she ventured to chaff him a little about her. It was not a hard game to play, because all that it required was the grace native in her. She simply acted as though Sonia was only an episode outside their love and the realities of their lives.

But Keith was flurried and flushed and unnatural. His talk veered, chopped, and changed like a restless wind. He was oppressed by mental hazards. First just a little, and then more and more, she began to feel something for him akin to pity. But it gave her added power, made her part simpler to play and live.

He prolonged their date to the last possible moment with an anxiety verging on fear. He wanted to be assured that all was well between them; and the more calm and gentle she seemed, the more his nerves jangled and leaped. She was the gay one of the two—with the sweet gaiety he remembered and loved. And when his American friends whom she had met the day before slipped away from their own tables to come and bow over her hand, he felt the first cold sweat of suspicion that disaster and remorse, not the blue bird of happiness, were waiting for him on his chosen trail.

At last she stood waving in the corridor while he ran for a rickshaw. He could still imagine the smile in her eyes, the easy grace of her posture....

Promptly at eight, the room clerk telephoned Donna that a Mr. Joe Baxter was waiting in the lobby. Donna had put on the same gown of dark red chiffon she had worn the first night he had met her—sleeveless, almost backless, and matched with her grandmother’s ruby earrings, contriving to bring out the warm and dark glow of her skin—and when she saw Joe she knew she had chosen well. He fairly shone at the compliment she had paid him. Besides, he was a partner to dress up for.

A Chinese tailor had been busy all afternoon. With his evening trousers, shirt, and black bow-tie, Joe wore a white linen mess-jacket that detracted not at all from his stalwart figure and big shoulder-muscles. Perhaps it was only happiness under his skin, yet his rugged face held something markedly handsome.

She did not propose to cheat her companion with an aloof and broken heart. Staunchly she lodged Keith for the night in the dim back of her thoughts, and locked the door save to the ghost of his voice and the poignant memory of his smile. She was laughing gaily as she climbed into her rickshaw, and she and Joe laughed together all the way to the Little Club, the current roost of Shanghai night-owls.

It was an expensive place, even figuring in American dollars, but they found an unaccountable hilarity in watching the waiter’s face grow long and longer as they picked out the cheapest food and drinks on the menu.

“This has gone far enough,” Joe protested at last. “It’s the big bust of my life, and hang the expense. You mustn’t eat like a bird.”

“Hush! We may want to bust again. And if the little Club doesn’t like us, they can kick us out.”

It was surprising how fast they could talk, how often they could laugh. What they saw at nearby tables was as exciting as a play: intrigue; characterizations sketched by a single gesture; a posture, or a mannerism; drama and comedy. The sinister shadow of reality beyond the colored lights made Donna all the more determined to enjoy these fleet hours with Joe—and make him enjoy them.

The revue was typical of amazing, fabulous Shanghai, the caravansery of the world—dancers from Luzon and the Argentine, crooners from Harlem, burlesque from Hollywood. But the best of all was dancing together, alone in a new world.

At midnight she was not nearly ready to go home. So in a blaring Chinese taxicab they went out to the Del Monte Café, not far from the city limits, where white and yellow mingled in the democratic wee sma' hours.

Here was Shanghai with a vengeance. Elite and gangster hobnobbed freely. There were tables of British officers, tables of rich Chinese, tables of dark-skinned races Joe could not even identify. Along one side of the dance-floor was a triple-row of long-eyed girls that made Donna stare. Nothing she had yet seen was so impressive of the World's Fair that is Shanghai, of the incredible contrasts of East and West abiding there, of the sense of whirling on the hub of the wheel of the world.

In America these girls would have been called taxi-dancers. In the old days of the gold stampedes they would have rated as dance-hall girls. They lived by their commissions on dance-tickets and on the food and drinks they and their partners consumed, and, in some cases, by their companionships with lonely young men out from

America and England. But in that long row Donna saw something more than a bevy of entertainers and touts. The fabulous breadth of Russia stretched before her eyes. She read the history of the Muscovite from the raids of Ghengis Khan to the slaughter-pens of Lenin.

Some were blondes from Petrograd, Nordics rather than Slavs, tall, aflame, and reminiscent of Sonia. Some were short, swart, big-boned, deep-bosomed peasant daughters from the Ukraine. One savagely-handsome creature, with her head thrown back, had the hook nose and cruel eyes of the Tartar. Another had the high cheek bones and the Indian look that hinted remotely of the reindeer tribes of the Siberian steppe. Mongol and Cossack, dark Pole and white Finn, refugée and adventuress—there was sign of them all.

A fair proportion of the patrons had come not to dance, but to see Helen Webb, the hit of the season in Eastern China. She came out presently, a slight girl with a black shingled head, the East and West meeting happily in her face. She was said to be the daughter of a German consular officer and of the erring concubine of a Korean prince. She swept into the Pagoda dance; and for a time the tinsel faded, the garish decoration no longer smote the eyes, the leering crowd was spirited away, and naught was left but a pagan god with his stone smile, and a devotée dancing her heart out at his feet.

Some time later Donna saw a familiar face at a table across the room. "There's Charley!"

"He told me he thought he'd drop out here."

"Who's the girl he's talking to?"

Joe took a long look. "By thunder, it's the girl we just saw dance—Helen Webb. The boy is a fast worker."

They caught his eye and beckoned. Then he was grinning beside them.

“Did you see who I’m with?” he boasted.

“How did you manage it?”

“Saw her sitting alone at a table, and just went up and sat down. Spoke a few words in French, and consolidated my position. She’s a real peach, I tell you. Talks English too, like a professor. She knows the whole East like you know Paradise, Montana.”

Donna clapped her hands. “Do you think you could bring her to our table?”

“She’d love to meet you, but I’m not sure she could go old Joe. I’ll try.”

Soon they saw him piloting the little Eurasian girl across the dance-floor. The hour that followed—before the dancer left to dress for her second turn—was one of the most vivid in Donna’s life.

Helen Webb had danced from Irkutsk to Batavia, from Yokohama to Kabul. Her careless words called up rainbow vistas of strange tropic cities, palm-fronds waving, and sunlit strands; of garish heathen courts, where men still crawled on their knees to petition their kings; of scimitar-guarded seraglios in fountained gardens; of the moon on the Yellow Sea.

“I’m especially interested in Indo-China,” Joe said. “Have you been there?”

“Just last winter. Saigon—Hanoi—Hue—most every place.”

“How about the interior, where there’s been some gold excitement lately?”



“I have danced in Luang-Prabang for the King.”

“That’s in Laos. But I didn’t know there was any King. I thought it all belonged to France.”

“Laos is mandated territory—big as all France. The dynasty at Luang-Prabang is ancient—he is the ‘King of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol.’ The gold excitement is near the Annam border, not hard to get to, now the French are building roads.”

“Do you suppose there’s anything to it?”

“It seems likely. The Laotian people have always had gold—many bracelets and ornaments—and the Prabang—that’s the titular Buddha of the principality—is an image in solid gold. But they would never tell the white men where their mines are.”

The talk veered, and she began to point out the various local celebrities in the crowd. It appeared that the Del Monte was the after-midnight rendezvous when other lights went out. Guests were still coming; the waiters were spreading more tables.

“And there—just coming in the door—is the most popular Russian girl in Shanghai,” the dancer said.

Donna glanced up—then sat very still. The new-comer was Sonia Sarichef, and the tall youth beside her, Keith.

Talking eagerly, the Eurasian girl did not notice the air of strain that closed down on the group.

“She’s a baroness. A great many Russian girls claim such titles, but hers is real. She used to dance here—just a ticket-dancer like the rest—and now she’s got her jewels to live on, she often comes back to be with her old friends. She doesn’t

try to lord it over them. She helps them every way she can to get on.”

“I think that’s a wonderful spirit,” Donna said softly.

“The man she’s with is named Elliot. He used to come out here to dance with her, and now they are lovers. But it’s not all smooth sailing—I heard that his fiancée, from America, is due out here soon—might be here already. But she’ll have to be a wonder, to win him back from Sonia. See them dancing.”

Charley looked quite pale and helpless, but Joe was trying to send distress signals to shut the girl up. These Donna saw, out of the corner of her eye, and turned and gave him an ironic smile.

“What are you wriggling about?” she asked. She was utterly mistress of the situation.

Joe could only swallow and stare.

“We’re all friends—she’s told us nothing that we don’t already know.” Then, turning to her guest: “I’m the fiancée from America.”

The Eurasian girl met her lustrous eyes. “You know I wouldn’t have said that, if I had known.” Hers was the dignity of the East.

“I don’t mind in the least. I have already met the baroness. I don’t blame you for admiring her—I admire her too.”

Not too abruptly, the dancer shifted the talk to other subjects. And then an immense Russian woman with a leonine head who ran the show came to the table with word to dress for her act.

When she had gone, Donna smiled at her two friends. “Why look and act so dumb? We might have known we’d run

into Keith and Sonia out here. Joe, would you like to ask them to our table?”

“Great idea,” Charley broke in.

“We might as well—though I’m almost ready to go home. Charley, you be special envoy.”

Charley performed his mission with delicacy and tact. When Keith found the courage to look around, he managed a cheery wave and smile.

Presently they were all at Joe’s table. The two girls chatted, apparently at ease; but for a time the three men only fiddled with their napkins and sipped their drinks. When the saxophones blared again, Charley made haste to ask Sonia to dance. Keith took Donna; and Joe looked on with a grin.

When his turn came to dance with Sonia, he felt vaguely alarmed. But he was hardly prepared for the amazing outcome.

“I shall call you Joe?” she began, in her deep voice.

“Just the thing. I’ll call you Sonia.”

“It does make me very honored. I have want this chance to talk to you. We must be very good friend, eh?”

“You bet.” But Joe was thinking hard.

“I has watch you with Donna. She is lovely, more so when she is with you. She smile, her eyes shine. She like you very much, eh?”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so too. It would be so good answer to everything. You—you love her like all the world. No man—not one in my life—has loved me so you love her, there is no such luck. Well, why can we not help each other?”

Joe looked down into her shining blue eyes. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“You are not a fool, big one. You look so, sometime—you speak slow—but the head is good. Why must we play with words? We will make pact, what you say? I will help you to have Donna—in many little ways you cannot think. You will help me for Keith—I shall find things for you to say and do. Then, the problem is solve. We are all four happy.”

Joe slowly flushed. He was tempted; and the warmth and fragrance of Sonia’s body dulled his more delicate reactions. But at last some inner man that was the secret and soul of Joe’s identity rose and took command. Slowly he shook his head.

Sonia bit her lip. “Why not?”

“Don’t just know, to be frank. This is not a game, you see, but the great decision of Donna’s life. I couldn’t conspire against her, or enter into Keith’s affairs.”

“Then you *are* a fool. Like most other Americans, and the stupid English too.” She was dangerously angry; and her yielding body turned to steel in his arms. But she never missed a step of the dance.

“I’m sorry. I don’t blame you. Our points of view can’t be expected always to click. I hope we’ll be friends.”

She was perfectly still for a moment, save for her floating feet. Then she squeezed his hand, and her lifted face was sunny. “I see. The Americans, they are such dreamers. They do not know that love is like a rare good wine, to take and drink. We will be good friends—and say nothing of this, eh?”

“We’ll say nothing.”

They danced happily, chatting, until the music stopped.

When all three men had danced with both girls, Donna crooked her finger at Joe and rose to go. “It’s been great fun, meeting you here,” she said to Sonia. “Don’t ’phone me before noon, Keith. Then we can plan the day.”

But in the cab Donna looked white and forlorn. She hardly made a sound until they stood outside her door, in the dimly-lighted hall.

“Good sleep, Mistel and Missy,” the irrepressible hall-boy called. Then her silver laugh had rung out.

“Are you embarrassed, Joe?” she asked.

“Like to know why. Just out of luck.”

“We never are embarrassed, are we, Joe? We can always laugh off everything, even this mess we’re making of Shanghai. Thank the Lord—and I mean just that—you are here!”

“Yes, and I’m going to stay here as long as you want me—until your fate is decided.”

She slipped her hand in his. “What about Indo-China? You want to go there, I know. And I have no right to let you stay here—just—to see me through.”

“Indo-China isn’t going to go off any place.” This westernism, in his slow tones, made her heart catch with laughter close to tears. “My light shines here.”

Her smile dimmed and passed. “But why? Tell me, Joe.”

“I told you, last night.” His eyes burned. “Will you let me tell you again?”

“Yes, I want to hear it.”

“I love you. That’s all it is. Just, I love you.”

Her eyes filled. “I’m glad you told me. It makes me very happy and proud. I can go on, now.”

“It makes *me* happy and proud. I’ll never be sorry, no matter how it comes out. I want to kiss you, Donna.”

She smiled through her tears, and shook her head. “It wouldn’t be fair to you, Joe. You see—I can’t pay Keith back in his own coin.”

But the valor, the truth, the splendor of his love had kissed and blessed her spirit, and now she could go on.

## VIII

*THERE* was more to Shanghai than luxurious hotels and night-clubs and yellow hordes. Sometimes with Keith, often with Joe, Donna took in the city from the Bund to the Country Club, from the Chinese Gardens on the Whangpoo to shot-shattered Chapei, still cringing from the air-fleets of the Mikado.

Meanwhile she and her mother were meeting people of their own kind. They were entertained with that gracious hospitality, asking nothing in return, that fames the Far East. Joe made them one of their most pleasant contacts. At the American Club he had met a rich automobile dealer named Hatstead; and before long they were all week-end guests, with Charley included, in a genuine American home.

A lovely, olive-skinned daughter supplied just what Donna needed in the way of a shopping pal. Hatstead himself, a keen judge of character, with a special liking for young, broad-shouldered countrymen, and brimming with the Shanghai zest for gambling chances, promised to be a friend in need to Joe.

They were all at lunch. Except for the light-footed Chinese servants, Donna might have thought she was visiting a college chum in her own state. There were no sleek-haired young men who uttered sophistries, no hand-kissing, but laughter in abundance, good fellowship, and the argot of her native land.

“I’m interested in that gold-excitement down south,” Hatstead told Joe. “It might be just possible you could go there as my proxy.”

“I’d sure like to, but——”

“Why not? You’re a practical prospector, and your college training hasn’t made you forget how to wobble a gold-pan. I might grub-stake you on a fifty-fifty basis.”

“I don’t see how I could let you risk your money.” Joe spoke hurriedly. “I might not start prospecting right away. I mean—might be delayed—might be busy——” His words ran off, and he turned red.

“Busier than a bird-dog,” Hatstead agreed heartily. “But when you’re ready to look for gold—the kind you find in gravel—just let me know, and maybe we’ll make a deal.”

The rumor of gold in Indo-China was only a murmur as yet, but it threatened to grow into a roar. Already there was a thin trickle of gold-seekers across the border of Yun-nan; whiskered sourdoughs in Alaska were gazing westward with dim but fevered eyes; the big companies were sending scouts to the new diggings. When Keith came to take Donna to the races, he brought a troubled face.

“I’ve got to go,” he told her. “But it’s just a tour of inspection, and I’ll be back in less than three weeks.”

Her heart leaped in hope, fell back in fear. But she spoke in measured words, level tones.

“That’s a long old time, Keith, to be away from each other.... When must you leave?”

“The day after tomorrow. One of the big French ships is going to put in at Haiphong on her way to Saigon, especially to accommodate gold-seekers.”

She waited a heartsick time for him to say something more, just a word that would give her an opening, but she



waited in vain.

“Will it be a rough trip?” she made bold to ask at last.

But there was no need for her to hold her breath. He just answered her question.

“Pretty tough, I expect. That’s part of the game.”

“But that dancer—Miss Webb—said there was an automobile road all the way from Haiphong.”

For a moment Keith seemed occupied with his driving. “I meant, it’s not the trip any one would take from choice. Rough accommodations, and all that.”

Donna nodded quickly, and changed the subject. But Keith seemed ill-at-ease.

“It’s bad luck our plans have to be postponed,” he went on. “I’ll miss you more than I like to think. But you won’t be lonely, hang in. Of course I don’t blame Joe, but it’s hardly cricket to rush an engaged girl off her feet while her fiancé is out of town on necessary business.”

He realized, too late, that he had waded beyond his depth. For some long seconds, Donna was tempted to answer him. The words were framed on her lips: “You don’t need to take the risk, unless you wish.” But in the end she found she could not give them breath.

Pride should not stand between Keith and herself now, but this was more than pride. It was the fundamental concept of her kind, of her womanhood as she was born and bred to live it, that she must be asked for, not offered. She could combat her rivals for the place Keith gave her; but that giving must be free.

Anyway, he knew the facts. Her wedding gown and veil hung dust-gathering in her closet. He knew well that his

journey into Indo-China could be the bridal trip of her dreams, its hardships only a joyous symbol of their wedded life-adventure. But he was still torn by doubt and fear.

But at least she could still defend her friend. "Joe plays a fair game, as you know," she said quietly.

"But it's not a game any more; the books are closed." Then, with his quick smile: "When I get this trip behind me, you and I are going to make a fresh start—set a date—and think of nothing in the world but each other."

This, she grimly knew, remained to be seen. Anyway, she would give Keith three weeks' grace, to search his heart and know his mind. She would long for him, yet was glad of the interlude. In his lonely nights under the tropic stars he might find the truth that eluded him now, in the roar and rush of Shanghai. If he lost it still, he would lose her.

She did not know—yet she vaguely guessed—that Keith too would be glad to go. Here, so near, he could not see the woods on account of the trees.

Moving in different circles, Sonia did not hear the news until Keith broke it himself, at the eve of his sailing. Why he had delayed so long he did not quite know: he would not admit he had been simply afraid of her answer. He had hoped to make a casual announcement in the presence of their friends; at least to tell her in some semi-public place, where her power was diminished. But he had been too wary; and now they were at her very shrine, in her own cunningly-chosen frame, alone together in the deep night while the city slept.

She heard him out, and for a time she sat dreaming, with half-closed eyes. Presently she laid her palm against his; and

the candle-flame by the ikon flickered and blurred in his sight. “It will be,” she asked slowly, “a rough journey?”

His heart smote his side. This was the question Donna had asked, almost her very words. The scene flashed back to his mind—his wheel in his hands, the traffic of Bubbling Well Road weaving in and out before him, and Donna’s face, half profile, pensive and sweet by his shoulder. And some fiber within him that had started to fray was raveled up. The candle-flame burned clear and true.

“Not so rough I can’t stand it,” he answered her.

“I can stand it besides. I do not care how hard it is. Keith, little one, I am sick of Shanghai and all these peoples. I must go with you.”

Keith smiled, patted her hand, and shook his head. “You know how I’d love that, but it’s impossible.”

“Why so? Has I not crossed from Irkutsk to Chita in the winter? At least I must go with you in the ship, and wait in Hanoi till you come back for me. Keith, little darling, would you stay me here to cry alone?”

“No way out of it, Sonia. You know I’m still engaged to Donna.”

“What of that? If I take a trip, is we to blame when it happen the same ship?” She laughed, and drew his head against her breast. “And at night, when the moon shine on the water——”

“Then I’ll think of you.” She stopped his lips with hers, but she could not hold them forever. “I mean it, Sonia. If I’d let you do this, the whole town would know it. It’s a broad-minded town, but it won’t stand for that, as long as she’s wearing my ring. Even apart from what I owe her, it would

react against me with my company. And Hatstead would have me kicked out of every club in the place.”

Sonia sat very still and straight. “Clubs, company—what does they matter? Oh, I know! You is American, made of iron and ice.”

“Not much iron, I’m afraid,” he answered sadly.

Sonia was trembling, so she leaped up, crossed the room, and stood for a moment gazing out the window. Keith came stealing up behind her, choked with fear that he had lost her forever, but his will still steeled against surrender. She heard his step, and turned with a wistful smile. Then she burst like a flame across the shadowed room and enveloped him in her arms.

“I love you,” she whispered. “Is you deaf, Keith; do you hear? I tell you—I love you.”

He held her close.

“I thought, just now, to say you good-by,” she went on. “To push you away, out of my heart. But my heart, it is stronger than Sonia. It would not let you go.”

“Don’t ever let me go. I want you always.”

“Those lonely days, they will go by somehow. I will watch through the window to the sea; I will come to you when you sleep, and kiss your lips. And when you return——”

“Yes?”

“Then you will know whether it is I or Donna you must keep. If it is she, I go away, maybe to Peiping. If it is I, you will tell her so, is it true?”

“Yes, I’ll tell her then.”

“It will be easy for her, after so long absence. Now hold me, very tight, in your arms. No more shall we talk with

words, but your lips will speak to my lips, many little secrets.” Her long lids drooped over the mirrored stars of her eyes. “They must tell me all they had mean to keep for three long weeks to come.”

Yet so goes the world that in a few brief hours Keith found himself again with Donna, rejoicing in her, and regretting with an honest heart his imminent parting from her. In the shore-boat packed with gesturing, jabbering French she went with him to the ship, and there they sat, and laughed, and sipped cool drinks in a secluded corner of the deck. The morning sun was on his hair and the zest of living in his hazel eyes.

His kiss was gentle, dimly sad, when at last she rose to go. He saw her off the ship and to her seat in the shore-bound tender; then bent and whispered in her ear. “Donna, you are the most wonderful girl in this world.”

This, at least, was sincerity, beyond her bitterest doubts. His lonely boyish smile grew dim to her sight.

“No matter what happens—ever—I want you to know that’s what I truly believe,” he went on. “I’m not worthy of you, Donna. No man is, that I know—and I’m well down the line. But maybe I can learn to reach up to you. I want to, more than you know.”

Standing on the jetties’ wharf he watched and waved to her until her little boat disappeared among the scurrying sampans. At last he reboarded the *Talleyrand*; and unwilling to face the solitude of his room, roamed over the decks. The sailing hour was now past; but the gang-plank was still out and no screw turned.

He wished that Donna had stayed for lunch. The pride and glory of their last hour together was fading from his heart;

and it felt lonely and bitter. He watched a firecracker celebration on the jetties, financed by some rich Chinese for a departing comrade—searched the crowd for acquaintances but found none—and at last turned sullenly toward his stateroom.

As he opened the door, some one rose from the couch with a little cry. Before he could grasp the truth or utter a sound, fragrant arms were around him, and soft lips crushed his.

“Keith, darling one,” Sonia was crying. “I could not let you go without me.”

## IX

*SONIA'S* arms about him, her lips on his, her fragrance and her beauty—these strong weapons soon broke down Keith's resistance. A breathless hunger for her captured his senses and clouded his mind.

Fate had decreed they should have each other, he assured himself. He would let it go at that—an easy explanation and the line of least resistance for desire. The Oriental gods of destiny had solved his problem for him—so he chose to believe—unaided by Sonia's soft, skilled hands.

“When did you come aboard?” he asked trembling.

“While you does talk to Donna. But Keith—you will not be angry——”

“Have you a room?”

“The length of the ship from yours.”

“But don't you see what it means?”

“It mean I love you, Keith. Nothing more.”

But it did mean more. It meant that tonight he must send a cablegram to Donna, telling her that Sonia was a fellow-passenger. Donna's return message would be to break their engagement.

Much would be lost. His eyes were not so dazzled as to deny that. A high star to follow, a blessed shrine to kneel to, a precious thing to have and hold forever. Sonia was a golden flame, to sweep over him and perhaps pass on. But there remained the rapturous hour, the sweet cup to drink and turn down.

He looked deep into the ineffable blue of her eyes. "I won't ask you to go back, Sonia."

In the meantime Donna had reached the Bund, and to pass a desolate hour, went shopping up Nanking Road. In the window display of sporting-goods she saw a traveling-kit that would just suit Keith. But her wrist-watch showed nearly one o'clock—no doubt he was far down-river by now. Regretfully she passed on, and sped back to the Cathay to freshen up for a luncheon engagement with Joe.

She met her mother in the corridor. "I didn't expect you so soon," Mrs. Randall said.

"I've been back over an hour. The ship sailed at eleven-thirty."

"Look at the bulletin-board by the desk. Her time's been changed for seven o'clock tonight."

"Keith hadn't heard that, when I left." Just then her eyes lighted. "Come with me to send him a gift I saw in a window—just the thing for his trip."

"Let's take it to him. We have all afternoon."

It would mean breaking a date with Joe: but she could leave a note with the desk-clerk; and he would understand. And if Keith remained aboard, through the dull hours of waiting, he would be glad of company.

Within the hour Donna and her mother were boarding a tender bound for the *Talleyrand*. There was not the slightest difficulty. Boats would be going back and forth all afternoon. The wind on the Whangpoo stirred Donna's hair and blew up dark red roses in her cheeks.



Soon they were aboard, a French steward showing them to Keith's room. The door was braced open a few inches by the hook, so Donna gave a vigorous rap.

At once she heard Keith's call to come. His tone was impatient—cabin-boys and message-bearers had been running back and forth. Donna slipped out the brace and threw open the door.

The room was small, bright with hard marine light pouring through two port-holes. The camera of her eye took it all in, in one brief exposure, in sharp black-and-white indelible on her memory. She saw the detail of the furnishings—the white berth, with its reading light; the cramped settee on one side; the narrow cabinets; even the water-pipes, and the life-preservers in the rack. She saw Keith's hat thrown down on the berth, and his bag open on the floor. And she saw Keith's face.

He had just stood up from his chair and was riveted in his tracks. His hands were open, a little thrust forward as though in the first gesture of entreaty. Sonia was leaning back on the settee, her lovely face still as an ivory carving, but her blue eyes alert and shining as a trapped tiger's. Donna had never been so certain of her rival's beauty, as she sat there, dressed for travel, perfectly groomed, the sea-light radiant on her uncovered golden hair.

So cruelly clear and swift were Donna's perceptions that she knew instantly how that beautiful head came to be uncovered. Sonia had left her hat in her own stateroom.

"I beg your pardon," Donna heard herself telling Keith. It was quite her own voice—low, calm, friendly. "I didn't know you had company——"

Sonia leaned forward and smiled. “It is no matter, little dear. We is glad you have join us. Keith, stupid, will you stand there all the day, and not ask in your friends?” She laughed softly. “He is embarrass, because his fiancée find him with another. What of it, little Keith? We is all friends, and she understands.”

“Perfectly,” Donna said. But she did not smile. She would not suffer the indignity of smiling.

“Sure, come in,” Keith said with a burst of breath. “We can all find chairs in this cubby-hole, and I’ll buy a cool drink. Donna, it’s so nice of you to come again——”

“Don’t bother about chairs. We’re only going to stay long enough to give you this.” She laid the gift package on the nearest chair. “And this.”

She slipped off his ring and put it in his hand.

He could not speak. He could only look at the jewel, flashing cruel light, in his palm. Donna was already turning to go.

But he caught her hand. “Wait.”

“Yes?”

“I want you to know there was no conspiracy in this thing, nothing underhand.”

“I don’t know what you mean, and I don’t care. It’s all over.”

But when he tried to tell Donna what he meant, the words would not come. A decent respect for his own honor made him want her to know that Sonia had invited herself on this journey; but some deep-taught, perhaps uncalled for sense of chivalry to a girl who loved him kept him from saying so. In

the end he found he must trust to that girl's native honesty to bare the truth.

He did not trust in vain. Sonia, an aristocrat of old Russia, had her own code. It bent, but it never quite broke, she had compromised it in the old, bad days of her flight from Chita to Shanghai, and would do so again if fortune smote her too hard, and it was predicated on an Oriental outlook on life half-across the world from these western codes she was battling now; but it remained the dignity of her being, the secret of her worth. If she remained silent, Donna would go out the door and never return, but the price was too high in Keith's contempt and her own shame.

"He means," she said clearly, "that he do not know I am come with him. He tell me, very plain, I shall not come, but I come anyway. Do not blame him, Donna. It is of all my doing. When he find me here, he is as surprise as when you find me here. You see—I could not stay away."

The blood rushed to Donna's heart and she turned white.

"Is that true, Keith?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Sonia, for telling me. We can all be friends still. Good-by, Keith—and good luck."

"You don't want this ring?" Keith asked.

"No. That part is all over." She started to turn away.

But Mrs. Randall, who had been quietly watching and listening in the doorway, now moved into the room.

"If that's all over," she said in her friendliest tones, "at least we can have the cool drink Keith offered. For old time's sake."

Keith made haste to press the bell. While the drinks were being brought and served, Mrs. Randall talked pleasantly, the quiet waters of her words soon wearing away the stone of restraint and humiliation in the little, cramped room. When the time was ripe, she turned her wonderful clear eyes into each face in turn, and spoke frankly.

“You can’t all be lovers, but I want you to be friends,” she said. “Friendship in this world is too dear and rare to throw away. What steps are you going to take to make sure you won’t pass out of one another’s lives?”

“I only wish I knew,” Keith answered fervently. “None of us know what we’re doing——”

“All you need is a little mutual understanding and sympathy—and time to make adjustments.... I’d so like to help you, if you’d let me.”

“Oh, please do,” Sonia said, with her wistful smile. “You is so wise woman.”

“I don’t know about that. But I do know that I want you three to settle your destinies with dignity and friendliness, so there will be no cankers to heal.”

If these were bold words, their tone was so motherly and kind, their manner of utterance so simple, that the proud flesh of Donna’s heart took no new hurt.

“I want so too,” Sonia answered, a softness in her long eyes.

“I wish you could all be together a few more weeks,” Mrs. Randall went on thoughtfully. “But you, Sonia, are sailing today too.”

“Just to Hanoi—and then wait and come back when Keith he do come too.... If he wants me.”

“Of course I want you, Sonia,” Keith broke in with a dignity that opened even Donna’s eyes. “But I wouldn’t want it to mean parting forever from Donna and Mrs. Randall. I wish we could all go.”

Mrs. Randall’s fine eyes lighted—as in triumph—but her voice remained calm.

“Do you really mean that, Keith?”

“With all my heart.”

“It might be possible, if both girls feel the same. Keith, does your trip into the interior mean many hardships?”

“I suppose not, when you get down to it. There will be three days’ auto run from Haiphong, with European hotels as far as Vinh, and rest-houses the rest of the way to the gold-fields.”

“Women have made the trip before?”

And now Donna whirled to her mother with a little gasp.

“Plenty of them,” Sonia broke in. “Since the road do open, women have crossed all the way from Vinh to Luang-Prabang.”

“So it wouldn’t be any harder than a trip through Yellowstone Park. Really a delightful experience for any woman.”

“It would so,” Sonia agreed.

“Then we *can* all be together—if you like. You three can have a real adventure and have time to build a lasting friendship. Keith, would you like to have Donna and me make the trip too, with Sonia as our guest? It would be the greatest pleasure for us both.”

Keith’s eyes lighted with gratitude. “Would I! It would be simply great to have all three of you all the way.”

“How about you, Sonia?” Mrs. Randall asked. “Would you like to see Indo-China as Donna’s and my guest?”

“It is so generous. I did not know that women could be so. I would most love to go.”

“You, Donna?”

“I’d enjoy such a trip very much, but there’s hardly time now——”

“Plenty of time. It’s only three o’clock and the ship doesn’t sail till seven. We’ll go now—get our tickets and permits—and pack our bags. Then we can meet you two at dinner.”

Donna opened her lips to protest, but could find no words. She knew perfectly well that Sonia, Keith, and herself were being practised upon, victims of a boldly-conceived experiment on human hearts, but it had happened so naturally, it seemed so fortuitous, that the embarrassment she should be feeling simply failed to appear. And after all, she was glad—glad—that the gate to her happiness was not yet closed and barred.

“We will make it just a social affair, between good friends,” Mrs. Randall concluded. “Keith and Donna are no longer engaged, and you can all enjoy one another’s company. So I think all three of you should agree that until the trip is over, you will take no step you cannot retrace, and postpone any definite settlement of your affairs.”

“It will be so,” Sonia said quietly.

Donna and Keith nodded agreement. Mrs. Randall gave them her wonderful smile, and surged to her feet. “I think you’re just splendid, all three of you, and I’ll be proud to be with you on the trip. Now, Donna, let’s be off.”

## X

**I**N the shore-bound tender, Donna pressed close to her mother.

“I ought to be angry—maybe crying—anyway raising a row,” she whispered, “but I’m only glad you put it over. And down in their hearts, I know Sonia and Keith are too.”

“Put what over?” Mrs. Randall demanded. “I simply suggested a nice outing——”

“Tell it,” Donna answered clearly, “to the United States Marines. Don’t think I accuse you of anything so crude as to try to make Keith and Sonia tired of each other, and win him back for me. I don’t even know you want me to marry Keith. But you certainly have contrived to bring us together so we can find each other out and know what we really want.”

“What’s the purpose of any social event, except to make people better acquainted? And I wanted to see Indo-China, anyhow.”

After all, Donna found she had only one real regret—to leave her best friend and comrade. When she reached the hotel she found his note—he had called for her for lunch, deplored finding her gone, and would be back to take her to tea at five o’clock.

For one long moment she stood at the desk, smiling to herself. Then she scribbled a single sentence: *I am sailing with Mother and Sonia on the Talleyrand, and won’t be back for three weeks.*

Still smiling, she gave the note to the desk-clerk with instructions to deliver it to Joe the moment he came in the door. From now on, it was up to the gods of chance—and the

dutiful hands of a half-caste clerk. She had only stated a fact, and her conscience was clear.

In a surprisingly short time she and her mother had packed, and were on their way to the steamship ticket office. It still lacked twenty minutes to five o'clock.

At ten minutes to five—because sometimes Donna was ready ahead of time—Joe stopped by the desk, and received her message.

The effect was electric. The clerk had observed before that Americans were an impulsive race—given to sudden actions and not careful of “face”—but he was never so sure of it as now. This Yankee giant cried out to one of his strange gods, and glancing at the bulletin-board, turned and almost sprinted for the door.

In record time he was tearing through the hall of the American Club, yelling for Charley. The latter, playing billiards in the lounge, dropped his cue and was with his friend in time to see him hurl his dinner-clothes from his closet into an open suitcase in the middle of the floor. A fair part of his wardrobe was already in the bag.

“Crazy?” Charley inquired, calmly.

“Like a prairie-wolf! Call up the French line, and get me a second-class ticket to Haiphong. I’m after gold.”

Charley was a youth of quick perceptions. “So Donna’s going to be on that ship too, is she?”

“It’s a kind of yachting party, and I’ve invited myself. Mrs. Randall—Keith—and brace yourself, boy—Sonia too.”

Charley jumped, and his eyes narrowed. “What does it mean?”



“It means that women have ways beyond the ken of man to fathom. Their trip is for three weeks—if you were just going with me, ours might be for good. Now hurry with that call.”

“The main thing is our permits. We can get our tickets on board.”

Joe raised his head from his packing in a fair imitation of astonishment. “Our?”

“Don’t think you’re going to leave me here. Where there’s gold digging, there will be many accidents, maybe shootings, certainly dynamite explosions. Wounds to dress—compound fractures to set—maybe a few skulls to trepan. Just the place for me.”

They had one tense moment while they examined their treasury, but found no cause for alarm. They had lived cheaply, even by China standards, and they could make the round trip to the gold-fields with more than a month’s board-bill to spare. True, they could not then return to America save in the steerage, but they had no notion of returning anyway, as long as the Far East held its present lure. For Charley, the wars of interior China were more sanguinary every day. If the carnage failed, he could take an internship at a hospital in Fu Chow. If the gold-fever died out, Joe had good prospects for a job in Nanking.

While Charley was packing, Joe called Mr. Hatstead. That good friend took an immediate and enthusiastic interest in the new venture. “But how’s the dough holding out?” he demanded.

“I won’t say we’re rolling in it, but——”

“If you hear of something good, go to our correspondent at the bank in Vinh. I’ll cable him tonight to grub-stake you within reasonable limits, and send along the papers. If you go

broke, he may make you a small loan. Good-by and good luck.”

A call to the French consulate revealed the fact that the consul himself was aboard the *Talleyrand* visiting with the captain—and this was French as French could be. If they hurried, they might catch him and prevail upon him to sign their permits.

They made the last tender with time to spare, and caught the consul in the middle of a sparkling anecdote. He signed the papers—Charley thanked him in academy French—they both bowed low—and all was well.

The ship sailed amid shouts of “Au Revoir” and “Bon Voyage!” Well-nourished in the second-class dining room and at peace with the world, they loafed and smoked and watched the sampan-lights on the Yangtze-kiang. About ten o’clock Charley knocked out his pipe with a determined air.

“You know, Joe, I’m against these invidious class distinctions.”

“What about ’em?”

“I think we owe it to ourselves and our country to walk right up on the first-class deck and see who’s there.”

“I was under the impression we bought second-class tickets.”

“A mere bag o’ taels. Come along.”

Soon they were strolling down the upper deck with the air of visiting admirals. When they saw a party of four reclining in deck-chairs, they paused in the shadows.

“Isn’t it tough,” Charley said clearly, “that we don’t know a single soul aboard this ship?”

There fell a brief silence, then a rich throaty voice gave a little shout. “*Why, it’s Char-lee!*”

It was Sonia. She sprang to her feet and gave Charley both her hands. In an instant they were all up, Keith the last, in the happiest of reunions. Charley was at his best. His air of innocent astonishment delighted Mrs. Randall, impressed Keith, and might actually have deceived Sonia. And no one could seem more surprised to see each other than Donna and Joe. No one remembered how absent-minded she had seemed all evening, how she had looked sharply at passing strangers; and now no one saw the little squeeze she gave Joe’s hand.

“So we is all together one more time,” Sonia rejoiced. “How did it happen?”

“Better not go into that,” Keith said with grim humor.

But running through the rejoicings and the nonsense was a taut thread of stress. Mrs. Randall was wondering how Joe’s presence would affect her experiment. It would not be the clean-cut test she had planned. She could share Donna’s joy in her old friend; but it would be better, in the long run, that she should take or discard Keith on his own merits, away from Joe’s influence. The decision thus reached would have a greater chance for finality, without regret. However, the shock of his appearance had been more or less discounted hours before. Mrs. Randall knew Joe well.

And Keith’s eyes were dark with jealousy. His air of good-fellowship was hard to force. How had Joe learned of the trip? He already guessed the answer, and it rankled. True, Donna had returned his ring, but still against all reason he could not—would not—think of her as free.

“We didn’t see you at dinner,” he commented politely to Joe.

“No, and you won’t, unless we can bribe your head-waiter.”

“The fact is,” Charley said, “that the second-class cook is an old friend of ours—it would break him up if we’d desert him and go first-class. But if you want to go slumming, we’ll give you a dinner that’s a dinner.”

“In other words,” Donna said, “you are just a pair of impostors.”

“And it is most fun,” Sonia added, clapping her hands.

But it might not have turned out fun, when one of the officers strolled by, looked twice at Charley, and paused. Keith’s heart made a little bound that made him feel ashamed.

“Are you first-class?” the officer asked.

“In every respect,” Charley answered promptly.

“And your friend?”

“Even more so, if that were possible.”

“I do not understand, what is your name, Monsieur?”

“Hendrik Hudson, Jr., of the *Half Moon*.”

“And your friend?”

“Monsieur du Baxter, of Paradise, Montana.”

“Perhaps I have made a leetle mistake, Monsieurs.”

“And now,” Charley said to his friends when the officer had walked on, “we leave you, before he has a chance to look us up.”

It was quickly decided to meet on the second-class deck. Mrs. Randall was ready for bed, but soon young laughter rang again into the haunted darkness, and the sampan gypsies

passing in the night wondered at the ways of their white lords.

Although Joe and Donna were often left alone, for a long time he did not speak of the missing ring. But when the midnight silence brought them close, and they stood by the rail to catch the water-voices, his hand slipped across hers and he clutched her naked finger in his palm.

“No, it isn’t there,” she murmured.

“I’m not going to be polite and say I’m sorry.”

“But the engagement may not be broken for good. It’s only on trial.”

“To make sure you love Keith?”

“There’s not much doubt about that, I’m afraid. To make sure that he loves me.”

“Then you aren’t ready for me to ask you what I’ve been holding back for weeks. Maybe you wish I hadn’t even come.”

“If I hadn’t wanted you, you wouldn’t have got that note.... Perhaps *you* are sorry.”

“I had to come, Donna. No matter how far. You know that. There’s no use of my pretending.”

“And you wanted to go into Indo-China anyway.... And I needed you so much——”

“As long as you want and need me, I’ll be there. It’s the great joy of my life. And don’t be distressed if you think nothing will come of it. I’m getting my reward just seeing you—and loving you.”

He saw her dim smile in the moonlight as she pressed his hand.

Three nights later they saw the heights of Hongkong hung with lights, one of the memorable sights of the wide world. Through mysterious Hai-nan straits, where the ship guns were laid out in case of pirate raids, into the gulf of Tongking—and then Haiphong low and dismal in the delta mud of the Red River. Keith and Mrs. Randall's party in one car, Joe and Charley in another, they sped on toward Hanoi.

The sixty-mile ride showed Donna a new world. Shanghai seemed as far away as America. The peasants in the rice-fields and the porters on the roads were not Chinese, but a small, proud, delicate-featured race whose history is lost in the misty mirror of the past. They seemed utterly untouched by western civilization. When there was water to raise from one diked field to another, they did it with pails in their tireless hands. All they knew was to till the fields, herd their plow-buffaloes, and garner the grain—dawn to dusk, moon to moon, birth to death, with never a care for the roaring world beyond their tranquil horizons—just as in the days of Kubla Khan.

Yet they were not dumb beasts, utterly slaves of their red earth and little checker-board rice-fields. At every village and nearly every cross-road stood a pagoda erected to a dream. To these they had given all they knew of beauty—paintings of gods and dragons, ornate carvings, carefully tended lawns. In each sat an image of Buddha, he of the quiet heart and enigmatic smile.

Then Hanoi, where France and old Annam clasped hands. Rickshaw coolies with bell-shaped hats and slanted surface-set eyes. Palm trees waving in tropic gardens. Sidewalk cafés, where boulevardiers renewed the joys of Paris over *aperitifs*. Lovely doll-like girls, in silk pantaloons and embroidered

jackets. Light-stepping French soldiers, parading often enough, but not too often, ammunition ready to their hands.

The visitors bought supplies for the trip—food, a cheap blanket apiece, mosquito nets, and medicines—Joe rented a rifle. Mrs. Randall invited Joe and Charley to join her party at dinner, and afterward all the young people went off in rickshaws to see the city, under the care of a half-caste guide. The climax of the evening was a visit to an opium-den, the real thing, not a show for tourists.

It was, the guide explained, “a extremely high-class place, oh yess.” Only the whites of the colony and the mestis—half-castes which by the French system ranked as whites—were admitted. There were many such dens in the city, but this was the best, conducted by a *grande dame* from Paris itself. The guide gave the suitable number of raps on the door, and they were admitted into a luxurious room, hung with Oriental tapestries.

A stone idol grinned in one corner. In the center was a large platform spread with mats, on which lay the smokers. Two were Frenchmen, with hollow eyes and sallow complexions showing at least fifty pipes a day. One was a beautiful mestis girl, in her 'teens.

Madame, so the guide explained, was a lady of great renown—she regularly smoked one hundred pipes, and was known to reach one hundred and fifty. She showed them the process—a little of the brown opium syrup encrusted into a small ball over a flame, and this inserted in a hole in a two-foot pipe of beautiful inlaid woods. The ball was consumed in a few rapid puffs, constituting one pipe.

“Will Monsieur try a pipe?” she asked Charley in French. He pretended not to understand, so the guide interpreted.

“Oh, a pipe. No thanks.”

“One, it is nothing,” the guide said. “Ten pipes for a beginner, perhaps then a swimming head and a blissful feeling, oh yess.”

“I’ll buy a round of beer, instead.”

But Sonia touched his arm. “You know, I should most like to try a pipe. It is no harm. Make one for me, madame.”

She stretched her long body gracefully on the mat, and with a bolster under her head, smoked with the ease of a rajah’s daughter.

“It is nothing,” she reported, when the ball was consumed. “Only a little sweet dream and a pleasant smell. But maybe it is good I live not here. I might too smoke fifty pipes a day.”

The guide took a pipe at Charley’s invitation, and by now Donna had seen enough. “And but messieurs—mesdames—do any of you speak French?” the guide asked.

Charley winked at the girls. “Awfully sorry. Narry a one.”

“It is no matter. I, then, will ask Madame the score.”

There followed a conversation in French that gave the visitors food for laughter for many days.

“What can I charge these American cabbages?” Madame demanded.

“I do not know. I do not think they are millionaires—they made me give them my third cheapest rate. Do not ask too much, or they may complain to the hotel.”

“Twenty piasters, say?”

“For one round of beer and two pipes? It is seven times the French price, but I will try, and you will give me ten piasters.”



“Five,” Madame answered promptly.

“Eight. Not a centime less, or I bring no more rich tourists.” Then he turned and spoke in English. “Madame says she wants twenty-five piasters. Oh yess?”

“Oh, no,” said Charley.

“It is the price. There is protection to pay the police, and opium is high this year.”

“Twenty-five piasters is nearly ten smackers, in our money. Try again, brother.”

“Perhaps I can get her down to twenty-two. This is very good, eh? Give me the money and I will see. Oh yess?”

“Here’s three. Pay it and get out.”

“Pardon, monsieur? You did not say three.”

“One, two, three—right.”

The guide began to wave his arms. “But monsieur, consider. It will mean trouble, perhaps a fight. You are not—what you call—cheapskate——”

“Joe?”

“Alongside, old chap.”

“This man says he wants a fight. Oblige him with a sock in the jaw.”

The guide turned ashen. “What is this, monsieur?”

“Either that, or three piasters. Think quick.” Then, in perfect French: “Not a centime more.”

When Madame heard this, she stiffened as though she herself had received the threatened “sock.” When Charley grinned and held out the money, she snatched it and cursed him in some foreign tongue. A moment later they were in the good fresh air.

The guide followed them, stuttering a bad mixture of French, English, and Annamite. But Joe lifted his foot in an ominous fashion, and he did not see fit to interfere as they got in their rickshaws and laughed back to the hotel.

The next day they took the train to Vinh, the gateway to the mysterious interior. Keith had a letter to the governor, Monsieur LaGrezô, and at dinner at the Residence they saw the brightest and best side of French Colonial life. They left in the morning in two hired cars, driven by natives, up the long road that wound toward the purple, jungle-grown hills.

Again the country changed. The rice-fields were left behind; the slow, muddy rivers gave way to clear brooks, the only cultivation was in guarded patches in the valleys. Grass yielded to scrub, scrub to thicket, and thicket to jungle, sweeping like green fire down the mountain sides and menacing the very road.

Keith saw only thick lush woods, nothing more. Sonia perceived the beauty of the interlocking trees with sunlight shifting through, and her voluptuous soul reveled in the heavy scenes, the waxen blossoms, the gay-winged butterflies that sometimes fluttered out of the gloom and died against the wind-shield, but her response was wholly sensual; and she looked at Keith with dreamy eyes and quickened breath. Mrs. Randall was practical as ever—she hoped they would meet no tigers. But Donna, she of the delicate mind and sensitive heart, gazed into the steaming depths with awe and fear.

Theirs was a sinister and soulless beauty. They symbolized all that was evil in the earth—rapacious growth, the lust of survival at any cost, the law of the beast; and the law that man has sought and found in his blue heavens, and

sometimes dares to hold and live by, stopped at their green walls. They would nourish the bad in any human soul that they clasped in their snaky tendrils, and practise upon the good. Donna could well pray that she and her friends need never stand that trial.

The natives she saw on the road were dregs from the human flood that had swept north into happier lands uncounted centuries before. They belonged to ancient tribes that had either lacked courage to migrate, or with mistaken valor had remained to wage unequal war against the jungle.

They were dark-skinned, somber-eyed folk, whose features suggested the Caucasian more than the Chinese. They lived by snatching little fields from the flanks of the jungle—until the green legions marched and drove them on. They had little plantings of rice and maise, fenced against the raiding sambur and the wild pig. Occasionally Donna caught a glimpse of their villages under the trees—long community houses raised on stilts, sweeps for crushing grain, children playing with bows-and-arrows, and perhaps a group of women, with bared breasts, carrying water in big stalks of bamboo.

These were Meuns, with the Khas and the Mois the oldest known stock of interior Indo-China. They were quite different from the Meuws, herding little ponies, laden with merchandise and hung with bells, along the road. The latter were the most picturesque folk she had ever seen, with long braided hair, dark-yellow skins, and blue robes, each fastened with a red sash. These were invaders from Yun-nan, the traders of the country. They wore their money around their necks—coils of silver which they chopped into pieces as required.

Starting early, Keith had planned to reach the gold-fields by sundown. But in late afternoon came new and startling developments.

They had crossed three ranges and were well up toward the Laotian Divide, when the road made an abrupt dip to cross a mountain river, rippling clear and blue under an old, moss-hung bridge. A picturesque Meun village nestled in the narrow valley; and Donna stopped the car to take a picture.

During this interval, she did not hear Joe's cheerful honk behind them.

"Do you suppose they've had trouble?" she asked Keith.

"Might have punctured a tire."

"Suppose we wait and see. I'd like to look over the village, anyway."

So they left their half-caste driver to drain his radiator, and strolled into the village. The children scampered up the ladders, and peeked at them from the doorways of their long houses; the younger women quickly covered their breasts. The men put their hands to their foreheads and salaamed almost to the ground.

Donna's smile beguiled one little boy, clad only in his sunburn, out of the door and half-down the ladder to reach a piece of candy. Sonia was admiring the muscular limbs and almost classic face of the young Meun chief, standing with a spear in his hand on the long porch of his house. Mrs. Randall called Keith's attention to a crudely-fashioned heavy bracelet of some yellow metal worn by a village belle.

"Probably brass," Keith said. He pointed to it, and the girl smiled and slipped it off. "No, by Jove—it's *gold*."

Sonia heard him, and forgot her savage chieftain. "Is it so gold? Maybe she do not know, and would trade it for a trifle." Sonia balanced it in her hand. "It is worth five hundred tael \_\_\_\_\_"

Something in her face made the Meun girl quietly take back the bracelet and slip it on her wrist.

"Probably handed down for centuries," Donna said. "I wish we could talk to her."

From the watching crowd stepped out a slight-built yellow man in a white sarong.

"*Êtes-vous Française?*" he asked.

"*Non, mais je parle français,*" Donna answered.

"Then I will translate for you. I am from the far South, my woman is Meun, and I learned French at the school in Pnom-penh."

"Then, ask this girl if she has any notion how long her bracelet has been in the tribe?"

"Not long, missy. Since the day before yesterday. Her lover hammered it out of gold he found in the gravel."

Sonia seemed startled, and a red glow ringed her cheeks. Keith nodded with satisfaction.

"At the mines near the village of K'ai-Pa?"

"No, lord. There is little of the yellow stuff there. The white men are already coming back. This came from the waters of the Ta-Lo, across those mountains." He pointed up the river.

"Far away?" Keith's voice did not hold quite steady.

"Only one day in a dug-out canoe."

"Are there many white men there?"

“Only two now. But Ho Fan, he who found the gold, told us at the council that they would soon be like leaves of the forest. The three white miners to whom he showed the gold said so, talking one to another.”

A strained silence fell over the scene. They were all standing so still ... their eyes looked so bright ...

“Let’s get this straight,” Keith urged Donna. “He spoke of two men before, and now it’s three. Ask him to tell the whole story.”

But the story was simple enough. “Last moon, Ho Fan journeyed to the village of Muk-Pet, further down the Ta-Lo River, to share the burial-feast of his mother’s brother. On the way he paused to eat and make prayers. A great tree had just fallen, and the torn-up roots revealed the old bed of a small stream. There was a large rock, with a hole scooped by waters. He looked in the hole for flints, and lo, he found this yellow stuff, as much as he could hold in one hand.”

Keith stilled his leaping heart. “Yes, and then?”

“The next day on the river he met three white men, coming empty-handed from the mines of K’ai-Pa. One was French; the others from a place called De Staits.”

“Americans, of course,” Keith said. “Tell him to hurry on.”

“He showed them the gold. They paid him good silver to lead them back to the fallen tree. They dug holes, and found much more of the stuff; and when they had drunk from their black bottles, one of them gave back the handful Ho Fan had found, and enough more to make this bracelet. They told him he could trade it for twenty bracelets of silver, but that, Ho Fan knew, was a joke from the black bottle.”

“But it is true,” Donna said quickly.

The yellow man nodded, but plainly did not believe. "Then the three white men put stakes in the ground," he went on, "and one left to go to Vinh, there to get certain seals and papers. He passed here only two days ago, with a bag of gold the weight of a belt of rice. Ho Fan, who came this far as his servant, said he will soon return, with many white men in his train."

"And Ho Fan—where's he?"

"He went back to help with the digging. His kinsmen live nearby in the village of Muk-Pet, and he felt no fear."

"I don't understand that last," Keith said. "Why should any one be afraid?"

"These Meun people cannot leave their womenfolk," the yellow man explained. "If they go where they cannot smell the smoke of their own village, they turn sick. Besides, they do not like white water."

"Has any one gone up there since the Frenchman came by?"

"Others are on the way now, lord—not white men, but Khas (savages) from their village on our river. They will go anywhere for a full belly, those Khas. The Frenchman mustered ten of them, water-rats all, and even now they camp at the ford below our village. Tomorrow they go on to the diggings, in their two great canoes."

The yellow man pointed down the village row. Squatting beside their big inverted dug-outs were a group of little, dark-skinned men, naked save for breach-clouts.

At that moment Keith's driver joined the group. "The car is ready, master. We must hurry to reach K'ai-Pa by sundown."

“Go and wait, until you are called,” was Sonia’s sharp, almost angry command. Then, when the man had gone:  
“Keith, little one, it is a chance of the life. The luck, it have come—if we turn our backs we deserve to beg in the roads. We will go with those Khas tomorrow, take each a claim, and all be rich.”



## XI

**KEITH** led his friends to the shade of a secluded tree. He was trying hard to keep cool and beat back the fire of Sonia's flaming excitement. Donna was flushed, but she was troubled more than elated, perhaps by the power of man's earth over man. Mrs. Randall wanted more facts.

"Of course I'll have to go," Keith said. "My company would kick me out if I missed a chance like this."

"Go, but for your own sake," Sonia cried. "Do not let the company steal the luck from your hand, and give you a little bonus of ten, maybe five per cent. Send a bearer now with your resign—then you are free."

Keith gave her an indulgent smile. "I'll stake a claim for my company, and one for me too. But the main question is whether to take you three people with me. It may turn out to be a wild goose chase after all."

"Don't let that worry you," Mrs. Randall said. "Everything in life is a gamble."

"It may be only a pocket. Their claims may cover all the rich ground. And the trip will be rough—possibly even dangerous."

"What is to be the danger?" Sonia asked.

"The rivers are swift, and look high for this time of year. Of course the Khas are said to be wonderful boatmen——"

"Other boats has gone there. Hardship, it is nothing for a chance for riches; and we is all strong and young. Go now and speak to the Khas."

But Donna only looked down the road. “I wish Joe and Charley would come. They’d help us to decide.”

She turned with an odd little start at the tense silence falling behind her words. Sonia and Keith looked quickly into each other’s eyes.

“Perhaps there is not room in the boats, for so many,” Sonia said at last, doubtfully.

“Perhaps not even room for us,” Keith added. He faced Donna squarely and spoke in frank tones. “Donna, I don’t see why I should let your friends in on this. I have nothing against either of them, but this is business, not friendship. I was sent here by my company. I have no right to let them share my discoveries, and possibly get the claims we want ourselves. I hope you see that point.”

“I do,” Donna answered gravely. “It’s just business, as you say.”

“Then you won’t blame me if I don’t tell them about it?”

“No, but I’ll tell them.”

Keith stood very still. “Do you think that’s fair to me?”

“It isn’t a question of being fair to you, Keith. If you had got this news alone and told me in confidence—or even if I’d heard it while I was your guest—I wouldn’t breathe a word to any one. But we all heard it together. We have equal right to it. I’m going to share my right with our friends—and I’m sure when you think it over, you won’t mind.”

Keith looked grave a moment, then his fine smile lighted his face. “Of course, Donna, if you see it that way.”

But he lost no time in calling Muang, the native interpreter, and leading the way to the river-bank to engage the Kha boatmen. These little savages leaped to their feet, salaaming,

as the whites drew near. Yes, they would take the *Chow* (prince) and his party to the digging-grounds. There was plenty of room in their wide dug-out canoes. There would be no danger.

The problem of an interpreter was solved as simply—Muang himself would make the trip. He was a traveler aforetime, not a roof-chained ape of a Meun. It would be only a few days, and he could live in opulence for three moons on the good silver piasters Keith would pay. They would pass the night in the village and leave at dawn.

At Donna's suggestion, the car-driver went back to look for Joe. Afterwards he would return to Vinh and await Keith's orders, to be despatched via mailcar and wireless.

The chief spread mats for his guests on the long porch of his house, and crouching, with clasped hands, gave them welcome. Buxom, bronzed women came kneeling with gifts—usually a stone dish of uncooked rice, in which were embedded a few eggs. This provision would be useful on their trip.

Keith replied with a full tin of fifty cigarettes, and soon every tribesman was puffing at top speed, consuming his prize in a slow streak of red fire.

The shadows stole out from the jungle; stone-age lamps cast weird high-lights on dusky skins. Exalted beyond their poor power of words by the honor come to their village the savages now must dance.

Four gongs were hung to the long roof-beam, and a bent patriarch with quills in his ears hobbled out of the night and sat cross-legged before the kettle drum. Soon the oldest music of the earth was beating through the forest, to confound the demons working spells under the jungle moon;

to halt the raiding panther and make him snarl and creep away. It was unutterably wild and strange.

The tribesmen swept into the dance. The old drummer renewed his youth; his drum-stick became one of his nimble bones and his eyes were like fireballs. Sonia sat swaying in time, her face strangely drawn. Donna was touched with awe and pity—and a creepy, lowering fear.

The dance ended with a thunder of gongs; and at once the solemn devil-charmers turned to light-hearted children on a holiday. Amid much laughter and hand-clapping, the women brought out two big earthen jars of rice-beer which Donna regarded with some misgivings. But when the chief thrust in a long hollow bamboo, sucked politely through it to show the beverage was not poisoned, and with a low salaam handed the stem to her, she proved her sporting blood.

A very curious contest followed. Each guest was given a fixed time to suck, to try to lower the contents of the jar as far as possible. The chief had no stop-watch, but the old drummer measured the intervals with a primitive water-glass, a buffalo horn with a hole in it, which he filled and permitted to drain. After each contestant sucked his fastest and best in the time allotted, the jar was again filled level from the second jar.

Donna, Sonia, and Mrs. Randall made a poor showing, but Keith caught the idea, and sucked as though his life were the stake. And the Meuns cheered and clapped their hands at the void he made in the jar.

Donna looked at him with a catch in her heart. His eyes were pure delight; the lamp-light burnished his hair. He had forgotten his dreams of Golcondan gold. He was the same Keith who had wooed her on an elm-grown campus half

around the world. It was strange that she could love him more under a thatched roof, holding wassail with half-naked savages, than in the glitter of Shanghai lights, but it was true.

That night they slept soundly on mats, on the community-house porch. But the jungle whispered beyond the watch-fires, and sometimes through her dreams Donna listened in vain for Joe's car on the road. Keith called them before dawn, fed them on eggs and bread, and led them to the boats.

It turned out that the four white people could all ride in the larger boat, an immense dug-out of a mighty tree, with five Khas and their interpreter for crew. There was also room for some of their personal baggage, but their food supplies, and the big bags of rice that the Khas had brought for their sustenance at the mine, had to go in the second boat. Clear until the last bag was stowed, Donna watched down the road for Joe. At last she scribbled him a note to be delivered by the village chief, took her place on the wide thwart beside Keith, and the blue waters began to ripple by.

For two hours the boatmen fought up a smooth, swift current, broken occasionally by long white riffles. They poled mightily, shouting to one another, and invoking their heathen gods. When they had stabbed and jabbed their way up a long rapids into a little lake, the entire crew laid down their poles, and standing in the boats, salaamed long and deeply to the white water behind them. Finally the head boatmen set fire by flint and steel to what looked like a strip of paper, and let it float back down the river.

Sonia was amused by this ceremony, and got out her camera. The headman protested with a frown and shake of his head, but she gave him one of her most bewitching smiles and took his picture.

“They are so like children,” she said. “Why should he be afraid?”

“I’d humor him, if I were you,” Keith said kindly. “That was a very serious ceremony to the little heathens. They were thanking the special demon of that cataract for letting them through—and the smoke from the flaming paper squared them with any jealous gods in the sky. If you laugh, they’ll think that the old devil will wireless up ahead to his pals in the next riffle, and then we’ll catch it.”

Crossing a little lake, they encountered a stiff portage of nearly half a mile. It was a full hour’s job for all hands, Keith included, to carry the big dug-out across a low ridge and moor her in a second, larger lake. Transporting the smaller boat and the baggage took them well past mid-morning, so to save time, they lunched on the lake-shore.

They were evidently on a narrow divide, the source of a number of diverging streams. A considerable river emptied out of the lake on which they had moored; hardly a stone’s throw distant was still another lake, from which a smaller river flowed. The headman and the little black Kha who acted as guide were seen to parley, pointing to the two almost parallel rivers, then pushed down the rippling waters of the larger.

“Quite a stream this, and running full,” Keith said. “We seem to have crossed the divide, and turned south. Donna, do you notice any difference in the jungle?”

“Greener—and thicker.”

“Can’t account for the thicker. It’s greener because the seasonal rains on this side have just stopped. No one can keep track of this mountain weather.”

As their journey progressed, the jungle seemed to grow even denser. It rose in green walls on the riversides, crowding the very flood, so that they seemed to be hurling down a chasm of jade. There were no open parks like they had seen on the road from Vinh. The trees branched high, and beneath was a tangle of creepers, thorns, and underbrush that would hardly give passage to the jungle lords, the panther and the python.

Unseen birds rasped and scolded in the high branches. There the monkeys had their wonderful cross-roads and lanes, and often a little dark face peered down at them from an overhanging limb. Once a gorgeous long-tailed peacock flew low over the boat. But of men, white or dark, of boat or trail or village or fish-trap, there was not one sign.

“We’re going to be in on the ground floor of that gold-strike,” Keith exulted. “Not many have gone ahead of us.”

“It’s as though we are the first to come here since the beginning of the world,” Donna answered quietly.

The river had a clear, moderate current, broken by frequent cataracts. Only its generous width permitted the crew to swing their boat around its rushing bends. At best it was hair-raising navigation, saved only by the amazing skill and the cool head of the little chief, riding in the bow of the foremost boat. As they drifted upon white water, he would rise, make a quick survey, choose the safest course for his boat, and call back his orders. Then the little lean muscles would run back and forth under the dark skin of his back and shoulders as he crouched and dipped his blade.

Sometimes the boat seemed to catch and hover at the very crest of a rapids, then rip forward like a loosed arrow. A wild yell rose from the crew—the bow dipped and all but

submerged—water burst over the gunwales—and the bank reeled by in a green blur.

When a rock broke the current, the pilot seemed to aim deliberately for it, and at the last instant swing his boat and barely skim by. But this was not sport. He wanted the strong stream that he knew flowed close to the obstruction, to give him steerage-way and keep him out of dangerous eddies.

Before long his white passengers were calling down the blessings of all his pagan gods upon him. Sonia would not mock him, when again he stood with clasped hands, and bowed his head and burned his little paper to the demons of the white waters—if indeed those angry deities chose to let him through.

The passengers enjoyed the first few cascades. The exhilaration of fast water—the sense of quickened living—made most sport seem tame. But soon these were too many and too strong. They sat tense and silent. The thought of gold, gleaming in the gravels beyond, lured them no more.

“How would it be,” Sonia asked suddenly in a strange, sharp voice, “if we strike one of the rocks?”

“It wouldn’t be any picnic,” Keith answered grimly.

It was hard to estimate their speed. They only knew that in a few brief hours they had broken every link to their known world, and were cast forth into the uttermost heart of the jungle. The little village on the road was now, measured in travel-time, nearly half way back to Shanghai. Every hour’s run down-stream would mean a full day’s fight back, poling up the current and lining the boat with ropes through the cataracts.

Slowly the conviction grew on Keith that he had reckoned without his host. He hoped that the river would level out in



its lower reaches, but it seemed to gather speed. He soon saw they were making a quick fall off the plateau. And now jungle-grown mountains rose steep on each side.

In mid-afternoon they were given their first real lesson. A roar ahead, and a glimpse of tumbling foam among the rocks, made the chief order a landing. They drew into a little backwater under the bank, while two Khas went forward to reconnoitre. Presently they reported that they dared not shoot down with a full load, so their passengers must walk along the bank and be picked up below the rapids.

They agreed gladly. It would be good to stretch their legs. Fortunately, the bank was here an easy slope, instead of a towering mountain-side. They climbed out, and began to push through the vines.

Donna had often heard of impenetrable thickets, and now she knew what the term meant. The labyrinth of vines and creepers that looked so soft and green turned out the man-trap of a demon—to let them in, and then not let them out.

They had plunged forward not more than twenty feet when the silky green ribbons tightened to bands of steel. Leafy tendrils that had swayed at their lightest touch now clutched their ankles and wound up their arms like Laocoon's serpents. It was a physical impossibility to gain another rod, save on hands and knees.

When they turned to go back, they found that the emerald gates had closed behind them. It took actual minutes to break them down, lunging with all their strength and flailing with their arms like drowning men, to reach the water's edge.

The boats had gone on and landed below the rapids. There was no way to overtake them save to work along the rocks and through the shallow water of the shore. It turned out a

grueling task, beset with danger; and their hands were bruised and cut and their nerves on edge before they again took their seats on the thwarts. And only the luck of the trail had saved them from impassable steep banks and deep, rushing waters.

It was a long time before Donna could trust herself to speak. “Are you all right, Mother?” she asked at last.

“Don’t worry about me, honey.”

Keith turned back to Muang, the interpreter. “Find out from the guide how far it is to the diggings?”

A muttered parley followed. “He is not sure. He does not remember this place. But he thinks it cannot be far.”

“The villagers near the mine must have some quicker road out.... Ask him how long since he was here?”

There was another brief parley. “It is so long ago, he cannot remember. Five years, or perhaps ten.”

There was nothing to do about it; nothing to say that would help. But Donna turned and looked behind her—a quick, searching, hungry look to the long reaches of the river white and bare as a bone.

But if Donna had had telescope eyes, with x-ray power to probe the green flesh of the jungle, she might have taken new heart. She and her companions were not utterly forgotten and abandoned to their fate. Joe and Charley were again under way.

They had rigged a jury-rudder for the broken steering mechanism of their car. They had reached the village only an hour after their friends’ departure, read Donna’s note, and had located the Ta-Lo River on the fine geodedic map which Joe had taken pains to procure from the governor at Vinh.

They had engaged—practically commandeered—a small dug-out canoe from the Meuns, big enough for two paddlers with a reasonable load of duffle.

The bad luck that Charley hardly knew one end of a paddle from the other had been offset by the happy fact that their car-driver, Ting, was a riverman born and bred.

“I am a Laotian from the Nam-Ken,” he had told them in his missionary English. “I, no other, shall take the bow-seat, and send this half-caste dog back with my car.” And so Charley had been stowed amidships, with the rating of second-class freight, in a dangerously-overloaded craft.

They had fought up to the portage, and following the Kha’s tracks, crossed to the lakes beyond. There were two of these lakes, both drained by rivers, so again they studied their map with utmost care. “It’s the further river,” Joe announced at last. “This other has never been surveyed.”

As they paddled through the shallows to get into the current Joe looked hard at the waterplants snatching his blade. “Queer that their big boat didn’t knock over some of these lilies,” he said.

“They’ve had time to straighten up,” Charley answered. “This is the Ta-Lo, plain as day, or your map is a liar.”

Only a hundred yards down-stream the current rushed between two labyrinths of fallen trees. The gap was hardly eight feet wide, and here another of those immense gold-and-black spiders, that infest every jungle trail, had hung his wonderful web. No doubt it was an excellent trap for water insects, but the high bow of the canoe tore it to shreds. The spider dropped in the boat and was despatched by Ting’s paddle.

They glided on. Joe took perhaps ten absent-minded strokes, then set his blade against the current with a yell. Charley turned to see sweat leap out on his gray face.

“That spider web——” Charley broke out.

“Yes, and we’ve got to go back.”

“But we saw where they had lunch, on the lake shore.”

“They went down the wrong river. And God only knows where they’ll come out—if they ever come out at all.”

## XII

*To* Donna, it seemed that time stood still and only the river ran. It was like the river of life, sweeping them far from their childhood havens, out from their anchorage at Fool's Paradise into the unknown. And in that river were cascades, rapids, and cataracts, and no short cuts through the jungle across its long bends.

She and her friends spoke little. Any hope they could express would only acknowledge a growing fear that each tried to hide. Sometimes they stole glances into the dark faces of the little Kha boatmen, but these were enigmatic as the runes on broken tablets found in the fallen temples of a lost race.

Sonia was the first to bring fear into the open. Perhaps it showed a kind of courage. She belonged to a race still cringing under the far-flung shadow of Kismet, the god of Tamerlane and the Tatar; and it was no good to lie about life for the sake of a comrade's hope or the comfort of one's own soul.

"It is something gone wrong," she said above the murmurings of the waters.

Keith managed a pale smile. "Nothing to worry about—yet."

"Tell me why? But you cannot. There is no use to hide the eyes, my friend. We is come to great trouble."

"You bet it's no picnic. We'll need a lot more time than we figured, and maybe live on native grub for a week or so. But we'll all come through, and have a great experience to look back on."

Sonia leaned forward, tense. “When is you expect to reach this mine?”

“It may be any minute now. Then we’ll find white men and natives from Muk-Pet.”

“Is you so blind? We will find only the rocks of the river, and even our bones will be lost. We is lost now, past any finding. There is only more jungle, every way you see. Soon we strike a gorge, or maybe a great falls, and then it is finish.”

Keith could not answer, but Mrs. Randall spoke in her calm, plain tones.

“Brace up, Sonia. We’re not dead yet. Personally, I’m hard to kill. This river is bound to go somewhere, and we’ll go along.”

“Only a little while now. These men, they is lost too: I hear it in their voices. There are no golds to dig on this river, only graves.”

Keith saw that the time had come to speak plainly.

“There were two lakes back there on the divide, each emptying into a river,” he told Donna. “Ask Muang if he’s sure we took the right one?”

A muttered parley followed. “The guide thinks there has been a little mistake,” Muang the interpreter informed Donna in French.

“A *little* mistake!”

“It was many years ago he passed this way, and he could not remember for sure which river ran to Muk-Pet. So he spat in the water for a sign, and to make sure he watched for a bird to fly. But he thinks the water-god was angry, and made

the spittle flow toward the wrong river, and put an evil charm upon the bird. It is not good luck.”

“Pretty darn bad luck, if you ask me,” Donna answered grimly in English.

“But even on the wrong river there is a village, and we will find it,” Muang consoled them.

“Tell him I’ll do the spitting from now on,” Keith said, when he heard the story. But Sonia turned white.

Between the rapids the river stopped as though to listen to the jungle silence, and stayed to mirror the overhanging trees; then roared and rushed on. Once on a rocky island they saw sign of man.

A stone tower, the upper walls of which bore immense carved faces, rose above the tangle of vines and thorns. But even the names of those sculptured gods had been lost time out of mind; black tunnels through the stone showed where vandals had searched for treasure; and from the terraced bank that once might have been a boat-landing, a cobra raised his hooded head and watched them pass.

The shadow of the jungle crept out across the water. In two hours the sun would set, and then the tropic night would pounce down like a black panther from his mountain lair. Unless they soon found a village, they must camp on the river bank.

They saw a dark spot in the river ahead, bordered by white with a blue glimmer beyond. It proved to be another island, with dangerous rapids on each side that dropped down into a reach of quiet water. The pilot called back an order; and back-paddling sturdily, the crews drew both boats against the bank.

“He says,” the interpreter told Donna after a brief parley, “that this place looks not good, and perhaps it is best that you take to the bank to lighten the boats.”

But Keith was tired enough to be reckless. “We’ve been through a dozen places worse than this. And look at that bank—a solid wall of brush, and steep at that.”

“It seems a little more open just below,” Donna said.

“We’d lose an hour, getting down there. Tell him we’ll take a chance.”

“Why not?” Sonia broke in. “We is all done with anyway. I cannot fight again through the thorns.”

“We’re all right, Sonia,” Keith assured her. “But if we don’t hurry on, we’ll lose our chance of finding the village tonight.” So he signaled the boatmen to shoot down.

“I think we’re taking a foolish risk,” Donna protested. But she too hated and feared the clutch of green hands, hardly less than the fangs of the river-rocks, and she yielded to Keith’s will. The pilot only shrugged his shoulders. These were white lords; he a Kha.

Ordering the second crew to wait, he took the near side of the island. The boat seemed to hover on the very crest of the rapids, then leap headlong. Her bow struck with a shock that almost threw him overboard; water dashed high. A rock loomed ahead—he swung her clear just in time, only to scrape another rock on the far side of the channel. She all but keeled over—lunged out of control—righted-zigzagged like a crocodile blind in one eye—and hurtled through the rapids to the quiet water below.

“That was cutting it fine,” Keith said with a grim smile. The two girls still clutched the gunwales. Mrs. Randall



straightened her hat and sighed.

But the second boat, loaded with the food supply, still clung to the bank above the rapids. The pilot studied the channels, then signaled to her crew to take the far side of the island.

What followed was bewildering to the palefaces, but the Khas understood perfectly. The river-gods were angry. They had tried and failed to swamp the first boat and drown these white invaders—now they saw a way to strike them on the flank. And the Khas, the little dark slaves of the jungle, must be ground in the millstones of their wrath.

The crew of the second boat came on boldly. Keith, watching up-stream, saw them gather speed—then the river itself seemed to rise and ride over them. There was a crack like a rifle, then a smashing sound, as a rock ripped through the bottom of the boat and split her wide. She upset the next instant, and one little dark figure after another came shooting and spinning through the foam, to whirl and check in the quiet waters below.

The events of the next few seconds Keith could never clearly recall. Thought was stunned; he could only act on instinct. But that instinct was manly and true.

Two of the Khas swam strongly for the shelving right-hand bank. One stretched up imploring hands beside the boat, and though his comrades were too dazed to help him, Mrs. Randall's sturdy arms jerked him overside. But two of the little men struggled in midstream, and were drowning before Keith's eyes.

There was no time to check the headway of the drifting boat and turn back to their help. The crew could only stand

and stare with wooden faces. “Steady her!” Keith called. At the same instant he dived.

He was by no means a powerful swimmer, and untrained in life-saving. When he overtook the nearest of the drowning men, naked arms clutched him and threatened to drag him to the bottom. Precious seconds were wasted while he fought loose. At last he caught the little savage by the long hair and swam with him to the bank.

When he turned to dive again, the other Kha had disappeared. By now Donna’s shouts had aroused the horror-stricken crew, and they were paddling over a dying swirl in the water; but there was no shadow in the blue depths. So it turned out that their river-demons did not go unfed.

“We will camp here for the night,” the pilot said in his guttural tones.

The savage Khas withstood the tragedy better than their white lords. For they had no illusions about death.

A Kha boatman had come to his appointed time; but this was no reason why his companions should not make fire and eat rice and laugh at a jest.

Stolidly they swung their long knives and cut away the vines from the level bank opposite the lower end of the island. With deft hands they slung their lords’ mosquito nets, and laid out their blankets. Except for a jar of preserves and a tin of crackers left from lunch, the strangers’ food had been lost in the river, so they shared their own meager store—a big wooden basket of cooked rice which the pilot had kept under the thwart.

“I cannot eat such thing,” Sonia cried.

“Stuff it down, daughter,” Mrs. Randall said crisply. “We may have a late breakfast tomorrow.”

But it turned out good fare. The whole-grained rice had a distinctive flavor, and Sonia dipped her fingers in the basket as often as her friends. Afterward the Khas finished the store, licking up the last grains.

By now a red sunset glimmered through the vines. The threat of the deepening shadows stirred Keith to life, and drove the haze from his brain. At once he called a council, the pilot, the guide, the interpreter, and his own companions.

“It’s certain now we’ve come down the wrong river,” he said. “Ask the pilot, Donna, if he knows anything about this country, and how much further we must go to find a village.”

“If this be the wrong river, the village of Nok-Pu (Peacock Mountain) is not far below,” the answer came at last.

“Bad water all the way?”

“Maybe. But men have gone there, in boats.”

“Then we’ll start at dawn, all of us in one boat. If need be, we will leave some of our hand baggage to make room. And we’ll make up to you the stores you have lost.” He turned gravely to his friends. “It can’t be far, considering the distance we’ve gone today. We’re certain to come out in a few hours. So let’s make the best of it, and not worry.”

But the little headman was the picture of gloom. “It is bad luck, this journey. The water-gods are angry.”

“Tell him I’ll square them for him,” Keith said. But Donna knew better than to translate this.

“One price has been paid,” the savage went on. “It may be not enough. Yet I will burn the prayer-paper and beg them to forgive.”

“Forgive what?” Sonia asked in French. She was very white.

The headman turned to her sullenly. “The white queen does not remember, at the little lake? She mocked at the god, and made magic against him with the leather box. For this, much rice is lost and a boat sunk—and a widow will weep.”

“That is child’s talk,” Donna said quickly, in French.

But Sonia looked crushed. A moment later Donna saw her steal to the bank, and gaze forlornly at the glimmering waters. Thinking herself unobserved, she put her hands to her forehead and made a quick bow. East is east and west is west—and Donna’s heart was touched with awe and wrung with pity.

But soon Donna too went to stand on the bank. She salaamed to no river gods, but gazed up the flood with aching eyes. The dusk thickened under the trees. The river was a luminous path between gray walls. It seemed to her that the jungle was waking like some day-sleeping evil serpent. It was writhing, rustling, breathing. Strange scents ... hushed sounds ... fantastic shadows ...

A twig cracked in a nearby covert. An immense owl drifted by on velvet wings. From far across the river came a long eerie wail, that rose and fell, quavered and died away; but whether it was beast or bird or a lost soul she would never know.

The last light dimmed swiftly. There was no use looking any more. Joe would not come tonight, perhaps not at all. What right had she to expect him? What claim did she have on him, that he need follow her here, into this green prison ...

But just then she stopped breathing. A hope struck her heart like pain. At the far end of the shining road she saw

what looked like a piece of driftwood ... and then it was like a floating log ... and then like an enormous spider with two gleaming legs and three heads ... and then, beyond all doubt, it was three men in a dug-out canoe.

She dared not shout yet. These might be three natives, on the way to their village. But now she saw the rear paddler in sharp silhouette against white water—the shape and swing of his shoulders. And at last the middle of the three, who held no paddle, saw her and gave an airy wave.

Her chest swelled to shriek out the news, but she only turned her head, and called quietly: “Here come Joe and Charley.” And when she looked back, they were almost to the island.

A feverish chill swept over her. What if some malevolent destiny was really and truly on her trail, and had brought her friends all this way only to drown them before her eyes? Then her common sense took hold, and she began to wave danger signals to Joe.

He pulled into quiet water to survey the rapids. Keith came to the bank.

*“Lighten your boat,”* he yelled. *“Danger!”*

*“What you say?”* came Joe’s bawl, little and thin through the roar of water.

*“Danger! Leave Charley on bank!”*

*“What you think I am, ballast?”* It was Charley.

Then before they could protest further, they saw the canoe dart from the bank.

*“Look out,”* Joe yelled. *“Here we come!”*

They saw the boat clean-cut against the foam. And Donna hardly had time to gasp before it shot down into quiet water

—the blades flashed—and Joe and Charley were landing at her feet.

She was torn between laughter and tears, but both were blown away by a burst of sudden and absurd indignation. “What do you mean by traveling so late?” she scolded. “Haven’t we enough trouble without having to drag the river for your bodies?”

Joe’s eyes opened, and he was instantly chastened. “We’d have camped two miles back, but we happened to see your smoke——”

Soon all the available facts were revealed. They had strayed down an unsurveyed river, into a large blank spot on Joe’s map. But the village of Nok-Pu was certainly within thirty miles; and Joe had a good day’s food supply for all hands. “So even if we have to cut our way around rapids and canyons, we’ll make it somehow,” he said.

For Donna, the whole aspect of the scene had changed. The jungle was sable-draped, ghostly and terrifying, but it could not pass the watch-fire. The camp was a little bright island in a gloomy sea. The firelight that glossed Keith’s wavy hair and disclosed his clean-cut youth only emphasized Joe’s plain features and rugged bones; but her eyes were satisfied. His rifle leaned against a log, in easy reach of his big square hand.

She would sleep well tonight. The hard earth-bed would be like down. Already she felt blissfully drowsy.

“But at least, we will lose the gold,” Sonia said after a long silence.

Donna started. She had completely forgotten their quest. Yes, they would lose the gold, but they might find other treasure. In the firelight of this little lost camp, all tinsel had

faded, all masks were down, all colored glasses broken, and they might find truth.

Muang the interpreter had not dipped paddle all day, and so was appointed to keep the watch-fire. By ten o'clock the tired whites were all under their nets; the Khas still crouched in a dark huddle, talking in low tones. Joe saw them just before he slept—the firelight glinting on their naked limbs, simian jaws thrust forward, eyes luminous in deep hollows—and all night long he dreamed of a lair of sticks in a tree-top of the young world, of the careless childhood of his race, and then of a red dawn waking him to some bitter truth and stern, adult task.

He wakened. For a time his fading dream fought with reality. Still half-asleep he saw the sunlit leaves of his tree-top home change to white mosquito-netting, fluttering in the breeze. But it seemed—and he could not shake off the illusion—that the red dawn still shone through the web.

His eyes opened wide. Yes, the night was lifting. The massed foliage showed in silhouette against a paling sky. But the glare that had wakened him was not in the distant east, but only a hundred yards away; it was not glowing clouds, but fire. And a shining rippling path, incredible and ghostly, led straight to it.

For a moment it made no sense. The fire seemed to be suspended in the air, half of the flames leaping up and the other half crazily, spectrally leaping down, and the whole surrounded by an orange-green nimbus. He sat up and swept away the mosquito netting from his eyes.

The nimbus disappeared. The fire proved to be on the river, a short distance below the island. It was floating slowly down stream and reflected in the quiet waters. For a second or two

he thought it was a burning log. Then his eyes bulged as he saw it was a burning boat.

*His own boat!* One glance at the bank told him that. And the next glance, sharp and clear, showed the river flowing naked past the landing. The big dug-out of the Khas was nowhere in sight.

A quick survey of the camp told the rest of the story. Muang, the faithless watchman, slept deeply by the ashes of the camp-fire, but the Khas no longer huddled beside it. They had deserted to the last man.



## XIII

*JOE* waited until the cold wave sweeping over him had passed away. Already he knew there was nothing to be gained by haste—the Khas were out of sight and beyond recall—and his first necessity was to keep his head. His friends were still sleeping. He need not waken them until he could think what to tell them.

His dazed wits slowly sharpened. Now he noted with relief that his gun still lay in easy reach, and apparently the little food-box had not been disturbed. None of the hand-baggage had been taken; and Ling, his paddler, still slept at his feet.

Suddenly it became too much to bear alone. He turned and shook Charley gently. “Wake up,” he whispered, “but don’t make a sound.”

His friend’s eyes opened wide and bright “All right?”

“The Khas have slipped off in their own boat, and burned ours.”

Charley’s face turned gray. “Sweet pickle now, eh,” he muttered bitterly, after a long deep breath.

“We’re marooned with about two days’ grub. And that’s the good news we’ve got to break to the others.”

But before they could talk it out a piercing shriek rang through the camp. It was Sonia—and she leaped from her net as though fleeing from a nightmare. “They’re gone,” she sobbed. “Look—look—they’re gone——”

Instantly both Joe and Charley were on their feet. “Steady, girl,” Charley said.

And now every one was up. Donna ran and stood by Joe. Mrs. Randall was stark and silent. Keith, panic-stricken, sped to the river bank.

“After ’em,” he cried, flailing at the jungle wall.

“Steady, old man,” Charley urged. But now the rising panic threatened to snatch both Joe and himself. The picture they had seen so clearly, blurred and was peopled by fantastic shapes of fear. The very light of dawn was eerie, and familiar objects had a strange uncanny aspect.

Instinctively Joe reached for his rifle. The feel of the cold steel seemed to shoot through him, like an invigorating electric shock. Instantly the light cleared. Sensing his quick self-mastery, one by one the others looked him in the face.

“It will be all right,” his big voice boomed. “Don’t worry—we’ll all come out all right.”

A sharp silence fell. “What do you mean, Joe, that it will be all right?” Mrs. Randall asked.

“The only real danger is fever. I’ve got a rifle, and can easily kill enough to eat. If we can keep well, we’ll soon be found and rescued.”

To relieve the strain, he knelt and began to rebuild the fire. His hand shook so he could hardly lay the kindling, but the others looked away. Presently he steadied, and the flames leaped up.

“Now, I think we can all face the music,” he said, as he threw on fuel.

“Right,” Donna agreed. “Sonia, dear—don’t cry any more. We’ll come through with flying colors.”

Keith passed his hand in a dazed way across his forehead. “Maybe we could build a raft——”

“How long would it last in those rapids?” Joe answered.

“Perhaps Ling could make a canoe,” Charley suggested.

But this was folly too. “It would take six months, with no tools but knives and maybe a flint ax.”

“Couldn’t we cut our way through the jungle to the village?” Donna asked.

“We couldn’t make half a mile a day. No, we’ve got to wait for help.”

“I suppose there’s no use hoping the Khas will be seen and questioned,” Mrs. Randall said.

“They’re going to strike off for the far jungles, quick as they can,” Keith answered. “They know what they’d get from the French for deserting white people. And they burned Joe’s boat so we couldn’t follow.”

“You don’t think”—and Donna could hardly frame the words—“that they deliberately left us to die?”

Only Joe took the trouble to stand up for his fellow men. “Not quite so bad as that. They wanted a head start. I suppose they’re not to blame—they thought we were a jinx. But I ought to be shot for not guarding against it.”

They made a little ring around the leaping fire. “How soon do you think we’ll be missed?” Mrs. Randall asked.

“Your driver told us he was going to Vinh, to wait for a wireless from you. We can count on him waiting two weeks before he begins to wonder, and another before he does anything about it.”

“Then it will probably slip his mind,” Keith added grimly.

“But the French—or our friends in Shanghai—will start to trace us in time,” Joe told them. “We’ll be hard to find—might as well face that fact—but they’ll find us in the end.”

“Well, we’ve made a thorough job of getting lost.” Mrs. Randall spoke with a grimness almost approaching humor. “We couldn’t have done any better if we’d tried.”

Donna was steadying rapidly, and now she asked a question close to the point. “Joe, have you got plenty of shells for your gun?”

“About thirty. That’s plenty with careful shooting.”

Sonia, who had dried her tears, at last found her voice. “They will not help. We will die just the same. How can you walk through the jungle to hunt?”

“We’ll find a way. Now let’s put on the rest of our clothes and get some breakfast. After that we’ll all feel better.”

On the whole, the next hour brought encouragement. Their resources were considerably greater than they had feared at first. In Joe’s outfit were a pot and skillet, plenty of matches, and a ten-pound sack of salt brought in hope of a leopard-skin or a deer-head, but which now could season and preserve the harvest of the hunting-trails. Both Ling and Muang had long knives for cutting short paths through the thickets. Both knew wild fruits and roots to add to the larder. There was plenty of mosquito-netting for a comfortable camp, and suitable outdoor clothes. Most important of all, Charley had his doctor’s satchel, to the wiser heads a treasure beyond price in these fever-ridden tropics.

“And I’m the medical officer of this outfit,” Charley said with unaccustomed gravity. “And here are some rules I’ll make right now.”

“Shoot,” Keith told him.

“Don’t bare your heads to the sun even for a few seconds. That wicked little ultra-violet ray can get through to cook

your spines, and then you're dead."

His hearers nodded gravely.

"You're not to drink unboiled water, no matter how thirsty you get," Charley went on. "Use boiled water even to brush your teeth."

This was permitted to sink home.

"Remember these are the tropic jungles, swarming with infection. So if you have as much as a stomachache, come straight to me."

But they could not fight fever without good and abundant food. So when the day's tasks were appointed and the palm-leaf shelters well begun, Joe took Ling and went scouting. By cutting a path to the mouth of a small creek, and then by wading up its shallow waters, they penetrated the jungle.

It fairly teemed with wild-life. A game-trail intersecting the creek led them to a wide natural meadow, the feeding-ground of the sambur and the wild cattle: here Joe would make his ambush in the gray dawns. Now the jungle-lords slept in their lairs, but he shot a peacock for the supper-pot, and Ling filled his war-bag from the wild harvest of the woods.

The day had prospered—a comfortable camp pitched—and they were gay at the evening meal. Even when the river glimmered in the twilight, and small, whispered noises crept out of the darkening jungle, they could still smile into one another's eyes.

But the job grew harder with the thickening night. They wanted to talk fast, to drive the smothering silence out of camp, but it was an increasing effort to think of cheerful things to say. One by one they were lost in lonely thoughts.

When Sonia let her mind wander, it ran to Keith. She gloated over his remembered kisses, and craved them now with a hunger that took her breath. Flowers bloomed and the petals fell—the jungle told her so. Only one thing endured—so the jungle whispered—and that was death. All that was flesh of her, for the moment rising into dominance, wished that she had taken him for her own when she had the chance: for an hour of the rapture of reality was worth a life-time's kneeling at a cold shrine, or following an imaginary star.

Keith was lost in greedy thoughts. He had always been aware of the selfish bent of his mind, and had deplored it, but now his honest shame seemed to flit away. Snatch with both hands—this was the precept of the jungle. Flourish at any cost—grow and wax green—throw out ravenous roots—and when tender plants reach up for a place in the sun, stamp and choke them out!

What if a chance came to escape this prison? His eyes narrowed, and flicked right and left. What if he could go on, to life and fulfilment, even at a comrade's cost? Only a fool—so the night whispered in his ear—would choose to stay and waste away with fever... But some finer, inner Keith that no jungle could corrupt prayed that this test might never come.

Charley tried not to look at Sonia. Her beauty in the firelight worked a ferment in his blood. Sturdily he fastened his mind on the many medical problems of their exile. He enumerated every object in his doctor's satchel, and wondered in what stead it would stand if certain emergencies rose.

Joe was not as enthralled as most of the others. He was used to lonely camps, the voice of the solitude. Although the

toxins of the night got into his blood, the pure flame of his young love quickly burned them out. He drank in Donna's dark beauty, thrilled at the memory of her kiss, and longed for her with a strong man's strength; but he still thought of her as his life's prize, not his prey.

Nor was Donna herself immune to the jungle call. Its fragrant breath blew in her face. Its carnal sorcery stole over her in warm waves. But it made her only vaguely wistful, perhaps a little afraid. She looked neither to Joe nor to Keith, but straight into the fire. Mrs. Randall alone was utterly unmoved. She had fought and won her battles in her youth.

Presently Ling, dozing in the shadows, threw up his head, listening. They saw the whites of his eyes.

Voices died away. For a long time the others could hear nothing but the nervous crackle of the fire. Then they heard—or thought they heard—a faint rustle of leaves in the thickets back of camp. But it soon faded out.

“Only the wind,” Joe said softly.

But still they watched and listened. Just as they started to relax, Sonia threw one hand to her cheek and pointed into the darkness with the other. Joe snatched for his rifle, but although he strained into the gloom, he saw only the firelight on the vines and the mocking shadows beyond.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“Some big thing that moved.”

“Just your imagination, I think.”

Again they waited. Ling began to sniff the air. What was at first the faintest taint on the perfume of the jungle grew to a rank wild smell, pinching their nostrils. It filled and drenched

the camp, and called back a forgotten terror from the childhood of their race.

“T-Sua!” Ling breathed, in a sibilant whisper.

But Joe need not ask him to translate. Suddenly he recalled a childhood experience—his first circus, and cages with iron bars, and a reek that permeated the tent.

“That’s a tiger,” he burst out, as his rifle-bolt snicked home.

But he did not get a shot. Just once, in the darkness, what looked like two close-set electric bulbs, green as witch-fire, blazed spectrally, then went out. The leaves rustled and stilled. The air slowly freshened.

“He is gone,” Ling said.

“But he’ll come back——” Sonia wailed.

“Not likely, Heaven-Born. He was only hunting, and came to look at our fire. Only a man-eater would make trouble.”

“But how do you know he’s not a man-eater?” Mrs. Randall demanded.

“It is one chance in a hundred, that is all. You see, there are no villagers here to eat on, and the striped one who hunts man stays close by the fields. You may sleep in peace tonight.”

Joe and Ling rose before dawn, and crept to their ambush. In the first light they saw what looked like a file of big black cattle wind out of the jungle and begin to feed in the meadow.

“T-Ting,” Ling whispered. (Wild oxen.)

So there was red work in camp that day. Joe had resolved to save every possible pound of the beef. While Ling remained on the field to butcher, the three white men acted as



humble porters, until their bones ached and their backs seemed permanently stooped. Muang was fireman—all day long the woodsmoke curled up under a rack of green sticks. And the lowly job of cutting the meat into strips, dipping it in salt water, and hanging it in the smoke and sun to cure, was given over to three pairs of soft, white hands.

Those hands were not white long. By noon they were cut and calloused and stinging from the brine. Long before the weary dark, Sonia had given out, Donna was going on her nerve, and only Mrs. Randall still hummed a tune over the toil.

But at nightfall there were nearly two hundred pounds of good jerky, the standby of the woodsman and the marching-ration of Indian fighters, stored insect-proof in expensive leathern hand-bags.

In the next few days, necessity enforced a division of labor nearly as old as the jungle. The three white men and the two natives furnished the bulk of the raw material needed in camp, while the women prepared it for use. On the latter depended not only a decent standard of living in this period of exile, but the vital cleanliness and healthy morale of the whole party.

Donna and her mother found a kind of exciting pleasure in the very rigor of the fight. They exercised the home-making instinct bred strong in their bones; and showed Yankee ingenuity for making the most of bad conditions. But although they never let her know, Sonia was only a little better than in the way. She found no self-expression in the grubby tasks, and therefore only drudgery. The lore she knew was of no use here. She had lost her kingdom.

One evening she spoke of this to Keith. They had walked down a new-cut trail to a level bank below camp, and were watching the shadows lean across the water. "I am only one more to eat," she told him desolately. "I wish I could be dead."

"Buck up, Sonia, this won't last always. Soon we'll be back in Shanghai and forget it ever happened."

"But it will not be the same. When you come into my arms, you will remember the bad lesson you learn now. 'Just love and sweet kisses and tight arms,' you will say, 'are not enough to make life.' You will ask what I do not have and cannot give. And maybe you will not even come to me."

"What do you mean, Sonia?" He touched her hand, and his breath almost failed. "I want you more than ever."

Her hand, only a little toil-worn, was still like a perfumed waxen flower against the green vines.

"You want me—for this one little minute," she mourned. "When we sit here alone, and there is nothing to fight, and no roots to pound with a rock, and the air is warm and close. But when we sit with the others, and they talk of tomorrow and what work there comes to do, and how this and that would be better, will you want me then? Then will you look at me so, with the eyes so hungry?"

She threw up her arms in a strange, nobly tragic gesture. "Oh, I hate tomorrow! I wish it never come. I love only today. I would live for today, for the very minute. I have teach you so—in many moments of happiness—but now you forget."

"Teach me again, Sonia." He held out his arms.

But she shook her head. “You would only forget again. Soon, you look again at Donna, with a look I never see. Your eyes will be proud and bright, not filled with smoke as now. They will smile with a joke on life I do not know, and a secret for tomorrow I do not share. Yes, she is winning you back, little Keith. I said she would, and it is turn out true.”

Touched, he reached for her hand, but she sprang up, and almost ran toward camp. But she paused, erect and proud, in the thickets back of the fire.

“You see, my own heart, she is the best girl of the two.... Yes, you do see it anyway, but at least I has found breath to tell you it is true.”

## XIV

**THE** jungle, Ling told Muang, when they lay side by side in their palm-leaf shelter, is a crafty antagonist and diabolically wicked. Often it will pretend to give ground, only to march at night. It will beguile poor humans into a sense of security, then steal upon them in an unguarded hour and dash their brains.

Its villainy takes many forms. Sometimes it is only the curling of a vine, fresh and good to see, but stealing out when a man turns his back and strangling the corn. Sometimes it puts poison in the springs. Often it sends clouds of mist that chill a sleeping child, likely a man-child at that, and make him cough and die, with all the cost of his raising gone to waste.

These white men from afar had fared well until now, but they had better take care, and make many prayers to their powerful gods. The jungle was only biding its time. Soon it would strike in an unexpected quarter.

Muang nodded a long time. There was cold in his blood and pain in his bones.

Ling was a good prophet: the attack was in a quarter which even Charley-*Chow*, who made medicine against the jungle, had never guessed. When he found Muang moaning on his blanket, early the next morning, he assumed it was merely a touch of common jungle fever such as he had expected to strike the camp at any hour. But when he came nearer, he noticed an odd, gray glaze on the sick man's face.

He noted that the features looked pinched, the eyes sunken and glowing. "What's the matter, young fellow?" Charley

asked, to give himself time to think.

“I—I am the sacrifice,” Muang said. “The rest will go back to the rice-pots and the stone-lamps and the drinking-horns, but you will roll me into a hole in the black ground.”

He spoke calmly—the ancient calm of the East.

Charley counted Muang’s pulse—found it very rapid—then thrust his clinical thermometer between the drawn lips. His own pulse quickened when he saw the silver column run nearly to the top of the glass.

Joe came strolling up beside him. “What’s up?”

Charley hastily put the thermometer in its case. “Can’t say yet. Muang seems to be under the weather. Just stand off till I take a look-see. I don’t suppose it’s anything catching, but let’s play safe.”

For a moment Charley stood in thought. His vacant eyes were fixed on the jungle—rustling in growth, flourishing, luxuriant in the morning light. “Green death,” he whispered.

It was true. The hot-house of the devil! All manner of pestilence spawned in these steaming gardens. And how ill-equipped he was to fight it! As a run-of-the-mill medical graduate, he knew practically nothing of Oriental maladies. Many of these were beyond all medical science. It was only too possible that his worst fears had come true—that some little-known, perhaps unnamed infection had invaded their camp and would sweep it clean. This, no less, might be the end of the adventure so light-heartedly begun.

Muang was a desperately sick man. His limp hands told that. And even if it were some common plague, how could a doctor cope with it in this lost jungle prison? There were no white beds, sanitary equipment, or microscope, and no

medicines except the meager store in his own satchel. There were no older doctors, trained and wise, to give advice and share his burden. The first cold chill of panic ran over him.

But slowly he stiffened. The job had to be done. Pitifully equipped though he was—a tyro in a science sadly inexact to start with—still the lives of his companions lay in his hand. Cool and alert, he turned back to his patient.

“Feel any pain?”

“Yes, lord. In the back, the loins, the head.”

“Sick to your stomach?”

“I have yielded up all I have eaten for many days.”

“Stick out your tongue.”

Muang’s throat was not inflamed, but on his breast was a light rash, scarcely visible. It might mean nothing, but it might mean—and Charley’s eyes grew narrow and bright.

A moment later he called Joe aside. They squatted down, out of the others’ hearing.

“What is it, black cholera?” Joe asked impatiently.

“Thank God, no! I’m reasonably certain of that. The rest I can only guess—let’s hope I’m guessing wrong. But off hand, I’d say the little chap has some damnably serious, contagious disease.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Nothing I can tell you. Just a hunch. He’s got a light rash, but that has no special meaning. It’s just the look of him that scares me. He makes me remember those fellows stretched out in the contagious ward of our hospital.”

Although Joe did not know it, this was the very essence of diagnosis. It was not science, but insight; a mysterious

conviction rising up from many little impressions too vague to put in words.

Joe shivered a little. "What guess would you make?"

"Not scarlet fever. His throat ought to show it. The same goes for diphtheria—and there's no sign of yellow fever. Head and back ache, and nausea, go with a lot of diseases, and this early in the game the rash on his chest doesn't add a thing to the cussed guess I've made—rather to the contrary, I think. And yet—and yet—I can't get it out of my head that he's got——"

"What?"

"No jungle malady, but smallpox—brought from the village."

"How soon will you know?"

"Not for a couple of days."

"But there are plenty of things—worse—than smallpox."

"Can't name 'em, right off hand. This would no doubt be the ghastly Asiatic form. Muang will survive, with any luck—he'll have resistance to his native plagues—but if any of us should get it——"

"What if we've been vaccinated? Wouldn't that protect us?"

"Yes, if done recently. Sit tight just a minute, and say nothing to the others."

Charley returned to his patient. "Muang, before you came with us, did you see any sick people?"

"Yes, lord. My wife's brother, newly come from Chieng-Khuang, was afflicted by his gods."

"How long ago was that?"

“I saw him last the day before we left, on the young moon.”

“About a week ago. Do you know the nature of the affliction?”

“It took the form of many little devils, very red, rising on his skin. His lids were swollen, so he was blind.”

“Were the red devils all over him?”

“Mostly on his face and his hands, some on his arms and his thighs. But around his middle, where he wore the sarong, there were none at all.”

Charley whistled thoughtfully and returned to his friend.

“Not much doubt now,” he said bitterly. “And I’ve got only enough vaccine——” He paused, and looked Joe in the eye. “By the way, when were you vaccinated the last time?”

Joe opened his mouth to answer, then a curious startled look flashed over his face. Thoughtfully he returned his friend’s glance. “How much vaccine did you say you had?”

“I didn’t say. I asked you a question. It’s your business to answer it, do you get that? This thing is up to me, not you, and I want the truth.”

Joe nodded, gravely. “I tried once about three years ago, but it didn’t take.”

“How long since you’ve had it take?”

“I was a kid in knee pants.”

“Well, stay away from that sick man. Today we’ll make a shelter for him, back of the camp. I’ve got only enough vaccine for one person, and a sheer fluke that I have any. It’s nearly the age limit for the stuff, and I don’t think I’ll try to split it between two people. Let’s go talk to the others.”



Their friends were all awake now, so Charley collected them in the main shack. They stood about him, hardly speaking. Something in his bearing told them a crisis had risen, but at once gave them heart to face it. The callow boy they had known had vanished from the scene.

“We’ve got sickness in camp,” he told them. There was no sign he was choosing his words with scientific care. “It’s just part of the game, here in the tropics; and I think this may be smallpox, brought from the village. It may not be far enough along to pass on, but I’m going to take precautions and do a little vaccinating.”

But he did not tell them that his vaccine was perilously limited. Although he had solid affection for them all, they were only human beings, with human limitations. Fear plays strange tricks on a man. It can raise him to a giant or shrivel him to a lying coward. Charley wished to contend with neither one, but only with good patients.

His questions brought out that only Donna and her mother were adequately protected against smallpox. Ling had never been vaccinated. Keith’s experience had been similar to Joe’s: no effective vaccination in his grown-up years. Sonia had a scar about eight years old: she had not tried since.

“On the whole, that’s pretty good,” Charley said. And only Joe saw the trouble in his eyes.

He went to look again at his patient, pretended to be busy with his medicines, and at last beckoned Joe to the river bank.

“Old man, it’s no fun, trying to be a doctor all of a sudden,” he confessed forlornly.

“We’re all behind you, Charley.”

“Yes, I guess I’ve sold ’em all—but I haven’t quite sold myself. Joe, let me think out loud a little. It’s not professional—but hang it all, we’re buddies. There’s four of you that need vaccination: I’ve got dope for one.”

Joe grinned. “Why not toss up a coin?”

“Joe, did that ever happen? Was it ten years ago, or a hundred? Where are our gray whiskers? I’m sure we’ve grown ’em by now.”

This foolish little interlude seemed to clear the air. “My vote would be——” Joe began.

“I don’t want your vote or your opinions. I want a yes-man, to brace me up. What about Sonia’s danger? Save women and children first—does that apply to smallpox? I’ll be hanged if I know.”

“I think it ought to,” Joe said gravely. For he was a man of old-fashioned sentiments.

“No, a patient should be sexless, as far as a doctor is concerned. Sonia’s eight-year-old vaccination will practically insure her a light attack of the disease, provided she can catch it at all. But even a light attack might ruin her chief asset, her greatest hope for a successful life.”

“Her beauty?”

“Yes. Isn’t that vile? And my boy, that isn’t half of it. Have you considered that Ling, the greatest danger of the contagion, is a native?”

The shadow of some dim disappointment fell in Joe’s eyes. “I wouldn’t hardly think—old man—you’d consider that. He’s a man and our servant and one of the outfit.”

“Go to blazes, will you? You and your blasted virtue. I’m not considering that Ling is a benighted heathen; only if he

catches the disease it probably won't kill him. It's Asiatic smallpox for us, but the home-town variety for him. And a few pock-marks on his face won't hurt his chances with the ladies."

"All right. What next?"

"You and Keith. The fact that you are my friend—I mention this now to prevent any more eruptions of virtue—doesn't matter a tin nickel. At least I'm going to kid myself so. But if you get sick the whole camp will bog down."

"We may be out of here by then. Anyhow we'd get along." Joe quickly changed the subject. "Keith has two girls in love with him. That's something."

"I can't imagine Sir William Osier writing it down on his charts. Donna would see it through, but what it would do to that Sonia gal if anything should happen to Keith——"

Joe looked solemn. "You are absolutely right."

"Oh, yeah?" Charley roused himself with an effort. "Let's you and me join in singing 'Poor Butterfly' and call it a day? No, by Jove, we're going to get down to business.... Keith spent most of yesterday cutting wood with Muang, who probably had fever all the time. Besides, his vitality is none too good."

"I've noticed he looks a little peaked."

"Too much sky-larking in Shanghai, too much worry since, and a little light amidships to start with. He'd be just pudding for a hungry bug. And if he gets one, he's likely enough a goner."

Joe set his jaw. "Give it to Keith."

"And if I do—and you get the Asiatic smallpox ... wreck that face even worse ... maybe check out—then what are you

going to think of your old pard?"

Joe could not answer lightly. The truth struck too deep. "I'll think, by God," he said, with young and unashamed idealism, "that he's a man and a doctor."

A curious sparkle came in Charley's eyes. "Will you get out of here, so I can't see your homely mug? I've got to do a little old-fashioned thinking, and if I don't think straight, the Lord have mercy on my soul."

Joe whistled himself away, and Charley attacked the last angle of the problem.

There was one candidate for smallpox whom he had not mentioned to his friend, and of whom Joe had failed to ask. Like millions of his countrymen, this man had received no successful vaccination since his childhood, although he had tried once or twice in his middle years of college. Since then his immunity had no doubt largely worn off, but the shoemaker's son goes barefoot, and in his easy-going way he had never again put needle to his arm.

He had taken a chance on the less deadly forms of smallpox encountered in America. At worst, he thought—if he had thought at all—he would escape with a mild attack; and so he had neglected a rudimentary precaution which as a doctor he would have forced on his patients. But he had had no illusions about the terribly virulent Asiatic smallpox. Knowing he would be an easy target, he had brought one individual tube of vaccine, intending to take it at his first convenience. And this was how the precious stuff came to be in camp at all.

The care of Muang would be wholly in his hands. He must wash him, change his clothes, feed him, even in those dreadful days when the pocks opened and the disease reached

to virulent height. And if he contracted it, the whole party would stand without defense, utterly at its mercy.

But soon Charley finished his deliberations. Calling Keith into the shack, he washed his arm, cleansed it with alcohol, and administered a small portion, perhaps a fourth, of the drop of vaccine in his tube. Considering the age of the culture, such a small quantity probably did not contain enough living germs for a “take,” but as Charley had enough left for his main purpose, the chance was worth running.

“Who do you want next?” Keith asked, as he started to go.

“You are the only victim, for the present.”

“But—but how about Sonia? She hasn’t been vaccinated for several years.”

Charley stiffened slightly. “She’s fairly well protected. And we don’t want any more sore arms than we can help, in this devilish climate.”

“But surely you won’t take a chance on Joe.” Keith spoke with a puzzled frown. “He needs it as bad as I do, maybe worse. At least his record was about the same.”

A very curious shadow—it looked like pain—flicked across Charley’s face. But he spoke in common tones. “Leave that to me, old sport. I have to do what I think best.”

Keith started to protest again, then turned and went out.

Charley withdrew into the shadows of the shack, and bared his own leg. With perfectly steady hands he disinfected and abraded the skin, and applied the remainder of his vaccine.

*Charles Hudson, M. D.*

## XV

*THE* next three days proved Charley's diagnosis beyond any shadow of doubt. From a scientific standpoint, Muang had a beautiful case of smallpox.

But Charley knew better than to show it off. The pocks crowded every inch of his patient's face, and puffed it almost out of human resemblance. His friends were not permitted to pass a deadline fifty feet from the pest-house, not only to prevent contagion, but to preserve camp morale.

Day and night, Charley grappled the disease. It was practically hand to hand. He had almost none of the weapons on which plague-fighters depend. For bandages and swabs he had to use spare garments from his friends' outfits. He had only a few antiseptics, and no way to get more. For his own aseptics, he relied mainly on steaming water and strong soft soap, made with wood ashes and animal fat over the camp-fire.

Meanwhile he was learning a resourcefulness that no medical college could teach, which would stand him in good stead all his life.

Not all the luck was bad. His own vaccination showed signs of taking perfectly. In a few days it would "bloom," then he could vaccinate Joe, Sonia, and Ling with the puss from the wound. These rough-and-ready therapeutics would end all danger of an epidemic. If the disease struck again at all, its attack would be light.

The minute drop of vaccine on Keith's arm was also starting to "take," perhaps a little more actively than the doctor desired. The surrounding skin was faintly swollen and

inflamed, his face looked sallow, and he seemed unaccountably nervous. Late in the afternoon, the third day of his vaccination, he felt so out-of-sorts that Charley prescribed bed.

Keith observed cheerfully. "But I want all the privileges and the good grub that goes with being sick," he said from under the netting, "and plenty of company."

"You're not sick. Don't think you can palm off anything on us. Just be glad you've got out of the evening chores."

When Donna questioned Charley, he quickly put her fears to rest. "He'll be all right in the morning. But we're in the tropics—there are a lot of bugs around here not in my doctor-books—and I want that arm kept quiet."

"How about company? He said he wanted it."

"Just the thing—and plenty of babying with it, but that's out of my line."

He looked quizzically from one girl to the other. But Donna had to help her mother prepare the evening meal, so the grateful task fell to her rival. Charley went to look after Muang; Sonia crouched by Keith's bed.

But the medicine she gave him was stronger than Charley had prescribed.

"Little one, will it be harm for you to talk?" she whispered, passionately.

"Of course not. I may get up to eat supper."

"I will pray for you, to my Lady of Kazan, to soon be well."

"Don't go to too much trouble for me, Sonia. I'm not worth it." Keith's moment of cheer had passed, and he spoke wearily.

“Trouble—for my heart’s heart? Keith, if you did die, I also. There would be no sun, no stars.”

“I’ve no idea of dying. What put such an idea into your head?”

But he had not answered her straight. Her heart made a frantic bound.

“Did you hear me tell I would die too?”

“Yes, but you wouldn’t, Sonia. You’d get over it, as you’ve no doubt got over things before.”

“You does not know. The old Sonia, who drank love like a cup of wine, is dead already. I do not know what killed her. Maybe you—maybe the jungle. And the new Sonia, she is so big a fool. She can no longer play a game, sometime like ice, sometime like fire. She cannot think of her own gladness, only of yours.”

Then, very softly: “And she do not even know enough to stay the secret of her love. She is a baby, not a woman, who must tell and be told.”

“Then tell me, Sonia. I want to hear it.”

“It is not any more just your arms and kisses, and your smile,” she went on sadly. “It is every hair that must turn gray some long time, it is every line to come in the face, and the feet that will grow tired.” She drew his hand from under the netting and pressed it to her breast.

“Bless your sweet heart.” He gave her a tender smile. “But don’t worry about me any more. Now better go and get some supper.”

Sonia’s eyes turned wildly bright “You—want me—to go \_\_\_\_\_”



“Of course not.” Color welled into his pale face. “I love having you here—if just to look at you—but I’m thinking of your own good.”

“There is only one food I need—for you to tell me, too. Quickly, little one.... For I is starving——”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Do you not know? Just say, ‘I love you, Sonia.’ Say quickly, ‘it is most wicked for you to doubt it.’ Be very mad to me, and say, ‘it is only your silly fear that make you think I is slipping away from your arms, only your foolish heart.’ Tell me soon, Keith, if it is true. I cannot wait any more.”

He looked at her a long time. The golden flame of her beauty had not even dimmed; it seemed to light and glorify the rude shelter. He saw the gold of her hair, the sheen of her silken flesh, her long eyes of blue heaven. But the old, mad hunger would not waken. The words she craved would not form on his lips.

“You is very still,” she breathed at last.

“I’m trying to make my head work. There’s a cloud on it I can’t shake off.”

“You does not need the head, only the heart. And do not be afraid to say truth, little Keith. It is better that everything be plain at last. No, I will not die.” She drew her hands away. “Do not be afraid. I will smile, and be most gay, and eat the quinine of the heart and get well.”

“Sonia, let’s not decide anything tonight. I’m in a daze. We both want the truth, but right now I can’t find it. We mustn’t —make—a mistake——”

Her eyes began to draw fire from the dying sunset glowing through the door. But before she could speak, a shadow

crossed the threshold, and Charley strolled into the shack. Keith relaxed with a sigh.

“Fit as a fiddle,” the doctor reported, after a quick survey. “Now Sonia, run out and get your supper.”

“I cannot eat. I does stay here.”

“Doctor’s orders. We don’t want any more sick ones. Now scam.”

Drawn and white, Sonia took her stool at the supper-table. She did not seem to see the faces about her, or the food on her plate. Only when Donna leaned toward her and pressed her hand, did her trance lift.

“You is very sweet.”

“We’ve got something sweet for supper. Look, Sonia—wild honey.”

“It must be poison.”

Donna looked startled. “I don’t understand——”

“Does not it come from out there?” She pointed to the jungle, mustering its forces in the twilight.

Joe leaned over and slipped a bamboo fork into her hand. “Eat, Sonia,” he told her gently.

Sonia’s gaze kept wandering beyond the camp-fire to Keith’s lodge, but he did not call her there. He did not ask for her, to beg forgiveness for his momentary doubts and heartless silence. Presently she saw Charley come strolling through the firelight, his shadow jumping first behind him, then before. She pretended to be busy with her food, lest he would hear the little whimperings of her heart.

“How is he?” Donna asked. And how could she speak so calmly!

“A little nervous—and I don’t know why. But he’ll be okeh in the morning.”

Sonia started to spring up. “If he is nervous, he is not like to stay alone——”

“He said he wanted to see Donna, just a moment.” Charley made a great point of reaching for his plate. “Donna, would you mind running along to see what’s on his mind?”

Joe and Mrs. Randall took endless pains with their food. Sonia, very white, gazed into the dark. Donna, very red, stared at her fork, then spoke in carefully casual tones.

“He’s a terrible baby. Sonia, he didn’t know you could gobble your supper so fast. If you’re through, would you like to go and tuck him in for the night? I’ve got dishes to scrape.”

“He ask—for you.”

“I know what he wants. To talk over something we’d planned for tomorrow. But I’ll humor the child.”

Leisurely she got up and strolled across the firelight. Sonia made haste to go on with her meal.

Donna found Keith sitting up in the door of the shack. He was only a dim shape, but occasionally a fire-beam, bolder than its fellows, flickered on his face, and showed it pale and set.

“Sit beside me, Donna,” he murmured, deeply moved. “I have something to tell you.”

She crouched down, wondering not at him but at her own stifled heart. But it ought to be leaping high! Her delicate perceptions had already promised her ... warned her, perhaps ... that this would be one of the memorable scenes of her life.

“Are you—sure—this—is the right time?” she asked.

She herself did not quite know what she meant. He could take it that perhaps he should not try to talk, nervous as he was. But instead he took the secret meaning of her subconscious mind.

“It’s not the right time. I never do things the right time. If I could have waited an hour or two, it would have been better, but I couldn’t wait twenty minutes. Why it’s so beastly unfitting just now, I can’t tell you—it’s a talk I’ve just had with Sonia—but you can take it from me I feel like a cursed cad.”

“Keith—I’m afraid. I’m going back to the others.”

“Wait. I tell you I’m not to blame. Only the appearances are bad. I’m a victim of fate, if there is such a thing.”

“Anyway, let’s put it off—the thing you want to tell me.”

“I can’t. It came upon me like a flash of lightning, while I was lying there in the dark. Something had happened to make me realize what it must mean to people to lose some one they truly love. And then I remembered that for weeks I’d been in danger of losing you. I’d been taking risks that made my hair stand up to think of. And then—even though it is the worst possible time, for everybody—I had to call and ask you. I couldn’t wait, Donna, it was a physical impossibility. I had to be reassured that—everything—is still—all right.”

She did not answer, but sat watching the fire-flicker dance in and dance away.

“Why don’t you tell me?” he whispered at last. “Good God, what a ghastly thing silence can be! I never knew before, I never dreamed.” Then, in a dark whisper: “Maybe it’s retribution.”

“What do you want me to say? Of course everything’s all right.”

“Evasions. White lies. How appalling they are! Donna, you know what I want. The words I once took so lightly, and thought were so easy to win. Tell me you love me, that’s all. I haven’t lost you. You’re still mine.”

But even as he spoke, the ghost of Sonia’s voice filled the corners of the silence. Its memory stole into the nooks and crannies of the scene, and he could not drive it out. In spite of himself, he seemed to take the words straight from her phantom lips.

Donna glanced at him quickly out of the corner of her eyes. His bright hair was a target for the far-flung spears of firelight and it glimmered in the shadows. All that was fine and young and appealing in his nature stood out from the dimness of his face, a swift and sure delineation by the magic pencil of the distant flame; and his true need of her, at last, cried to her heart in his voice. But it was her head, not her heart, that reeled and grew faint.

“You’re not yourself, Keith,” she gasped, buffeting the deep, dark waters. “We can’t settle anything now.”

The soul of the man writhed. She was giving him back almost the same words he had given Sonia, the same excuse. But he smiled like a brave man smiles in the face of his fate.

“Come across, Donna,” he said gently.

“Oh, what is it?” She was twisting her hands together.

“It’s perfectly simple. A few words can settle it one way or another. We may as well have the facts, good or bad—now as well as later. Do you still love me?”

She thought she saw an island in this troubled sea, and she leaped for it.

“You haven’t the right to ask that,” she said. “It was your love that needed testing—you, not me, were the one on trial.”

But the island of refuge proved only a wave-swept reef.

“I’ve been tried in the fire,” he told her in hushed tones. “Now I want a chance to prove myself to you. Take back my ring! You needn’t wear it till you’re ready, but take it back. You’ll never regret it. I love you alone. I’ll give you my whole life—forsaking—all—others——”

But now she had seized a life-line. It had been thrown out weeks before, a safeguard against just such a storm as was breaking over her now. Strong hands, wise head, understanding heart: it was not the first time she had cause to bless them.

“Not now, Keith. Our engagement is still on trial. You remember what we all promised mother, that day on the ship; not to settle anything till we were home again.”

And before Keith could answer, some one slim and tall moved from the darkness beside the shack and stood with a nimbus of firelight about her lifted head.

“Sonia?” Keith gasped.

“Yes, it is Sonia.” Her voice was clear and low.

“Do you want to tell us something?” Donna asked gently. Both she and Keith rose.

“Just one thing. I has been to the river. I did go there, in the dark, so those others could not see my face. I could not wish for any one to see my face.”

“I understand,” Donna said gravely.

“There is two trails from the river to the camp. I knew I must go the short one, because the other trail, it pass behind this hut, and I might hear you talk. I might see you in each others’ arms. But I did not go the short one. I try, and cannot. My feet—and my jealous heart—walked me here.”

“That’s all right, Sonia,” Keith told her.

“I decide I will go quickly, and not stop to see or hear. But I could not go quick enough. My feet, they drag on the ground, and I hear a little anyway.”

“You don’t have to tell us that, you know, unless you want to,” Donna broke in, with a rush of pity.

“I hear him say that he love only you,” Sonia went on, with a strange, moving calm. “His voice ring in the dark. But I am glad now, for him, that I has heard. It has save him the trouble to tell me—for even now it would be a great trouble, when he like me as he do, and pity me. And so is why I confess the shame of listening, to make it easier for him.”

Donna held out her arms to Sonia, then let them fall. “But nothing is settled yet,” she pleaded. “Nothing can be settled, till we go home——”

“It is you who say so, not Keith. It is settle with him that he love only you, and so it is over for me. I do want him to be happy. That is not just words, but the truth of Sonia’s heart.... And—we will not speak of it any more.”

## XVI

**CONFUSED** by the lightning changes of the days—plagued by doubts and fears—Donna tossed in her bed. Twice she heard Charley rise to see his patients. She saw the fire burn down and out, the last glowing of the last coal fade and cease, and the inviolate dark repossess the camp. Through her raised net, she watched the furthest, little star come out and twinkle.

She heard the wild orchestra of the night tune up—the resonant throb as of a 'cello close at hand, a clear flute note in the distance, a blast as of a trumpet far away—sporadic sounds that slowly began to have intermeaning and at last to harmonize. The harp of the wind came in; the muffled drums of the river kept time and filled the rests in the savage tune. For one brief moment—at the edge of sleep—she heard the full chorus of the jungle, lifted to God who made it, as He made all things good and evil to try the soul of man.

In the morning the light broke calm and sweet. She drifted blissfully into waking. But when her eyes opened, and she tried to see and catch in her hand the happiness her dreams had whispered, it stole away into the misty distance behind the purple hills.

At breakfast, Charley brought what appeared to be good news of his patients. “Everything’s rosy, even poor Muang’s face. He’d be ready to move—if there were any place to move him—in a few more days. Keith’s vaccination is taking hard; but he seems a little depressed, and I think I’ll let him get up.”

Her worries at rest, Donna drew her mother aside. With the morning washing in their arms, they made for the river. And



never had they felt so close or talked so clearly or understood so well, as while they soaked the clothes, and pounded them with a stone.

“It’s too deep for me,” Donna said, when she had told her mother of last night’s events. “Do you think Keith meant what he said?”

“Certainly he did.” Sturdily Mrs. Randall washed Joe’s extra shirt.

“Do you suppose he’s ready to give up Sonia?”

“Yes, for your sake. It won’t be easy on him—he’s tasted her beauty and it’s sweet—but he’ll go through with it like a man.”

Donna’s quick hands grew still. “Doesn’t that reflect on his love for me?”

“In story-books, yes. In life, no. The human appetite for love is prodigious. The man who can see no woman but his own is dangerous—likely to explode all over the place. But Keith has learned his lesson. A little of his selfishness has been knocked out of him. He knows he can’t have Sonia and you too, and he’s chosen you.”

Donna studied her mother’s face. “You don’t seem one bit surprised.”

“No, I saw it coming. And of course Sonia did too.”

“Why shouldn’t I take back his ring?”

“Why not?” Mrs. Randall looked ominously at a stubborn spot of dirt on the shirt she was washing.

“You—you want me to?”

“It’s none of my business. I just said, in all innocence, ‘why not?’ He’s madly in love with you, properly chastened,

and he'll make a good husband. My experiment has been a huge success."

"But what—what if——"

"What if you don't want to? Ah! Now we're getting to it. There's the rub." And she rubbed the dirty spot hard.

"Oh, you're dreadful. I didn't mean—exactly——"

"Sorry if I misunderstood. You've fought for your man like a true sport, and now you've got him. I'm glad I encouraged you to fight—even on the chance it might turn out pretty hard on him in the end—otherwise you'd be nursing a broken heart for goodness knows how long."

"Don't talk as if it's all settled." Just then Donna turned with flaming cheeks. "And what do you mean, 'it might turn out hard on him in the end.' That's just beginning to sink in."

"Because I had an idea that when you did get him hooked and landed, you might want to throw him back. And knowing men, I didn't think he'd like it. But since you don't—since you are perfectly satisfied with him and have made up your mind to keep him—why, it's turned out all right after all." Mrs. Randall spread out Joe's shirt. "He must have spilled honey on it, but it's clean at last."

Donna started to speak, then crept up and got in the hollow of her mother's arm. "Don't show off any more, mother, but help me out."

Mrs. Randall smiled and kissed her. "Good. Now let's have the truth."

"Maybe it's on Sonia's account—maybe for some other reason—but—but I hemmed and hawed dreadfully to Keith last night."

"So you didn't jump at the chance, eh?"

“No, and I feel like a crook.”

“You needn’t You’ve played the game square. I don’t blame you for pitying Sonia—I don’t just see how she’ll come out—but she is outside your problem. Don’t even pretend to yourself that she is now in any way the barrier between you and Keith. So that brings us to ‘some other reason.’ And we both know what that reason is.”

“Joe?”

“You bet your life.”

Donna’s dark eyes began to shine. “How can I lose Joe?”

“Well, you might manage to, somehow. He keeps a map handy, and has a nose like a dog, but if you make him turn his back, and then you run like blazes——”

Donna’s laugh rippled over the water, then stopped short. “Be serious, mother.”

“All right, sweet. How can you bear to lose Joe?”

“I just can’t. It makes me heartsick to think of it.”

“So now it’s you, not Keith, who must choose between two lovers.” Mrs. Randall dreamed off across the river. “Things have taken a strange turn, haven’t they, Donna? Joe was out of it at first. He wanted you, but you wanted Keith—and Keith wanted Sonia. And now look. It’s Sonia who’s left out now. She still wants Keith—but Keith wants you—and you—want Joe.”

Donna clasped her hands. “Mother, do you think I do?” she whispered.

“Donna, don’t you *know* you do?”

“But how can I have him? Think what it means! I’ve taken Keith away from the girl who loves him. Can I throw him over now? It’s the most heartless thing I ever heard of.”

Mrs. Randall snatched up the nearest dirty garment and vented her surplus emotions upon it. "I'm not a bit sure but it serves him right. At least it will teach him to take a good thing when he can get it. But that's not the point. You must think of your life's happiness and success. I can't guard it much longer—you are grown up and must fight for it yourself."

Mrs. Randall's fine eyes lighted. "If you love Joe," she went on, "even half as much as he loves you—take him! And don't let anybody or anything stand in the way."

But it was easy enough to say so! There was a sudden prophetic pain in Donna's heart. For all her wisdom, Mrs. Randall did not know the ancient secret of the East—that Kismet rules still, above all the gods that come and go. No soul was wholly master of its fate. Even now, something—some one—might rise inexorably to bar her path to happiness.

## XVII

*At* that very moment, Charley was rolling up Keith's sleeves for another look at his arm. He was whistling cheerfully: it was a cool, fine morning, prophetic of good reports. Muang, his main problem, had shown a remarkable resistance to the attack of smallpox, and would soon be out of danger. Keith looked considerably better since sun-up; his eyes, always bright, fairly shone in the shadowy hut; and he was inclined to be talkative. Probably he had a good "take" from the vaccine, and all was well.

When Charley glanced at the bared arm, he continued to whistle, but the notes no longer made a tune. For a considerable area about the abrasion, the skin had turned a fiery red, and the swelling he had noticed two hours before had not receded, but slightly increased. And then for one sharp instant—one brief interlude charged with such suspense that Keith felt it and turned his head—the whistling stopped altogether.

In the center of the sore was a tiny black dot, hardly larger than the point of a pin.

Charley glanced once at his patient's face, then seemed to gaze at something through the doorway. Actually the vista there was only a green blur. All he saw was a black speck, dancing before his eyes.

Although he had a realistic type of mind, for long seconds he tried to believe that some morbid imagination had tricked him. Anyway, it was only a speck of dust that had got into the wound. But he did not desire to look again to make sure. At last he had to force his eyes, first to Keith's face, then to the

inflamed arm, finally focusing on that tiny black mark, like a final period in India ink by the pen of Fate.

Yes, there it was. Not a speck of dust, but a dot of death.

“What’s the matter?” Keith demanded.

Charley drew a deep breath. “Nothing special,” he lied calmly.

“Why are you looking that way at my arm?”

“I was seeing how your vaccination was progressing. Feel much pain?”

“Not much. Fact is my arm feels a little numb.”

Charley laid his hand on Keith’s forehead. It was dry and warm. “Guess you’ve got a little fever. That’s not uncommon, with a good active ‘take.’ Let’s see.”

He put his thermometer between Keith’s lips. Meanwhile he counted his pulse.

“Well, what about it?” Keith demanded, when Charley held the glass to the light.

“Just about what I expected. Keith, you must drink a lot of water—quarts of it—and sweat it out. I’ll get some for you now.”

Charley stood over him till his patient drank his fill, then walked down to the river. He deliberately avoided his friends: a gregarious soul, at last he knew the bitter need of a few moments’ solitude. Not that he must get alone and think. Thinking was worse than useless: he could only wait. But while he waited, he could not suffer his companions to see the terror of helplessness pinch his face and distend the pupils of his eyes.

Temperature—one hundred and a fifth. That meant nothing. Pulse—one hundred and ten. Not at all alarming. If

only he had not seen that black dot——

Again and again he glanced at his watch, but even the second hand hardly stirred. He had intended to wait half an hour, but after twenty crawling minutes he turned and almost ran to Keith's shack.

At his first glance at the sick man's face, he paused in his stride, and a visible change came over him. Until now, he had been toying with self-deception. Instead of challenging the truth, he had been seeking means of escape—excuses, lies, false hopes. But now the plain sight of the enemy steadied his reeling head and aroused his fighting heart. His glance grew sharp; he stepped so briskly to the bedside that the confused, animal terror in Keith's eyes changed to new hope and childish trust.

That dumb terror was only one of several signs that galvanized Charley into action and nerved him for what must be one of the great crises of his medical career. In the last twenty minutes, all nature's alarms were sounded. Keith's face had changed like that of an actor's in a dual rôle, in some grotesque picture-play. It had been fresh, youthful, of good color; now it was haggard, drawn, and ashy-gray save for a bright spot of red in each cheek. His eyes glittered with fever. The infected area of his arm was increasingly swollen and inflamed, and the black dot was a dot no more, but a spot as big as the end of a pencil.

“Charley, I feel queer,” Keith told him. “What's the matter with me? I keep floating off——”

“You've got a touch of fever from your arm.” He did not say that the glowing coal had leaped to wildfire in the past twenty minutes.

“Can't you give me any medicine?”

This wail was prophetic of many tragedies to come. If Charley lived and practised his profession, he would hear it ten thousand times. And how often the answer would be no, or else a white lie of colored syrups! Bitterly he cursed the whole business. To parade as a healer—to hear the hopeful call of the sick and the suffering—and then not know how to lift a finger to help: that was a doctor’s life!

But to Keith he spoke in clear, confident tones. “You don’t need any medicine, except water. I’ll fix a salt compress for your arm.”

He left to notify the camp of the impending siege. Even before he spoke, Donna leaped to her feet, staring; and Sonia threw her hand to her breast.

“What’s up?” Joe demanded, when the others could not speak.

“Keith’s sick. Infection has got into his arm. Boil plenty of water, and boil and wash all the spare rags you can find.”

Sonia, dead-white, turned to her rival. “Do you not hear? Why not you go to him quickly?”

“No one’s going to him, except to nurse him,” Charley said. “I want him to rest. Sonia, you can look in a moment at the door, but don’t speak.”

Sonia shook her head. Her eyes turned coldly bright. “It is not me that he need now.”

No, it was not Sonia—so Donna’s thoughts rushed—that Keith needed now. For an instant everything went black before her eyes.

“Then, Donna, you go in and stand by till I get organized.” Charley’s voice came out of the gray distance. “Don’t let him



talk—if he begins to get excited, move out—but pour water down him, all you can make him take.”

She hurried to Keith’s shack. He was lying on his side, his gaze fixed on the open door, but at first he did not seem to recognize her. Already the figments of delirium had begun to jump and run in the corners of the room: a child’s terror was on his gray, drawn face. As she stared, she remembered the premonition of disaster that had come to her by the river, and now she could begin to guess its meaning.

The sight of his bright hair, tossed by his restless hands, fairly stabbed her heart. He needed her—and what would be her answer?

Slowly the fear went out of his eyes; their distended pupils began to contract as they focused on her face; their first glimmer of recognition gave way to a flooding light of happiness and hope that would haunt her always.

“Donna?”

“Yes, it’s Donna.”

“Don’t leave me. I love you. I love you.”

“You mustn’t talk, or Charley will make me go. You must drink some water, then lie quiet.”

“But sit close to me.... I’m afraid when you’re out of my sight.... I hear drums. I think it’s savages, dancing in the jungle....”

But the drums were only Keith’s heart-throbs in his ears.

Charley came in, and took Keith’s temperature. He did not show the glass to Donna, but she saw him turn pale. And when he looked at Keith’s arm and applied a salt compress, she read in his face the true measure of the crisis.

The spot of dead flesh was spreading with appalling rapidity. It was now as big as the doctor's thumbnail.

And now Charley's furtive terror began to spread to the others. It was in the air, in the overtones of a carefully calculated speech, in the shadow behind a smile. The whole camp was stricken.

Only four days before they had met the smallpox scare with high hearts. But that was one of the familiar maladies to which flesh was heir, and man passed it from hand to hand. Its attack on Muang had seemed a little remote from their intimate lives: they had not laid eyes on him for four days and Charley had borne the brunt of the battle alone. But Keith's trouble was a blow of the Unseen. It was no mere reaction to the vaccine, but a separate infection of the invisible death that spawned in the jungle. And Keith was no brown-skinned alien, but one of their very own.

They were stunned—but a little at a time they began to understand. Grim truths half-veiled by their young hope and optimism they could now read as they ran—the depth of their jungle prison, the malice and the might of the dark powers, the fragility of the Cord and the Bowl of very life.

The crisis proved a true and searching light into every comrade's heart and soul. Joe's kind nature was profoundly touched; the days when he had been so jealous and resentful of his rival seemed to belong to another existence. He came in to offer awkward condolences, but succeeded only in spilling the bamboo cup of water by the bed and entangling his feet in the mosquito netting until Charley ordered him outside. Donna thrust her terror and pity into the back of her heart, where they would not cloud her mind or slow her

hands, and simply made herself useful. Still and white and glassy-eyed, Sonia crouched by the river and said no word.

By noon the black spot on Keith's arm could no longer be concealed. It was an inch in diameter and spreading every hour. He was in the throes of delirium, babbling of childhood terrors, vanished faces, and lost joys. Occasionally he spoke of Sonia, but Donna's name returned quickly to his lips. He plead for her forgiveness and begged her love.

By mid-afternoon the inflamed area had spread to Keith's shoulder. His pulse was a hundred and thirty—his fever a hundred and five and still rising. The black spot was the size of a half-dollar. And now Charley watched it as a condemned man might watch the hand of a clock. If it spread much more he must act—one final desperate stroke for Keith's life.

With the whispering dark came the crisis. The death-mark could hardly be covered with a silver dollar, and had reached the limit that Charley had set.

Grim and white, he called Joe aside. "I suppose you know what that black spot means?"

"Yes. Mrs. Randall told me. Gangrene."

"Get ready to see me through the hardest job I hope I'll ever have to do."

"*Amputation?*"

"Yes."

"Good God, man, you can't do it!"

"I've got to. The spot is already bigger than most doctors would permit. It's either that or his life."

"But how can you amputate with no table, no nurse? He'll die anyway, sure."

“Not sure.” Charley spoke with dreadful calm. “I’ve got a finger-saw in my satchel—I’ll have to make it do. I’ve got chloroform, and you’ll have to help me administer it.”

Joe could not speak, but he tried to nod his head.

“The shock may kill him,” Charley went on. “The poison may be in his blood stream. But it’s the only chance he’s got.”

“I’m behind you, Charley—for whatever that counts.”

“It counts like God Almighty.”

“Do we start—right now?”

“In the next hour. We must take time for every precaution, and try to soften the shock to Keith. I’ll call you when I need you.”

Charley gave him a little smile, and returned to his patient. He looked at the still-spreading gangrene, then fastened his eyes on Keith’s.

“Old man?”

Something in his tone called the sick man from his far wanderings. “Yes, Charley.”

“I’ve got bad news for you.”

“I know what it is. I’m going to die. Well, between you and me and the tent-post, I don’t give one whoop in hell.”

“No, you’re not going to die if I can save you. But you’ve got to help me—and face the hardest blow of your life.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re going to cut off my arm?” Keith’s tone, though no more than a husky whisper, held strangely steady. “You can go straight to the devil.”

“May be—but I’m going to cut off your arm, just the same.” Charley’s sharpened instincts made him adopt an

almost casual tone. “It’s your only chance.”

“I don’t want it. I can’t get anywhere with two arms, let alone with one.” His voice broke in a low, hysterical laugh, weird in the silence. “Donna doesn’t half want me as I am: I’d have a sweet chance with a stump. No, I’d rather die.”

“You may die anyhow. It’s only a gamble at best. But I’m going to try it, in less than an hour. Make up your mind to that, Keith. Plenty of good men get along with one arm, and you can too.”

Keith’s eyes filled with a maniacal shine. “I’ll fight you to my last breath.”

“It won’t do you any good, only harm.” Then, almost pleading: “Don’t make trouble, Keith, and hurt your chances for coming out alive. God knows it’s tough luck——”

“I may not have much fight left in me, but you’ll get all there is,” Keith went on in the same fateful whisper. “And I’m not going off my head again, or take any knock-out drops. I’ll lie here and be ready for you.”

“Is there any one you’d like to see, before you go under the chloroform?”

“You won’t need any chloroform. I told you what I’ll do, and I mean it.... You might send Donna in, if she wants to come.”

Charley found the girl filling the bamboo cups with fresh boiled water. It was almost as hard to tell her as Keith himself.

“How’s your nerve, Donna?”

“I can stand it, whatever it is. Is Keith dying?”

“Not as bad as that, but bad enough.... I’ve got to cut off his arm.”

She recoiled a little, then stood steady. “Are you—absolutely sure?” Her voice broke, and she went on in faltering tones. “Have you considered everything—every other chance?”

“Every one—a thousand times.”

“You know—some men would be happier dead than maimed. Keith is not like you and Joe—such a blow might break his spirit. You must do it only as the last extremity \_\_\_\_\_”

“It *is* the last extremity. I’ve considered the personal equation, too—and must go ahead. It’s a doctor’s business to save life.”

She nodded hopelessly. “Are you going to do it—*tonight?*”

Charley glanced at his watch. “I can start in half an hour.”

“Oh, no.” Her wide eyes filled with tears.

“Yes, and you must help me. Can you do it?” And he looked her in the face.

At first she shrank from his steadfast gaze, then turned and met it straight. “What you tell me to do—*I will.*”

“That’s the girl. Your mother and Joe will help me with the actual job, but you’ve got to get Keith’s consent.”

“Oh, you don’t know what you’re asking!”

“Yes, I do. I wouldn’t ask it, if it weren’t life and death. He says he’s going to fight us. If we have to use force to get him under, the added shock will probably kill him: it’s touch-and-go at best. You must persuade him to submit.”

“But what can I tell him?” Her hand crept to her prophetic heart. “You don’t understand——”

“I’ll leave that to you, Donna. He’s very depressed—a big factor in the rapid spread of the infection—and you must

buck him up. If you love him, tell him so. And anything else you can.”

She nodded dully, and crept toward Keith’s shack.

His glittering eyes were fixed on the entrance. As her shadow crossed the threshold, he gave a snarl of fury and surged up as though to fight. Then he saw her face and sank back with a moan.

“Oh, Donna,” he whispered hoarsely. “Do you know what they’re trying to do to me?”

“Yes, but it’s to save your life.” She ran to him and took his hand. “You mustn’t fight them, Keith.”

“Are—are you with them too?” His look was of infinite sad reproach.

“For your own good. Don’t you understand? Charley knows what he’s doing, and you must help, not hinder him.”

“But you know I’d rather die than be maimed.”

“Don’t say that, Keith. It’s unworthy of you. Other men have stood it, and gone on to win, and you can too. Your life is too fine to throw away——”

“My life is a joke. Win, you say! What can I win that I want? Haven’t I lost you already?”

“Oh, not yet, Keith.”

“Even as a whole man I couldn’t hold your love. What could part of a man do?”

A giant’s strength surged through her. “Try and see.”

He looked her in the eyes. In his own was a terrible sanity, keen as the hearing of the blind, sharp as the cunning of the drunken.

“You tell me to go ahead,” he breathed. “You say that life will still be worth living. Can you prove it?”

“What do you mean, Keith?”

“Will it make any difference to you? Can you love a maimed man? If I let Charley go ahead, will you marry me just the same?”

“You say—‘just the same.’ You know I hadn’t agreed—yet—to take back your ring.”

“I thought so!” He smiled bitterly. “You see, Donna, it’s easy enough to talk——”

“Wait!” Her face was still white, but that whiteness shone in shadows. “If I will promise to marry you—and love you always—and stand by you to the end—will you let Charley go ahead with the operation?”

“Yes, and watch him with a smile.”

“Give me five minutes, Keith. Then I’ll bring you my answer.”

She turned and ran straight to Joe. “Come with me,” she murmured. “I have something to tell you.”

He was building four fires in a square, to make light for Charley’s knife, but the urgency in her voice made him turn over the job to Ling and follow her into the shadows.

“You know the contract we made, before we left Shanghai?” she began in low tones.

“Yes.” And he tried to read her face in the moonlight.

“I’ve got to break it—for Keith’s sake.”

“If you know you must.”

“There’s no other way. But I wanted to tell you, anyhow. You’re the only one still concerned—Sonia withdrew last



night.”

“You’re sure—you’re not making a mistake? Absolutely certain? Think hard, Donna!”

“I tell you—there’s no other way.”

“I’m pleading not only for myself, but for you.” Joe went on. “You have only one life, you know, and mustn’t throw it away on an impulse of pity. Do you love Keith?”

“Don’t ask me that. It scares me. Of course I love him—I came clear out here to marry him. Let it go at that.”

“Can you be happy with him?”

“Perfectly happy, I’m sure.”

“Donna!” He took both her hands in a rough grip, and made her look into his eyes. “Tell me the straight of it. You haven’t just made up your mind you love him. His trouble has wakened every drop of tenderness in your heart, but you’ve got too much sense to let it decide the great question of your life. Something has forced your hand. What is it?”

“Don’t ask me anything more, Joe. It’s time you went to help Charley.”

“No, he’ll call me when he’s ready.... I’m beginning to see.... Keith’s about to lose his arm: to console him you’re going to promise to marry him. But it’s not your proposition—unless you’ve been swept off your feet—so it must be his.”

“He’s not himself. And if I don’t promise, he’ll fight to exhaustion against the chloroform, and probably die.”

Still Joe would not surrender her. “Did Charley tell you so?”

“He told me to get his consent—and I mean to do it.”

“But he didn’t expect you to go so far. He’d veto that scheme mighty quick. Keith’s a man and should be treated so.

It's his arm and his life. If he wants to commit suicide by fighting the operation, it isn't your business to buy him off."

"I tell you, he isn't himself, or he'd never ask me to do it. When it's all over I expect him to offer to let me off. But I'm not going to be let off. I'm going to marry him—and learn to return his love—and be the arm he has lost."

Joe recoiled. He was white as the summer moon. "You say —'learn to return his love.' You don't have to learn that, Donna. You love him now, or you'd never do this. I've been hoping in vain."

"And I"—and Donna's eyes gleamed with tears—"have been hoping—in vain."

"Donna! Tell me what you mean!" He groped for her again, with trembling, awkward hands. "Great God, I don't understand——"

"I doubt if you'll ever understand. I can only tell you I have to obey my heart. It may make no sense, but it's more important than sense—or life, or the happiness of you and me. I only know that I fought for his love and won it, and for that I've got to take the responsibility. If this hadn't happened, you and I might have had each other—but I can't forsake him in his dark hour. I've got to see him through."

Joe looked at her in white awe and wonder. "*You play the game, Donna,*" he breathed at last.

"I don't want any praise. There was simply no other way."

"It's our fate, I guess. If you were less than you are, I'd never have loved you so. At least I've had the heaven of loving you——"

"Don't say any more." Her voice broke in a sob. "I can't bear it."

“Then I’ll just say—good-by.”

“Yes, it seems to be good-by.”

“May I take you in my arms?”

“Please do, Joe.”

For a long moment they clung together. Their kiss called down the stars in reach of their hands. And then they heard Charley calling them to duty.

## XVIII

*EVERYTHING* was ready for the operation. It would take place in the open ground wrested from the jungle. Four bright fires made a brilliantly-lighted square, in the center of which stood the table from the mess-shack.

All possible aseptic precautions had been taken. The table still steamed from the boiling water with which Ling had scrubbed it. Mrs. Randall, her hands and wrists pink and stinging, stood by as chief nurse. Wearing rubber gloves from his satchel, in a shirt newly boiled and still wet—his face utterly calm save for his brilliant eyes—the surgeon waited his patient.

“Just a minute, Joe,” Donna said coolly. And with light, unflinching feet she ran ahead of him into the sick-room.

Keith gave her a dim smile. “I was afraid you’d gone for good.”

“No—and I’ve come to stay.”

“*Does that mean——*”

“It means that as soon as this operation is over, I’ll take back your ring.”

“Maybe Charley’s decided not to operate. Then I might lose you still. Maybe I’ll not live through it, and you’ll be glad——”

“Hush, Keith! Of course you’ll live through it—and I’ll pray for you. And Charley’s all ready to begin.”

“It’s worth an arm, to win you.” Something of Keith’s old charm lighted his drawn face. “I guess I can slip the ring on

your finger with one hand. There's just one thing more I'd like to hear you say——”

“Yes?”

“Tell me you love me. Because I know you do, or you'd never make that promise.”

“I promise to love you, Keith, with all my heart.”

“Then kiss me.... I hear them coming....”

She bent and kissed his fevered lips, lingeringly, lovingly, with infinite tenderness. So he did not guess. And in her heart was the high-born hope and gallant resolve that he might never guess.

Joe came in, and lifting Keith in his strong arms, carried him to the operating table. Donna slunk away into the shadows. Sonia, dead-white, hid under her net, and no one knew what prayers she said or whether her eyes were dry. For a space the others stood entranced. The only sound was the cracking of the fires.

Charley roused himself with an effort. “All ready, Keith?”

“All ready, doc.”

“Joe, take off the compress. I don't want to touch it.”

Joe obeyed with steady hands. As he looked at the infected arm, his wide eyes slowly narrowed—sharpened—fixed.

“The black spot doesn't seem to have spread any more,” he said in an odd, flat tone.

“*What's that?*” The words cracked more sharply than the flame.

“It looks about the same to me. See for yourself.”

Charley moved stiffly forward. “It has spread a little—but not much—by God, not much.... And the inflammation——”

He turned and bored his eyes into Keith's face, then crept up and leaned over him.

"Well, what about it?" came Keith's hoarse whisper.

"How do you feel?"

"I can't tell you ... something's gone that was here a half hour ago.... I'm not floating—any—more——"

"Joe, get out my thermometer and put it in his mouth. Keith, don't build on this. It's probably just a short lull in the infection."

"Build on it!" Keith smiled dimly. "If you only knew! Come on there, black spot, and show what you can do."

This grim joke, its meaning only half guessed by Charley and Mrs. Randall, heartened them all. It showed more nerve than any one here had ever dreamed he possessed. Joe's fingers flew on the thermometer cap. His eyes were blazing.

A long tense moment dragged by. "What does it say?" Charley demanded savagely.

"One hundred—four—and three fifths."

"Then it's gone down a degree. It probably means nothing, but at least——"

"At least, what?" Joe snapped.

"We're going to wait a while! We're going to keep the knife in the bag, until we see where we stand. I tell you again it's only a chance in ten, but we'll play it for all we're worth. And if that black spot doesn't spread any more——"

"It won't, curse it," Keith broke in. "It's a false alarm, and you may as well carry me back to bed." A ghastly choked sound that was meant for a laugh broke from his drawn lips. "I've saved my arm—but none of you know what I've lost. The same old luck."

The next hour brought no visible extension of the spot of gangrenous flesh. It seemed to Charley that the inflamed area was a paler shade of red.

Still he hardly dared hope. The fires were kept up, the knife ready. Mrs. Randall sat on a stool, her eyes speaking worlds but her lips still, and tried not to soil her hands. Joe continued to change the salt-water compresses on Keith's arm and force water down his throat.

Keith dozed on the table, sometimes waking to babble in delirium. Donna, in the shadows, heard a new note in the men's voices, and creeping up to the firelight, crouched there to watch and pray. Sonia gave no sound or sign that she knew or cared.

By midnight Keith's pulse was down to a hundred and twenty, his temperature to a hundred and four. From then on, both fell rapidly.

The long watch went on. Joe brought blankets to ease the sick man's body. Charley offered to let the others rest, but they dared not stir from the scene, lest the tide of life and death should turn again. They were tired out, but they did not even know it. The first glimmer of dawn rimmed the eastern hills.

"Take his temperature again," Charley ordered.

Joe obeyed. They all held their breaths. "One hundred—and—a fifth."

Charley stiffened strangely. "His pulse?"

With his eyes on his watch, Joe counted aloud. "Even hundred."

And then the doctor did a grotesque thing. He began to dance a jig around the fires.

“Saved, saved, saved,” he cried, in a delirious undertone. “Put him in bed. We’ve licked that black devil for good and all. Joe, bring out our last two smokes and our next to the last bottle, and Glory Hallelujah!”

“But are you sure?” It was Donna’s voice. “Don’t take any chance——”

“I was sure two hours ago, but didn’t dare say so.”

“But how did it happen?” Joe marveled. “Is it a plain miracle?”

“Look at his doctor! Look at you and Donna, holding something out on us, and I don’t know what!”

“Hold on, Charley. Something saved him in the nick of time. What was it?”

“Life conquered death, that’s all. The little white corpuscles got together and said, ‘this has gone far enough,’ and rallied around like old troopers and stopped the corruption. It often happens like that.” His tone dropped and changed. “You see, a disease readies its natural crisis—the doctor thinks it’s winning and takes up his knife—and then the tide turns. It’s no special miracle, except that all life’s one big miracle.”

“Did Keith’s state of mind have anything to do with it?” Joe asked shrewdly.

“He was mighty depressed. That made nature’s job all the harder. By cheering him up, Donna might have helped save his arm—but why he didn’t seem more grateful, I don’t know.”

“What you don’t know would fill a book,” Joe told him.

“Keith was only joking, of course,” Donna broke in.



“Just the same, I suspect that Fate played him one of her neatest tricks. Now put him in bed.”

As is often the case with localized infections, Keith’s recovery was dramatically rapid. By the close of the next day his temperature and appetite were practically normal. By the following noon, Charley granted his incessant petition for a few minutes alone with Donna.

She sat by his bed, and he drank in her dark beauty like one returning from a gray desert. “I’ve been aching for this chance,” he told her at last, in his familiar resonant tones. “There’s a load on my mind that wouldn’t let me rest. Donna, you know what it is.”

“I’m not—quite sure.”

“That crooked deal I made with you! That promise I forced you to give me. I was out of my head at the time, but that’s no excuse.”

“It’s all the excuse you need, Keith. Let’s not talk about it any more.”

“No, I want to come clean. It showed first how much I wanted you. I’m not ashamed of that—I want you now, more than words can tell—but I’m bitterly ashamed of the means I took. They say that the true self comes out in delirium. If so, my true self must be something I don’t want to face. Grasping ... unscrupulous....”

“Don’t you dare to think that, Keith. You simply reverted to childhood—and all grown-up rules were forgotten.”

“Yet you meant to keep your promise.”

“Of course.”

“Even if I’d offered to let you off?”

“That would have made no difference. It wouldn’t have given you back your arm.”

“Do you believe I would have made that offer?”

“Of course you would. As soon as you were in your right mind.”

“But I wouldn’t have insisted. That’s the thing that hurts and poisons my thoughts. I wouldn’t have run away, where you couldn’t find me. No, I’d look at that stump—and stay the child I was three nights ago. I’d never grow up again, but would find excuses for myself—and run to your arms.”

“And they would have taken you in, Keith.” But she did not refute his words, because she knew they were true. “Now let’s forget it ever happened. Your arm is safe—you’re a stronger man than ever—and the episode is closed.”

He reached for her hand and kissed it. “Do you remember what I told you, that day we said good-by on the shore-tender? ‘You’re the most wonderful girl in the world.’ That’s what you are, to me. You will always be. I love you—only you.”

She smiled and pressed his hand. “You make me very proud.”

“But you don’t say—you’re glad!”

“I don’t say anything—yet. We’re back where we were. We won’t decide anything till we get to civilization. The contract that we broke in the emergency is still in force.”

“Anyway, I’ll go on hoping. You can’t stop me from that. And I’ll go on fighting for you too—to win you fair and square.”

The next day Keith got up to stay. All likelihood of re-infection had passed. “Just the same, you must take it easy

from now on,” Charley told him at supper. “The next time it might be your neck.”

“I wish we could get him back to civilization,” Donna said.

“Why not wish for the whole Rockefeller Foundation right here on the river-bank? We’ve been here two weeks now—no, I didn’t say two years—and nobody cares but us. ‘Whatever happened to old Doc Hudson?’ one of my pals will ask in the dim future. ‘Oh, yes—old Doc Hudson—handsome fellow—why, he disappeared some time in 1933—or was it 1936?’”

“It is no joke,” Sonia broke in tensely. “We will never escape. We does all die here—maybe we is dead already—and this is hell.”

“It’s a cinch it’s not heaven,” Mrs. Randall remarked.

Donna’s vivid eyes grew dreamy, and she gazed a long time over the camp-fire into the darkening thickets. “It’s neither one,” she told them at last. “It’s a half-way land, a kind of purgatory. But we seem to have come through the fire.”

Joe remained practical. “The search-parties will be starting any day now, and in a week we may be on our way to the settlements.”

“And we’ve had only a fair share of trouble,” Donna went on, dreamily. “I suppose people need some to grow up.... If that’s cold comfort, it’s the best I can do off-hand.”

“But when you grow up, what do you see?” Sonia demanded. “Only truth—and the truth is sad.”

Donna’s mind leaped back to her first night in camp, and to her prophecy that here they would all find truth. But now

they had seen it gleaming like a sunrise through a mist of dreams, could they look at it straight?

She glanced once at Keith, his bright hair and sunny eyes and the first color bathing his wan, thin face; but soon her gaze wandered back to a plain, brown, smiling countenance that did her heart good.

## XIX

*Two* days later, Sonia was sitting on the river bank, gazing forlornly across the water. It was late afternoon. Another jungle night would soon come stealing. There was naught but solitude as far as she could see.... But through the silence she knew so well—that had come to seem a fixture of the landscape—she heard an alien sound.

It was a man's voice. It came not from camp, but from down-river. "Dog of a fool!" some one yelled in French. "Can you not go faster?"

She took one glance, then ran crying to the camp. "Men coming—in a boat," she gasped out.

The whole camp emptied in an instant. With Keith leading, the suddenly-frantic exiles ran to the river, and soon were feasting their eyes on a glorious scene. Sonia's words were true. Paddling up-river through the quiet waters toward the island, were two men in a dug-out canoe.

They had already seen the smoke of the camp. The white man in the bow raised his paddle and stared. But still the castaways waved and shouted, unable to believe that at last they had been found.

Then Donna gave a little gasp and turned quickly to Joe. "Do you think we ought to warn him we've got smallpox in camp?"

"Not on your life. We'll vaccinate him, if necessary ... And I'm beginning to wish we hadn't been so all-fired enthusiastic.... You see, he's taking a good look."

Charley got the same idea the same instant. "Keep still, and not overdo it," he told the others, out of the corner of his

mouth. “Everybody sit tight.”

In the meantime the white stranger had finished his swift, almost furtive survey of the scene. He could not help but notice that the campers had no boat, and he was plainly suspicious of the situation. He gave a quick, low command to the native in the stern, who checked the canoe and held it stationary in the slow current.

“*Bonjour, messieurs—mesdames,*” he called, lifting his hat.

“*Bonjour,*” Charley answered. “We are Americans.”

“So! You are far away from home. I did not this expect!”

“Beach your boat, and we’ll give you a bite of supper.”

“I thought to go on... But it is late, perhaps I should stay the night here.” He looked again at the pale, silent row. “But you are crowded, is it not so, and I shall perhaps better camp on the island.”

“Don’t think of it. We’ve plenty of room. And we’ll be happy to have you at our camp.”

But now the hope that had soared so high began to flutter down. While Charley had been talking, Joe was looking—and the more he looked, the less he liked this wandering Frenchman. He was no honest colonial, no government agent or forester on a tour of inspection, but plainly a renegade. A tall, slightly-built man, there was something disagreeably jaunty in his manner and the get-up of his outdoor clothes. Quite possibly he had been born a gentleman of France, but the tropics had dealt with him harshly. He wore a carefully waxed mustache, but his black eyes had a furtive, foxy shine in their deep pits, and dark rings below.

“Did you land here from an airplane?” he asked politely. “I see you have no boats.”

Joe stepped forward and took charge. “Our boatmen deserted us. We’re all right—plenty of grub—but we want some information and perhaps a little help. Come and have some supper, and we’ll talk it over.”

The Frenchman smiled blandly. “I had best camp on the island. Many, many thanks, but I have my own meal.”

“Just as you like.” Joe controlled his voice. “Sorry you won’t join us. My name is Baxter.”

“I am Henri LeBarre, at your service. What information can it be that you require?”

“First, how far is it to the village of Nok-Pu?”

“Four hours down-stream.”

“Much dangerous water?”

“Not nearly so bad as above, but most tiresome to pole up.”

“Any trails along the bank?”

“The same as here, only worse. Many steep banks and thick jungle.”

The native started to speak, but LeBarre turned with a snarl. “Son of a jackal!” he said in French. “Will you open your mouth when messieurs talk together? Push the boat to the point of the island.”

Sullenly the native obeyed. With a few strokes of his long knife, he cut away the vines for his lord to land. LeBarre stepped out, but did not forget his rifle leaning against the thwart. Holding it carelessly in his hand, he turned to resume his talk with Joe.

“In that case, we need your help,” Joe said. His ordinary tone carried perfectly across the tranquil waters. “We’ve got a man here we want to get to a village as soon as possible. He’s

had a touch of fever and is feeling the effects. Will you take him down-river to Nok-Pu, and send a couple of native boats to get the rest of us?”

“But monsieur, it cannot be. I must go on up-river. When I reach the settlements I will send all the help you need.”

“But it will take you a week or ten days to get there?”

“Eight days anyway, monsieur. Give me four days more, or five at the most, to collect boats and Kha paddlers—there are none but lazy Meuns close at hand. In a fortnight from now you can be in Nok-Pu.”

“That won’t do. You see there are ladies here too, and it’s vital to get them out as soon as possible. You can name your own price.”

LeBarre glanced once down-river, then shook his head. “I cannot go back—for any price.”

“You must not refuse us, LeBarre.” Joe spoke in grave tones. “As another white man, you’re obliged to help us out. You needn’t take our friend, if it adds to your danger. But at least you must return to Nok-Pu and get help.”

“I am most sorry. It cannot be. It is as vital for me to go up-river, as for you to go down.”

“What if we offered you five hundred piasters?” Keith broke in.

“Still I could not do it. Not for five thousand piasters. It might be possible that for a small sum I could carry the sick man up-river, and in eight days he would be at the village.”

“No, it would be a rough trip, with only a few days saved.”

“Or”—and as LeBarre looked again at the castaways, his lips curled in a leering smile—“I might take one of the young ladies—they weigh very little—free of cost.”



Not trusting his temper, Joe turned away. But Sonia's breast swelled, and a queer, cold look of appraisal made her eyes shine.

Nothing more could be done at present, so Joe withdrew to the mess-shack. He thought that all his party followed him, but Sonia had lingered on the bank for a friendly chat in French with the stranger.

“You are not American,” he said.

“No, the Saints be praised! I am Russian.”

“What's your name?”

“Sonia Sarichef.” But she thought best not to tell this interesting man that she was a baroness.

“Sonia! A pretty name for a pretty girl.” At once his tone grew more familiar. “How do you happen to be with these Yankees?”

“The *grande dame* took a fancy to me, in Shanghai, and invited me for a tour. It was fun for a time, then bad luck set in like the winter rains. *Mon Dieu*, but I am tired! And it will be two weeks more at least before help can come.”

They chatted pleasantly while Pu-Sai, LeBarre's servant, made a rude camp. With vivacious words and many gestures, Sonia related some of their adventures.

The bright waters flowing between them did not stop good talk, nor drown the sparks of interest now shooting back and forth. They seemed to have much in common. They had been born to the same world. They talked of distant cities; LeBarre knew many of Sonia's exiled countrymen in Paris.

Meanwhile she seemed oblivious of his foppery, and the brands of dissipation on his face. Plainly she saw him as he used to be, a man of fashion of the most brilliant city of the

world—the same as he saw himself when wine or some other ferment inflamed his brain. And he looked at her, at her beauty in the sunset, with glowing and ravenous eyes.

“Listen to me, *ma petite*,” he said at last. “You are tired of this grubbing in the woods. Why not come with me tomorrow? We will go where lights are shining.”

“It is a long way up-river, and many hardships. I cannot.”

“But I have plenty of good food, and a little wine. We will make pleasant camps along the way.”

“It is too far. But if you will go down-river, to Nok-Pu \_\_\_\_\_”

“That, I regret, is impossible. I have had some small trouble with the natives there. But we will go up-river, *n'est-ce-pas?*”

“I am afraid I cannot.... You have food and wine, you say, but have you good American cigarettes?”

“I wish I had, *ma chérie*. For a month, I have smoked rank leaf.”

“I have one small package, hidden away. You shall share it, as a gift for your voyage.”

She stole to her quarters, and presently returned with the package.

“I shall tie on a little stone, and throw it over,” she said. “But I am one bad thrower——”

LeBarre laughed. “Wait. If it should fall in the river, my heart would break—even as it is broken now, by your face in the sunset. We are friends. I’ll send my dog, Pu-Sai, to fetch it in the boat. He will not come ashore—I do not trust your band of castaways—but near enough for you to toss it safely.”

“But my companions are at supper. You needn’t be afraid.”

“They may be lurking in the thickets. The jungle teaches care, my little one!” He spoke in an undertone to Pu-Sai, who at once launched the canoe.

This native was a master boatman. He drove straight toward the bank, then held the bow off shore while Sonia tossed in the cigarettes. “And half of them are for you,” she told him in French. Then, with a laugh “take them now, lest Monsieur forget to give you your share.”

Pu-Sai glanced once at his master, then opened the package with a quick flip of his finger. Before the canoe could hardly begin to drift, he removed a few of the cigarettes and dropped them in his war-bag. His white teeth flashed in a smile.

But LeBarre was at the brink of fury. “Need you give white man’s smokes to an Annamite dog?” he demanded. “Is not native tobacco good enough for him? Mademoiselle, you are beautiful, but not wise.”

“Don’t be angry. I promised only to share the package—and I cannot help but give my share to this good man.”

“You have the Russian heart, tender but foolish. I can’t blame you for that, but I settle with Pu-Sai.”

“You will spare him, I know.... To be so cruel, would make me afraid to go with you up-river.”

“Do not be afraid, mon amie. I was once an officer of the Foreign Legion—there I learned to master men—but I have not forgotten the homage due *la belle femme*.”

“I’ll think it over and let you know. Now I go to join my friends.”

As Sonia approached the mess-shack, she saw that the others had hardly noticed her absence. Her lips wrote a bitter

line across her drawn face.

Donna looked up with a start. "Where have you been, all this time?"

"I has been talk to the Frenchman."

Keith gave her one suspicious glance. "He didn't say anything about coming to shore, did he?"

"No, I think he is afraid you does take his boat."

"Pretty canny frog, I tell you," Charley said. "And a hard case all round."

"Oh, I do not think he is so much bad," Sonia broke in. "He was a gentleman."

"'Was' is right." It was the first time Keith had ever made light of her faulty English. "But look at him now."

"He's a bad egg, Sonia," Joe said, "and you know it."

"I think not so. He has offer to take Keith up-river."

"That's out—I'd rather take my chance here," Keith said. "But Joe—why do you suppose he's so set against going down-river? He can't have business as important as all that."

"He may be on the track of gold," Joe answered. "More likely, he's got in trouble and is skinning out. If we could only get him on shore long enough to grab his boat——"

"Would you make force upon him?" Sonia asked.

"Just give me a chance. He's refused to act like a white man, and needn't be treated as such."

Charley smiled a little gray disagreeable smile. "Why not sneak up to the bank, frame him against his camp-fire, and plug him in the right arm? That would hold him awhile."

Donna held her breath until Joe shook his head. "I might hit an artery and kill him."

“Well?”

“Not much loss, but we don’t want to spend the rest of our lives on Devil’s Island. He’s in his civil rights, and we haven’t a leg to stand on. It might mean prison even to threaten him with a gun—and too dangerous besides. But speaking of sneaking up....” Joe looked hard at his plate.

“The moon comes up about ten,” Keith broke in.

“Still we might manage it. Who’s the best swimmer in camp?”

Charley’s old smile, quick and warm, broke now. “You forget how I disguised myself as Gertrude Ederle, and swam the English channel before breakfast.”

“You’re elected. When I swim, I make more noise than a cow. We’ll wait till midnight. He ought to be deep in the hay by then. Then you slip over and ease his canoe into the water. Ling will wait below to catch it as it drifts down. I’ll stand guard with the rifle—but don’t get in a jam and make me shoot it. We can’t take a chance on French law.”

“But is it worth the risk?” Donna asked with a white face. “We’ll get out anyway in a couple of weeks, if we can persuade the Frenchman to send back help.”

“If he’s hitting for the tall timber, he won’t stop to raise an alarm,” Joe told her.

But Donna’s eyes grew wide with visions of tragedy. The boyish flush on those eager faces estranged her and snatched at her heart. “Some one will come,” she persisted. “Besides, the river is falling a little every day, and we’ll soon be able to walk along the bank.”

But Charley would not be cheated of his sport. “I don’t want to wait two weeks. I want some swabs for my patient—

I'm tired of using discarded lingerie.”

“What about your Keith?” Sonia asked Donna in hard, almost sarcastic tones. “Is it not worth any risk so he go away at once?”

High color welled through the pallor of Donna's face, and she could not answer.

“Don't worry about me, Sonia,” Keith said shortly.

Charley leaped into the breach. “She's perfectly right, Keith. You are just pie for any jungle bug that comes along.”

“Then if it's all decided,” Joe broke in cheerfully, “we'll fool around—make a play at going to bed—and then young Decatur will sneak under the enemy's guns and make off with his warship.”

“Your history is a little vague, but you've got the right idea,” Charley told him.

By midnight, LeBarre's fire had burned out and the solemn hush of the tropic night lay over his camp. Stealthily Joe led the way down the back trail behind the shacks, to the thickets of the river bank.

Young, strong, and light of heart, they could break the eerie spell of the gray, waning moon, and saw no ill-omen in her drowned twin in the silvered waters.

Joe took his post. Naked save for his breach-clout, Ling dropped down-stream to lie in wait for the drifting boat, and Keith stood by to help. With his face blackened with soot, and wearing Mrs. Randall's black silk tea-coat to hide the pale gleam of his flesh, Charley slipped into the river.

But he had hardly taken two strokes when a mocking voice cut through the dark. It was LeBarre, and the moon showed

him sitting up in bed, his rifle across his knees.

“Pu-Sai?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Do the wild red-dogs of the jungle swim this river?”

“Often, lord.”

“I thought I heard a little splash. Perhaps I should try a shot.”

He raised his rifle and shot into the air. The raiders saw the flame, and heard the snick of the bolt as he threw in another shell.

“A bad shot, Pu-Sai,” came LeBarre’s careless tones. “But if I see the dog’s head in the water, I will do better.”

Charley needed no further warning, but swam quickly to shore and dived into the thickets. And now from the camp came the rush of frantic feet, swift to help. But Sonia had been close by all the time. In the darkness they heard her voice raise in disdain.

“*Diable*, what a clown’s trick,” she said in French.

Charley stepped from the thickets in front of her. “Go back. No one’s hurt, but it’s a wash-out.”

“Oh, is it you, Sonia, little one?” LeBarre called. “I thought I heard your voice.”

Ignoring Charley’s warning, Sonia stepped full into the moonlight. “Yes, it is I, monsieur.”

And now all the others were riveted in their tracks. They forgot why they had come here, and the fiasco just past counted no more than the moon-glitter on the water. Like a gale out of the sky, the sudden rush and sweep of some deep drama of the human soul broke over the scene.

“I shot to scare a dog,” LeBarre said, in familiar tones. “But you, *ma chérie*, seem a little surprised. Perhaps you did not know of the plot against me.”

“I knew, monsieur—but I could not stop them. I didn’t—dare—warn you.”

The only sound, for a moment, was Charley cursing softly in the darkness. But Keith could not even breathe. Joe stared in bewilderment at her white, moonlit face. Mrs. Randall clutched her daughter’s hand.

“That relieves me a great deal,” LeBarre told her. “I felt sure you were my friend.”

“I is glad now they did not get your boat,” Sonia went on. “And in the morning I go with you—up the river.”

“All right—if you can make your light-fingered companions stay in camp while you get aboard. Now, little one, I must sleep. We have a hard day tomorrow.”

But now Keith’s trance of shame and dread passed off, and he stalked like a sleep-walker to Sonia’s side.

“What do you mean?” he gasped. “You *can’t* go with him.”

“Please to tell me why?” Her face was still as an ivory carving save for the contemptuous droop of her lips; her voice, although too low to carry across the water, was as cold and aloof as the moon.

“You know the sort he is. My God, Sonia, what’s come over you?”

“I is only being true to form. I has lost you—what does it matter? It is the old, bad days of Irkutsk and Chita come again.”

“But you lied to him. You said you tried to stop us. If you go with him, we’ll know you were lying to us—all the time.”



“I does go with him, little Keith. This game—it is played out. Remember, I am—what you say—one who digs gold.” She raised her voice so that LeBarre could hear. “I is going back—to life—to lights—maybe soon to love.”

## XX

**KEITH** and the others stood back, as Sonia stole to the fire. The silver of the moon was in her hair; they marked the angel grace and lightness of her step. And then they saw the gold of the firelight run out to meet her and make a mocking halo about her head.

“The leopard’s spots,” Charley quoted grimly.

Keith passed his hand in a dazed way across his forehead. “I won’t stand for it,” he muttered. “I’m going to tell her so.”

“Better not tell her anything, right now,” Mrs. Randall advised.

“If necessary, I’ll hold her here by force.”

“It’s her own life, you know. She has to live it, not you.”

“But she cheated me, all the time. She cheated us all.”

“Let’s not throw any stones,” Donna said gently.

So the scene closed. Quietly they walked back to the shelters and began to lower the mosquito nets for bed. Sonia crouched by the fire alone.

Mrs. Randall finished her preparations for the night; then on an impulse too strong to resist, came and stood beside Sonia. The girl looked up with a cynical smile.

“What now is it you want?” she asked coldly.

“Just to tell you you ought to be in bed. Especially if you are going to start early.”

The motherly tones seemed to strike home. The blue ice of Sonia’s eyes melted a little. “You is most kind.... I will never forget.”

“Oh, Sonia!” Mrs. Randall’s fine eyes filled with tears. “Won’t you talk to me? I’m old enough to understand—everything.”

“It is no use. You would only say me not to go. And I is going anyhow.”

“I won’t say that. I know you’ve made up your mind, and I promise I won’t try to stop you. I know that everything here has gone wrong for you—you feel you must get away and forget it——”

Her tone flattened out and trailed off. Sonia glanced sharply into her face, then sprang to her feet.

“I will try to tell you,” she murmured quickly. “Maybe you will understand. Come with me, into the dark.”

The others watched them go. Keith gazed bitterly, Charley smiled grimly; but Donna felt a little encouragement, and Joe a rush of new hope.

In his patient faith in human goodness, Joe had hardly believed in the first place that Sonia meant what she said. It was only the mood of a bitter moment, and Mrs. Randall would soon win her over. He lay down on his blanket, confidently waiting good news.

The others got under their nets. When the two women returned, the only stir in camp was the dance of the shadows, and the only sound the crackle of the dying fire and the intermittent whisper of the jungle. But no one was asleep, unless it were Ling on the grass or Muang in the pest-house. Eyes and ears were alert and straining into the darkness. And Joe was the first to read the verdict.

As Mrs. Randall crept dully to the fire, a lurid beam disclosed her face. It had a baffled look, close to terror. This

was evidence enough, without the proof that followed. With listless hands—he could hardly believe they were Mrs. Randall’s—she began to help Sonia gather her few belongings, and pack them in her bags.

Plainly Sonia was utterly unmoved. If anything, she was stronger than ever in her purpose. Her hands were not listless, but steady and fleet. Joe could not tell for certain, but he thought he heard her humming as she worked. And soon both women had gone to their shack and to bed, and the silence of finality brooded over the camp.

Joe lay wide-eyed a long time, then his mournful thoughts began to tangle, and he slept. When he awakened, the glimmer of dawn was on the water. Ling was building a fire; Sonia and Mrs. Randall were already up and dressed.

The ugly truth that had been no more than a vague trouble confusing his dreams, rushed to his waking mind. It seemed even darker, in this dawn. He rose with a blind resolve to make some last effort—he did not know what—to save Sonia from herself.

But even this purpose began to waver, in the chill gray light sifting through the foliage. The game was too deep for him. If it were a man who was hell-bent—a friend like Charley or even Keith—he could tackle him about the knees, batter him into submission if he resisted, and tie him to a tree, with perfect trust in his own good motives and of his victim’s ultimate blessing; but Sonia was a woman. Cowed by her still face in the dawn-gleam, the best he could do was call Mrs. Randall aside and ask advice.

“Tell us what to do,” Joe begged.

“Just stand back and not get in her way.”

“But to let her go off with that skunk——”

“He’s not that to her—something else entirely.”

“But if she’s taken in by him, doesn’t that give us the right —?”

“She knows what sort he is. She knows more about men than Donna and me combined—and I’m no schoolgirl. Remember what she said—‘one who digs gold.’ ”

“I still think we ought to grab her and hold her by force.”

“Put the idea out of your head. It would be a mortification to her she’d never forgive or forget. Besides, she’s in her rights. She is playing her own game for her own needs.”

Joe nodded, and turned away with a white face.

Preparations for Sonia’s trip went forward rapidly. Mrs. Randall cooked and served her breakfast; Joe carried her bags to the landing. But he did not answer LeBarre’s half-mocking greeting across the water, or even look in his direction.

And now Sonia walked lightly to the river. “I am ready, monsieur,” she called.

“*Très bien*. Have you said your farewells to your friends?”

“Not yet.”

“Oblige me by saying them now—well back from the landing. I am sorry they cannot come with you to the water’s edge—but after last night’s little difficulty——”

Mrs. Randall, who had followed Sonia, raised her strong voice. “We won’t interfere with you again, Mr. LeBarre.”

“*Merci, madame*. But will you ask your party to remain in front of the shacks, while the lady gets aboard?”

“Yes, I’ll line ’em up in plain sight.”

Keith, who had now come up with the others, started to protest, but Mrs. Randall silenced him with a glance.

“I have not heard your friends agree to that,” LeBarre observed.

“I’ll speak for them all,” Mrs. Randall told him. “I give my word that we’ll make you no trouble or interfere with you in any way.”

“That goes,” Joe agreed quietly. And Keith and Donna nodded their heads.

The good-bys were brief and characteristic. As she started to shake hands with Joe, he drew her into his arms and kissed her on the lips.

“Good-by, Sonia, and good luck,” he told her.

“Good-by, big one. I hope you is very happy.”

“And since Joe’s started the good work,” Charley said, as Sonia turned to him, “you can bet old Doc Hudson won’t fail his duty.” He kissed the girl twice with frank pleasure.

“Good-by, Char-lee. You is very good to me——”

“Plenty more where those came from, Sonia, if you’ll stay and give me a chance.”

Sonia laughed. “It is too late now. But maybe sometime we meet again.”

She turned to find Donna holding out her arms, her dark eyes brimming with tears. They had come a long way from Shanghai; a long time had passed since their first meeting in the room of the ikon candle. Only Mrs. Randall, herself a woman, understood.

“Good-by, little darling,” Sonia murmured very low. “I does pray for your happiness—and Keith’s too.”

Donna’s lips opened, but no words came.

“It would be no good luck for him to has me,” Sonia went on, whispering in Donna’s ear. “But to has you is all I can

wish for him now. You see—I has learn to love you, Donna.”

“I love you, too. I do, Sonia, I do. And if you’d only not go \_\_\_\_\_”

“I has to go. Maybe some time I see you again.”

Last of all, she turned to Keith. She appeared to wait, her blue eyes very wide, for him to speak first. But he did not speak. Without a smile on his cold, white face, he held out his hand.

“You does not—kiss me?”

“That’s all over. Good-by.”

“Not good-by, little Keith. *Au revoir*——”

“Good-by, Sonia. I hope you’ll be happy.”

She nodded, bit her lip, and turned away.

In the meantime LeBarre and his boatman were on the opposite shore, cutting their way around the worst of the rapids and lining the canoe up through the white water. Sonia walked up the bank to meet them; they crossed in the boat and LeBarre helped her aboard. Soon she was out of sight behind the dark arm of the jungle.

It was the longest morning Joe could remember. The camp was desolate; the exiles huddled together but could think of nothing to say. Their prison walls that they had begun to forget, seemed to close in, darker, more inviolate than ever.

Such compensation as they had found—wild beauty, laughter, adventure—turned bitter in their mouths. Youth’s dearest illusions were shattered. They had fondly hoped that they had begun to conquer the jungle, but it had been winning all the time. Perhaps it always won. Perhaps there was no

escape from its wicked law ... *Wax green. Flourish at any cost....* This might be the ultimate law of all life.

Just before noon, Charley came and sat with his best friend in the shade back of camp. “You’re looking a little green around the gills,” Joe commented. “Anything new?”

“Nothing special. Joe, do you suppose LeBarre sneaked in our camp last night when we were in the hay?”

“That wary frog would never take a chance like that. Why?”

“I’d rather hoped he had. As it is, I’ll have to blame it on Ling.”

“Blame what?”

“Maybe he started thinking about his grand big drunks in his native village, and was tempted. He—or some one else—has pinched our last bottle of whisky.”

“But it was in your medical satchel.”

“I know it.” Charley began to sing lustily.

“How about questioning him?”

“Not on your life. ‘*But she knifed me one night, ’cause I wished she was white.*’ You see, we might just be unlucky enough to have him prove himself innocent,” Charley went on, “and then——”

“And then—it would look like Sonia.”

“Shut your mouth, will you? Anyway, what’s a little snort after a long day’s paddle to brighten up the camp? If you like, we’ll blame it on Keith, or maybe Mrs. Randall—night-drinkers both of ’em, for all we know....

“ ‘*And I learned about women from her.*’ ”



“I’ll tell you,” Joe said. “I pinched it. We went off, Ling and I, for a quiet little binge in the woods.”

“Let it go at that.” And then Charley turned with a grave, troubled face. “Just the same, my lad, I wish we could get the hell out of this camp, the sooner the better. Otherwise something’s going to pop.”

Lunch was a dreary experience. Even Charley’s shafts fell flat. The exiles rested in the shade during the searing mid-day hours, but at three o’clock Keith and Donna went to the river to try a new fish-hook made of a stray bit of wire.

“Do you know how long we’ve been here, Keith?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Forever.”

“Seventeen days last night. It doesn’t seem possible, but it’s the truth.”

“And we can count on at least one week more, perhaps two,” Keith said. “The alarm may be out already—at least they’re beginning to get worried back in Shanghai—but it will be a good while before any French official thinks of this lost river.”

“It feels like we’re dead, but we’re not,” Donna went on. “One of these days we’ll wake up and find ourselves back on earth. We may see natives any day, poling up from Nok-Pu. And look how the river’s fallen. In two weeks there’ll be room to walk to the village, under the brush on the river-bed.”

“Pretty tough going. Plenty of steep banks to cut around. But we might do it in a pinch.”

“Joe and Ling want to try it, at the first possible moment. But as we’ve got only one rifle, we can’t split the party.”

And here the subject dropped. They had gone over it scores of times before. She sought some other topic that would afford casual talk, but could not find it in time. He was leaning toward her, his eyes searching hers, his intimate presence enveloping her. There fell a brief silence, charged with suspense.

“And when we get back to earth,” his voice came flowing, “will you tell me—what you couldn’t tell me four days ago?”

His nearness, his hand closing over hers, stirred her deeply; but still she must play for time. Time, to think things out, to sift her own heart, to set her course straight. It would be so easy to make an irremediable mistake. She was trembling.

“When we all get back to Shanghai—and the contract is over—I’ll tell you the whole truth.”

She saw him fighting with himself—setting his lips—then he spoke with a desperate burst of breath.

“I’m afraid of that truth.”

But she did not answer.

“No, I won’t be afraid,” he went on valiantly. “I’m going to believe that love like yours can’t die. It will all work out right. You’ll forgive anything I’ve done—all the risk I’ve taken——”

“I’ve forgiven you already, Keith.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just that. I never blamed you anyway.”

“But can’t you say—a little more? Just a word or two to pin my hopes on? I’d be the happiest man in the world, Donna.”

She was tempted. She longed to bring a smile to his drawn lips, to kiss the torment out of his eyes. Was this love unchanged, or only pity? How did she know—love was so strange. It was like fate, a power from without. But something seemed to thrust her back.

“Keith, I can’t say it now.”

“Won’t you even try?”

“It’s no use. We’ve got to wait and face the changes coming to us both.”

“How ominous that sounds, Donna! As though it’s all over, all lost.”

“Not all. Something remains that will never go away. It’s more than friendship—something sweet and near. But it may not be—what you want.”

“I want your love.” She saw his pale face flush. “Nothing more or less.”

“I know. Keith, I know. But I may not have it to give you any more.”

He nodded and turned away. “It’s fair enough, I suppose,” he murmured at last. “I might have known I couldn’t escape punishment. I’ve done nothing false to myself or to my own heart, but ignorance of the law is no excuse. Still, the sentence seems a little severe. To find that your love is faltering—and Sonia never loved me at all.”

“Sonia did love you.” Donna’s tone rang. “Don’t you ever doubt it.”

“In her own fashion, yes. Perhaps I should be grateful even for that. Anyway, I who had so much, have nothing now but a distant hope. Quite a finish, for our little adventure.”

But Keith did not understand. The adventure was not over. They were talking quietly, only a few minutes later, when some slight distant strangeness in the scene, some little alien movement up the river, caught the corner of his eye. He turned carelessly—then stared—then cried out.

“Look—look——” he stammered, pointing.

It was a boat, speeding down-stream toward them. There were two people in it, little and dark against the bright water. The one in front held no paddle, but the man in the stern was handling the small craft with ease.

“It must be two natives,” Donna whispered. But she did not believe it, even now before the light came clear. She said so only to forestall tragic disappointment in case her secret premonition turned out false.

“No,” Keith said, leaping up. “No, it’s not two natives.... Look, Donna.... Look, my God!” Then, with his arm outstretched, his voice shaking: “The face in front is white ... she’s wearing a helmet.... It’s not a native; it’s not, I tell you. Can’t you see, Donna? *Oh, can’t you see?*”

Donna snatched his hand and pressed it. “It’s all right, Keith,” she pleaded, as the tears leaped from her eyes. “Don’t worry; there’s no mistake. It’s a native in the stern, but the other is Sonia, and she’s coming back to us.”

## XXI

*LIKE* a man out of his mind, Keith turned and ran a few steps toward the shacks. “Sonia—coming back,” rose his hoarse yell. Then he raced back to Donna’s side.

The call brought Joe and Charley in a breakneck sprint. Only Mrs. Randall kept a sensible pace. And even she reached the bank in time to see Pu-Sai steer his boat into the cataract.

It was a test for any craft, let alone a dug-out with a one-man crew, but even Keith watched the feat with fearless eyes. Pu-Sai was master of white water. He took the rapids like an otter. And if he capsized, three men stood ready to save him and his solitary passenger.

But no such crisis rose. The voyage ended in a bold and stirring leap through the foam into quiet water. Pu-Sai’s blade dipped and flashed—the bow touched the bank—and then with her old grace, Sonia rose from her seat and caught Joe’s hand. An instant later she stood tall and proud before them and looked them in the face.

But now she had come, not one of them could greet her. They could only stare—and wonder at her undiminished beauty—with kindling eyes and faces flaming white. It was she herself who finally broke the trance of silence.

“I is brought back the boat,” she said simply. “And now Keith can go to Nok-Pu.”

At once all the stark figures came to life, but Mrs. Randall first found breath to answer.

“Thank God you’re safe!”

The words were plain enough, and fitting to the event, yet the others took curious note of them and would remember them later. They seemed to mean more than they showed, a grasp of the situation that the others did not as yet fully share.

“I did have no trouble,” Sonia answered with a shrug.

Donna and Charley were the next to guess the riddle, she by her woman’s intuition, he by the natural pick-up and dash of his mind. Donna could not speak—her throat was too full—but Charley had recovered from his first aphasia, and did the talking for them all.

“What a grand racket!” he exulted.

“Anyway, it did get the boat.”

“What did you do with LeBarre? Hope you drowned him.”

“I leave him on the bank at our noon camp, but he has plenty of food for two weeks, maybe a month, and his outfit also. I think he will be all right.”

“And you mean you just watched your chance and slipped away?”

“No, he was sleeping very good.”

“Sleeping, eh? Just an afternoon nap? No,” he searched the girl’s eyes, “that doesn’t fill the bill. Sonia, are you sure he’s ever going to wake up?”

“Oh, I see not why. It was only two little ones. And if not ——” She shrugged again. “We had to have the boat.”

“Two little what? *Bullets?*”

“Sleep-pills, out of the medicine-bottle in your case. I think maybe one do good enough, but I give him two to make sure.”

Charley let go enough to slap his hands together. “Exactly right. You can bet he’s deep in the hay right now. But he’ll

wake up fresh as a daisy about noon tomorrow, and I must say I'd like to see him, when he looks around for his sweetie and his boat.... But Sonia, how did you get 'em into him? Hold on—wait just a minute, and give me three guesses!" He turned to a patient dark figure behind him. "Ling?"

"Yes, lord."

"I owe you an apology. You don't know what for, but Joe and I do."

"Lord, I do not understand." But he privately suspected that the doctor-*chow* was the very maddest of all these mad half-gods with whom his fate had cast him.

"No matter, my boy." Once more Charley fastened his brilliant eyes on Sonia's face. "I know now what happened to the whisky."

"I is sorry, but I did need it."

"But you must have had him charmed, not to taste the narcotic."

"He was a little charmed, maybe." She spoke with magnificent simplicity. "Anyway, I take all the care I know how. I drink some too, before I drop the pills in his cup, so he is not afraid. And I tell him before hand that Americans are very strange people, and put always a dash of bitters in their whisky."

"Masterly! But even then, you were taking mighty big chances. How did you know Pu-Sai would desert his master and come with you?"

"I did not think he love him very much. If it would come to trouble, I had this." She opened the little handbag at her feet and showed them a small-caliber revolver, pearl-handled and

pretty as a toy. “It is not much good and shoots crooked, but he would not know. I bought it in Irkutsk, long time ago.”

Charley nodded, but for once he could not speak.

“But I did not need it, ever,” Sonia went on. “Pu-Sai is very glad to come with me.”

A brief silence dropped down. They watched Pu-Sai beach the boat and carry up the rest of Sonia’s baggage. And now Joe, flushed and solemn, pushed his big bulk forward.

“But why didn’t you tell us, Sonia, what you meant to do?” he asked gently.

“Then you would not let me go.”

This answer jarred Joe visibly. It had the rock-like impact of truth. “But to let us think, in cold blood——”

“Do you think I fool you for the sport? Mother of God! You is all my friends, my only friends, and to see your eyes fill with contempt——” She broke off with a shudder, then proudly lifted her head. “There was no other way.”

“I see that now.” Joe’s fine eyes began to blaze. “Good work, Sonia.”

“You, big one, would be the first to stop me, you—and Keith himself,” she went on somberly. “Charley might say yes—Donna, after a long time, might understand—but still you and Keith, so different in so many things, would stand together not to let me go. And you would not believe I could do it. I could hardly believe myself. I know not how long it do take, maybe one night, maybe two; it was only luck that make opportunity at the noon camp.”

“But what if you’d failed altogether? Look what we’d have gone on thinking!”



“I would have it so. I rather have you think me just all bad, than a failure. Oh, don’t you see?” Sonia’s hands flashed once in eloquent entreaty. “I cannot pound roots with a stone. I has done nothing to help all the time, no use in the game. But then there come a chance for a game I knew. No, it is not a good game—to have to learn it leave many scars on the heart and maybe on the soul—but it is all I have, all I can do for you.”

Grave, calm, imperious, she turned the light of her gaze on the man she loved. “Not only for you, Keith—who came first—but for the others, too. And there”—and she pointed to the boat—“is the prize of the game, the gold I dig.”

With the sun on his hair and the light of exultation in his eyes, Keith came and took both her hands in his. “Will you ever forgive us, Sonia?”

“For what?”

“For even thinking——”

She smiled faintly. “I did my most to make you think so. I was please I could place it over.”

“But I was the worst of the lot. Say you forgive me, Sonia.”

“For—everything, little Keith.”

Deeply moved and unashamed, he raised her hand to his lips.

A few minutes later, Donna managed to corner her mother in the mess-shack. She had been dense enough, heaven knew, but not quite so light in the head as to imagine that the story was now all complete.

“Your little dumb Dora wants a few words with you,” she began.

For once in her life, her mother did not meet her eyes.  
“What is it, daughter?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. I noticed that you kept mighty still, while we were talking by the river.”

“I was busy thanking the Lord that it had come out all right. To think of the responsibility I took—on a philosophy of life that may be false to start with—shakes me to the marrow of my bones.”

She was not jesting now, but desperately in earnest. “You might as well get it off your chest,” Donna advised. “Of course you saw through Sonia’s scheme in the beginning.”

“She realized I had guessed it, so she told me all about it. Why didn’t you guess it too, Donna? It was plain as day. Just because she is Russian—an Oriental under the skin—and belongs to a different world, you forget that she is a woman first of all. Then, I wouldn’t have had that dreadful decision to make alone.”

“How could I guess it?” Donna’s tone was half-angry, but the anger turned inward. “To take that means of getting the boat would never occur to me in a hundred years, and if it did, I couldn’t put it over. I might knock him on the head with a stick——”

“That was exactly what Sonia did—with the only stick she had and knew how to use.”

The girl’s eyes sunk deep in her head. “It was you who stole the whisky and medicine out of Charley’s bag.”

“Yes, but that was nothing.”

“Perhaps it was your idea to handle LeBarre that way.”

“No. Sonia worked that out herself—I suppose she heard of it in Irkutsk, or some such outlandish place. I only helped

her get ready.”

“Then what is on your conscience? That you had the chance to stop her, but instead you let her go?”

“Oh, Donna! What a terrible risk it was. I knew we could get along without the boat—we’d be rescued anyway in a week or two. But still I let her go.”

“Why did you?” Donna persisted mercilessly. “For Keith’s sake—to get him out of here so he can get well?”

“Partly—a little perhaps—for Keith’s sake. But mostly”—and now Mrs. Randall grew calm and strong—“for Sonia’s own sake. For the sake of her sick pride, and maybe—it sounds so strange—for the saving of her soul.”

The light broke in Donna’s face and shone in her dark eyes. “I have a vague idea what you mean.”

“It was her great chance, don’t you see? A call to the highest of her nature. Donna, could I tell her not to answer? It was her turn to grow up, like you’ve all had to do. At best that’s a painful and dangerous process; in her case, the whole weight of mature life laid on in a few brief hours. Didn’t she have to go through with it? Did I dare stand in her way?”

“Right you are, mother,” Donna said with a burst of breath.

“It turned out so, I think. Life’s a queer business, Donna—no one yet has any idea what it’s all about. But I’ve never believed in reason and expedience when they interfere with the great moment of any life. I don’t know why. I only know that while it takes years to grow and age a person, a single instant can make or break a soul.”

Unaccustomed tears stood in the woman’s eyes. “We seem to measure lives by their length, but we ought to gauge ’em by their height,” she went on at last. “And now you know

why I've never tried to keep you from climbing your own mountains—no matter how afraid I am that you will fall.”

## XXII

**So** it had only been an interlude, after all. There *was* a doorway of escape from the jungle prison, and Sonia had found the key. Below the rapids there was quiet water, and beyond the solitudes, a native village.

Looking back on those last days, they seemed to Donna like a long dream in the night. Packing bags; saying farewells; embarking and disembarking on ever-larger boats; seeing a strange face and then a crowd of faces; sleeping on a cot in a rest-house, then in a berth, then on a civilized bed; drinking coffee from a porcelain cup; watching the jungle change to scattered patches of scrub and then die out against the terraced fields—slowly, yet so swiftly it seemed in retrospect, she returned to the land of the living. And one morning the towers of Shanghai rose as though by enchantment out of the river mists.

Yet weeks passed by before her great experience began to fall into true perspective, so she could guess its meaning. She and her mother were living in a comfortable apartment in the heart of the city, but often the hum of the street below her window changed to the murmur of a lost jungle river, and the papered ceiling in the twilight became a dark canopy of boughs. She met Keith and Sonia frequently, taking their places in her rediscovered world, but two faces that she had seen in vanished firelight returned to her only in dreams.

One morning she came to her mother with an opened letter in her hand. The hand trembled a little; she kept her countenance well, but her eyes betrayed her with their

shining. Mrs. Randall took pains to glance up carelessly from her reading.

“I’ve another letter from Joe,” Donna said. She said so without one tremor in her voice.

“How’s he getting along?” Mrs. Randall asked calmly. “Found any more nuggets?”

“He didn’t say so, but he sounded pretty cheerful.” She paused a few seconds. “He’s coming to Shanghai—on business.”

Mrs. Randall made a point of receiving this news calmly. “Any time soon?”

“He was starting the next day. That means he’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Well, well! I’ll be glad to see the boy.”

“That’s not all. He has written Charley to get leave from his army work, and they’re going to meet here.”

“No doubt they’ll have a happy reunion.”

“I was just thinking—why couldn’t we all have a happy reunion—Keith and Sonia too. It would be the first time we’re all together since that last morning on the river. If you think they’d enjoy it——”

Mrs. Randall gave over all pretense of calmness, dropped her book, sprang up, and folded her daughter in her arms.

“Can you do it, Donna? Can you? You know what it means.”

“It means the ending of our contract.”

“Can you face it? Your decision can’t be postponed again, you know. If you bring them together here, it’s an open declaration that you’ll make your choice and abide by it. You’ll owe that to Joe and Keith—and to Sonia too.”

“I’ll make my choice—and abide by it,” Donna answered quietly. “Tomorrow night will either be a new beginning—or the end.”

Mrs. Randall stood very still. “The end, Donna?”

“I know you’re longing to get home. Your roundtrip ticket will soon expire. I’ll know tomorrow night whether I’m going with you.”

On Donna’s first night in Shanghai—when she was so young, so young—she had consulted with her mother as to what to wear to Sonia’s party. It had always been her practise, a happy little rite to them both. But on the eve of her own party, she broke the familiar rule. And when she emerged from her room, at eight o’clock, her mother was struck with something deeper than surprise.

Donna wore a clinging dress of white satin. It was one that had hung in her closet throughout her Shanghai nights. But it had been altered since Mrs. Randall had seen it last: a glossy train hanging from the shoulders had been removed.

“*Oh, Donna!*”

“Yes, mother.”

“Does this mean——”

“I might as well get some wear out of it. I may not get another chance, in Shanghai.”

With one blink, Mrs. Randall drove the tear-mist from her eyes. “You look lovely in it. Just as lovely——” But she did not quite know how that remark could end. “Well, I’ll get you something to wear with it.”

With vigorous movements, Mrs. Randall rummaged in her dresser and brought out a flat cloth-covered box. But her

hand shook a little as she held it out.

There was a soft white glimmer against black velvet. “Pearls,” Donna gasped.

“Put ’em around your neck, Donna.”

“But you shouldn’t have——”

“They’re Japanese pearls, scandalously cheap over here. I was saving them—to go with that dress. But you might as well get some wear out of them, too. Then if you take ’em through the American customs, you may get a reduction.”

Donna fastened them about her throat, then crept to her mother’s arms.

Sonia and Keith were the first to arrive. The Russian girl wore a beautiful black gown glittering with sequins, its sophistication subtly bringing out the girlish lines of her long body, the childlike gloss of her golden head, and the maiden whiteness of her arms and shoulders. Her fingers were no longer chapped and thorn-scratched, but delicate as rose petals.

Keith looked better than Donna could ever remember—more engaging and desirable. His worn, drawn look had changed to the glow of health; even in the twilight hall his eyes were sunny, his smile radiant.

“How marvelous you look, Donna,” he began. “Just like a ——” And he stopped, appalled by what he had been about to say.

Any girl would have known better, let alone Sonia. She leaped into the breach.

“Like a little virgin, long times ago, dressed up for a sacrifice to a wicked god,” she said, without an instant’s



hesitation or faltering. “Donna, it is music.”

But neither of them understood the new Donna. She could have laughed away Keith’s blunder without a pang. This was not cynicism, no mere *savoir faire*, but rather an enriched life, perhaps a deepening sympathy for human folly and an increased faith in human hearts. It was Sonia’s graceful words that fell heavy on her spirits. Yes, arrayed for a sacrifice, powerless to escape, and the wicked god was Fate!

But it was only a dark prophetic mist that swiftly passed away.

“And look at my pearls,” Donna said. “Their first public appearance.”

“One dark pearl, and many little white ones to set it off,” Sonia answered. “But it is most fitting for this wonderful night when we does all meet again. Look, Donna. I too has worn my best. On this emerald are the initials of the last Emperor; he did give it to my father in Petersburg long ago. Tomorrow, maybe, I does give it to a pawn-broker to buy beef-steaks.” And her throaty laugh rang through the room.

Just then there was a sound of confusion in the hall outside, heavy footfalls, a noisy investigation of door-plates, an exchange of amiable insults in Yankee voices, and then a prolonged peal of the bell. Those within turned with brightening faces. There was an upsurge in Donna’s breast. She saw even Keith’s eyes light up. And then, as she opened the door, the whole room seemed crowded with broad shoulders—brimful of friendship—charmed with happiness.

“Hello, hello, hello, everybody. Great guns, I’m glad to see you. Donna, I’ve got to kiss you, in front of everybody.... Sonia, you’re next, and no use to fight.”

“I is not fighting.”

“Mrs. Randall, I’d consider it a mighty big favor——”

“I’m not going to be left out, if that’s what you mean.”

Meanwhile Charley said absolutely nothing, but no grass grew under his feet.

“Why in the deuce didn’t I stay away all this time too?” Keith complained dolefully.

For more than an hour no one could hear his own voice. But there fell a brief silence when Donna led the way into the dining room. For an instant they heard a distant river flowing, saw the green fire of jungle blaze over far hills, and dreamed a fantastic dream of another world.

But it was only a bit of stagecraft on Donna’s part, a little surprise for the party. In the center of the snowy table, under candle-gleam, was a jungle-scene in miniature. And they laughed again when they saw that the pool of water was only a mirror set in paper-grass, that the palm-leaf huts were made of cardboard, and the tiger lurking in the twig-forest was fresh from the shelves of a toy-store.

“A joke’s a joke,” Charley said, “but if you give us root-bread and smoked buffalo for supper, there’s going to be a row.”

“Buffalo my eye,” Joe scorned. “That was a *sladang* you ate—the finest trophy in the world—and much too good for you.”

The room rang with laughter as they recalled the lesser mishaps and minor incidents of their adventure. They chaffed each other till Mrs. Randall marveled again at the free ways of modern youth. But she noticed at last that there was a line they did not cross. Not one word was said of Sonia’s valiant

theft of the Frenchman's boat, and no mention was made of that tragic night when death laid his hand on Keith's arm.

"And now," said Donna, when the coffee was poured, "you've all got to give a report of everything you've done since we last met."

Charley made a move to dive under the table.

"Oh, you can skip the pretty school-teacher you met on the boat," Donna told him, with dancing eyes.

"In the first place, she was a nurse," Charley answered. "In the second, it was on the train. And third and last, my life's an open book."

But at last Donna was able to restore order, and Keith was prevailed upon to give his report.

It appeared that he had taken up his old life where he left it off, acclimated to the roar and rush of Shanghai. But his firm had discovered a new maturity in his work, a greater value, and he was expecting immediate promotion.

"And I'm working harder than I ever thought I could, and somehow I feel ten years older," he concluded.

"What about you, Sonia?" Donna asked eagerly.

"I does not know. I cannot put it in words. Sometimes at parties I get tired, the ears ache, and I think how still it would be in the jungle. And maybe, who knows, soon I take a job."

"That's wonderful, Sonia," Mrs. Randall breathed.

"I cannot help myself, maybe. The jewels, they is most all gone. And I has a chance to work in a dress shop, to show fat ladies how to look slim. I think maybe I do so. Yes, I think so, soon."

"You're next, Charley."

Charley had had the time of his life, of course. "Let's see, I've amputated six legs, trepanned a couple of skulls, sewed up any number of knife and bayonet cuts, and dug enough slugs and scrap-iron out of yellow hides to fill a bucket," he told them, acting it all out. "Fighting's getting heavier all the time. Just now we're planning an invasion of the peaceful cultivators in Hu-Nan. The next time you see me, I'll be Surgeon-General."

"Surgeon-General of what?" Joe demanded.

"Of the official, first-chop army of Hu-Peh, or so it was when I left camp, four nights ago. I don't just know what it is now. It changes from time to time. An old laundryman with long mustachios, named Hung-Hai—and that's what he ought to be—was in command, last time I heard."

"But Charley, it's so dreadfully dangerous," Donna cried, when the banter had died away. "You might be shot any day. And how do you know you won't be taken prisoner and—and your head chopped off?"

"Don't you worry. I stay well in the rear when the battle's on. Besides, it's only innocent bystanders that get shot in Chinese battles: our soldiers shoot first and aim afterward. And if I'm taken prisoner, I'll just join up with the new gang. No one's going to chop off a noble intellect like mine."

But when his flying hands came to rest, Donna saw how trained-down and fine they were; and behind the mirth in his eyes was the solemn promise of service to his kind.

"You're the last, Joe," she said. "Tell us all about it."

So Joe narrated his adventures, in his plain way and deep, pleasant voice. He had made his way from the village of Nok-Pu to the gold-fields on the Ta-Lo River. They had turned out like most other gold-fields, a few rich claims,

occasional strikes to prolong the excitement, but mostly barren gravel. He had staked out some promising ground, and had made good wages with a “rocker” such as he had learned to operate on the white waters of the Saw-Tooth Range, on the far side of the world.

“But now a big French company wants to buy my claim, along with a lot of others, and give me a job as assistant engineer. It’s a nice little nest-egg to start with, and although the job has more future than anything else, it will buy bacon and beans. I’ve come up to talk it over with my grub-staker, Mr. Hatstead, and am going back next Tuesday.”

And this was all the story. But Donna’s child-heart glowed and leaped and fluttered as though she had heard the Song of Roland.

They returned to the living-room for the cozy, lazy after-dinner hour. Sonia took the piano-bench, and soon her silky fingers began to caress the keys. She was not greatly skilled, but had a soft, sweet touch, and the sentimental ballads that she played were fondly familiar to them all.

Joe and Charley sang. Neither was a McCormick or a Tibbett, but youth and hope rang in their voices, they were practised at barber-shop chords, and their audience was in a responsive mood. And when Sonia played “My Little Gypsy Sweetheart,” Keith groped between the chairs for Donna’s hand.

The ballads gave out. Sonia turned from the alien music to the songs of her own people, and now her heart was in her finger-tips. Melodies of old Russia, plaintive things weird as the wind on the steppe, made them all remember that they too were strangers in a strange land. And then Donna felt Keith’s hand tugging at hers, drawing her to her feet.

She glanced once into his face. It was pale and set. And now she knew her hour had struck; she had come to the forks of her life's road. She let him lead her to a small iron balcony overhanging the street.

For a moment she looked down to the blaze of Shanghai lights, then up to the glitter of the stars. Both told her something, signaling her inmost soul, but the glow in Keith's eyes told her most of all.

"Have you anything to say to me, Donna?" he murmured.

She faced him a long time. Tenderness swept her heart, and vanished song echoed in her ears, but at last she shook her head.

"But the contract is over. We're all back in Shanghai." He paused again, as though to rally his courage. "You mustn't keep me waiting, any more."

"Anything you ask me, Keith, I'll answer."

"I ask you to take back my ring. To believe me, when I tell you that I love only you. It was true out there by the river, and it's true now. Oh, Donna, if you'd only trust me again——"

"I do trust you. I believe you. But Keith——" and although her voice was soft and low, it was unwavering as fate—"it's all come too late."

"Your love for me is dead? Is that what you mean?"

"Love like I had for you can't die. I know that, now. But it's changed. Love is like a flower that must be picked when it blooms; if you wait, it goes to seed. Not death, but change." These strange words seemed to flow from her lips beyond her own knowing.

"But couldn't it bloom again, Donna?" he begged.

“I hoped so, a long time. I wanted to love you, Keith, when you needed it so. But I can’t; it’s gone away.”

He looked out over the city. She stilled his trembling hands in hers.

“That’s final, Donna?” The question seemed to be wrenched out of him, by a need transcending pride and despair.

“Yes, Keith.”

“Then everything’s lost. Nothing left. I wish I’d died out there by the river.”

“Don’t say that. It’s unworthy of you. You’ll have a wonderful life.”

“Forgive me. I’m glad I did love you, even though I lost you. I’ll remember what you said about the flower. How it doesn’t die—only makes seed. Maybe it will be the same with me.”

“And that seed will grow. I know it. Now—good-by.”

He turned to her, shaken. “What do you mean, Donna? Good-by to our love, or—oh, you’re not going away!”

“I think so, back to America. Fate seems to point that way.”

When her arms slipped about his neck and she kissed him tenderly and lingeringly, the travail and lost ecstasy in his heart would find no language. A moment later they were back in the living-room, waking from a dream.

Their friends did not look up as they entered. Sonia was playing “Siberian Chimes,” that terrible prelude of dying hope.

One o'clock in the morning, and the Moving Finger writing Donna's fate had not come to rest. Her heart was full of frightened longings, trembling hopes, but the will to make them come true seemed caught up and smothered in some wilful power from without, and whether that power was good or evil she did not yet know. It seemed to her that she could only wait for its next move. She found herself watching for a sign ...

Her breath stopped when Charley sprang into the center of their group and raised his hand for silence. "Leave it to me to think up grand ideas," he said. "Let's all go out to the Del Monte Café and do some orgying. We ought to share our celebration with the populace. And there's a special attraction tonight—they've got Helen Webb for a return engagement."

"And you want a return engagement with Helen Webb," Joe answered. "Boy, she's forgotten you were ever born."

"You wrong me. Mrs. Randall is my girl tonight. What do you say, Mrs. Randall? Would you like to go for a little debauch with me?"

"Not unless the others come along to chaperone us," was the laughing answer.

A vision swept before Donna's eyes—Charley and the little Eurasian dancer at Joe's and her table, Keith coming in the doorway with Sonia walking in beauty beside him. "And now they're lovers," the dancer was saying, pointing out the new-comers, "and his fiancée from America will have to be a wonder to win him back."

But she *had* won him back, only to lose him at last. She hadn't wanted to lose him—it was not her doing—yet life and fate had ordained it so. The flower of love in her heart's garden had gone to seed. Perhaps little Donna had died, and



another girl, no longer trusting but fearful of her own heart, wore her bridal-dress.

She would revisit that scene. It was as though she were told to go there. Perhaps in the blare and blast of the dance-hall she would understand the whisper inaudible now, and in the smoke-haze under the lamps see her way clear. But perhaps she only hoped to meet the ghost of a lost girlhood.

“We’ll all go out there and raise the roof,” she said with a flashing smile.

It was by no collusion that Keith and Sonia rode alone up the dimly-lighted boulevard. He could have taken one of the others in the roadster he was driving, but Joe would not leave Donna and Charley squired Mrs. Randall, so these four rode off in Joe’s rented car.

But when Sonia’s hand crept into his, and the grace of her being flowed out to him, Keith was glad it had happened so.

She was silent a long time. Then he heard the music of her voice before he caught her words.

“How is it with you now, little Keith?”

“Just about what I expected, Sonia.”

“Does you wish to tell me? I could understand, maybe. There is no need for secrets any more.”

His heart fell sick and faint, then leaped up in strength. “Oh, Sonia! Will you let me tell you? You don’t know what it will mean to me.”

“Heart to heart at last, Keith, little one? I is not afraid.”

“I asked Donna tonight if she loved me. I told her I loved her, and I do. And she answered no.”

Sonia leaned back on the seat and closed her eyes. “It is very sad to love—and not be loved in return.”

“Yes, but it’s not all loss. I grew up tonight. My eyes are opened.”

“And I grew up—that night on the river, when I listened in the dark. It is just life, my Keith.”

“I know. But if love ever comes to me again, I’ll not throw it away. I’ll guard it every minute, and never let it go.”

“You mean, I know, a love you can return. But maybe an unanswered love will comfort the heart a little, while you wait.”

“What do you mean, Sonia?” He could hardly speak.

“You does not need to ask. It is heart to heart now.”

“You mean—an unanswered love for Donna? Tell me, because I mustn’t make—another—mistake.”

“No, Keith. I am a Russian; I do not understand such things. To love in vain may make strong the soul, but it tears the heart. I mean the comfort of being loved—by another. You know that, Keith. Let us don’t pretend any more.”

He stopped the car by the side of the road and looked into her starlit eyes.

“Sonia, do you love me still?”

“Always, little Keith. All this life.” She spoke simply, gravely, and there was no fear nor shame.

“Then I’ve got something to live for. Something to reach to.” He caught her hands in a trembling grip. “Oh, will you let me start again, at the very beginning? A new Keith—a new Sonia—and a new hope?”

“It is for you to say.”

“Will you keep on loving me, while the wounds heal and things straighten out? Who knows what happiness may be waiting for us both!”

“I could not stop, even if I try.” And then, after a little pause: “It is dark now, but another day does come. We will wait and see what it bring, little Keith.”

When the party reunited at the door of the night-club, Keith left Sonia in Mrs. Randall’s care while he saw to the parking of his car. He met Joe in the lot, and impelled by a sudden impulse, beckoned him aside. His heart to heart talk with Sonia had set him on a new road of life. He had learned the profit of plain dealing, and now he wanted to tear down the last barrier between himself and his former rival.

“It’s been a grand reunion, but we’ll soon be going different ways,” Keith said, looking into Joe’s face. “You’re leaving Tuesday, and we may not meet—in quite this way—again. So if we have anything to tell each other, I think that now’s the time.”

“I think so too. It’s fine of you to offer the chance.”

There was a brief pause. Keith smiled faintly, perhaps a little sadly. “We’ve been good rivals,” he went on at last, “and good friends, too.”

“And I’d like that last to continue, all our lives. As to the first—I wish it could be over and settled, as soon as possible.”

“It’s over now.”

Joe stood very straight. “I don’t quite understand, Keith. Unless you mean—she’s promised to take back your ring \_\_\_\_\_”

“No such luck, old man. Everything’s finished between her and me—for good. She told me so.”

Joe stood staring. For a moment his exultation was drowned in whole-hearted sympathy for one who had lost so

much.

“Hard lines, Keith.”

“I wanted to tell you, and relieve the strain. And I thought you might like to know you’ve got a clear field.”

“It’s mighty sporting of you.”

“Thanks. I’ve got one more thing to say, and I hope you won’t think I’m spreading it on. I don’t blame you for trying to get Donna. I laid myself open. I feel especially kindly toward you, for the way you stood by all through our trip. And although it’s pretty cold comfort, I can see you’re the best man for her. You’ve got the better chance to make her happy.”

“That’s plain talk, and I appreciate it.” They were both young men, not yet cynical of time-worn symbols, so they shook hands in silence.

The party took a table in a comparatively quiet corner of the cabaret, with, but not part of, the crowd. Donna’s first impression was how little the scene had changed since her last visit. The same-looking throng, save that their faces had been switched around. The same triple-row of ticket-dancers, their casualties replaced by similar peas from the same great city pod. The same disharmonies of color and sound that somehow blended into a strangely touching song of life. The only real change was in herself, in the new deep-seeing of her eyes.

She no longer gazed in wide-eyed wonder. These people were her own kinsmen, on the same quest as herself save by different paths. And how few could land on the Happy Isles, and how many would be cast away! They were not to blame, she thought—none of them were to blame. They searched, hoped, strove with such powers as had been given them, each

with his burden heavy or light, and in the end inexorable destiny laughed and let them through, or leaned and thrust them forth.

She saw Carter, whom she had met at Sonia's party. With him was a young girl in an ingenuous fluffy dress, but with sly, old eyes. He looked older, Donna thought—worn and tired; but still he kept his tragic quest along the same dark road. His eager talk died away as he caught Donna's eyes. He stared—half-rose to his feet—touched his forehead in a stiff, jerky salute—then dropped into his seat with a jar.

“Our friend seems a sheet or two to the wind.” Joe said.

“Poor old fellow,” Donna murmured.

Meanwhile the fluffy-dressed girl stared daggers.

Every way she looked, Donna saw frustration. The laughter she heard was harsh; when the hostess-girls forgot to smile, their mouths were wistful; the faces at the tables were more often sad than gay. On the dance-floor she spied Marge, her eyes alight with self-hatred, her lips curled in a malicious smile.

“Donna, you look white,” Joe told her. “What's the matter?”

“I'm scared, Joe.”

“What of, for heaven's sake?”

“I couldn't make you understand. I hardly do myself.”

“Snap out of it, Donna. You weren't scared a bit out there in the woods, when there were tigers all around us. And now that we're all out with whole skins, and the whole world's before us——” He stared incredulously.

But there was no use trying to explain to Joe. He would go on, grinning, trusting, blundering, until he found out for

himself, the truth thrust down his throat. Dearest Joe! To look at him tore her heart.

“If you only knew how beautiful you are in that white dress,” he was saying.

And he didn't even guess that it was to have been her bridal-gown.

Just then the crowd stilled. From the bawling mouth of the orchestra-leader they heard a familiar name.

“And she will appear in a brand-new number of her own creation,” the announcer went on, “entitled, ‘Surrender to Kismet.’ ”

The orchestra struck up an Oriental tune. The saxophones droned; the drums kept savage time. Helen Webb, the little Eurasian dancer whom the whole East loved, danced out with a wild, proud tread, her glossy head held high. Her arms gleamed with bracelets, jewels flashed in her hair, from her shoulders hung a scarlet cape.

The first part of her dance symbolized the high-heart of youth, valor, ecstasy. Whirling, she seemed a pillar of red flame. Her arms spread wide, possessive of the world. Her bracelets clanked; rapture was on her face.

“Great, isn't it?” Charley whispered to Joe.

“Yes, but that gang would rather see her do the hula-hula.”

“Hush,” Donna warned. A prophetic pain drove through her heart, but she would not shrink from its meaning.

The tempo of the music changed. A look of fear crossed the dancer's face. She seemed to be whirling frantically, now, with frequent, started pauses, as though the time was short. Her imperious gestures seemed forced. Once she stopped, covered her eyes, then danced madly on.

The music became ever slower. There was a breath-taking pause between each drum-beat. Fear on the dancer's face began to change to despair. She seemed to be tiring—ageing; her gestures were pleading. She removed the tiara from her hair and laid it on the floor.

The tune seemed floating away. She ran here and there, as though trying to hold it. One after another she removed her bracelets and put them with her tiara on the floor.

The spot-light dimmed. She seemed fighting toward it, but something thrust her back. At last, while a calabash wailed and the drums were muffled, she stopped dead still and slowly removed her scarlet cloak and dropped it with the jewels. Clad all in white now, she knelt, threw out her arms in surrender, and touched her forehead to the floor.

Long after the applause had died away, Donna sat entranced. Only when the orchestra swung into a jazz tune did she start up out of her dream world and return to her friends. Then she reached and touched Joe's hand.

“Dance with me, Joe,” she murmured. “I have something to tell you.”

She slipped into his arms; he smiled down at her with shining eyes. Even now he did not guess ...

“And I've got a world of things to tell you,” came his jubilant whisper.

“I'm afraid I'll never get to hear them.” Then, very quietly: “I'm going back to America.”

She felt him stiffen; his hand closed tight on hers. “What's that again, Donna?”

“Mother is sailing soon, next week I think. I'm going with her.”

She dared not look into his face. But his voice was strangely calm. “What does that mean? I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s the only thing to do. I realize that now. We’ve both been living in a dream.”

“Then let’s dream on.” His tone was resonant, almost rough.

“I can’t. I’ve waked up at last.”

“It’s not a dream that I love you. I’d begun to think—to hope—that you loved me. By God, I’m still going to think so until you tell me in plain words that you don’t.”

“Don’t ask me that, Joe.”

Unheeding, he looked straight and deep into her eyes. “Do you love me, Donna?”

But she looked down. “You are very dear to me. Dearest of all. I love being in your arms. But I’m afraid——”

“I want you there always. Will you come?”

“Not now. It wouldn’t be fair to you. Oh, if I could only make you understand——”

“You mean you’re still too fond of Keith?”

“That’s partly it. I can never forget him; something of him will always be in my heart. Maybe that would keep me from loving you all I want to, all you deserve. I’ve become afraid of love, Joe—afraid of life.”

He nodded, and it seemed to her that a little smile curled the corner of his lips.

“It has such power to hurt,” she went on. Then, as his arm pressed her close: “Perhaps I do love you, Joe. I want to be yours, always. If you’ll come to America, a year from now, maybe we can have each other. But not now. And—and that’s final.”



He danced a turn in silence. At last she dared to glance into his face, but the despair she had expected and dreaded was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, he looked as he always looked, kind, plain, calm save for his luminous eyes. Her heart seemed to close up ...

“I tell you what let’s do.” He spoke so clearly, in such an every-day tone, that she was startled out of herself.

“Yes?”

“Go outdoors for a breath of fresh air.”

She could not have been any more taken-aback if he had suggested a sandwich. Dazed and white, she danced with him to the door, then followed him through the hall. He led her straight to his car, helped her in, and got in beside her. A moment later they were gliding down the silent road.

He drove in silence, his face serene. Long moments passed, while he swung from street to street, moving generally westward.

“You’re giving me a lot of fresh air, Joe,” she said at last.

“You need a lot, Donna.” He spoke calmly.

She made a violent start. “Why?”

“To blow all that Oriental rigmarole out of your head.”

She did not know why her heart leaped up. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean that moonshine about fate—or Kismet—or whatever you want to call it. It may be all right for the Chinese, but you’re an American girl, free, white, and twenty-one. You’re the master of your fate, if you just knew it—every one is. And I’m not going to see it get you down.”

The fresh air burst through the open window into her face. Her whole body began to glow. “Joe, do you *really* think

that?”

“I know it. Donna, you’ve been too long in Shanghai with nothing to do but think. When you were pounding roots out by the river you didn’t have any of those ideas—you were your own boss, and the boss of most of the rest of us besides. A person’s life is what he makes of it—and you and I are going to make ours, and make ’em glorious.”

She grasped his arm, trying to speak, but her breath failed.

“You know where we’re heading for right now?” His voice rang. “The American Mission outside the International Settlement. We’re going to get the minister out of bed, and you and I are going to be married. And that’s what we think of old man Kismet, and all his works.”

It was a long time before Donna found breath to protest. And then her words were poor and her voice small.

“Joe, you’ve gone crazy.”

“You bet.”

“We can’t do any such reckless thing as that.”

“Can’t, eh? We’re doing it, aren’t we?”

“Even if we wanted to, it wouldn’t be—practical. People can’t get married without a—a license.”

“We can in China, sweetheart. There’s no legal formalities out where we’re going. We’ll get one later from our Consul, if you like.”

And even now he sped out Bubbling Well Road, heading into Chinese territory.

“Joe!”

“Yes, darling.”

“Go back. I won’t be married without a ring.”

“It’s here in my vest pocket. A native made it for me out of my own nuggets.”

“It was mighty cheeky of you.” She tried to say more, but only threw up her hands and let them fall again.

Presently he gave her a sideways glance, smiled his kind smile, and drew her against his shoulder.

“Parting with Keith was bound to go hard with you tonight, Donna—left you up in the air,” he told her gently. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have had to carry you off this way.”

She made no answer.

“I’m glad of it, now. I get you that much sooner. I’m sorry about one thing, though, for your sake—that you didn’t have time to get a wedding-dress. But I know you couldn’t look any more beautiful——”

“You big sap. This is my wedding-dress.”

He slammed on his brakes and pulled the car to the side of the road. “You know Donna,” he said, as he drew her into his arms. “There must be something in this destiny business, after all.”

After a long time he felt her lips whispering his name.

“Joe, darling.”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“We’d better hurry on, if we’re going to get back in time for a sunrise wedding breakfast with our friends.”

THE END

**Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:**

quite so stanchly=> quite so staunchly {pg 5}

so much contact work=> so much contract work {pg 30}

leared and thrust=> leaned and thrust {pg 268}

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[The end of *The Splendid Quest* by Edison Marshall]