

HOME FOR HO FAT WUN

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And because it seemed to him a perfectly natural offer she did not at once perceive the outrageous impertinence of it. Then her eyes widened and she gasped.

Of course it was her cue to register highly offended dignity; to say "How dare you, sir!" and to stalk coldly, gracefully away. But in all her twenty-two years no stranger had ever before offered her a valuable gift that she yearned for and couldn't afford to buy; and if he had, certainly he had not looked so absurdly like a great, earnest little boy while he was doing it. She missed her cue. Her lips quivered indignantly, and she, too, made speech uncensored by a properly deliberative brain.

"You—you lied to me," she said, "and you—bought my mandarin—and now—oh, it serves me right!"

And then she went out of the shop. She did not stalk coldly and gracefully; she almost ran. And Peter, knowing that he had done an unpardonable thing and that she was going away forever, with no volition of his own, bolted hatless after.

"I'm sorry," he entreated. "Please don't be angry. I didn't think—I'm an idiot—"

AT THE curb she turned, and cold, clammy dismay overlaid his consternation. She was quite composed; she even smiled—right through him. "Please don't bother about it," she bade him sweetly. "It doesn't matter in the least."

A *caramela*, one of those diminutive victorias that serve for locomotion in Colon, drew up at her signal. "Hotel Washington," she instructed the kinky driver, still with that same chilling sweetness.

And Peter—just stood. He felt large, unnecessarily large. Even her wrathful scorn had been preferable to this impregnable composure in which she had wrapped herself, leaving him outside—oh, very definitely outside. He had, in fact, ceased to exist. The pony got under way with much pattering of hoofs, but little speed; even now he could have overtaken the carriage in three strides; but he stood rooted helplessly to the sidewalk, feeling very, very large and superfluous.

Probably he looked it too. He felt eyes upon him and met the disapproving gaze of a policeman. Now the police of the Canal Zone are not the usual deferent and easily-awed little *gendarmes* of Latin-America; they are six-foot Americans in businesslike khaki. This one, to judge from his face, was probably named Halloran or Casey.

"A little mashing this afternoon, buddy?" he inquired softly.

Now Peter was readily intimidated by young women with poise, but he was not afraid of red-faced young men with Irish eyes. He grinned sadly. "Do I look like a masher?" he demanded.

The policeman returned the grin. "I'll say you ain't havin' much luck at it," he admitted.

"Do you happen," said Peter, "to know who that young lady is? Does she live here? I made a bad break—without meaning to, you know—and I'd like to get an introduction and square it if I can."

The policeman shook his head. "Just goin' through, I reckon. She told the driver Hotel Washington. Waitin' for a steamer, likely."

In the hotel—where she probably had few acquaintances and he had fewer—a proper introduction would be difficult. And it must be so extremely proper after what he had done!

"Have a cigar," said Peter dismally.

IT WAS tea time when he reached the hotel. He was not normally addicted to the gentle vice, but he was ripe for desperate deeds. Many women took tea. Perhaps—

No sooner had he emerged among the tables on the seaward veranda than he saw her. And in the party at her table was a man he knew, a man named Alexander or Patterson or Smith. Peter's sore heart leaped. With the idle, carefree look of a man storming single-handed a nest of machine guns he advanced.

"Hello, Alexander," said he lightly—or Patterson or Smith. "Will somebody give me tea? I'm starving."

A stout matron, whom his acquaintance introduced as Mrs. Carson or Pettigill or

Nell Harney—of course that was her name; pure music it was, too, when you come to think of it. Those faint, delectable freckles were slightly submerged in color, probably due to the heat; but her eyes were quite cool and candid.

"How do you like Panama?" queried Peter brightly.

"It's very interesting. One sees so many different kinds of people." It was entirely plain that Peter was one of the least desirable kind.

WITHIN three minutes he was reduced to dumb and perfectly apparent misery; so apparent that his friend—Mr. Alexander or Patterson or Smith—saw it. His eyes, which were blue or brown or black, twinkled. "Gets delightfully cool here in the late afternoon—eh, Allen?" he drawled, with that genial tactfulness that no law book defines as provocation for murder.

The girl's clear eyes smoldered darkly. She rose. "I've got to get off some letters, people," she explained, calmly oblivious to the fact that the letters must go on the same steamer that would take them all to New York. And with perfect dignity she made her way among the tables and departed.

It was a relief when the party broke up and Peter was no longer at the necessity of pretending to be civilized. He slumped in his chair, chewing savagely an unoffending cigar and meditating on the wreck of his hitherto approximately happy life. The butterflies came out, the little living pansies of Panama that rejoice in the cool of morning and evening, swirling and dancing on the air about the smooth green lawn; but Peter stared glumly past them at a large bronze statue of—apparently—George Washington Showing Pocahontas the Atlantic Ocean. The sun went down in a brief flare of color, shading through rose and gold to dim purple on the sea; but to him it was only a sunset and a great deal of water.

"Ho Fat," he growled unjustly that night to the little mandarin, "Fat Wun, you're the guy that spilled the beans. Everything was lovely until you butted in."

The mandarin smiled politely. He was too courteous to contradict. His masterly non-resistance moved Peter to shame.

"I apologize, old fellow. You're right. I did it all by myself. Just opened my mouth and put my foot in it."

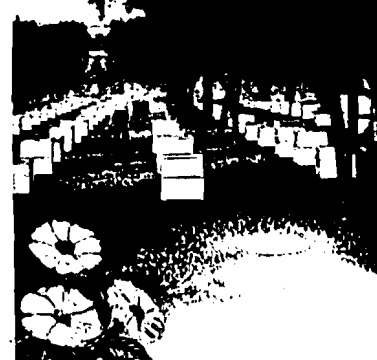
The mandarin smiled in forgiveness. "Cheero!" he would have said, or the Chinese equivalent of that comradely word. "All is not yet lost. Perhaps on the boat—"

BUT on the boat Peter's lack of desirable qualities became even more distressingly plain. He managed to attach himself to the party long enough to remark brilliantly that it was a lovely morning; to which the girl assented sweetly, turning within the next half second to join animatedly in another conversation.

It is a fact confirmed by our best psychologists that cheerful surroundings only intensify inward gloom. The *Abangarez* was a white and not unseemly ship; the sea was dimpling blue, the morning sky gay and clear. Peter stood exiled at the rail and watched the waterfront of Colon recede and take on beauty across the distance, flanked by green jungles and topped by purple hills. It was all wrong. The sky should have been overcast with threats of violence; the ship should have been black, black as the sails that sent their message of despair across the Aegean Sea.

The ripening and waning of a perfect day drove darkness deeper into his soul. He could not pace the deck without seeing her, though he himself had become totally invisible to clear hazel eyes. In the dining saloon he was opposite her across the room, but those laughing eyes never paused on him. How bright she was; she kept her whole table merry!

After dinner he escaped from a dreary bridge game in the smoking room, alleging falsely that he was in need of sleep. What he needed was gloom about him—gloom without to match the gloom within. He made his way forward from the lighted promenade, down across dark, unfamiliar hatches, past vague, shadowy winches to the pitch blackness of



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