THE LAST DITCH

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The Last Ditch

BY

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TO
JOHN

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PROLOGUE: HANKOW
THE YELLOW RUG WOMAN

I

Romney saw the rug before he saw the woman. It was the yellow of India, the yellow you see on the breast of the purple martin and on the inner petals of an Emperor rose. The weave of the rug was like no other. Its folds looked heavy like raw silk, yet the fabric itself was thin. It would last a life time, and then become a priceless gift for the one held most dear. It was soil-proof as a snake's skin. It was either holy or savage.

They were on the little river steamer, *Sungkiang*, a day's passage below Hankow. The woman had boarded that forenoon at Wu-chang. Romney had come through from Ngan-king. The yellow rug lay across the knees of the woman. The afternoon was breezy and bright. It was May, and the rice was green along the flats of the southern shore.... She was either English or American, Romney reflected, and also that the world was well supplied with pretty women, but not with rugs like that.

Just now the woman held out her arms to a missionary's child—a passing

boy-child of five in sandals. His legs were bare and brown and scratched. His name was Paul and he was a stoic from much manhandling. He went to her arms in silence, and there was a burning now in Romney's chest. Her voice had been a thirsty primitive note, like a cry, as if the presence of the child hurt her.

The little boy stood erect and silent against her limbs. She lifted the rug and drew it about his waist to hold him close. She was lost to everything else. Romney had fancied her the most exquisite and delicate creature, but this face that he saw now had the plain earthy passion of a river-woman talking to her first-born—a love of the child's body and face and lips, the love of a woman who loves the very soil of play on her child. Paul had been running the decks for two days, making enough noise to give the missionary the reputation of being a widower. The child was moist from running at this moment, and the woman buried her face in his throat.

Romney wished whimsically that he were the missionary so he could come into the picture for the sake of meeting the woman. The child was drawing away. Her dark eyes were untellably hungry already. Paul must have told his name, for she was saying:

"Such a right name for a noble boy. And where are you going?"

"To Hankow."

"It's like a fairy-tale—a young man going to Hankow to seek his fortune—"

"My father does not like me to read fairy-tales—"

Paul's eyes were full of pictures. Romney did not hear what she said to that, but circled the little deck again, thinking of her eyes and voice. They went with the yellow rug. As Romney returned, the child pulled back from the woman, announcing:

"That's my father."

And now for the first time Romney's eyes and the woman's met. The child had pointed his way, though the missionary was behind him. Her look came up with something that seemed to say, "I beg of you—don't disappoint me." Then Romney forgot the peculiarity of that, in the sudden sense that she was like the blood-sister of some one he had known. At the same time flat in his consciousness was the fact that he had not known any such "some one." She was young, but this was not the look of a girl at all—the look of a hungry imperious woman who had known love and been denied—adult understanding, the shoals of cheap illusion passed. She was looking beyond him at the real father of Paul.

Under his own calm, Romney was intensely sensitized. Something had happened to him from her eyes. He felt he was out somewhere in the deep waters of life wherein she sailed—the shallow problems already put from them, all decoration, convention and imitation thrust aside. The missionary and the little boy had passed. And now Romney did a very good thing for him, and something

that he would not have thought possible before this day. He drew a chair close to the yellow rug, saying:

"May I?"

"Yes."

... They talked of Paul, of missionaries, of Asia, travel. Her manner was easy and genuine, her observations wise and humorous, but her eyes full of challenge. There was tenderness in them, and something that for a better name he called deviltry. He felt himself in the presence of a big nature, whose sweep was from the primitive passions of birth and death, of fear and hunger, to some consummate and mysterious ambition. He could not tell what she wanted; and at the same time her thrall was stealing over him, preventing him from seeing her the same at different moments. He felt that her sweetness could be unfathomable to one she loved. She was exquisite in every detail—lip, nostril, finger-tip, hair, figure, voice, manner, wear—all as perfect as the yellow rug. Yet it was beauty, rather than loveliness, something to fear about it.

Romney knew in that first hour that he did not challenge her. He felt his youth, his imperfections, the wastes of his past years. All that he had fancied good about those years looked questionable now. If he had known that he was to meet this woman, his life would have been different. He had met no one like her. She accepted his best with ease and without wonder. No man had been able to do that. She tossed a crown over the highest of his mental offerings and added a higher one of her own on his favourite subjects. Yet they were not showing each other their wares. She stimulated him as no one had done before, and as for her part—it was the pleasant passage of an hour.

An Irish woman with an olive skin and dark hair and eyes—slender and not too tall. Her face in profile had the Greek essential of beauty, but with a hardly imaginable delicacy covering the rigour of that austere line of bone structure. She seemed the most conserved creature he had ever met, as if every excellence of life had been known to her from a child—all love and reverence and protection. He suddenly remembered that fury of instinct with which she had kissed the boy Paul in the throat. Something earthy and ample about that, sound and deeply-grounded like a peasant woman's passion.

He wondered again and again what she wanted. It had nothing to do with money or position—Romney was sure of this. Queerly enough the truth did not come to him until later. They dined together humorously in the little cabin of the *Sunkiang*.... A Burmese tiger had killed her husband.

"I can stand it—if I don't stay in one place too long," she said, looking at the farthest punkah. "It is always with me. If I stay at home, or any one place many weeks, the thoughts seem to pile up so that I cannot breathe. They drive me away—"

She had evidently not found before much understanding of this point—seemed without hope to make herself clear to him.

"The thoughts of it become heavy in any one place," she added, "so that there is no home—"

"I know," Romney said.

She looked at him quickly. Any one might have said it, but Romney spoke as if he had earned the right, and she questioned that.

"The tiger killed my baby, too,—though I was in England—"

She said it apparently with little emotion, but Romney sensed a slow pounding of agony in her breast, like a sea that cannot quiet down.

"I have thought of everything," she was saying. "I have some philosophy. I have no foolish sense of this life being all—or death being all, but, oh, I was going to take him his little baby—as soon as it was born. I was at his father's in Kent, England. And to think that a bit of pink paper and the word *tiger*—"

Romney was silent.

"My baby would have been as old as that little boy with the silly missionary father," she added.

"Why silly? I only saw a bent drab man with his particular idea of God—"

"Silly because he doesn't permit the child to hear fairy stories—"

"Ah—"

Romney found himself regarding her judgment as quite right.

He thought he was beginning to understand now, yet she seemed to live too powerfully in the present hour to be lost altogether in a tragedy of five years ago. The look of her eyes had to do with the future, not with the past. At the same time there was something tremendous in the slow, still way she had spoken of her child and its father. A magnificent sort of Englishman he must have been to hold this woman's life to his....

They were on deck again. The wind had gone down. The moon played upon the mists of the ricelands on the southern shore. To the north the river was crowded with small boats and the myriad lights of a low-lying city were fused into a dull red glow. The woman was thrilling him now with every sentence:

"I am not hugging a grief. I see that I gave you that impression. Perhaps I carry it with me—and give it forth from time to time as a matter of habit. It is doubtless as interesting as another, but it is not true. Life is too short to try to make most people understand. If I care enough to explain, I tell a different, a more real story. You are good to talk to. I think I must have been lonely when you came and drew up your chair. That startled me pleasantly—your doing that. At least, I knew you weren't common. Grown-ups—men and women adults—should dare to be real to each other. How chatty I am—"

"I like it. I do feel the gift of it—"

"No, I'm not going around the world clinging to an ancient bereavement.... He was a very good man, patient, a man's man—a tiger-hunter. It's all in that. I was younger five years ago. I was so young that I thought for a time my future sufficiently wrapped in his. Then I had his baby. That made a kind of devil of me. I had *lived* those months. I found that there was something huge and endless about that experience. I am not giving you any cant about motherhood. I could smell and taste and see into things as never before. I was in a rage when he went away to hunt tigers. Why, he took it as a matter of mere nature—as something in the natural course of events—that I should bring *his* child into the world. I was growing into a real creature and he could not rise out of the annual tiger rhamadan. It is a sort of religion with his family—and couldn't be broken. And then I was smothered in his family. When the word was brought a kind of madness came over me—sorrow—yes, there was real sorrow. I remembered all his good, but the madness had to do with *perpetuating him*—a man who could leave me in that smothering British household.... It seemed I wanted a child that had nothing to do with him—with them.... What I wanted in those days, I wanted with a kind of madness. They said it was my grief that killed the little one. These things are mysterious.... And now—"

She laughed softly. Romney was trying to adjust this story with the earlier talk, but each part destroyed the other. He could as readily believe the first as the final. It dawned upon him that the real truth might lie somewhere between, but there were no tangible forms to grip in this middle distance. He was not inclusive enough to know that she was for the moment intensely what she said. In any event the strange lapses of the tale did not break the enchantment.

"Don't try to understand," she added gently. "No man could understand—at least, none but a very great artist."

"But now," he repeated.

"Oh, I search and search. I know that travel does not bring me nearer to what I want, but I can't rest long in one place. He left me everything that the world can give, but I can't live long in his houses. Yet what I search for is as likely to come to me at home, as here in Asia—"

"What is it you search for?" Romney asked.

"A man," she said.

2

Romney lay in his berth after midnight. All that he had known and won hereto-

fore was gathered together but did not weigh in the balance against Moira Kelvin. No discrepancy stopped the tumultuous striding of his thoughts after her flying image and the multitude of her sentences. She had amplified her story. Here was a woman brave enough to go out and look for her own. She believed she would know him at once. She believed the woman in her would know before he knew.

"It's not a matter of place," she had repeated. "I don't hasten matters by rounding the world every year or two. I know he might just as well cross my own threshold in Ireland or come to one of the late tiger-hunter's households in England. Not a matter of place, but the right time. I think when we are both ready he will come surely—it must be he who is not ready.... See how the years go. I am older than you, Sir Romney. These are years on the vine now. I am nearing thirty. I am afraid of this waiting. It sometimes makes me feel sour to wait. I don't want to be sour when he comes. I want one more child—one child from him. I learned something of what it means—oh, just the beginning of that mighty mystery. I would kill him—if he did not prove the real lover. No more tiger-hunters for me. All boyish things would have to be put away by the man I took for my own. He would have to know what it means to be a father. There's something heroic about that that the world doesn't dream of yet. My lover would have to understand that. At least, he would have to know when I told him. God, how few are the lovers in the world."

Romney pondered this again and again in his berth, sentence by sentence. Once she had laughed and said:

"The man I mean—why, his romance is greater to him than his life work."

And again, she had bent forward whispering, her hand upon his knee: "Sometimes I feel as if I were strong enough to be the mother of the new race."

All this on a little river steamer, deep in China, the rice-lands giving away to the hills as they neared Hankow. Moira Kelvin had but one theme—the lover she would some time know. A frail superb woman burning with a dream. Romney felt that there was stuff in her to endure fire that would wither most women. She had the physique for great emotions. He quite believed that she was capable of killing the man who failed her. He sensed something of her deadly horror in the mistake she had once made. She was different now from the girl-wife of that patient English sportsman.

"There are analogies in nature about this killing of the male," she had said. "Look at the fate of the bee whom the queen crowns king in their flight."

The hours had passed magically. It was he who had risen first. He was afraid of the woman, afraid as he had never been before, of some intrinsic lacking of his own. He felt at times that his own presence had nothing to do with her ideal—that she was merely telling her story as she might have done to some woman companion. Then there were other moments of personal relation—as if

she felt from the first the power she possessed for him; that she was interested in making it greater; that she loved the use of her power in his arousing; even that he might be or become something of this solar being she dreamed of.... Always with her was the feeling that she was not interpreting herself exactly, some histrionic weakness—that she was carried away in the ardour of her impulses; that she acted perfectly the moment, but was not exactly that. Romney hated the logic of the male mind that persistently brought him this observation.

They were together the next afternoon at Longstruth's *Pyramids* by the river, a little table in the bamboo clumps with the most famous tea of the Empire. Two white butterflies were whirling together persistently near. Moira Kelvin's eyes followed them dreamily. Romney said:

"They make me think of the States—little common kid-day butterflies. I don't know as I ever saw them before in China."

"They are around the world," she answered. "They are always where I am because I see them. Always two—like bluebirds, and always silent like bluebirds. I see them and all well-paired things.... Once in Ireland in the fall of the year I found a cocoon, a very large and different one. It was on an old lilac tree near the bedroom window where I slept as a child. The silk was gray brown, a filmy weave like a dress my mother wore as I first remember. I loved her terribly in that dress—ah, the moths, I was telling you. I broke the branch and took the cocoon to the room. Then there was a night in the following June when I happened to be home for a few days. It was a misty windless evening of endless twilight. Great purple mists came up and breathed upon the earth and mated and melted into the holy breath that hung over the grove of copper beeches.... I am hungry and thirsty to-day, Sir Romney, or I would not talk like this. Sometimes Nature maddens me....

"But I was telling you of that June night. There was a rustle in the corner, and I ran from the little room. That house was full of ghosts to me, and there seemed no love in the world—only loneliness and twilight—my heart streaming its torrent upward and outward, but seeming to touch no living thing.

"I laughed at myself for being frightened by a little rustle and went back into the room. I saw a great gray moth at the window screen and then I remembered and ran to the desk where I had left the cocoon. The whole branch had fallen—and I got the picture of the birth of a winged thing there in the shadows. The moth itself was on the screen—a gleaming gray creation, with a light of its own about it—the light of the fairy world which I remembered from a child. The wings were whirring silently—the still strange creature poised for flight in the night, and held by this man-made screen. At the end of each feathered antenna was a pendent cross. I tried to open the screen, but it was old like all of the things of that house and I ran to find a servant.

When I returned, the moth was not alone. *Its own* had come to it through the twilight—answering some cry we are too coarse to hear. They were there together—a mystic pair of wonderful gray mates—one on the outside of the screen, one in the room. I could not wait for the servant, but cut a door in the wire with a rough bronze paper-cutter, and away they flew together."

It was her theme.

All that day Romney dwelt in her power. She gilded his world. He found that his relation to her was that of servitude. She commanded imperiously, dictating what they should say, where they should go, what they should eat and drink. Yet he was glad, for this had never happened before. It did not occur to him that this mysterious establishment of their relation was fatal to the real romance. Each minute forged him anew. She was great and glowing. He did not know that all the old ideals of wooing and winning that the world has come up through were impossible with her. Vaguely and darkly the hope formed that *time* might change something; that the luck of a white man in Asia might come to his aid.

Romney was less the mere crude male than most men. He had intuitions, visions, deep yearnings, answered to very little of the levelling dominance of the trade mind, but on the very points that he excelled, she chose to master him. It was as if he had been provinced in Asia and she had come from all the earth. His thought of her to-day was not the thought of yesterday. It did not dawn upon him that her changes might not be moodiness or incoherence, but the very width of her orbit and splendour of her diffusion.

There was at Longstruth's a Chinese boy who served them. He seemed to enter into their thought of the little delicacies. He had some English which Romney chose to use for a time, but there came a moment of late afternoon when a matter of service required explicit information, and Romney administered it in Chinese, excusing himself as he took his attention for a moment from the woman. He turned back to her to find a new interest in her eyes.

"Tell me about yourself," she said suddenly. "You must have come to China as a child to speak like that."

"No, I have been here only four years—three years in India before that. My ways have not been interesting. Since you came they have all been cheapened. I see I have wasted my time—"

"Now that is a good saying. Thank you. Sometimes, Sir Romney, you are very attractive—"

"It is quite true. The things that interested men here—I mean the Americans and English, the big exploiters—have not held me long, though I have worked with them and for them. Always the different, the more hidden things called me. Until yesterday I thought I was at least doing decently well. But I see you have

somehow touched the core of things. I've been puttering—"

"At least, it is good not to be considered either wicked or insane," she answered. "I usually draw that. I wonder that you like my things. Sometimes I have even felt myself that I am a little mad. The first time that came to me was in England the first year after the tiger. It was a summer Sunday morning—the earth was risen in beauty—birds singing as they only sing in the sun-mists that follow a night of rain. It was a seething of bird-song, of colour and fragrance—just a year after the tiger. As I listened, the fury of longing that I live with came upon me in high tide—and then in the midst of it, I heard the sound of church-bells from the village. It was like a gray cloud, an evil odour, a catarrhal voice.... Spectres of the English Sabbath. People stifled me for days after that.... But I talk and talk and I want your story now. See, we have been together all day and some of yesterday and you have listened—"

"I am not through listening. So much of me was asleep before yesterday."

She smiled swiftly at him. "You shall not escape now that you are so good. See, the night is coming. Everything is here. Longstruth's is worth coming up the river for. China is sweeter here and undefiled. I would be hideously lonely without you—and you have not told me who and what you are. Why, listen, I don't often ask a man to talk about himself."

"I get the force of that. It's only that what I have is drab and young. I would have made it different had I known you were coming—"

"Sir Romney—there's a pull about you. You do not diminish. Oh, I must know all about you now—"

"I hear and obey," he said.

3

Romney was a bit taller than necessary with a beaked nose and a head that bowed naturally. When he turned from the side and looked up at you smilingly, it was a face you were apt to remember. The mannerism was so peculiarly his own when he was interested or amused, that he did not know of it. There was nothing about him (unless it was the depth of calmness in his eyes) to denote other than a sophisticated white man travelling in a state of comfort if not plenty. A clean-faced, white-toothed American of twenty-seven—a good mouth, a good brow, straight lean shoulders, and a long dark hand—nothing striking or exceptional, except the beaked nose, and possibly the depth of calmness in his eyes. Something of poise and power in that.

"I came out here seven years ago from California," he said. "A tender-chested young student from Palo Alto with book-Sanscrit. I had a post with an American consul in one of the second towns of Bengal. I used to write letters in Bengali for him. He had a rice-brewery on the side, and couldn't write English. He used to chew tobacco and promote his business, swearing that rice beer was more delectable than English ale, and experimenting in keg-making with the native woods. It hurt him to have to import kegs. The English didn't like him and he had an incessant war on. It kept him fit, this battling. The East could not smother his energy.... But I took other posts and was presently touching the skirts of Mother China.

"She challenged me more than India had done. I really got the call from her one morning on the Pearl River a little above Canton. It was a shimmering day—the big rice-lands on either side. Some rice we saw yesterday, though we're a bit far north. There was a glitter about that day as the sun rose. I seem to remember this now more than then. You always put an atmosphere to your stories—the kind of day or night. Nature means things to you.... I knew right there that day that I had left India for good. That was four years ago. China needed me and I was to spare. All hitherto was mere preparation for a life in the East, more real. You see the English have everything in India. The higher a man climbs the more he feels the ordering English hand. It doesn't make any difference if he likes it or not.

"I was merely carrying a little commercial message up the Pearl River that morning. China touched me, kind of opened up to me then and there, the big deviltry, the big cunning, the big beauty in the world above the dollar sign and the designation of the British pound.

"I remember the saffron legs of my boatman and his sing-song intonation as he hailed some naked neighbour in a passing junk. I began to get the quality of the voices of the Chinese then, as I had heard the native Bengali three years before—a kind of lust in my heart to know what they were saying, and why they said it. I threw up my job and travelled north. I studied long in Shanghai. Long—that is, about two years. Academic Sanscrit didn't help then. I had to get a new neck. I learned the basic Chinese and then began to put on the flourishes of the provinces. I didn't do this with the idea of commanding big money, but I began to make money. You see, I was getting something that only eight or ten Americans have. I wanted more than the language. I wanted the working of the Oriental mind.

"The only clue to that is religion. I had studied a lot with the Hindu boys in Bengal. That's what they do best—study, gather in, mull over, meditate, but bolt at the idea of action. I was American enough to want to make some of this study-stuff come true, but that in India was a valuable period of mental accretion.

It wasn't living here in the East that made me in a sense familiar with the native mind—it was the sacred writings of China, India and Palestine. In Shanghai, and later in Peking, I hobnobbed with the young *literati*—a different class from the Indian students, very interesting men who prepare themselves almost cosmically to enter local politics. I saw that China had always pulled me strangely. Meeting the boys here recalled to me how interested I had been in the Chinese students at Palo Alto. It was from a Chinese at college that I began to get a real conception of the historic and esoteric figure of Jesus—the man we make a religion of in the States. Over here the steady-going literature of the best minds is never far from the utterances of the mystics and the prophets. I met them all from Patanjali to Paracelsus and volumes of magic, the spiritual properties of medicine, studies of the stars that none would scoff at so breezily as the modern astronomers of Europe and America.

"More or less at this time I was in touch with Americans in China who were making money. I lived a double life—holding fast to the commercial world, and keeping secret my enthusiasm for matters of mysticism. This recreation kept me from getting stale and tainted. The white man over here plays a lot, and he drinks too much at his play. Perhaps I'm getting too diffused in this story, but I rather wanted you to understand, since I began, the idea that drove me to become powerful in the native mind and at the same time to hold a grip on the West. I was disinclined to the poverty of the earth and at the same time unwilling to release my grip on certain ideas of Heaven. You see all real mysticism is out of the East. There was only one way to make good on this training and the Chinese knows how. The Hindu doesn't. It's to keep God and man separate, to keep the left hand for the spirit of things and the right for matter and the world. I had a gift in the beginning for these languages. I wouldn't have gotten them without that. I wouldn't have had the urge without it. It was that lust to know what the river-men were saying, and not only that, but to know why they said these things. A man might learn Chinese in a certain number of months, but he can't learn the *feel* of the people without a call to them.

"Finding that I had mastered something, I proceeded to forget it. That means that the processes began to work automatically. I had learned to think in Chinese—that's the truth—so much so that the English and American training I had known began to take on the same sense of distance and novelty that they would from the standpoint of a cosmopolitan Chinese. For instance, you and the yellow rug—even before you spoke, appeared to me in a kind of haze of romance—"

He smiled at her. Romney was himself for the first time in her presence because he saw that his story was making her incline to him pleasantly.

"Meanwhile," he added, "I had ceased to be a boy in certain ways, and I had

come into a bodily health and strength that I never knew as a boy. I had learned to wait and I had learned how to laugh—"

"That is much," Moira Kelvin said.

Then Romney realized—perhaps it was something of premonition—that what he said was not quite as exact as it would have been before meeting her.

"Perhaps it is too much," he replied quickly. "I would have said it without qualification before—before yesterday. I only mean in men-matters. Perhaps I have to learn how to wait and how to laugh all over again in the things that are nearer the heart. I was only talking about the pressures that the world put on a man. Perhaps I have not put away boyish things that pertain to a man's relation with women, his woman. That's an arcanum to me—"

"Arcanums call you, don't they, Sir Romney?" she asked.

He saw the gleam of her eyes and teeth in the purple dusk.

"Something as they call you, I think. I have never known the sheer excitement of a human presence such as you have brought to me. It's because I can lose myself in you. China has a new atmosphere when I'm with you—"

"I am interested. I like your praise."

Her voice came lingeringly to him. "You are not so young as I thought," she went on. "And yet you are young. You are still preparing, and yet you have passed the multitudes of men—oh, so far."

"Presently I began to see the new birth of China. It became clearer and clearer as I learned more of the native mind. Now that I think of it, this new birth which is not yet consummated, is like the gray glistening moth of your Irish house that lay in the desk through the long winter. All that the usual white man sees, even now, is the weathered rusty chrysalis of the old, but I see the wings. They are still pinned. The body is moist and craving, but it looks great and good to me. I met some of the young men who are ready to give their lives for it—a kind of inspired group of young men, like Hugo's group that nearly became famous.

And there is one American whom I was honoured to meet—oh—just recently. My story is rapidly getting up to date. This American, a hunchback and a prophet, has given himself to old mother China. He dreams about the peace that is ahead for the world, and his dreams are straight as the hammer to the anvil because he has no sentiment, knows all about war—even the cleansing of war—has written a text-book on military tactics which is the biggest and newest thing in American and British camps—yet a dreamer about peace—"

Her face was close to his in the dusk, a yearning in her eyes that shook his heart. A chill went through him because this yearning was not for him. He saw that he had touched her in the center of her mysterious being—saw that a man with a dream was more to her than any man's action.

"Tell me more," she whispered.

"Nifton Bend—have you, too, heard of him?"

"Not until now. Is that the Hunchback's name?"

"Yes. I only saw him for about ten minutes. It was in Peking a year ago—the strangest, saddest and longest face in the world. It looks up at you, for he is maimed. I could not speak when he first looked up at me. Something leaped in my chest. I wanted to put my arms about him and lead him to a chair. It wouldn't do to tell that impulse—only to a woman.... The name of Nifton Bend was repeating in my mind. It was in a room of a native professor's house in the Congrou section of Peking. There were students about, but all became hushed with the Hunchback's presence. Cushions were brought and we sat down around him. I remembered his name in connection with the military text-book now. That came with a jump. He was young and yet long ago I had read another book of his, which, until he was here before me, I had not related to the author of the text-book. It was during the college days in California when that other book came to me, and I loved the Chinese setting. The book itself, I did not remember. It was half a story, half a fairy-tale, but from it, the spirit of China had come to me—something related to the emerging of the great gray moth. This was only the beginning of recollections. I had heard this man spoken of as the spirit of Young China, as the organiser and leader of the new Chinese army, as a represser of the Japanese influence. This frail and broken body seemed, in the extravagance of my thoughts of that moment, to hold the future of the Empire. I saw him somehow as the embodiment of the depth and genius of the yellow race. They called him *The General.*

"He was looking at me with a dead, expressionless gaze. An instant before his eyes had been burning, and there had been a smile on the woman-mouth of him. Only the pale angular jaw and the narrow temples had not changed. I was startled at his look. His head made me think of a wolf-hound—that long ironed head. It was not until normal consciousness and the smile returned that I realised that his lapse of expression meant that he was *seeing into me*—that I had been appraised body and soul—"

Romney talked coldly now. He felt the entire passion of the woman turned from his own story—that he had touched something that took her farther from himself, if nearer to her dream. He caught a glimpse of what it would mean to hold the heart of this woman in all its power. It was like Romney to make as much as possible now of the opposing influence, yet he hurried through:

"Nifton Bend's eyes were lingering warmly upon me again. I felt zeal for service under him, but I was tied up for the time being. Yes, it was as if I had found a master. In coming into his presence, I had touched the inner circle. He spoke of China and Japan, a low uninflected English, and then of America—how he had left her because there was no play of his powers in America—how the

States seemed to him tranced in trifles—yet how he loved the States. Presently he said that we were destined to meet again—and I knew that the audience was finished."

"Where is he now?" Moira Kelvin asked.

"In Peking—at least, he is never far from the centre of things, and that is Peking."

They were silent some time and then the woman spoke:

"You have told me a story of yourself—by talking about China and another man.... Take me back to the hotel, Sir Romney, I will see you to-morrow. Come to me at noon if you like. It has been a good day—thanks to you. I'm glad to know you better and better. It sounds cold—but perhaps some time you'll know what that means. I am a little mad to-night.... I seem to feel old China in her new birth—moist and craving like the big gray moth—her mate not yet come—and this Hunchback whom you are destined to meet again—"

4

It was a whirlwind fortnight at Hankow. Romney was game, rather big game, for a questing beauty a-wing around the world. His soul had been asleep to her kind of magic. She touched him awake. His education and many attitudes towards life were torn down and rebuilt. There was a furious lover in the man, and serious weaknesses that had never been tested before. Though he did not acknowledge, and perhaps was not aware of the fact, he had been in his own way a terrific worker. The passions of his life, in a single day, had been turned from his tasks to Moira Kelvin. She had to be a rather splendid creature to take gracefully the full tumult from such a man's heart, but this was her genius.

Romney's woman matters heretofore had been sundry and discursive.

She took his all and was not filled. No other pressure could be brought to bear upon a man to make him greater, to make him surpass himself, than an encounter with a woman who could contain him at his highest force, and still have an aching void to spare.

Moira Kelvin was thirty years old, in full bloom, trusting nothing under the sun but her own heart. Whether it was mania or the excellence of her evolution, her conviction remained upstanding that there was one man somewhere who could fully awaken her. She was without laws and without fears, but she would have considered it the most vulgar form of failure to give herself to a man who called her only in part. She was in the height of her power, and modern enough

to wish to know a man well before she revealed to him more than the usual arts of woman. Her one great mistake had been made at the end of girlhood in the case of the tiger-hunter. She held her body and her beauty even more sacred now because of that failure. Yet she looked into the faces of men everywhere. Any man brave enough could have his chance. Romney made the most of his.

For hours on their last day together Romney could not speak. He looked long into her face from time to time—until it turned into a mist before his eyes, or other shadowy faces passed before it. He could see nothing beyond her but his own death, and he knew enough to realise there could not be much help in that, considering his present frame of mind.... They were at Longstruth's, a sultry evening. She was tender and tyrannical in turn.

"... We are not enemies," she said. "I have been no more to you than you have called. I know you are not holding that ancient balderdash that I lured you on. I have never from the first day kept from you my conviction that the one had not been found in Sir Romney. And yet you were more to me than I thought at first. Why not take the full honour of that now?"

"You are going away," he said dully.

"It is a mercy to you—though I am not merciful. If you were a fool, like most men, you would think me a devil."

"I suppose men who are not big enough to make good with a woman—call her a devil—"

"Or a vampire," she laughed.

He shook his head. He had lost his sense of humour for the time. "I'm not making any mistake about you. I've been away about world matters like most men. The women we meet usually call us to be less than we are, rather than more—"

"Men have made women that way," she said quickly.

"The way doesn't matter. That's what happens, or at least men think so, and fail to get on the ground where even an average woman is at her best.... But it's not generalities for me. I perceived myself lost in you. I loved from the first the great open nature which you drew from—mates in everything, your whole creativeness lost in the one subject—your whole power and reason for being—love. When I came to you I seemed to come into my own country.... I did not seek you. I was happy enough in the old. I looked bleak and blind to myself before your coming. Oh, I praise you right enough—only it's hard, damned hard, to give up—"

"You will be tremendous for some woman," she whispered. "Let me tell you—there was one day when I rocked before you—"

"To think I could diminish after that," he said slowly. His voice chilled her.

"You have said it all, Sir Romney. We did not seek this thing. At least, I had

no wish to hurt you. I do not play in these great matters. Some have thought otherwise, but I do not play. You would not have known me an hour if you had not been worth knowing—"

"I have ceased to be worth knowing then—only to-day?"

"That is not kind, Sir Romney. You are less than yourself to say that. We have been much together. If you are hurt by this, it is because you are less than I think you are. Hurt—I mean enduringly. Hurt, of course now, but constructively. You will not die. Perhaps you will not break training seriously. Listen, do you think I fail to know what will happen to you—if you make the best of this? ... You will be a greater lover for some other woman. She will have to be a greater woman to call you. You will know her more in the first hour because of these days with me. You will be less apt to make the one hideous mistake which men and women make in the world—that of choosing the wrong mate. You will be a quester because of these days with me. There's something precious about that."

"If there is but one woman in the world for me—as you say there is but one man for you—then why is it that I want you so?"

"This is your initiation. Mine was more sordid and revolting with the tiger-hunter. I am your awakener. You think I am everything, because I am older, deeper in the world of love—demanding so much—thinking so much of these things. Remember this—there is no such thing as the triangle among real people. Mark the woman as common-minded who is in doubt between two men whom she knows well. All shuffling and experimenting is the cause of misery in the world. The higher the soul of a man or woman, the more essential is *the* voice, the hand of one. Any key will fit common locks. As for you—you were held in your work. All the natural fury of you was compressed in the gray and the silence of mere men-things. You were like a sleeping prince, Sir Romney. I but break the enchantment, and look into your face as your eyes open, and say sorrowfully—'No, it is not he,' and pass on."

"Moira Kelvin—you pass on."

"You would not want me to take less than I dream of?"

"But I love you. I never said it before. I have no place to put this great thing—that you have called. It doesn't come back to me. It's got all of me. It leaves me so much less than alive—when you pass on." He smiled at her. "Sounds weak and pleady. I don't mean it that way. I want nothing of pity, of course. Pity, that would be obscene. I'm not making a picture of the heart bereft. This is no doom-song to a gracious lady—only knowing you is an insult to the rest of the world."

Her slim hand darted out to him.

For a moment his voice choked. The touch of her was like a greater self. He was tortured with a vision of what it would mean to have all of this woman—to

command her tenderness utterly, her bestowals, the full deep look of woman to man, the night and day presence, the child she dreamed of—this woman lovely as a golden cloud.... He trembled and his head turned away.

Her face came around to his.

"Romney," she whispered. "It isn't nearly so easy as it would be if you were less a man. Oh, don't you see that? I would have had the heart of a girl and pitied you, and thought it love. You're enough to make that—except for the life I learned in England. Now it's the one covenant. Why, the man I want—I'll do the winning. I would bring the fight to him. Nothing could stand between us. I could be saint or wanton. You don't know me. You would not want half of me. You could only want that part of me you are able to command. Perhaps, as that Hunchback said to you, 'We shall meet again.' I feel that you are a big fellow—brave and quiet and generous—that you have the stuff to make a lover. The real lover must be a bit of a mystic and you have that—but not now, and I must go on.... See, how I have stayed—"

Romney stared hard at her a moment, and then beyond. It was all black, a depth of bamboo clumps like a jungle, over her bent left shoulder. He saw his end in that blackness. She was light and power and beauty and art. A group of waiting-girls were playing the *vina*, behind the lattice by the bank of the river. It was like the slow song of nightingales. The scent of roses passed between them like a spirit hand. Her face was nearer. The warm scent of her was in his nostrils, and power came to him that he had not known at all that day. Romney spoke:

"Don't think of me as holding you. I love you too much for that—how easy to say that after once it is spoken.... I have nothing but praise and gladness to give you. Yes, you have stayed—that I might be with you—that I might have my full chance. I know what you mean by its being worth death—and what a man he would be to command your heart once, even—and live on afterward.... No, I wouldn't hold you. I wouldn't cry out. I would hold you by sheer love for me—but I am not great enough for that. I would cry out if you came to my arms, but they are not magnetic enough. I have had my chance. I know what a woman is. Forgive me if I disagree about there being another—for me. I'm afraid there isn't, because I've known you—"

His voice became very soft. "You'll feel it," he added. "You'll feel it following you around—a man's love for you—mine. I win—to know what I know to-night. And when you find him—know that I drink his health. I could do that devoutly.... I have had your baggage taken to the boat. The launch will call here for you.... In a few minutes.... I think—I think you are not a woman at all—but an immortal! You see I cannot suffer thinking of you that way—"

"Romney—"

"Yes—"

"Romney—no one is watching. I would not care if they were—put your head a moment on my breast.... Ah, and now upon my knee ... dear boy ... Romney, I am blind. I almost hate to go. Don't let me stay, will you? ... Ah, kiss me—once ... lips ... ice cold ... once? It isn't true! It's just passion, Romney! I hate myself. Don't let me stay to-night ... once—"

They were standing. She had not spoken for long. The launch was waiting.

"I want something that you have on—something of yours," he managed to say steadily.

She unfastened her cloak, gave it to him to hold—took off the waist she wore—a bit of gold-rose chiffon that he could cover in his palm. Then she put on her cloak again.

He helped her into the launch. Her bowed head turned to him a moment, and she covered her eyes. The launch sputtered away.

Romney went back to the seat near the bamboo thicket. The scent of roses wavered past, and the music of the *vina* came in to him. Romney drank. Once he raised his head. It was her steamer passing down the river. Hours afterwards he was drinking there alone.... Toward morning Longstruth himself came and sat down, but the American did not speak. Neither was he drunk in the least.

PART ONE: THE GREAT DRIFT
SUNDRY ADVENTURES

1

The night was starless, windless. The funnels of the *John Dividend*, a tramp steamer, lying in the yellow water off Woosung, were smearing the deck; the cinders crunched under the boots of the solitary forward watch. This was a white man who leaned over the railing, and reflected in the dull fashion of a bruised mind, that he would have to scrub down that deck at dawn. A live cinder dropped on the back of his neck. He brushed it away stolidly without haste. The action was that of one so accustomed to suffering that the finer sense was deadened to ordinary pangs. The tall attenuated figure was clad in loose and dirty garments of cotton. One of his reckless eyes a fist had rimmed with black. In some re-

spects this was the most miserable man that ever swabbed the decks of the *John Dividend*.

He had been given a berth without undue questioning while the ship lay in Manila harbour; had spent eleven days and nights on board the tramp, learning what the deeper hell is like. He had been refused the privilege of going ashore at Woosung, had been abused by the captain and the crew, beaten by the second mate and bitten by the engineer's dog. Besides he had gotten onto McLean's books to the extent of twenty-five dollars.

McLean was the second engineer, a sober Scot who augmented his earnings by loaning money to the crew at interest. The murderous rate which he charged reinforced him somewhat against the big chances necessary in dealing with lawless, ship-jumping wanderers. Yet his losses were smaller than men believed. McLean had a sleepless gray eye—only one, but that sufficed—and a memory for faces and wrongs as remorseless as temporal things can be.

He never accounted a debt lost until he had seen the dead body of the debtor and found it barren. He was a profound believer in the smallness of the world and in the efficacy of time. He had money banked in all the Oriental seaport towns from Aden to Yokohama. He was a money-lender by nature. The sea was a means, not a labour of love. In a word it was wisdom to keep away from McLean; and if that were impossible, the next best thing was to pay what he had coming with interest in full, for he had a way of overturning cities and draining seas for his own.

The white man on watch had seen the more favoured members of the crew return from the port in song and sottishness. He thought of the lights of Shanghai up the river, beyond fourteen miles of foul marsh mist. His own various and recent miseries had often recurred. On this night that the *John Dividend* dropped anchor off the Shanghai port, they brought the white man a kind of madness. There was nothing in particular to watch. Overside, the sea and dark were one, though the ship was surrounded by Chinese junks. Some of the junks were manned by begging lepers, but the needy would have fared ill from the mercy of the *John Dividend's* crew.

As if moved by an involuntary impulse, the white man tumbled forward into the dark. The junks shot toward the splash, like a school of sharks after a chunk of pork. The nearest dragged in the prize, and the forward deck of the *John Dividend* was left without a watch. This was not exactly a loss, since the missing man as a sailor was equally worthless above and below, but there was a bad debt and a bad name left behind, consequently a memory. McLean held the memory and the missing man's note for five pounds.

Dawn was upon the water as the junk approached the city. From either bank came the shrill voices of the river-dwellers not unlike the waking sound of

winged scavengers. Hoarse shouts were heard ahead. The American buried his face while the last drunken party of the *John Dividend* pulled past, headed for the ship. When the voices could be heard no more, the fugitive raised his head, shuddering. It was then that he noticed the other occupant of his own junk—a hairless female without hand, without teeth, with an empty socket in the place of one eye. She manipulated the oars by means of straps attached from her wrists to the handles. A child was in her lap, and the child was so far clean.

This was the creature who had helped him into the boat before light, who had touched him. When the junk bumped into the masonry of the city's front, he tossed a silver dollar into the leper's dress. She screamed for more as she would have done had the piece been a double-eagle. Fearful lest she should spring at him, the white man threw another coin into her lap and fled.

Yet after all, he took Shanghai with something of a smile that day. The first thought was to get clean clothes, but there is always formality and inconvenience about such purchases that are not connected with the barter of rum.

Within a few hours he had fallen once more into the great drift; resumed his classic jaunt over Asia and the Islands. It had begun far up a certain big yellow drain many months before.

Of the two days which followed, only distorted passages that touched McLean, the money-lender, came to surface. Certain foreigners, however, were stopped upon the streets of Shanghai by a dilapidated American who seemed to have a wild laugh back in his brain, and who inquired with manner, "Has the *John Dividend* put to sea?"

The drift took him at length to the Walled City where a white man may truly be lost, and where countless animals, roughly shaped like men, move about to a dirge-like beat of many afflictions and seem waiting for death.

Three days after the white man disappeared into the walled city of Shanghai, a great liner's nose cleaved the yellow water off Woosung. On the hurricane deck, well away from the enthusiastic party of American tourists, a small slant-eyed man stood alone by the landward rail. To him every puff of the warm breeze was lotus and memory-laden, though he kept his sentiments in chilled steel.

"*Dr. Huan Ti Kung, San Francisco to Shanghai,*" was all the ship's registry told of him.... He might have been twenty or forty, as you preferred. One couldn't tell anything definite from the styleless black suit and hat he wore, nor from the sombre repose of the classically Chinese face.

Throughout the final two hours of the passage between Nagasaki and the Shanghai port, Dr. Ti Kung did not once leave the liner's deck. The ship was now churning the yellow emptyings of the Yang-tze, and that which held his

eyes ahead, looked very much like a swamp to the eyes of the Americans and English. To Dr. Ti Kung it was not marshland, but the garment's hem of the Mother Empire, not seen these many years. There were no tears in his eyes; it is doubtful if his pulse had quickened. It is dangerous to suggest the nature of a yellow man's emotion. None but a yellow man could understand exactly. Yet this was certain, Dr. Ti Kung had not stood on the deck heretofore during the three weeks' voyage from San Francisco. He had not gone ashore in Japanese ports. The expression on his face was as serene and contemplative as usual while the liner lay on the different days in the three harbours of Nippon. But the face of the yellow man is not an authoritative document.

The recent ten years in America had been years of much movement, study and mystery. He had lived much in college towns, in Toronto, Vancouver, also in California and New England. It had not been the mere matter of an education, though he had specialised rather extensively at chemistry and biology. Plentiful education is to be had in Peking.

Dr. Ti Kung had made friends in America. There were Americans of his own age who had tried to know him as a white man knows another. It may be certain of these believed they succeeded. The Chinese accepted with equal mind the condescension of his inferiors, who held the belief that the Celestial Empire was a kind of giant laundry, and the frank, emotional friendliness of those of his classmates and business affiliates who had found that he was equally prodigious as athlete and student. His was a manner of profound gentility, with a mental background sumptuous in colour and experience. To Dr. Ti Kung most of these Americans were acquaintances, nothing more. The word *friend* in his language was something to which only the best aspired.

In spite of his various appearances for a year or more in different colleges and commercial establishments, none of these affairs had made up the real life of Dr. Ti Kung, nor had anything to do with his present journey home. He had not worked for money. A certain class of American acquaintances had found him not only approachable for temporary benefit but admirable in forgetfulness as he was unswerving in bestowal. His material means seemed inexhaustible from the first. A large portion of his life in America was unaccounted for, except by the few men and women whose lips were as well governed as his own.

Dr. Ti Kung made himself very small in the crowded launch on the way up the river, and was one of the first to step forth upon the stones of the Bund. A word to a coolie there and his baggage and other matters of disembarkation were taken from his hands. He moved into the foreign quarter swiftly, passing through the streets with as little interest as if it were a daily custom. A mile deep in the Nankin Road, well past the row of German tobacconists, he hailed a particular 'rickshaw coolie from a group and was carried by a round-about

journey through the northeast gate of the Walled City. Here Dr. Ti Kung sniffed; at least something of relaxation was for the first time apparent. His surroundings were not pleasant, but it was China herself.

The street had now narrowed to a passageway. There was not room for two 'rickshaws. The beggars were forced to move back close to the stall-fronts as he passed, and the progress of his coolie was necessarily slow. Presently the passage was broken by a series of broad stone steps to the right. Half way up these, in the midst of a group of beggars, sat a white man, very drunk. He appeared to be expounding some great matter in a lingual mixture straight from nowhere. His head rocked leisurely from side to side. But one eyelid could withstand its heaviness at a time. On occasion both of the lids would drop, whereupon the white man's hand would fumble to his face and prop up the nearest with a very soiled finger, an effort that quite commanded his faculties so that speech halted for the moment.

Dr. Ti Kung spoke to the 'rickshaw coolie, who halted promptly. Leaning forward, he surveyed the figure with thoughtful interest. It now appeared that an insect threatened the lean inflamed face of the American, for the propping finger was withdrawn and waved laboriously before the beaked nose, the eyelids meanwhile falling in abandon. Just a word was spoken from the 'rickshaw and the next instant the figure on the steps was alone. Dr. Ti Kung now took one shoulder, ordering his coolie to the other, and the American was lifted to his feet. Walking rigidly on either side, they steadied the limp and slender giant to the vehicle, where he sprawled across the wheel and was pushed with considerable effort into the seat. He sighed luxuriously and called for a cigarette. Dr. Ti Kung brought forth his case, lit the match, and resumed his way on foot, a man's length or more behind the 'rickshaw.

Thus they proceeded for some distance along the numerous unsavoury passages. Keeping to a direction was impossible in trending the intricate alley-ways; the coolie seemed merely to be following the paths of greatest smell.

By degrees the novelty of the ride wore off for the tall fellow in the 'rickshaw. Even the cigarette stump, burning into the padding of the seat, failed to interest him. The eyes of Dr. Ti Kung, walking behind, were presently held to the back of the vehicle which strained and creaked outrageously. A moment later, it stopped. Stepping forward and around, the Chinese gentleman found his 'rickshaw coolie standing like a faithful horse, waiting to be extricated from the embrace of the American who had launched forward over the handles, with the intention seemingly of depositing himself upon the neck and shoulders of the native. He had not altogether succeeded. Dr. Ti Kung decided that his charge must have a change.

They were now at the junction of the passage and a broader artery, where

a barbershop was in operation, partly upon the corner and partly within doors. Dr. Ti Kung beckoned and three of the barbers were at his side in an instant. The idea was not broached to the white man. He was seized and benched, lather applied at once. He had evidently met Chinese at home. His jaw hardened and he appeared to await some brutality from without, before taking exception to events. At the first scrape of the blade, however, he lay back at ease—a white man's long training under the knife.

Meanwhile the chief barber, disdaining other than to officiate in the present activity, turned to Dr. Ti Kung as if resuming a conversation halted yesterday:

"... The amazement of this low-minded proprietor in having his unmentionable shop patronized by so enlightened a personage, is without bounds and earth-defying." He produced a water-pipe of silver mounting and proceeded: "To say nothing of this illustrious foreigner who thus disguises his exalted rank—"

"You suffer from slight misconception," said Dr. Ti Kung, "only as regards the companion of this foreign prince. Behold in myself a rural born of lowest degree—"

The barber drowned the utterances in the loud bubbling of his water-pipe. "This day will ever linger in the memory of one degraded chief of barbers, for the patronage of a court companion of the great Yi—"

Dr. Ti Kung again courteously depreciated himself, and they turned to the American. The chief of barbers said:

"The illustrious one now occupying the chair has relapsed in revery, having given no directions. Is it desirable that the entire head be denuded?"

Ti Kung uncovered his own queue-less head. "Let the hair be short-cropped merely, as this of his servant—and the features shaven."

"So be," said the chief, shuffling over to direct the operators. In a moment he was back in his position beside the Chinese gentleman.

"This illiterate one," he began again, as the gurgling of the water-pipe was renewed, "perceived in the reports today that the wrestler, Kwong, won all honours in the athletic contests at the Imperial Pavilion. His prowess has doubtless come under court attention before. Today the trained cormorant of the Mandarin Pih has proved to be the best diver in a tournament that has been held three successive days on the river. Probably, however, this fact is already known to one whose relatives recline in the Yellow Palanquin...."

Just now one of the barbers drew back a step to survey his half-finished task. The eyes of the others were drawn to the strange voices at the turning of the street. A small party of American tourists, exploring the Walled City, had reached this point. Dr. Ti Kung recognised the party as belonging to the ship he had left this morning. Just at this moment the white man leaped up from the barber's chair and staggered forth, waving his hands. Dr. Ti Kung observed that

his charge had been whipped back to consciousness by the voices of the tourist party.

The Chinese gentleman spoke quickly, a low, intense order. One of the barbers darted after the white man who had turned down an alley-way to the rear of the shop, Dr. Ti Kung following leisurely. A moment later, he watched without concern while two brawny bare-shouldered natives overcame the half-shaven one, and carried him through the nearest door.... It was still early in the day. The tourist party had passed on.

2

The white man awoke several hours later on the floor of a small stone cell containing one table and one chair. The chair was cemented to the floor. He had not jarred it loose, though the cell was so small that his body had been forced to adjust itself to it during sleep. The table was also stationary. The door was of heavy black wood, intended to preserve silence from without and possibly from within. There was a small metal disc in the door and by the finger-marks around it, the prisoner grasped the fact that it doubtless covered a hole.

Gaining his feet he had to bend considerably to put his mouth to the opening. He called and turned his ear to the disc for answer. He was about to make further outcry when he heard a peculiar scuffling step in a distant corridor. It soon halted before the door and inquired in a nasal, whining tone, something which sounded like:

"*Pai ning?*"

The white man now recalled that he was in China. Recollections came quickly. He sank down into the chair, the thick table pressing against him. He heard the scuffling step depart and wondered what he was in for. There was no doubt in his mind regarding the nature of the place. There is a similarity to such places around the world. The stationary table and chair, however, were new.

He was dry. He was in pain. His face felt sticky, and rubbing his fingers across it, he was at first inclined to doubt his senses. The right side of his face witnessed to several days neglect, while the left cheek and part of the chin were cleanly shaven.

"*Pai ning,*" he repeated. "Or was it *pai ning*?"

He could not tell. He remembered a native barber, but did not know if this were a new day or still last night. The last he remembered clearly was a vow of mortal friendship delivered in Shropshire dialect by a sailor from his Majesty's

cruiser *Dunedin*, and that they were about to anoint the vow in a bar-room close to the water-front. He wondered if all the lights had gone out at that instant or just his own. He patted his face in several places, regarding his hands intently in the gloom for blood, but none appeared. He was all right muscularly; the choking which he experienced was to be expected. Now the vital questions appeared: How long was he in for? Had he been tried?

"*Pai ning,*" he repeated. "Yes, that's what he said."

He now arose and shoved back the metal disc once more, but his call was touched with a different respect. Listening was again rewarded with the scuffling step and a whining voice.

"*Pai ning?*"

"Sure! *Pai ning*," said the American.

There was hesitation without, after which the question was repeated. The prisoner explained his need for drink in Chinese and found himself making signs of draining a fourth-dimension cup against the black door. The scuffling retreated.

He now relapsed in awe. His first impulse had been to use strength. He was aware of his strength because it had been tested and failed. The awe had to do with thirst. He had felt this before and became deadly afraid at the memory. He pressed his body into the seat again and cleared his throat.

Just now there was a voice in the corridor, a key in the door, and a Chinese gentleman in European attire entered smilingly, holding out his hand. The white man took the hand and tried to recall where he had seen that face before. It had nothing to do with China, nothing to do with recent years, yet somewhere before he had seen that smile, and something was glad within him.

"Well, Mr. Romney," said Dr. Ti Kung, "did you rest well?"

"Let me have a cigarette," the other said unsteadily.

A certain case was proffered again.

"Thanks. You haven't a touch of heartener—have you?"

"I have ordered refreshments," said Dr. Ti Kung, lighting a match.

"How did you hear of my trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"Well, the fact is," said Romney, "I was not altogether there when it happened—just a sort of night-shift working.... What did I do?"

Dr. Ti Kung lit a cigarette. "This morning in passing by the waterfront," he began pleasantly, "I came upon you in the midst of a group of friends—sitting and talking, you know. I recognized you at once, waited until you were not engaged. We had a short ride in my 'rickshaw up to the street of the Everlasting Spring. Here you became restless; you were not feeling yourself. We stopped at a barber-shop, but you were impatient to be off. In fact, you insisted upon leaving before

the—"

Romney smiled painfully, passing his hand again over his half-shaven face. However, a certain appreciation formed in his mind for the man who described his condition so delicately.

"And after that?"

Dr. Ti Kung hesitated.... Here the door swung back on silent hinges and the old man whom the American had called to through the chink, scuffed in with glasses and a bottle. He made a curious little bobbing bow to Dr. Ti Kung, and scuffed out.

Romney added, when the door had closed: "I mean the lock-up, this calaboose, what am I in for?"

"This is not a jail. You're merely in one of our examination cells."

The other turned white and arose.

"What am I enlisting for? Some conscript mess I got into with your countrymen?"

"Not at all," laughed Dr. Ti Kung. "This is an educational institution; this chamber is connected with one of our colleges. We put aspiring young men in these chambers together with a set of questions and a large quantity of white paper, leaving them in quiet contemplation until the questions are answered. Here, exchange of thoughts with any other student is impossible and one is able to put his best concentration upon the task."

"I see," said the American, looking about at the thickness of the stone walls.

"Our young literati," continued Dr. Ti Kung, "are rigorously brought up." He eyed Romney with narrowed lids through the smoke. "It so happened that this place was at hand when you required rest, so we carried you in. By the way, you are very light for your length."

Romney did not appear to hear the observations, but leaned toward the other, saying apologetically, "You'll have to excuse me, but I give it up. My head is bad. Where did I meet you before?"

Dr. Ti Kung almost smiled. "The first time, I believe, was at a certain field-meet in the Santa Clara valley."

"Lord, that's more than seven years. I have you. I was fit that day—"

"You were fit this morning," beamed Dr. Ti Kung.

Another drink came. Romney was more cheerful.

"Say, what's this *pai ning* stuff in use here? I know the expression, but didn't get the connection."

"*Pal ning?*" repeated Ti Kung.

"You've got it. That's the way he said it."

"Why, that means literally, 'f-i-n-ee-s-h-e-d?' It had to do with the examination papers. The hall-boy came at your call. His duty was to inquire if your

work was done before turning the key."

"It wasn't," said Romney thoughtfully.

He was thinking of the day of that field-meet in the Santa Clara valley. He had been a distance runner of sorts, a bit too fine physically—a little cough in the throat that had stuck until he came to China, but a superb bit of health compared to the red panting animal he had become in the past nine months.... His throat was cooled; his whole nerve-system had leaped to the stimulant which Ti Kung had ordered. Romney laughed. He wouldn't even have been able to think as coherently as this, but for the two recent drinks. It was a deep ironical laugh from somewhere within, possibly from the soul of things.... Running—and a victory had thrilled him. Cheap things to thrill over. He hadn't asked much in those days. Now he was an inflamed pig, half-bearded, in soiled white clothing that he could get the smell of.... He had sincerely tried to arrive at the end of himself, but he had put on a belated kind of toughness in the years of Asia. He wondered if he would go on trying, or square about and regain something of his old form—form of mind as well as form of body, his old form among men.

Romney looked up at Ti Kung and laughed again. This very thought of rehabilitation was not from the wreck that he felt himself to have become, but from the fresh warmth of alcohol.... No, he had done his living. If he got well enough to think connectedly for any length of time, a certain two weeks would rush back and make a monkey of him. No, this was a false note—this idea of regaining form. He didn't want form among men. Nothing would be interesting. The Immortal had spoiled all the rest. Even China would bore him. And she was gone—on her own blessed highway. It had seemed good to put an end to himself out of extreme boredom of days, but he hadn't counted on being tough as blacksnake.... He would be kicked and trampled around Asia a little longer until something broke—something that had been so perversely strong inside of him.

He looked to find Dr. Ti Kung smiling contentedly and without haste. The Chinese had understood the laugh. It was remarkable how this little yellow man understood. It had been the same, many years ago. They had all commented upon it. They had always found Ti Kung on the dot, without haste, without raising his voice. It was so now.... Why had he stopped to pick up a ruffian white man on the street? Romney felt himself leaning on the other. He hated it, but didn't lie to himself about it.... His hand crept to his face—one clean side, one hairy one. It was like him. He swallowed the shame of it.

"Well," he said, "what are we going to do about all this?"

"I will tell you in three days," said Dr. Ti Kung.

There was something so authoritative, so decisive and prepared, in the statement that Romney identified it with a clean side. It had to do with climb-

ing out.... This man was on the dot. His eyes were full of fire, yet hard-held, steady and kind; full of reason and order. Three days. Ti Kung meant three days. There was no lying, no leaning in that. He had a design. There was something to Romney in his own weakness and vacillation, like the splendour of God in this capacity of vision, this steadiness of eye and clarity of speech; white strength of hand and hard-held manhood.

"And what now?" he remarked. Even in this rare moment of self-examination, he did not know it, but he asked that last question like a child.

He was spared the pathos.

"We'll go to my home," said Dr. Ti Kung. "It's not a 'rickshaw this time. I have ordered a carriage. I take great pleasure in bringing you to my home."

Romney drew his hand across his chin. The other touched his arm.

"All that will be attended to. Don't let's think of it. You will find that all is ready for you."

3

The scent of soap in the fountain-place of the Ti Kung house might be considered by some a preposterous detail, but it was real to Romney. It had to do with Longstruth's, on a certain night when he had felt himself to be a far more reckonable person even than on the day of the field-meet at Palo Alto which brought him a trophy or two. It was on a night about mid-way in the Moira Kelvin revelations when it suddenly appeared that she was wavering a little. Hope lifted and he had felt fit to conquer continents. But that had passed. He had somehow diminished again.

It is true that she had been shaken during their last moments together, but that was different. Romney was man enough not to take any advantage there—even in thought. He understood her that night. She was in a scope of a more common attraction. She had hated herself in it. Had he pressed that advantage, it would merely have meant to unseal a crater for hell to break forth not only for himself but for her. Before knowing her, he might have considered the savage splendour of that passion as having to do with a woman's great gift, but he glimpsed in the days preceding what it would mean to the man who could force the capitulation of the full creature. Even in the blinding of those moments of parting, he knew he was far from that magnitude.

Romney threw back his head and laughed at the upper arch of tiles, his arms held out. It was the laugh of a man who stands on the rim of the last ditch.... He

had certainly sifted to the bottom of things. The *John Dividend* was the last of many ships. He had made the grand traverse of the Asiatic coast from the Yellow Sea to the Bay of Bengal and doubled back to Shanghai. This drink-thing was the great weakness he had uncovered. Three days after her steamer had gone down the river, he had fallen into the low eddies of it—a cheap thing, but he felt cheap. He saw that he had always been intoxicated somehow. A turn of a card and he might have become a saint instead of a drunkard. Mother China had intoxicated him first; then the woman. It was all a matter of temperament. Having lost the levitation of cleanness and strength, he had permitted the mother-force of gravitation to take her certain course. From Longstruth's at Hankow he had swirled into the great drift of the water-fronts—deserters, remittance-men, hangovers from every form of human failure. He had spent everything he had within reach—a large amount of money. He had learned the value of money when his pockets flattened to a few thin coins. There was a large slice of his fortune left in Peking, but it was so placed that he would have to go there to get it. He was on the way back now. In fact the *John Dividend* would have taken him almost there—she was booked for Tientsin—but had been too stagnant and stenchy in her bowels. The fact is he would never have reached Manila and the deck of the *John Dividend* except for this new something, superlatively fine in his physique. Altogether he had seen a lot of life with the integument off—and had expected little more of the late days than to be found dead somewhere....

The scent of the fountain-place had a certain whipping magic about it. It seemed to cleanse away some weakness.

It made Moira Kelvin draw close in memory, but there was a queer up-pull to it now, as if she said:

"*You have played enough, Sir Romney. Give it up—you're too clean-blooded to die soiled. You don't want me. You've forgotten for days at a time what you are trying to kill yourself for. If that next daybreak had found me in your arms—you would have hated me, and I would have had for myself something infinitely worse than hatred. You were big that night to let me go. Nature will not let a man as big as that pass out without doing his work and finding his own. If you want sin—pray, sin magnificently.*"

The cool running water passed over his fevered and wasted body. There was ample time for everything. A servant brought him a house-gown and slippers. Ti Kung's barber was waiting. A little helpful drink was brought from time to time, not too often, and just a touch. Ti Kung was waiting for him below. Romney had found a fineness of comprehension in the Chinese that he had not revelled in from any man for months. It was almost like a woman's. It liberated the better parts of him, but he was ill and fagged to the core. He looked forward to a long, clean night. First he would go back to the fountain place. He

would think of that Longstruth's night before he slept.... Ti Kung showed him his room, opened the door, led him to the window of the low-lit chamber. From the casement he pointed out the stars and the lower lights of the distant shipping.

"I'll be away tomorrow," he said, "but shall return for dinner. You may rest and read. You may go to the city; there is a carriage. There are books; there are servants who understand English. Forgive me, I always forget that you speak our language; in short, anything you may wish. If convenient, be here for dinner at eight to-morrow. If you have another appointment, of course, I can wait—"

"I'll be here," Romney said.

... It was not until the door was shut that he saw the gleam of glass and the half-open door of a walnut cabinet against the wall. He understood all that it meant before he took a step toward it. He wished that Ti Kung had spared him this hospitality.... It was very complete, even to importations from America, even to certain brands that he had not seen for years. There was crystal, silverware, napkins, and this that was covered on the table clinked with ice as he touched it. He was dry and tense. Everything had been designed to turn him loose, even the departure of his host.

Romney thought of the words of Dr. Ti Kung in the examination cell: "I will tell you in three days."

He laughed softly. "And what he will tell me in three days hangs imperatively upon this most perfect cabinet. Romney, here's a ripe chance to use your head. You are allowed one respectable *touch*. You may choose your poison—but just one."

He measured out a portion by no means of a size that a man is inclined to seize with his last dime, drank it with discretion and without water. Then he stared awhile at the stars and the shipping, took a long drink from the water-pitcher, and went to bed.

But Romney could not sleep. It was not so easy and laughable as when the episode began. His thoughts turned to the walnut cabinet as the eye turns to fire in the night. He lay restless and wide-eyed in the dark. Presently the moon came in and gleamed upon the open door and upon the glasses and bottles on the table, bringing out inner fires from the multi-colored glass. He arose often for water. There was fever burning full-length. The novelty of keeping himself in hand left him and it became fight. The bars had long been down.... The long night crawled.

He heard some English sailors pass through the street below. The Chinese city was full of sounds not to be designated—cries, gongs, the tapping of canes, sounds that the elemental traffic of the day had deluged, for he heard women's voices and the voices of children. One does not hear these in the day-time. He relit the lamp at last, smoked and read, and when the activities of the night had at last died out, there was an hour of blackness and quiet that was like a jungle

experience. He was full of fears, not at all the kind of fears that Romney knew when his mind was in order.

Dawn came, and with it a soft breeze that stirred the wind-glasses in the garden below. It was a thirsty tinkle, a sound he had heard somewhere before and found hauntingly sweet. There was a touch of rose in the light, and the scent of rose came to him in the morning dusk, and rushed his thoughts far up the Yellow River.... Old days in the open swept back to mind with rugged value. He was on his feet. The night was gone. He could take a drink now without breaking his word, but the new strength tided him over that.

A servant tapped at the inlaid door and asked if he would have anything. Yes, he would have coffee. He found the place of the fountain. The cool morning air came in as he bathed, and with the scent came back to him the sense of equilibrium that he had not known for many days, a suggestion of self-sanction, perfect but valid.... The coffee was served when he returned to the room. He asked if he might walk in the garden then and the servant tarried to show him the way.

Three servants were standing at the street door in the dim-lit lower hall as Romney and his guide passed below. They were engaged in a more or less orderly passage of words. Suddenly a cry arose, and the three servants were seen to leap upon a man in European dress who seemed intent upon entering. Romney disdained more than a side glance at the encounter down the long dark hall, as he followed the footsteps of his diminutive but most engaging guide.

In the garden there were stone and water glasses, cool shallows, deep drinking palms, awakening birds and amazingly perfect roses, all in a space no larger than a city back-yard. A high wall with broken glass on the top, suffocating China outside, and within the beauty of the pearl and the lotus. The American's tension allayed somewhat in that beauty. He smoked and picked his way among the stones, sniffing the blooms while the day rose. The voices of his own countrymen outside the wall hardly broke his reverie at first. Presently a peculiar sound held his attention. It was a scraping, as if some wooden object were being raised against the masonry. He halted as a hand came over the top of the glass. A blue-sleeved arm was picking its way to the inner-coping, the woolen sleeve alone between the flesh and the bare glass. The top of the head that appeared presently was rugged and close-cropped. Something about it was strangely familiar, but no more showed for the present. There was a renewed scraping, the head paused in the air, then dropped back again.

It startled Romney, but he did not feel called upon to protest. The house seemed adequately protected with man-servants; that fact had been impressed at the street-door. He forgot the incident, and was leaning back against the wall a couple of minutes afterward, when his eyes were called to the corner of the wall

at his right. Poised motionless above it was the ominous head again, and that light vulture-blue eye, which found his own like an electric contact, and loosed his jaw. McLean had seen him at the same instant.

"Looking for me?" Romney asked.

The answer made him think of the boiler-room of the *John Dividend.* There was silence after that. The eye remained fixed upon him.

"Come here," added McLean, unwinking.

Romney did not move.

"Come here," reached him again, hoarsely.

There was pull to it. The intensity and concentration of that single utterance had real attraction.

Just then the little house-servant appeared, saw the head above the wall, and called for assistance. Other servants came quickly. There was considerable hub-bub behind in the garden as Romney went indoors sick and slowed-up.

He found his way back to his room. There hadn't been a single coin in the clothes that he wore when entering Ti Kung's house. The contents of these pockets otherwise had been carefully placed on the table in his room, but the clothes were gone. As he stood in his morning-gown reflecting upon the recent affair, his boy came in, bringing a plain black suit of fine quality, suggesting that he try if it would do, and adding apologetically that breakfast was now prepared. The clothing fitted perfectly. Romney realized that they had been made overnight from the dimensions of his old suit, which did not appear again. He wondered if such a thing could be done outside of China.

McLean was both light and heavy upon his mind as he transferred his few belongings to the new coat. Drawing forth his hand, he found that it contained currency of the empire to an amount that he had not seen since the early days of his abandonment. It was an altogether comic-opera amount.

He turned to the servant who stood by, grinning.

"If that one-eyed man comes back again," he said, "show him in."

"One-eye gone way down," grinned the boy.

"What's that?"

The boy made an eloquent gesture to betoken an open grave, supplementing the picture which Romney felt mentally, with: "One-eye gone way down."

"Now, that's too bad," mused Romney. Then there was a crisp, brown, small fish before him that made him forget.

That night the Doctor came for dinner—a cool, delicate meal, exquisitely Chinese—rice, tea, several varieties of sea-food and small high-colored vegetables. Ti Kung appeared alert for the welfare of his guest.

"My dear Romney, I'm afraid things have been pretty dull for you here. A little matter takes me to the Provincial Headquarters. Would you care to come

for the ride?"

The American learned more of his friend. Certain officials and older students were encountered. Their deepest respect, even reverence, for Ti Kung interested Romney, as well as their quick and animated interest in himself as he showed acquaintance with their language.

There was a secret meeting which he could not enter, but he became aware as he waited that the long halls of the provincial building were dotted with groups of nobles and elders not in the least pleased with the political activity of the younger men with which Dr. Ti Kung was associated.

Presently Romney retired to the carriage to wait, leaving word with a page for Ti Kung to be informed. Nobles and others were still entering the building, often old men largely attended and in full regalia. A native throng was collecting rapidly and cluttered the street at the entrance of the building. The effects produced on the crowd by the entrance of different personages were varied and absorbing. Some were lauded; others brought forth scowls and mutterings. Excitement seethed and cleared Romney's mind.

Ti Kung was not long in coming forth. He apologised for being detained, quite as if the matter he had attended was of most trivial importance. Even as he talked, the crowd thickened about the carriage, and pressed against the wheels. Dr. Ti Kung leaned forward to speak to the driver, who began to lash furiously at the heads and shoulders of the throng. Romney was the first to see the long knife that whipped up from the wheel, and was lucky enough to jerk the Doctor back into the seat in time. A pistol was thrust into his hand.

"I regret we will have to fire," Ti Kung said.

Neither shot to kill, for the way was instantly cleared for the horses. They passed out of the public square without further molestation. Romney leaned forward whimsically and searched the Doctor's face.

"Quite the usual thing, is it?"

"Of late. They're just children."

"Are they apt to get any less good-natured?"

"Yes, they have suffered much. They do not understand."

Romney fingered the pistol. "I feel quite like a boy," he remarked. "There's a charm about this thing. I never shot one before—without everybody standing well back."

Ti Kung's hand darted over and touched Romney's appreciatively.

It was the end of the promised three days. Romney was dressing for dinner when there was a tap at the inlaid door, and Dr. Ti Kung entered with grave smile and hand outstretched. For just a second he had looked into Romney's eyes. His manner showed neither relief nor surprise; nor did he offer any comment upon the rallied manhood which he must have observed.

Romney had climbed a stiff grade in the three days. They went below for dinner, but it was not until their coffee was served and the catfooted servant was gone, that Dr. Ti Kung appeared to note the patience of his companion.

"Doubtless, Mr. Romney," he began, "you have been wondering a good deal why I brought you to my home, and toward what end things were trending here. The time has come for me to enlighten you somewhat."

The American lit a pipe he favoured and Dr. Ti Kung drew his chair closer. They were alone.

"I saw you laughing there in the Street of the Lepers—or was it the Street of the Ever-lasting Spring?" continued the Chinese. "To me it symbolised the blending of America with my poor country. We are now without veils between us. I was in a most serious mood that morning, anxious with the weight of many affairs.

"You sat upon the stone steps with the beggars beside you, laughing. You were in the glow of events—at one with those about you. You used to say back in college, 'To hell with it,' that most ingenious of many wonderful American remarks. I thought of that. I said to myself, 'Huan Ti Kung, you are heavy; you are long-faced. Why should you bear your burdens with such labour? If you fail, very good. If you win, especially good, but having done the best you can—'To hell with it.'

"So you see, Mr. Romney, you offered me a fine message that morning, and after all I was very fond of you from the beginning. So, here we are. I promise you days of excitement. You have seen from the little episode in front of the Provincial House last night, that all China does not love me. I counted it a good omen that you saved me from a wound. You may have the pleasure again. But supposing you had not, or supposing you were not quite so quick the next time—'To hell with it!'"

Romney leaned forward. He knew that the foregoing was simply the Oriental way of introducing a subject of real moment. He felt new inside, mind and will.

Dr. Ti Kung continued:

"I look upon you now with great satisfaction. You are free and adventurous, and you are my strong friend. You are a mind—an interpreter of our life. We need all these things from you. You know how poor China is distressed at this hour—"

He leaned forward and spoke very softly. The long low room in which

they dined was empty, yet the voice was pitched to reach Romney's ears and no farther.

"... I did not go ashore in the Japanese ports on the way home, but I heard much from those who did. It happened that I became so interested in you that much of the first day here in Shanghai was consumed. The three days since, I have been catching up, studying the events that came to pass during the two weeks' voyage—events, Mr. Romney, that the world is too intensely occupied to notice, but which we Chinese regard with finality and deepest foreboding.

"As you perhaps know, the Japanese have demanded from us all that we hold dear. They are a fighting people, whetted by recent victories. There are three parties here in China: Old China, which says 'We will temporize,' the Middle Party which says, 'We will fight,' and the party—"

Romney knew instinctively that the destiny of Ti Kung was aligned with this third one; and yet he supposed that it was also a fighting destiny.

"And the third one," the Doctor repeated, "which believes that war as the Japanese know it; that war as it is being waged on French and Polish and Carpathian fields at this moment, is a stupid and ancient activity, having no part with what the best men of all countries know—"

"But," said Romney, "it's the Japanese way. They may bring the fighting to you—fighting such as they know. You may say that war is archaic rot, but if it is to be met, must it not be met with force?"

"Of course, but not with force of the same nature," said Dr. Ti Kung.

"You mean to say that this third party in China is going to stand pat on the expediency of toleration. The Hindus have taken a hundred years—"

"Not exactly that," said Dr. Ti Kung. "We believe that Japan can be stupefied—even strangled."

A servant entered at this moment and spoke to Dr. Ti Kung—a hurried sentence. Voices from the street now reached them, as if an outer door had suddenly blown open.

Dr. Ti Kung arose quickly, beckoning Romney to follow. They made their way to the rear of the house and into the garden.

"Another little engagement. So glad you appreciate these absurd affairs. You have your pistol?"

"Yes—I have become attached to it."

Ti Kung thrust a packet of papers into Romney's hands.

"These are invaluable and safer with you. In case I am separated from you or hurt, deliver the packet in person to the address in the inner envelope, Tientsin. Now we must get over the masonry."

Together they lifted a bench from the poolside to the wall. Romney helped his companion over the jagged glass on the coping. He then removed his coat and

laid it upon the top for his own passage over, his hands and arms already bleeding. On the coping, he perceived that Ti Kung was not alone below. Romney landed upon his feet between two struggling figures. A knife burned his back. He kicked with effect in the direction it came.

Meanwhile he called for Ti Kung, and a hand came up to him from below. The assailant had vanished. Something in the touch of that hand made him know that his friend was badly hurt.

"As little noise as you can, Romney," came a whisper. "There will be others upon us. Are you hurt?"

"No, are you?"

"I am afraid—a little. Help me up. We must get away from here with all speed. Have you the packet?"

Romney left him and sprang to the wall's coping for his coat, pulling it loose from the glass. The papers dropped out as the coat fell.

"Yes," he answered, "I'm glad you mentioned that. I'll be more careful hereafter."

"Do," said Ti Kung, regaining his feet.

They were in a passage of almost utter darkness. The Chinese was making poor work of walking. The American lifted him forward and listened for direction from a voice that grew weaker as moments passed. All was silent behind.

"I need sewing up," the Chinese whispered. "It's very unfortunate.... That light ahead is the Grotto Road. We will be safe there. If consciousness leaves me, put me in a carriage, paying the driver and speaking the words, *Sarenji loopni*; then make your way as rapidly as possible, taking the papers with you, to a gentleman named Minglapo, in Merchant's Square, Tienstin—full directions inside outer envelope."

Romney reached the lights of Grotto Road with the form of the Oriental sagging limp in his arms from loss of blood. It looked like death to the American. The hardest, or possibly next to the hardest thing he ever did, was to obey orders. It was very far from Romney's way to leave a friend in a plight, but this he was called upon to do.

Whatever it meant, the driver seemed to understand, but to Romney, there was something altogether too frail in the words *Sarenji loopni* to send a friend away with. The driver accepted his coin, closed the door of the vehicle, and whipped away, leaving Romney standing alone under the dim street light. He watched the vehicle out of sight, and began for the first time to feel the effects of the night's activities. Under his torn coat he was wet with blood. He transferred the packet of papers to a safer pocket, lit his pipe thoughtfully, and then it occurred that he must set out for Tientsin that night either by rail or the sea.

5

Minglapo was a dealer in inlays of wood and pearl and jewels. His shop in Merchant's Square, Tientsin, was a still place of many riches. Minglapo sat in the far shadows, an elderly Chinese of large unwrinkled bulk and a voice like the wonderful water-music in Fingal's cave.

The large part of a week was required for Romney to reach this shop, for they do not travel great distances over night as yet in China. When he sat down before Minglapo his faculties at first were deeply occupied with the problem of where he had seen this old master before. It dawned upon him at last that he hadn't, but that Minglapo when he shut his eyes was almost identical in feature and color with a death-mask of Beethoven that had hung on his study-wall back in Palo Alto.

"I came from a gentleman named Dr. Ti Kung," Romney began.

Minglapo bowed.

"My orders were not very explicit. I believe that there was an order-book that he asked me to deliver to you," the American resumed, perfectly aware that a direct statement of facts would have discountenanced the Oriental. "It was all very hurried at the last. He was stricken with illness in the street, and turning to me, a comparative stranger, asked me to deliver this package to you. With that he was helped into a carriage and driven away."

"Yes," said Minglapo, raising his eyebrows just a trifle, "the order-book—you have it?"

Romney was startled at the English, quick, concise—the speech of a Chinese who had been among the younger peoples for many years. He drew forth the yellow packet and gave it to the other.

Now Minglapo was sitting upon a raised dais, several sumptuous rugs between him and the polished wood. He sat upon his limbs, and smoked continuously.

The large envelope was opened and a certain paper drawn forth. This he perused at first with surprise and impatience; then with a beam of humour which opened into laughter wide and deep. Minglapo was a spectacle in this giving forth. His body rippled under the silks; the ashen yellow left his face and neck, giving way to rising ruddiness, the yellowish eyelids dropped, suggesting the mask again, but this was broken by the open mouth. Mastering all was the sound—soft, intoned laughter, full of leisureliness and music; not infectious exactly, since one who witnessed it first was too awed to be drawn in—a surpassing wonder over all. The teeth of this elderly Oriental were like the teeth of a young woman.

Minglapo subsided by imperceptible gradations, and lifting his eyelids at length, surveyed Romney as one newly awakened from sleep.

"This is a most wonderful order-book," he said slowly.

Minglapo was rippling again under his gown as he replaced the papers in the envelope. The inscrutability of the fat figure challenged Romney. It occurred to him that if he should start to go, something of finality might come from the impressive figure. He cleared his throat and arose.

"Dr. Ti Kung, as I have said, gave me no further orders before the door of his carriage closed upon him. I presume, having fulfilled my task, that it would be well for me to return to Shanghai—"

"Very naturally," said Minglapo.

"Then I will bid you good-day."

The Chinese was holding the yellow packet in his hand. A further sheet had been drawn forth, glanced at, and returned. Minglapo's hands were perfect. The face of the envelope toward Romney was but partly covered by the eight beautiful fingers that held the paper lightly, while the face bowed above. The eyelids narrowed and the corners of the mouth were sunken, the broad, bland forehead, just faintly ruffled. There came to the white man a sense of prodigious power, as if this man's thought could manipulate the destinies of other men; as if behind that brow a conception was now forming so clean-cut in all its processes that instant action must follow its maturity. A suspicion dawned upon him that this man was strong enough to be Ti Kung's master.

Minglapo rose almost imperceptibly.

"Mr. Romney." The voice halted him. "Your friend informed me you were coming some time ago. I have been expecting you. Please sit down."

Romney smiled.

"It would be natural, as I said before, for you to return to Shanghai, except that I have heard from Dr. Ti Kung, who, I perceive, picks well his associates. These are delicate matters; these are times to try men's souls. Our friend is now healing at sea. I am grievously concerned, however, over wounds that could delay such a man for six days. Much depends upon his coming. The character of Dr. Ti Kung's service cannot be duplicated. In saving his life, Friend Romney, you have done one of those significant things upon which the destiny of a great people hangs, and an action that can never be publicly known. It is with utmost pleasure that I ask you to remain under my roof. I hope that we may succeed in making you comfortable in the interval before your friend arrives. There is to be a particular servant for you in this house—one of my favourites—"

Minglapo clapped his hands, and a small but almost perfect creature of the *boy*-class appeared, alert in every sense and apparently without inertia.

"This is Bamban. He is yours, Friend Romney, and you who know so much

of China realize that a bestowal of this kind between man and man means that Bamban is no longer my servant."

Fastidious in his ways, swift and delicate in all his doings, Bamban appeared to embrace his new master with the sudden look of eager intelligence which shot out from under his lifted brows. Romney knew enough about China to realise that Bamban held something in the deeps of his being that could not be transferred. At the same time he knew that only some significant treachery on his own part toward the interests of Minglapo could ever call this reservation into action.

In the several days following Romney became convinced that he was being studied in ways beyond Western ingenuity to fathom; and though he was schooled to be guileless in intent and at the same time wise as the serpent, the processes of surveillance which he imagined about him were either above or below his own levels. He had nothing to conceal, and no plan apart. He met all fancied subtleties by being himself, just that, which in the case of uncomplicated purpose is the invariable master-stroke. The fact is, Romney had learned much from the Great Drift. He could let himself go. His nerves had left the surface once more, covered themselves in the cushions of health. He did not know the particular passion that drove Ti Kung and Minglapo, but he felt it big and gripping. He even felt at last that he was identified with a movement potent and far-reaching enough to command those powers of his which all his former dealings with men made him repress.

Though Minglapo did not appear to be a man of great riches, there were objects of priceless beauty in his establishment, which was a shop only on the street floor. No one appeared to buy while Romney was there. Once while the American was standing in the rear of the shop, the floor raised a little before his feet, and he was aware of a deep oil-lit basement that had every look and indication of being a fully equipped chemical laboratory—vials, flames and crucibles, tables with spawn-trays and culture-boards. An oppressive, earthy breath as from fungoid growths touched Romney's nostrils from the opened trap. Minglapo called him to the dais at that instant and the trap itself was abruptly closed. The Chinese upon whose shoulder the door had been raised did not emerge. There was something aged and wasted about the figure, the eyes spent and hollow.

Romney enjoyed the challenging mystery of it all. The two upper floors, high-ceiled and extending far back from the street, formed little less than a palace. Ti Kung's house in Shanghai was austere as a monastery compared. Romney found himself surrounded with luxuries startling even with his considerable acquaintance in the East. Ensconced here in the midst of influences insistently languorous, he was amused to find a tendency of his own character to tighten rather than to let down. The first night in Ti Kung's house had seemed to straighten him out and render distasteful abandonment such as he had known. Abandonment

here, he was well aware, would bring about the same results as the wastrel days on the water-fronts. He had entered into that with the fixed purpose of letting life go. It had refused to leave him, and now he was rather distantly glad to be alive.

In his own quarters, on the second day, he drew forth the frayed and soiled chiffon waist, washed it carefully and put it back in his breast. It was no more than a handkerchief. It had seen him through strange days and roads. He was the least maudlin of men, but the little fabric meant something striking and imperishable in his nature—something of him no longer, but around him. She was not *the woman*, but she had made the picture of what a woman could be. The farther from her, the more he appreciated. She had known in two weeks what it had taken him nearly a year to find out—that they were not for each other. The change had come to him from the months in the Drift—something to break his unparalleled infatuation. All her wonder and daring and splendour remained clear, and yet the terrible draw of her had somehow eased upon his heart. In a word, he saw as quite true another of her sayings—that love can never be on one side alone in a great romance.

Late the fifth afternoon of his stay in the house of Minglapo, Romney got the first inkling of the real business at hand. There had been talk at the dais for several moments, when the old master turned at the soft swinging of one of the shop's rear doors, and without finishing the sentence on his tongue, remarked:

"And now, Friend Romney, you are ready to meet a countryman of yours, General Nifton Bend—"

Very low in the doorway appeared that long, sad, strange face, and again the leap in Romney's breast and the impulse to hurry forward and help the Hunchback to the cushions. At the same time—a hot thrill for an unemotional man—the thought that his association with Ti Kung and Minglapo meant association with Nifton Bend, the genius of Young China.

At the moment of the General's entrance from the rear, the servants had sprung to the main door opening on Merchant's Square, closed and barred it as if for the night, though the afternoon was not entirely spent. The servants of the shop were banished and the three sat down together....

Romney's mind had rushed back not only to his first meeting in the native professor's house in the Congrou district of Peking, but to Longstruth's where his impressions of that brief former interview became vivid and animate again for the listening of Moira Kelvin. The Hunchback seemed to bring again something of her almost as intimate as her perfume....

Daylight did not reach them now. The dead expressionless look had come again to the General's eyes. Romney felt his own face turn bloodless under the second appraisal, as was the other's in the warm gathering dusk. The unhasting

and uninflected voice spoke again—the voice of a man with a single purpose, a man so close to the end that he laughs at pain. The words came slow and steadily, like running water:

"... We are working for the future of China. We may be wrong. We are doing the thing as we see it. Our deepest convictions are that we are right. We do not mean to meet Japan in this extraordinary crisis in the old fashion of arms and battle-lines. We do not care to fight. We favour theoretically the expediency of toleration, and yet we observe to the east and south, India, and on the north and west, Japan. Old India is magnificent in philosophy and yet so far without the physical impulse to protect herself; Japan, empty-minded, imitative, is furious with the idea of her own raw power of men and guns. If mind is a finer and more potent force than matter, we believe that guns and explosives and battle-lines are to be mastered by a thought. It cannot be written that Chinese age and wisdom shall succumb to the upstart and hot-headed people that has not even a language of its own—"

Nifton Bend's face was lit. Romney did not comprehend. This man, an authority on arms and military matters, spoke now against their use in case of war with Japan. He may have been a mystic in so far as his vision of the future went, but he had been enough of the manipulator of matter to make the new Chinese army. Did he plan to use some force of extermination more powerful than gases and explosives?

Minglapo now spoke to Romney, though his hand affectionately touched Nifton Bend's shoulder.

"We have learned to accept a lift of the General's eyelid, Friend Romney. He had not been thirty seconds in this room before you were approved. Already Dr. Ti Kung had approved you—and I. Still you would not have touched this inner circle as now but for your action in saving our Doctor's life. It appears they burned his house that night in Shanghai. You were intrusted with papers that contain certain of our plans. You may be asked to carry them again—even to Japan. There is for you a possibility of being an instrument toward the ending of all war from the world. China need act but once to end all war. It is a superb adventure for you, and incidentally you will be a power in preventing the world-calamity of a Japanese Asia."

Nifton Bend now spoke again:

"The history of that package which you so safely brought to us would make the raciest of novels. Once I hoped to become a novelist myself. That was in the days before the big dream of being a foster-child to the ancient Yellow Mother. In order that you may not be troubled longer by working in the dark, I am going to tell you something of what the yellow packet contains—"

And now there was the snap of a bone—the unmistakable snap of a faulty

knee-cap, from the far end of the room. Nifton Bend's utterance was cut short. Romney glanced quickly at the two faces. Minglapo's hands lifted slowly from the cushions. They seemed to waver a moment—then were clapped together. No servant appeared. It had undoubtedly been a servant of the household and had he been innocent he would have responded to the master's signal. Minglapo clapped his hands a second time, louder, and Romney saw in his eye what to him was unmistakably a command to make haste toward the part of the shop from which the snap had come. Rising, he heard a cry from Minglapo and was conscious of Nifton Bend making for the door to the right of the room. From overhead and from the hall-way outside was now heard the stirring and hurried approach of servants.

Romney skirted the shadowy edge of the long rear-hall, running silently on tip-toe. All that he saw at the far end was a slight movement, as of a door being softly shoved to. It had moved possibly no more than an inch. The American pushed it open. This rear-room was empty, and there was no sound whatsoever. He crossed quickly to a further door which opened to a dim hall. A crouched figure came to a stop at the far end under Romney's eye—the decrepit figure he had seen for an instant under the lifted trap to the basement. One of the servant's hands was concealed under his blouse.

6

Certain aspects of the affair which followed were ridiculous, and others profoundly Asiatic. Romney had felt himself far removed from the need of physical encounter with any human being, and yet as he came close to the tense bowed figure of the Chinese, the meaning of the concealed hand darted to his mind, also the sense that he must act quickly in an aggressive way or withdraw again out of the reach of the striking arm. It has been observed that, generally speaking, it was easier for Romney to advance than to withdraw. There was another point in that fraction of a second. He could not use a hand or foot upon an Oriental bowed with years—not even to disarm him. The fact is Romney dove forward, a sort of hip-tackle, the idea being to carry the servant's body to the floor with his arms pinned. After they had bumped the polished wood together as one, he was disagreeably shocked at the extreme emaciation of the figure beneath him. This turned in a moment to astonishment at the extraordinary strength and agility which the Oriental displayed. There was a crush in the thin hard limbs

twined about his own, and the hands were not to be held captive, but darted again and again to the girdle where the knife lay. Romney flattened his weight upon the lithe body and struggled for possession of the tearing, cutting fingers which sometimes found his face and again burrowed into the pressure between them. It was Minglapo's voice and foot that stilled the struggle, the latter placed disdainfully upon the neck of his house-servant.

Romney strolled back to the dais ashamed of himself somehow. Minglapo and Nifton Bend joined him a moment later, and rather quietly, as if they appreciated the delicacy of the white man. The emaciated one was brought in by two house-servants. He stood now before the master of the shop, trying to repress the heavy breathing of his exhausted body, and to cover as well as he could the trembling of his muscles from the recent strain. Something of warmth and approval crept into Romney's heart for the old man, as the pregnant meanings of the moment cleared in his mind. Minglapo dismissed the servants and regarded the trapped one, as Romney imagined, with something of strange kindness. Shutting his eyes, the vast head of the master moved slowly from right to left, then bowed before the American.

"Again you are our good genius, Friend Romney.... There appears a need wherever you are—of fast action. I am beginning to believe in what our Doctor says of the thing called American luck."

Romney waved his hand deprecatingly, and the General remarked with a smile:

"Our young friend feels with very good cause that he has better gifts for us than the force and swiftness of his hands."

He turned to Romney, adding:

"Do you not see that it was imperative for Young China to find the owner of that badly-hinged knee? Our enemies would have required but little more than a report of our words before that accident. I trust there has been no mistake as to one of these being the lucky knees."

He pointed to the house-servant's thin legs, and presently Romney fell once more into the charm of Minglapo's voice, though a tension was increasing in his mind in regard to the fate of the captive, his eyes turning often to the hollow-eyed one, as the voice of Minglapo came to his ears as from the deeps of a bubbling well. From none but a fat man with a great chest could such softness and volume issue.

The trembling of the servant's body resulted from exertion, not from fear. His features were sombre and changeless as the east at evening—a face of deep intelligence, but just a wrapping of yellow-pale tissue on the bony block of it, except for the burning quiet of the eyes. The ears were decently cut, the mouth and brow were good. Deference, attention, apprehension—these three were ex-

pressed and held in order by a concentration that was no less than mastery.

Nifton-Bend had also satisfied himself in study of that face. Minglapo was now questioning his servant in Chinese.

... Fifty years old ... served in this house for two years ... came from the South, from Canton ... papers in his possession to prove this...

Nifton Bend leaned forward to straighten the fringe of the cushions at Romney's knee and whispered:

"They all have papers. He is Japanese—as we shall doubtless prove—"

The talk went on. It appeared that Minglapo was interested in the same point that the General had just expressed, for presently he made a gesture to bring the servant down to his level. The lifeless eyes rolled backward for the fraction of a second as the wasted figure obeyed. He bent but one knee in his kneeling, his right leg thrust back loosely, the left bearing the full weight. The three also watched intently. Again the warmth surged up into Romney's throat—a curious fondness for the Oriental's courage and guile.

Now Minglapo stretched forth his hand to his servant's head and drew it forward into his lap. Silently and resigned, the other submitted. Still the left knee did double service. Very carefully Minglapo examined the man's crown, tweaking the queue with tense fingers, peering into the braid close to the scalp, letting the tight black length of it pass before his eyes slowly, as if watching the gloss of it under the lamp-light. This braid alone of him seemed fully alive.

"The queue is right enough. He has probably been in the service for many years, ever since a little boy—probably helped to map Manchuria—like as not helped to whip us in '95. Worked here two years waiting for to-night, and then, just a little dryness of the knee—"

Minglapo bade his servant stand once more. Nifton Bend leaned forward, placing his hand upon the loose right knee.

The servant explained that it was a bit rheumatic; that the pain was unbearable when he bent it.

"I'm afraid he will have to bend it," Minglapo said.

A look of agony swept across the servant's face, as the master commanded him to bend both knees at the same time. The force of will now called into action was so intense as to be like a frictional heat in the room. He lowered himself slowly, the weight seemingly equally divided in both limbs. He was now sitting on his heels, Oriental fashion. Minglapo waved him up again, and commanded him to repeat the exercise with a quick movement.

The tell-tale snap filled the room.

There was something exquisite to Romney in the fact that not one of the three faces to whom this was like an ultimatum, changed. Not the trace of a smile, nor light of triumph appeared in the eyes of Minglapo or the General. A hundred

times more, they respected this old man as a captive spy, than when he was merely one of the house-force. They respected him perhaps as only one gamester can respect another.... Minglapo went on speaking, but slowly, fragmentarily now. He clapped his hands. A servant came and returned immediately bringing a small lacquered box.

"Is he not superb?" Nifton Bend whispered.... "They train them from childhood. The Japanese system of espionage is far-reaching—ah, look there."

Minglapo had reached forward and lifted the blue loose-hanging blouse of the spy, rolling it well up above the shoulders. The bare brown chest and back showed scarred and blackened from some terrible maiming in the past. There were series of lumpy welts upon the back which Minglapo examined minutely. The disfigurations of the chest were of a different nature, long pale scars over which the skin stretched with a honey-like transparency.

"One of the most trusted of his kind beyond a doubt," said Nifton Bend. "This is not the first time he has been caught. Those three-barred welts on his back are from the Siberian knout, a devilish contrivance made of knotted whip-cord soaked in brine. The dark rashy appearance in spots is also from the North—frost-bite. We have a hero in our midst, Mr. Romney, one of the real ones whose names are never known."

The spy stood perfectly unemotional, looking upward, turning obediently whenever Minglapo took his arm.

"... He knows it is his last half-hour—"

The last was in a sense abrupt to Romney. He had been so absorbed in the whole game of these passionate nationalists, that the life and death end of it for the one caught had been put aside from his mind for the moment.

Minglapo arose and drew a goblet of water from the cooler, opened the lacquer box, took forth a small metal case which contained a long needle.

The pressure of it all was now a trifle heavy, even for the well-repressed American. The excellence of physical manhood manifested in the whole affair did not take away entirely the fact that the spy was about to be murdered. Romney felt he could not stay. His head turned to Minglapo and back to Nifton Bend. Their faces were expressionless and half averted. They would have accepted a reversal that meant death to them, with the same external calm that characterized the manner of the spy.... Yet the American could not lift. He was no stranger to the various fashions of brutality, but the temptation to pluck the stupor needle from the hand of Minglapo was well nigh overpowering. The unoccupied hand of the master was now held out toward the servant as if to take his arm. Very slowly the spy's hand lifted from his side, the palm toward Minglapo's, moving forward as one would grope in the dark. Over his face was that same eternal quietude like a faint reflection of day in the sky at evening.

That tableau seemed immortally fixed in Romney's mind. He leaned forward, his hands gripping his ankles as he sat.... Suddenly the principal was plucked from the centre of things. It was the queerest extraction—a sort of side-lurching as if the spy's body had been hurled past....

A quick shot from Nifton Bend at Romney's left—the voice of Minglapo in English—then a crash of glass and frame as the body of the spy hurled itself through the forward casement.

"Your work, Friend Romney. Get him, or all is ruined!" this from Minglapo.

As he darted across the room Romney realised that it did appear to be his work, that the house-servants were not to be trusted, that Minglapo was fat and the General maimed from birth. He dove through the pearl casement, somewhat enlarging the opening the other had made, and the street took him—a stunning impact. Then came a curious realisation of the freshness of evening.

The spy was up and away, the American following at a pace not adjusted to distance, a sprint which could not have lasted two hundred yards.

7

A boy runs, an animal runs, but a white man cannot preserve his esteem chasing a native through a Chinese street. Still the words of Minglapo rang in his ears—"Your work, Romney. Get him or all is ruined."

Other thoughts flashed as he ran—thoughts having to do with the changing and colouring of the Oriental maps, the end of a warring world, the strange patience and passion of practical visionaries like Minglapo and Nifton Bend and Dr. Ti Kung.

He ran with his elbows tucked in, his head forward. The spy, turning often, would have seen but for the duck a face that did not know how to quit. Yet Romney who knew what physical condition meant was surprised at his own lack of form. The Japanese ran with a limp—ran for his Emperor in whose service he had given youth and all the fine edge of his vitality. It was not until he was spent that he turned fox. Luck was not with him. The white man neared and the streets they passed furnished no hiding place, not even an open door. At his last turn Romney met a creature on the ground with fists upraised. Perhaps at no other time would he have found the spy without a weapon.

The fists of an Oriental are always pathetic, but these were piteously so. Romney did not join action with them, but sat down on a door-step, gasping, laughing a little. The ludicrous cringing attitude was a clue to a still greater

pathos. The white man in his exhaustion was struck again suddenly with the darkness of the whole drama. Why should he return this heroic little figure to his death? It was true that he was somehow in the service of the Big Three, that he had touched the secrets of their devoted lives, but now, as in the shop of Minglapo, the great zeal and patience, the unswerving fealty of this spy's service to his most human and impossible God, had a merit to it that touched him where he was tenderest. Nifton Bend and the two Chinese leaders meant adventure; reinstatement into the world of real men; more than that they meant initiation into the deepest crafts of men.... Ti Kung had picked him up from the gutter of the world's darkest slum, placed him on his feet, trusted him with a matter of life and death, sent him on a journey to his masters. Minglapo was a figure to tie to; and as for the Hunchback, Romney had uncovered an emotion that startled himself. He knew now what it meant to love a leader—something of the old mystery of what it means to die for another.

And yet they had thrust their responsibilities upon him. To take back this old man, all broken with exhaustion, meant to deliver him to his death. The personal side of the subject was big and near. He had run down the spy but didn't know what to do with him.... The little Jap had his life to live, his work to do. He had already done great silent unanswering tasks. He lay face downward on the turf now, panting hard—too old a man, his vitality too far spent, to be used so roughly.

The fact that Romney had been too long in Asia to care much for Japan and her ambitions and that he was deeply called to the mysterious activities of such men as the Big Three, didn't change a whit his incapacity just now.

He sat down on a doorstep, just at the feet of the spy, and mopped his brow laughingly, though his mental movements were heavy and severe. The way he personally panted and perspired, disgusted a mind in which the old ideal of an athlete still remained.... He saw for the first time the expediency of Pilate's memorable washing of hands.... The sound of hurried footsteps came up the narrow way.

Romney gambled with himself. If these were Minglapo's servants—the affair of course was out of his hands. If not—well, he couldn't exactly let the Jap escape with information that would betray the lives and work of his friends.... The hurrying feet had not to do with the house of Minglapo. They were Tientsin policemen—three of them—summoned to duty doubtless by the chase. Perceiving the American now, and his game on the ground before him, they brought lanterns to bear upon the two faces, talked long and with much gravity. Romney blinked into the lantern light again, an extra-long exposure. Then his life-story in full was hypothecated by one of the officers. The two others afterward relieved themselves of prolonged intonations in many high keys, having little to do with

the facts of the case. Their manner became sumptuously courteous, even deferential, so that the American felt in justice to them he should rise from the doorstep. They touched his elbows on either side—slight, lifting pressures, bowing repeatedly to him and pointing over their shoulders in a direction contrary to the shop in Merchant's Square. Romney did not care to return just then to Minglapo. In fact, he doubted whether he ever would again. Two of the officers had lifted the spy between them.

As they walked, a little ray came down upon the American from the future. Policemen meant calaboose, even in China. Calaboose meant on some occasions an inconvenient chance to think. Minglapo of course would exert himself in behalf of them, but delivery meant a return to the dais and resumption of the murder process. Meanwhile in the little old head walking behind, between the two Chinese policemen, were facts and suspicions enough to break entirely what Romney was willing to grant as the biggest game in Asia at the present moment.... Just now it occurred that a properly trained Japanese spy would be able to talk in English, which would prove utterly unintelligible to the Chinese police.

"Oh, I say, we'd better fix matters somehow—so we'll pull together—"

"Good," came the answer.

"You—why didn't you say something before?"

"There was nothing to say. I expected death when I fell in the street—"

"I suppose that was my business."

"I do not understand—"

Romney was charged with queer elation. He would have known the spy was Japanese by his English—probably a University of Tokyo training. He was familiar with Japanese students. Always they bent forward with the effort of thinking in a foreign language. The Chinese were inclined to sit back and let the other do the heavy work of listening.

"You mean you don't understand why I didn't kill you?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

"I'm not a murderer. I haven't got anything against you."

"Then you are not with them?"

"Yes—"

"I do not understand—"

It was the East and West again, a chasm that could not be bridged. Romney dropped the subject.

"We'd better fix matters—as to what front is best to put up—"

"Front?"

"What we'd better tell them, so that our stories will fit—"

"Stories?"

"Listen," said Romney, straining for the non-idiomatic. "They will ask ques-

tions at the station. We must answer. If we answer differently, it would be better if we had not spoken—"

"Yes. I am your servant. We had a disagreement. You started to beat me and I ran—"

"Just a little domestic difference," Romney remarked.

"Yes."

"Where do we live?"

"I came with you from Shanghai four days ago. We have been in the country since arrival—"

Romney was further amused. Minglapo had been studiously avoided in the arrangement. The spy had a fertile mind. These things were a part of his work. He was aware even of Romney's coming from Shanghai.

"You are not to remember the place we have been since Shanghai and Tongu," the Japanese added. "I have been showing you our country. You are rich. You just play and pay.... You must speak sharp to me now, as if you did not like my talk—"

Romney noisily rebuked his servant. The hands of the little policeman tightened on his arm. "Good," said the Japanese in frightened, cringing tones. "Now I will explain to them that I am your servant and that you were displeased with me."

There were suspended explanations to the policeman; long, voluble breaths and fresh beginnings, as if the spy were releasing a memorized address; after that a moment of silence, and a low wailing sentence in English:

"It does not please them altogether."

They were locked presently in the same cell. Voices of the drugged and drunken beat through the corridors, and screams of madness from lower passages. And still Romney had his chance to think. The Big Three wouldn't be pleased to learn that he had permitted the spy to fall into the hands of the law. Even the Japanese didn't understand a white man's mercy. These nationalists were an interesting sort. They didn't ask from others what they were unwilling to give themselves. Failure meant forfeiture of life in their work. But the West didn't breed this sort of thing in a man. Romney found himself not as intrinsically of the East as he imagined. He could conceive a big system doing away with a host of lives, but still he didn't care to be the direct instrument of taking the life of one man.

Presently he found himself in the midst of conjecture as to how the Big Three meant to strangle Japan. For many moments this matter wavered back and forth through his mind, and did not take real form until he happened to recall the laboratory in Minglapo's cellar. There might be a connection here. He had heard of a ghastly, almost incommunicable horror having to do with the slaying

of multitudes without any formal arrangement of platoon, brigade or corps....

He dozed in his chair at last, dreaming of a nation stricken with pestilence—its soldiers all away in the clean and ancient barbarities of war.... He would wait for Ti Kung and then possibly it would be well to clear himself from the Big Three. Perhaps they wouldn't trust him—even to keep his mouth shut.... The little old spy slept at his feet.... In the heart of the night, a prison-guard entered with a lantern, drawing the cell-door shut behind him.

Romney opened his eyes, and saw a queer intelligence in the glance of the other—a face he had not seen before. The prison guard was intent for an instant upon the figure at Romney's feet, the lantern-ray pouring over the spy's length from feet to queue—then back to Romney's face.

"Sit quiet and say nothing," he whispered, "Your friends are working for you. To-morrow you will be free. This—remember—is a madman. He is not responsible.... Say only that he attacked you and me—now—"

The voice of the prison-guard came from the dark, behind the lantern-ray. Romney caught up sleepily with the full significance of the words. Suddenly the lantern fell and the stranger raised a terrible outcry, springing upon the spy, who had half-risen. Now they were on the floor together, and a shot was fired.

The prison-guard was the one to arise. The lantern was spraying the stone floor with light, above was darkness. Romney's face was caught in the hands of the policeman, and these words were driven in his mind, even as he struggled to be free:

"Listen. He leaped upon me and tried to take my pistol. I had to shoot. He is done and cannot deny. They are coming—"

The officer now raised his voice for help, and the corridors drummed with hurrying feet.

8

Romney did not sleep during the rest of the night. They were slow about taking the body of the little spy forth from the cell. The murder passage recurred repeatedly. It had been very swift and matter of fact, the prison-guard explaining what Romney should say as he watchfully prepared to assassinate the Japanese, who in his turn arose slowly and empty-handed to meet the end—all this in a treacherous lantern-ray. Romney did not fancy such patriotism. Of course he realised that the cause of the Big Three would have been ruined had the Japanese spy managed to live to make his report. He granted that the Big Three dreamed

of a greater and purer China; even granted that if their dream were applied to the machinery of nationalism, the result would be finer for the Orient and the world, than if Japan became the dominant power of Asia. At the same time he was not so modern in holding a curious repugnance for the present episode.

In mid-afternoon the murderous prison-guard found an opportunity to whisper that Romney's liberty would have been obtained hours before, had there not been found another charge against him, the nature of which was not yet clear. The prisoner was asked to be patient, however, that great forces were at work to set him free. Romney took another long breath. At times like this, the period of his life, since the parting at Longstruth's seemed altogether irrational.

They had not yet cleansed the floor of his cell.

It was not until toward evening that he was led forth to meet this mysterious new charge. A bearded Chinese in lavender robes sat in a high box and appeared four-eyed behind his spectacles. Before him stood the avid McLean of the *John Dividend*, now turning at the step of his prey and feasting his single eye on the length and thinness of the American.

Romney's laugh was doubtless charged to him.

"Hello, Mac," he said, "I heard you had gone way down—"

"It has cost me a great deal to bring you face to face—"

"If I had seen you ten minutes after our meeting over the wall in Shanghai, I could have fixed that little matter—"

"It is to be fixed now. The cost of collection and the payment for personal damage received—brings the amount to twenty-five pounds. The items are all here—"

McLean presented a long paper of charges.

"I may not have that much—what in that case?"

"Back to *John Dividend* or rot here—"

Romney recalled that he had slightly less than a hundred dollars, which, with his other belongings, was now in the hands of the police. He offered seventy-five dollars to close McLean's claim.

To his surprise this amount—three times the original loan—was refused.

"Come around to-morrow—maybe I can raise the wind," Romney suggested. "I've made you a lot of trouble and you've got a right to be sore."

Romney was still further surprised that the money-lender did not wabble. He had not expected to be led back to the cell. An hour later, however, he was called to the office again and after an evening's performance of formality, extending through trial, initiatory and several deeper degrees, he found himself in the street, his own money not used in obtaining this freedom, and a secret verbal order, imparted by the prison-guard, for him to report at once to the shop of Minglapo.

Dr. Ti Kung had returned.

The three were gathered at the dais when Romney was admitted. Dr. Ti Kung raised his hand and apologised for not rising.

"From what they tell me," he said with a tired smile, "your former proficiency in athletics has stood you in good stead."

Minglapo glanced whimsically at the forward casement, repaired since Romney had crashed through. The deep bubble of a laugh started, but dripped back.

The Hunchback bowed toward his countryman, studying him with a strange mixed expression of anxiety and compassion. The long, narrow, wolfhound head held something that invariably lifted Romney—something very deep that had to do with the love of man for man.

"I'm afraid," he remarked, "that I don't take the joy in a foot-race that I once did. And it's mainly knowing how now. I'm really far from fit."

"We trust that there will be no more of that for your portion. We have reserved a task for you, Friend Romney—not more important, perhaps, but of a much higher form of activity."

It was in Romney's mind at that moment to state certain objections, but the face of Nifton Bend held him silent.

"I have been honoured," Dr. Ti Kung added, "in that my friends have found you all that I promised—and more. It is strange that Mother China should uncover among her most valuable workers, two men of your country—"

"I have been wondering if I have the training for such ardent nationalism," Romney said quietly.

Dr. Ti Kung turned to Nifton Bend who replied:

"We have thought of that. I can answer you best in my own experience. I was without a country—and dared to be a citizen of the world. It was this old Yellow Mother who took me in. China is not a nation. She is the bed-rock of Asia. All elements are in her breast—the most ancient, and conceptions so modern that they cannot be spoken aloud. For one must *whisper* the absolutely new. There is no place as yet for a visionary in America—but there is a place here. One who works for China works for all the East—and for the world, since out of the East all great things come to light."

The Hunchback smiled. "I do not speak much in this way. There is something in you that draws forth the dream.... But I see you are troubled."

"Perhaps it was because he was locked up for a night and a day," said Dr. Ti Kung.

"No, it is not that," said Nifton Bend. "I saw it here before the little house-servant escaped. He won your heart, Mr. Romney?"

"Yes," the word came eagerly.

"You lost your sense of the greatness of a cause—that could sacrifice him so ruthlessly?"

"Yes. He was all tempered with suffering—so absolute in fortitude.... They murdered him at my feet in the cell."

"He has done well. Perhaps you can see that we too love a servant like that—"

"Yes—but to put him out of the way—"

"The cause is greater than the man."

"I do not mean to argue. I can either take it or leave it." Romney could not say more. There was an encompassing understanding in the Hunchback's eye.

"We are glad to discuss this with you. The East regards these things differently. Tell us how you overtook him and what happened before the arrest—"

"He fell from fatigue. His hands were held up to me from the ground. I knew that you wanted him dead, knew what you expected of me, but I sat down on a doorstep to think it out. He expected death. He was trained your way. He asked me afterward why I had not killed him then. I knew you could not rest while his thoughts held together in that gritty head. Presently the police came along. It occurred to me if he were a trained spy, he would know English, and it was so. We arranged our story on the way to the lock-up—arranged it so as to keep out the name of Minglapo.... When I saw him trying to take care of that dry kneecap right here in this room—why, the stuff of me went out to him."

"Europe has gone mad," the Hunchback said wearily. "France, England, Italy, Austria, Russia, Germany, all goring each other—America threatened—Japan standing ready to take up the murderous confession of her material-mindedness. Mother China can stop all that forever."

Except for the presence of the Hunchback, Romney would have assumed a Western point of view fully at this time and explained that life had taught him to do most of his dreaming at night. Instead, he said:

"Of course, I should be very glad to hear about China's power of mastering Japan without arms and ending war forever from the hard-pressed earth—"

It was one of the strangest moments. Romney had come very close to the truth several times in his own thoughts, but never so close as now. His question had put the answer into three minds. It was not that any one of the three intended to speak, but what he had asked had brought the picture of the truth as each saw it into a kind of form of words. If there is anything to the transference of thought, the mental pictures of the three may have helped Romney to the solution at that moment. He had turned from Nifton Bend to Dr. Ti Kung. Queerly enough, just now he recalled the extraordinary interest and capacity of the Chinese in chemical and biological matters during his work in Palo Alto. Instantly upon this was added the sharp recollection of the trap entrance to the basement laboratory

in this very house. Then came the large seeming importance of the packet he had delivered to Minglapo from Dr. Ti Kung. Might not the documents contained in that represent the fruits of Ti Kung's studies in the laboratories of the States? All this was in a flash, and over it all—it was like a panorama—a Japan with desolated streets and highways, an Island of Pestilence.... Nifton Bend next spoke:

"You see, Mr. Romney, as you now stand troubled by this dramatic little matter having to do with our spy—it would not be well for us to complete our plans for you. You are honest. You are of the West—called to us and called from us, by your ideals. Our measure is heroic. A measure to accomplish such a result as we deem to be required now must be heroic.

"Without knowing exactly the form our activity will take, you can continue to serve us. If we told you the exact truth—your very possession of it would endanger your life in the event of its making you waver in your allegiance to us—"

"You mean like the spy. You had to kill him because he had learned too much. But I know as much as he now—"

"Perhaps not. He has been in this house for two years, and during the last day or two, he has been used in a particular service."

"Then you think what he heard here was not all, but merely an added inkling to the full understanding."

"He became dangerous to us."

"You do not think that I am dangerous to you now?"

"Your case is different. We have seen your trustworthiness. We know that any difference now is moral and that our cause is safe in your hands. At the same time any explicit methods which we might use must not become the property of any mind which is not imbued with the great passion which we feel."

"You say you could use me without divulging further?"

"Yes. We wish—"

"You are not treating me then, as you would treat an Oriental—"

"That is because I am an American. My friends have learned to trust me—and I have chosen to trust you—"

Romney thanked him.

"What plan have you for me?"

The two Chinese turned to Nifton Bend who arose.

"This morning we planned to send you to Japan. The delay in securing your release from custody has changed that. You are to start for the Gobi Desert. The plan is written, the progress of your journey set down, the policy and full meaning of your mission. These papers are in my chamber on the floor above. There may be a detail or two to finish in regard to them. Your servant will bring you to me in a few minutes. If you can be ready within an hour, it would be well

for you to reach Peking in the morning. Let me add that this is a mission of great mercy, not a mission of death—"

Romney made himself ready in his own quarters. A lift had come to his heart which he did not pretend to understand. It had seemed that his acceptance of the mission had been ordained deep in his own volition—the decision arising finished in his consciousness while the Hunchback spoke.... Many of the preparations for travel had already been made by Bamban, who left him to bring the word from Nifton Bend.

... Romney was in one of the halls, his servant walking ahead. A door opened a little distance forward and low in it, the place a half-grown child's head would occupy, appeared the long face of the Hunchback—beyond that, golden lamplight, the sound of a softly-playing fountain, and an instant later, the movement of another figure in the mellow light.

Romney halted. The figure had come forward. The head and breast were above Nifton Bend and two bare white arms rested upon the low shoulders. One was held out.

Her head turned slightly, the light touching that perfect profile. She was smiling. Romney could not feel his limbs, yet they carried him forward to the outstretched hand.

"It's good to see you again, Sir Romney."

Something had broken within him. The strange elation had changed to a tangible power. There was sorrow in her loveliness. But such a sense of the beauty in the presence of the two together—a kind of entering into the heart of a sacred place. And queerly enough he felt himself at the end of commonness—mere man movements and matters put away, an end to the drift of the waterfronts, all helplessness and the stress of hand to hand. She was close, looking into his face.

"You have put on something that I could not find a year ago, Sir Romney," she whispered.

"For awhile I thought I had lost rather than gained. I hope you are right," he answered.

His eyes were held to the yellow rug. It lay over a low chair by the fountain. She led Nifton Bend to it, the bare arm ever close to his shoulder.

"I am glad that he is chosen for the mission to the desert," she was saying to the Hunchback. "I am glad you two know each other, for I found Sir Romney

very much a man."

PART TWO: THE GOBI
ANNA ERIVAN

1

Romney was not delayed long in Peking, and the few days were interesting, for his credentials opened a different shelf of native life from that which the foreign traveller ever encounters. Here he was surrounded by the young men to whom the names of Ti Kung and Minglapo and Nifton Bend were demigods, no less. He saw the cause of Young China in force, felt the strong fresh beat of it, and became more than ever glad that it was in the world, and that he had the honour to be a servant of it. To him, there were no longer three but four leaders. He told Moira Kelvin this before he left the lamp-lit room in Tientsin. She was vital warmth and depth of background to a picture such as his. Men called forth his friendship and loyalty and service, but there was something in the spirit of romance which she stood for, that made a slave of him, and there was something of creative significance in her love-relation with the General that was so intimate and sacred that he did not bring it even to the foreground of his mind for close analysis. Her personal pull upon him was easily borne now. He kept it as a kind of secret sweetness of life. It honoured her, and the yearning that came with it was one of the finest ingredients for moral health. No man spends energy in yearning whose real forces are asleep. So they were good girding days and his health came back. He felt himself relaxing again in the slow rhythmic breath of the interior.

Romney only knew that he was going to the Gobi Desert. There was a Peking letter among his numbered documents; another letter to be opened in Tushi-kow and for all points of his journey ahead up to a town in the desert called Wampli. But these letters were not to be read until he reached the towns noted, and the documents attending each letter were promised to give him further details as to friends, impedimentum, his task and safe conduct.

Three days were spent in Tushi-kow where the Chinese Post Road forks

from the Russian caravan route to Siberia. Here he was quartered in the house of Fai Ming, whose name was in daily use by the members of the cause in Peking. This old aristocrat who felt honoured in giving his wealth and strength to the people, had many tales to tell of the Chinese awakening, of the young social order in America and Europe which he had visited since Romney had been home. It was his view that a certain brotherhood passion was trimmed for ignition around the world and would shortly become a circle of cleansing flame.

"The camels are ready," Fai Ming said on the last day, "but I would not have you hasten, my friend. There is a long caravan-route from here—let us say to Turgim, where a real activity may begin for you. Another party will start three days hence if you wish to wait—"

Romney shook his head. "Yet I have felt that I have been in my own home with you," he added.

"Your mission is unprecedented. The desert tribes are said to be full of zeal, and slow in discrimination, though you will not meet dangers on this side of Turgim. In any event we are taught that a man with a real mission is in the hands of strange and powerful helpers."

Bamban meant superb tea, dry blankets, and dustless food. Also, he appeared to command a proper respect for his new master not only from the native travellers, but from the camel-drivers and Tartar merchants. Moreover, that camel-reek which became a part of the very texture of everything in the caravan, as all men and equipment of a cavalry outfit partake of the essence of horse, was at least checked in its pervasiveness so far as Romney was concerned, by the tireless efforts of the fastidious one.

"Bamban, you're getting to be a habit that will be hard to break," Romney remarked one evening early in the journey to Turgim.

Days folded into each other, and something from the unearthly gleam of the desert edges entered his soul. His mind moved slowly. Sometimes he wondered if the old quick thinking and sharp mental activity would ever come back. At times he had no care regarding it, feeling that all surface glibness had passed for good. His orders so far were only arousing. He did not know as yet what he was to do in the Gobi, though the intimations were of a most challenging kind. He had been furnished with copies of manuscripts written in Chinese and in part in Sanscrit, containing information regarding the desert, information that the world at large would scoff at. He was advised concurrently to study these papers. More and more he realised that in ways other than his linguistic prowess he was fitted for the journey at hand.

He thought much of Moira Kelvin and Nifton Bend. One night by the desert fire, with Bamban sitting expectantly near, the salient events of the year moved by in steady, and for the first time, ordered procession, beginning with his first

glance at the yellow rug on the little river steamer *Sungkiang*—that whirlwind fortnight. For a month or so he had been close to death—he saw this clearly now—her laugh the note of his delirium, her kiss the heat of his fever. After that, a kind of low animal hate which had to burn out before decency and sense came.

He was cool now. The night was winter clear. He would never have been able to see her so largely and definedly as now, had she taken him. She had become a kind of institution, but impersonal. His present run of thoughts was not without a touch of chivalry. He saw that there are very few really exciting vampires among the love-women; that no man strikes fire with a superb woman's genius without enduring benefits. If a man figures out the cost in dollars for such an adventure he's not a lover of quality. If a man's career in the world is slowed somewhat, it's an easy price to pay for being privileged to enter even for a little time the domain of a passionate woman's genius. The yellow-rug woman was his initiation. The fact that he had glimpsed a devil in her too much for a boy to subdue, no longer prevented him from seeing that the fault was his own weakness and that her devil was in no way smug. He had well put away the cheap male diversion of hating all women, because he had met one too great to hide herself in him. He did not want Moira Kelvin back, but his heart was strangely expectant of meeting some one of her quality, some glory akin to hers, but nearer his own full comprehension.

Because he did encounter something of this kind, he is present on these pages. The rest—the strangeness, the peril, the desert itself, is mere setting and arrangement.

In the main, the deeps of his mind were undisturbed, the forces there moving often with a finer vitality than he had known before, but day after day the expectancy recurred in the same form, the sense of an imminent and radical complication. He could not quite put away thoughts of this delicate and encompassing mystery. Always he said, "This will pass when I really enter the desert," but it was not so in the journey to Turgim, though he saw no white woman throughout those majestic days—only the dark and yellow women in the shadows of the Rest Houses at evening—creatures very far from complication. Still, the gently lingering of feminine redolence in his reveries....

Always when he thought of the woman yet unknown, the penetration and one-pointedness of his mission diminished. In the colder morning hours he was able to reckon with the soft haunt of it all; but in the wondrous nights of desert moonlight (the same lady of the moon, full-throated, head tilted back) Young China of the towering present, and the sand-strewn relics of the ancient Lemurians, said to be left in the Gobi, alike lost their conspicuous magic.

At Turgim, a vile and sprawling town, Romney drew a somewhat clearer idea of what he was out after, and the vague vastness of the undertaking at this

time possessed the large part of his thinking in the day-light hours of travel. The main road was left at Turgim and the next point was Nadiram, six days' journey straight west into the desert. Three Tartar merchants arranged to travel this stretch and Bamban explained that they relied upon his master's credentials, since Nadiram was usually reached from an open spur running south from the Chinese Post Road at a point ten days' journey ahead. Nearly two weeks was to be saved by this western cut, but the trail was commercially unsafe. The remotest of the Russian consuls was said to be stationed at Nadiram.

Six days—a party of five camels. The Gobi now gave them battle, days of burning, nights of sudden chill. The three strangers proved helpful, as they knew the best switches of the trail and the halts for water and rest. Three times desert bands swept up to the little caravan—foul and furious they appeared, demanding their tariffs of money to the last copper or kopeck. It was on this journey that Romney first heard the hyenas....

The last day of the journey to Nadiram was ending. It had been an extra long stretch for the camels. He planned to rest a few days, and Nadiram was supposed to be for him, the last day on the outer and open highway of the desert. A sense of the mystery of the East came that night, as it had not since his early days in India.

They neared the settlement in the first coolness of early evening. It lay in a strange, fixed fashion, as if moulded low upon the rolling sand. Except for the shadows, it would have been unearthly. Indeed, there was a sharp intensity to the shadows, such as one finds upon the moon through a strong lens, but the colour was lowered—a Gobi colour, a lifeless, sand-scoured yellow. Romney gathered his padded coat about him before the hut-shadows fell across the way. The desert was clean, but the smell of the town was of uncovered dead. In the open, the sun had played upon all surfaces; men had defiled these shadows. Romney shivered, his nostrils had long been clean of Turgim....

Nothing of his reading or imagination had pictured this entrance to Nadiram, and yet there was a strange and evil familiarity about it all—as if some ancient picture of his mind finally opened to tally with the present, object for object.

The moon was not yet risen; the town was lit, but the desert still in twilight. The main road through the town stretched straight into the East. In the very centre of it, in the low distance, the planet Jupiter was rising—something to hold to, something of peace and spaciousness. It was needed, because the sights and sounds and scents about him, as the camels rocked in, belonged to a flaring hell. Little shops were lit with torches in the doorways, torches that roared and were red. The faces of the keepers took on this red light, also the faces of the beggars in the streets. The tired beasts moved forward rapidly and with a stealth that had long been forgotten in the desert. The forward drivers were continually

screaming for right of way. Thus Romney saw Nadiram, the faces of the people turned upward in the red reflection—like a kindling of hatred upon a countenance of impassive gloom.

The three Tartar merchants disappeared into a side street. Romney turned presently into the court-yard of the Russian consulate, and dismounted, deeply conscious in the dusk of the eyes of a woman in the doorway.

2

From the moment that he beckoned to Bamban to make his camel kneel in the court of the Consulate, until the woman's eyes turned to his from where she stood in the narrow opening of the door, an intensity of sheer living possessed him such as he had never experienced except during the Hankow fortnight. His good limbs stumbled as he crossed the level stone flags, not because he had been on the rack for hours, but because the main force of his life had turned out to the woman's face—as if all his life hitherto had been but a journey to that face.

She gave no sign; merely bowed and said in English:

"The Russian Consul is ill. He can see no one."

To the weathered Romney had come a certain dismay. He had been able to meet most pressures from men; take up most of men's crosses and carry them to Golgotha, if necessary, but the burden of this—that her face was calm, that her eyes gave no sign, that his approach meant nothing of the extraordinary nature that had prevailed upon him—this held the unique pang. He tried to save himself, as a man's mind will, by the thought that the suddenness of this encounter and the utter absence of beauty from his life for many weeks, had stimulated him in an unusual way. This that had rocked his heart was just a pretty woman's influence. She would say something presently to break the dream, and he would be quite calm again.

It was not until after this rush of thinking that Romney came up out of the deeps—enough to laugh at himself, for expecting her to be startled by his coming. But it was not a very successful laugh, not the kind he used in men's affairs or against the worst that the world had shown him since the other woman went her way. The idea of his mission did not rouse him. He had merely concentrated on work to pass the time until this moment. In fact it is the great workers of the world who become terrific to handle when they turn from their tasks to a woman....

Romney had no particular message for the Russian Consul, yet he said with

difficulty:

"Is the Consul very ill?"

"I think he will be able to see you in the morning."

Now she was looking at him differently, her head bent toward him.

"You do not speak like an Englishman," she added.

He drew closer. "I am American."

It was not apparent whether she was pleased or regretted the fact. That there was a medium of language between them did not occur in its full importance until afterward.

"I am Anna Erivan, the Consul's sister."

If she had been Erivan's wife, Romney might have treasured for some time a certain deep dream, but certainly he would have kept his dreaming clean-clipped that night; and certainly he would not have tarried in the court, until he was asked to enter the Consulate.

Bamban was sent with the camels to the Rest House. The woman made tea and placed food before him, lighting the candles and tending the fire upon the hearth.

It was a low, broad room, the beams of the ceiling uncovered, the floor paved with flags, like the court, and gratifyingly clean.

She spoke as she served him.... Her brother was not dangerously ill. He would be up again in the morning, if that would do.... She had been here with him a year. Yes, she had been lonely.... There were no other Russians here, no other Europeans, none who remained.... No one remained in Nadiram. It was but a point on the long road. No one came back; all moved on. In good time every one passed on. If one remained long enough in Nadiram, all Asia would go by, she supposed.... Mostly, however, they were Chinese and Buddhist holy men, many of them weak from hunger that they had brought upon themselves. She loved the holy men. Some of them were quite pure.... There was one very ancient one, who was almost dead. He had slept in the court for a whole day, and she had served him. His heart was an abode of peace. She had been better for days following. She had felt a strange peace for an hour or two from others who had passed, but never like the power of this very old saint. His name was Rajananda.... Mostly it was a passing of world faces, Chinese and Tartars who pressed on, wanting something—their faces set with desire.... Sometimes it was all like a dream to her, the great rolling, burning desert—the moving dots becoming men and horses and camels, the men and horses and camels becoming dots again....

Thus she talked, breaking and toasting bread, pouring his tea. Romney's heart was like an upturned cup with listening. He ate but did not taste the food, drank but did not know that the tea was priceless. Night had closed upon the court. He heard the heavy breathing from an inner room, and horses somewhere

outside clearing their nostrils from the dusty forage. The voices of the Chinese came in when he stopped to listen, an endless iteration of nothings.

The woman moved about—a sentence and a silence—cleansing the tea things. An hour passed. The place was bare as before. A plate of sweets was left upon the table, a pitcher of water with a cup beside it, a tin of tobacco and papers. She rolled a cigarette absently, standing by the table, still telling of the long road. She proffered the cigarette to him, suddenly recalling herself.

"I quite forgot," she said. "He taught me to do it for him." She looked at the shut door, from which the breathing issued.

Romney accepted the cigarette gratefully. He spoke very little and quietly, a deep hush upon him. He had been afraid to comment, lest she be aroused and hastily call in the fragments of her story. He was sensitive enough to know that she was easing some tragic ache from her heart. Her voice, her face and figure, the hands that served, the story itself, filled his imagination with pictures and a startling kind of power.

The sense now came to Romney that he could be himself at last. This woman was a flame that freed him. In the light of her, he dared be a full being. He did not feel less, nor was prompted in any way to act or cover. She did not make a slave of him, but called forth such as he had of humour and wisdom. He could see past the flash of her eyes. There had been at times such a surface dazzle in the eyes of the yellow-rug woman that he had not been able to see beyond it, but that dazzle was for him and the world. Nifton Bend doubtless encountered no such difficulty. It was but one of the perfectly appointed barriers that preserved the love-woman for her own.... There was a moment—it was the same that Romney fully realised that he was himself at last—in which the smooth-running levels of Anna Erivan's story changed to rush of a cataract:

"... I have been here a year—do you understand that—a year? I came from Odessa, four thousand miles, by train, by caravan, over mountain passes, across rivers, through wastes of sun and rock.... Days of fever heat, nights of perishing cold—thirst and suffering—four thousand miles, five hundred on the back of a camel.... My mother was just dead, yet all the way I dreamed of the bountiful heart of a big brother I had not seen for years. He was here. All the way from Odessa I came to him.

"The last fifty miles I travelled with Tartar merchants, and learned to know them well. They were not unreal. They were good to me. And yet, I was so frightened. They told me as I neared Nadiram on the road from Urga that their caravan had a thousand miles still to wander through the desert, past ruined cities and along dried-up river-beds to Peking.

"It was evening when we reached here—just as you reached here this evening. I had seen Nadiram spelled out on the maps; I had seen the post-mark

on his yearly letter. I had pictured it so differently, and this is what I saw—sun-dried clay, and the low blowing desert and this court-yard with the Russian flag. I had expected him to come forth to meet me. All day I watched. I had started early for the journey's end. I entered the court, but saw no face. The merchants passed on, turning queerly. The door-way was heavy with dust, that door where you entered. I pushed it open, my arms ready to fling about him. I thought he must be busy or detained.

"This room was darkening. It was not as you found it, but sodden and evil—an evil odour. I called, and there was no answer. I was frightened. I had been frightened all day. One does not know what one can stand. That was but the beginning, and I thought I was close to death then.

"Do you know what I found? I will show you—"

She turned quickly to the door and opened it. Romney saw a great bear of a man, half sprawled over a wooden table, the candle sputtering near his head in the fresh pressure from the open door, the sharp fume of brandy issuing. The body seemed swollen, neck and ears, shoulders, abdomen, legs—all swollen, but the top of the head. That was small and sparsely covered with hair, the candle-light upon it. The lips were swollen and parted.

"That is what I found," she said.

3

Presently she shut the door of the forward room with quick hand—her face remorseful and tender.

"I don't know why I did that. It was hateful to do that—and before you. I don't know why I did it."

"You had to," he said. "I listened so intently, you had to tell me. You could not tell one more ready to understand and help you."

"But he is not always like that—not always like to-night and that night. There have been many days ... oh, but he is not what I expected—so different from when he left Odessa. But very kind, always kind. To-morrow morning he will be kind enough. Only such a desolation comes over me out of his soul. It is like the desert.... And nothing I can do changes him. I have ceased trying to change him, ceased trying, ceased hoping—"

"Some men can't stand the desert," Romney said. "One must bring a certain integration of force, a certain resistance, to stand it here. The Gobi saps the vitality of the weak; it often takes the sanity of men who do not drink.... Your

brother does not know what comes over him. He feels himself going insane, that's all. A man drinks, when he feels that, if he's the kind that turns to drink.... You had to tell me. It's lucky I came. I wouldn't have failed to come—not for worlds. Perhaps I came to take you away—"

... Her fineness appeared only to one who had the grace to see. Romney, surprised at his own words, sensed vast reaches in her, depths that defied him, something of the newness of new Russia and hues of beauty ancient as Asia. Her eyes had widened, making her face the more fragile. Just then he saw the rising moon through a low pane behind her. It was in the full and still red from the horizon. The glass was poor, distorting the circle so that it was like a bulging grain bag.... She had not smiled, nor taken exception to his words. There was no coquetry in her. She waited for him to explain.

"You have seen all the terror and the oppression of the desert. You cannot have failed to see something of the rest," he suggested.

She paused and he added, "Something that has to do perhaps with that old Buddhist holy man you spoke of so kindly."

"I only know he brought me a strange peace," she replied. "As if living here with no one to talk or listen to, wasn't all of life, but just a little part, a hard part.... He was very little and old—but so kind! I am telling it very badly, but I got a sense from him, not through words, that I must take this hard part, day by day, and put it behind; that it had come to me because I deserved it, every day of it. And I do just that for hours, feeling courageous, but I cannot always hold it. The rebellion comes back; the darkness and squalor of it all come back."

"Does something like that peace ever come to you from the desert itself?"

She shivered. "No, it does not belong to me. I am here, because there could be no more terrible place. If I deserved suffering, the design is perfect. But I have whimpered enough. You see I was choking with it. I have *used* you—to ease myself."

"I wonder if it is all illusion to me," he mused. "I have seen another side to the desert—nights like to-night when everything is softened in moonlight—the old civilisation—and all so clean. The Gobi is a mate of the moon's. I think it is almost as big as the moon. It starts the imagination because everything is finished. It has had its day, like the moon, and there is a wonderful story to be read if one could pass the aloofness. Even here in Nadiram we are but on the edge of its mystery. Hasn't the heart of the desert ever called to you?"

"Only when I wanted to die," she answered. "I don't know why men should love the past. Each day is enough conquest for me. I can face anything in the morning—*except yesterday.* Until noon I am brave, and feel that I can take what is to come from ahead; but I cannot turn back. The moon is dead. The Gobi is dead. I don't care for the cleanness of death. The death ahead for you and for

me and for all—that's not so hard to face, but it seems to me sometimes that we are the products of many deaths and I dare not think of that.... How strange our talk! And you should rest from your journey. There is a room here for you. You will not need to go to the Rest House. Are your servants cared for?"

"Yes, thank you. I'll stay, if I may. The journey has not wearied me, but you are very tired. The day has been hard for you. I wish I could say something that would make you rest.... I wish I might say the words to make you sleep like a little child, forgetting the moon and the Gobi and all that is past—your face turned with a smile to to-morrow. There are such words, if I could think of them."

The smile had come to her face. Her lips parted. Romney had somehow helped her. He did not know just what word had done it, unless it was the mention of the little child.

"You have *fancy*," she said softly. "For ages here, no one has talked except of meat and smoke and fire and beds. Perhaps I shall rest. We do not often keep guests here. Perhaps that was why I asked you—so that I could rest—"

Still the smile remained. She added:

"Very rarely an American comes. We are fond of America in Russia."

He wanted hours more. He could have talked the night away. Yet there was something in his very passion to remain with her that forced him to rise, that long training that makes a man skeptical and impatient of the thing he wants most for himself.

She brought a candle and led the way to an inner room.

"Is there anything I can do for him to-night?" Romney asked, pointing to the forward room.

"No, there is a cot there. When he finds himself in darkness, he will feel his way to that. You will hear his fingers on the wall—but do not mind."

She swung open the single window of the little room. The stone-work was barred. She left him, but did not shut the door.

He stood waiting in the centre. There was just a cot with blankets and a table at the head, upon which the candle sat in solitude. He thought of his travel-bags just then, but she was bringing them and he hastened to the door, for they were heavy and the camel-reek was upon them. She left him again for a pitcher of water and a cup, very pleasing and graceful in her services.

"And now is there not something I can do for you?" he said.

"No—unless—" She laughed.

"Yes?"

"Unless you think of me sleeping like a little child, my face turned toward to-morrow—"

She was gone. Still she had not shut his door.

It was all a kind of blur to Romney until he lay down. Then the picture

straightened and steadied. Could it be that he, Romney, had hypnotised himself—so that the first possible woman had fallen straight into his heart? He had reached the period of life when a man begins consciously to look for his woman. Does not such a search make the man blind? One cannot see clearly so long as he doesn't want anything. Was he so shallow and common as to be caught in a whirlwind of the artificial? It was not that he lowered Anna Erivan in this thought, but could she be the one woman in the world for him?

Then he thought of her from the first moment to the last, reviewed her every gesture and movement of face and hand. It was not what she said, though there was much in that for him, but her comprehension was so instantaneous. She had *fancy*. She loved the half-lights; she had passion; the whole strength of her had to do with that. Was her strength the strength of repression? She had beauty, but was it the kind of beauty that goes with terrible self-love? ... She seemed tender and brave and imaginative.

Romney sat up on the cot with a suddenness that made the whole fabric creak. And what of his task? The possibility of his penetrating to the heart of the great Gobi mystery seemed far and intolerable compared to the next morning, when she would come into the outer room.... Would she be there first and he emerge to join her, or would he be waiting?

He laughed. Even this simple question had absorbed him utterly, banishing the mystery of the desert. There could not be two missions. As for her beauty, it seemed as if he had created it in his own highest moments, touch by touch.... Might she not journey on with him, thrilled, too, by the strange thing he had set out to accomplish? This was madness. Even the physical dangers forbade that.... The task, whatever it was, looked little and fanatical beside her. The Big Three and Fai Ming seemed altered, their zeal misguided; his own former seriousness in relation to man's accomplishment, seemed absurdly young.... This is what a woman had done for him in one evening.

There could not be two missions. He must stay or go on.... Perhaps after reading the Nadiram documents he could tell her something of what he was out after, but it would change nothing. There could not be two tasks. He must cleave to the one and forsake the other....

Romney was sweating. It would not have been so hard, had she not made the whole business appear insignificant. Must he be a ghost-chaser, leaving this superb creature here? ... Wickedness in her? He could not find it anywhere. She might become a saint or a wanton, but there would be greatness in her giving in either case. In that she was like Moira Kelvin. Splendours flashed for his eyes about her repressions, and yet what had her repressions to do with him? She had merely talked with him, and she was dying to talk. She would have talked with any one who would listen and furnish understanding. After all, Romney relied

upon the one fact that such meetings as he had known in the twilight in the court of the Consulate, did not in the nature of things rouse one heart alone. There was no magic in life, if meetings such as that did not contain magic. Still he had not won Moira Kelvin.... It may have been only a waver, a gleam to her, so far, yet he felt that if he remained, Anna Erivan would know something of this that had come to him in an instant.... There was a kind of bruise in his heart that all his old life had been lessened. Suppose she was destined to be only a passing face to him. Would the old zeal for the world come back? Did he want back anything that had been spoiled? A woman great enough to diminish everything else, even for a night, was great enough for any man. But the things he had set himself to do.... Romney's lip tightened with self-scorn. He could come to no decision. The episode was making him yellow already. He had hitherto prided himself upon his faculties for decision. He arose and paced the room in bare feet. The night cold came in....

He thought of journeying with her in the evenings together on the dromedary—she sitting forward, sun and moon and sand, the deep drinking at evening, the fire on the desert, the tents—the tent.

He had stopped in the centre of the room and now paced on again. He was not quite the same after that last. He wished for the day. He tried the cot again, but could not stay; paced the room, longing for the day. At last he thought of papers given him to be opened at this stage of the journey.

4

There was much to read from the Peking papers, and something was made clear at last regarding the purpose of his travel. His work though political was imposing. It was of China yet above China. Full knowledge of his undertaking was promised at the next point of his journey, Wampli, but Romney had enough now to understand that there was no illusion about the bigness of the thing he was called upon to do. For a time he was lifted a little from the intensity of the present episode—at least, from what the world would have called madness in connection with it.

That was Romney's longest night. When the dawn came in, cold and yellowish gray, he felt that much which had been his the night before, was gone from him. He arose quietly and went forth. The outer room was empty, the house, even the forward room, still. Outside the chill was leaving, a day of bright heat promised. No one was abroad. He located the Rest House with difficulty,

and finally touched Bamban's shoulder.

"Find the camel drivers," he said. "Get the party ready as soon as you can. We start for Wampli at once."

Bamban looked up quickly—the nearest thing to a start that his master had ever noted. In ordinary course, there would have been a halt of several days in Nadiram, and even under the pressure of speed, the camels would have been permitted to rest for one day. Moreover, it meant passage alone to Wampli, since the three Tartar merchants were now to continue by a northeastward trail to the Post Road. Romney laughed at his own sensitiveness in feeling so keenly the surprise of the little man. He did not hasten back to the Consulate, yet it was impossible to loiter. Turning into the gate of the court he saw a movement of the woman within. It was very early. The feeding and saddling of the camels and the procuring of stores would require at least an hour.... Anna Erivan came to the door. He saw something of her morning joyousness fade as she glanced into his face. This numbed him further.

"How early you rise," she said. "I heard your step and made haste to join you, but you had gone.... You have been gone a long time. The tea is ready."

"Thanks," he said briefly.

There was no sound from the forward room. She stood behind his chair waiting for him to be seated. He glanced at her. There was a hard thing in his breast; it seemed as if his breath did not go lower than his throat. He sat down to the table. The woman brought a covered dish hot from the fire, placed it before him and poured tea. She cleared her voice before speaking:

"Did you rest?"

Something gray had come into her face.

"No. Did you?"

She winced. Yet there had been something in her mind to say. She let it forth, but the gladness was gone.

"It was as we said last night—a strange and sweet kind of rest at first. I went to sleep like a little child—drifting away so pleasantly. But it didn't last. Something awoke me—some change. I could not have slept an hour. Since then, I have been waiting for the day."

They were like two melancholy strangers meeting on a strange road, each having lost his way, debating vaguely.

She ate nothing. Just as he was about to remind her, she suggested to him that he try the contents of the dish before him. He put the spoon into it and discovered that he was forced to follow each movement with his mind lest his hand stop; that he must give separate thought to each gesture, the placing of food upon her plate and upon his own, then a thought for each morsel that he lifted—a thought even to taste it. If he did not keep up the thinking, movement

stopped altogether. His eyes were called to her face. The gray widened there, her eyes very large.

He heard Bamban bring in the camels to the court at last. The voice of the driver with him was like a voice from the pit. Anna Erivan cleared her throat:

"Are you going at once?"

"Yes."

"But my brother.... You see, I did not call him because every moment of sleep helps him—like this. I shall get him—"

Her dismay was rending to him.

"Don't trouble. What I had to say isn't vital. It will hold until I come back from Wampli if—"

Her throat was like a flower. This that she wore at the throat was black. He could see her hand clearly and her throat. Above was enveloped in the pervading grayness, all but the eyes. Always as the face cleared, the low voice of Bamban, or the voice of that camel-driver from the pit, blurred it. Again Romney began to think of the food, morsel by morsel. One spoonful remained on his plate. It seemed as if he could never come to the end. And now he saw the tea. He drank it eagerly. That seemed to help her, too, as if something of life had come into the room—something human and grippable. She took his cup and thankfully refilled it. He drank this more slowly, because it had not cooled.

In the open door was sunlight. It was not like the sun of yesterday, yet it was sunshine. This brought him a swift picture of the day's journey, a long and full day's passage, then nightfall. Every league, every mile, every camel-pace would take him farther away from this room.... He heard her voice.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said your face looked gray," she answered.

The horror of the journey held his mind again, twelve hours in swift passage, and two more like it to Wampli—every camel-pace away from this room.

She cleared her voice. He turned to her.

"Your camels should have rested."

"They are good," he said.

And now he was debating if there remained strength enough for him to rise and depart. All he could say was good-bye and the lie about Wampli, that he would come again. He was not sure of his limbs. He was very tired and her hands were so near—just across the little board. His eyes lifted from them to her throat, and he felt the burn of her eyes, without really looking higher. Back to her hands again. They were never still—lovely quick hands, waiting now to fill his cup.

A queer thought came to him—that he should some time bring her a yellow rose, and she would hold it in the arch of her hand, her thumb beneath.... He

arose. He could stand. He turned from her to locate the door, so that he would make no mistake after he spoke. He did not know what he said—some huddled, unintelligible phrase. All that he knew well was that he took her hand, that he had to leave it almost instantly or fail, since a mist came over him—even over the single madness that he held to. It was madness to leave her, yet it was the one strong prevailing thing.

His feet stumbled on the way to the door. In the bright light of the court, his camel was already kneeling. Bamban stood there ready to take his ankle. He reached the seat. The camel arose.... Voices of the pit in his ears, and now he saw her there below. She had come forth into the light. Her face was clear. He saw her hand below on the leather near his foot, her lips forming to speak. He bent to them.

"Why don't you *tell* me?" she said softly.

Romney brushed his hand across his eyes and bent again.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Why don't you tell me?" she repeated.

Romney glanced about till he found Bamban.

"Tell the driver to bring this camel down," he said.

The beast knelt obediently.

Romney stood before her in the court. He brushed his hand across his eyes again, then turned to Bamban:

"Tell the drivers to put the beasts away. It's a long journey and they had better rest for to-day."

"What have I done?" she asked. "I would not delay you. Oh, no, I would not hold any one from his journey—"

"Don't make it harder," he said abruptly. "Let us go in."

"But—nothing but misery comes to a woman for holding a man from his journey."

"How do you know that?" he asked hoarsely.

5

The second camel sprawled out of the court. He looked elongated like a dog that stretches as he walks. The man and the woman went in and took their former places at the table. It did not occur to them to move the chairs.

"I had been thinking only of myself," he said at last.

She smiled faintly, as if she had met that from men for ages and ages. Then

the gray cold came again to her face.

"It's a fact," he repeated, "I was thinking only of myself—I didn't know I was like that."

"It has always been man's way to forget woman's part in a crisis—and woman's to turn to man. You don't know me at all."

"But I do know you," he said. "You must have seen that. In fact, never before did I know so much from a first meeting—"

"But man always believes that a woman is at war with his work. I have always said that I should not care to be the rival of a man's work."

"And yet, you said—'Why don't you tell me?' ... Anna Erivan, I shall always hear that question. I am going to tell you."

She did not help him to begin. There was a kind of core of silence from the forward room, which was as distracting as the sound of breathing had been. He had to organise himself repeatedly.

"... I was sent out here because I had *fancy*."

He laughed a little harshly. "Because you have that you will understand. I have been forwarded from Peking somewhat like a valuable package. My next point is Wampli, as you know. I had looked forward to the real desert from this point. It would have been desert right enough had I gone on this morning."

Her eyes gleamed at him.

"I can't tell you all—not even all I know—I pick up my orders on the way; but this much I can tell you, and it mainly became known to me from papers read only last night, for they were not to be opened until I reached Nadiram—"

He told her hastily, something of the world-crisis, of the parties of China, of the Japanese danger, and of the big dream of the truly great men of the Empire, and something of his own relation with Nifton Bend, Minglapo and Ti Kung.

"This new party in China is not great enough to have a large following," he said, "and yet, though there are some things about it that trouble, possibly because I am a bit of an Occidental still, it seems to me that the power and the vision of the men I have met in it must become a terrific constructive force in the future of Asia and the world. You see Japan threatens to become a Japanese Asia, if it is not met with vision and force. The two older Chinese parties have neither. At the heart of any Empire is its religion, and it happens that the centre of the religion of the Chinese Empire is yonder in this desert—the Inner Temple, even the great Lohan himself—"

"You are sent to that Inner Temple?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes."

"To bring forth a sign for the people of Young China?"

"Come to think of it—it is something like that."

"And you let me delay you this morning?"

"I had not thought of it as a bringing forth a sign," he mused, watching her, "but that is really what it amounts to. If the new social order in China is recognised by the Inner Temple; if its dream of progress and power is found to be a true dream by the Holy Men of the Inner Temple—don't you see, the support of all the people touched by this religion will be turned from the old to the new?"

"They chose a white man, an American, for this mission—and I am delaying him?"

Still Romney evaded the issue.

"I always thought it queer that they chose me," he said. "These Holy Men are free from racial prejudice. They are said to be super-national. Our leaders in Peking felt that if they sent a Chinese, the Holy Men might see in him one nation's ambition, but if they chose an Occidental who was called to the struggle of New China because he had found it the purest dream for all Asia; one also who could place before the wise men the position relatively of other nations—"

"What an equipment!"

"I'm afraid it sounds more than it is," he said hastily. "You see they did not have many foreign adherents to choose from. Nifton Bend would have accomplished the mission far more wisely than I, but he is the Centre—needed every hour in Peking."

"I'm afraid you can't make me see anything insignificant now—about your being here. They thought you pure enough—real priest enough—to enter the Inner Temple and bring forth a sign to the many. You know the many always demand a sign. They did in Judea—"

He did not look above her hands. They were tightly shut.

"I asked you last night—if you ever had any sense about the Gobi, other than that of its terror and menace," he said, in an effort that he knew was vain to lift her from her part in keeping him from the journey. "The Chinese believe that the heart of the desert is a spirit-haunted land; that the Inner Pavilion holds all the ancient writings, all the seeds of wisdom and magic out of the past, the essence of truths gathered by forgotten civilisations.

"In fact, the myths and legends which surround this country make the stories of Peru and Central America seem paltry and commonplace. There are forests, it is said, in which no white man has penetrated, buried gold and statuary and all that—" Romney smiled.

"You do not need to be afraid of me," she whispered. "I love to believe such things."

"Ten years away from America—perhaps I am too ready to believe," Romney finished. "Anyway the Chinese leaders say there are wise men, whom the world never hears of as persons, doing the great constructive tasks behind the scenes, and that the central pavilion of these wise men is in the heart of the Gobi, and not

in Thibet.... But all these things belonged to yesterday. I know now that there are meeting-places in a man's life, and that in the hours of meeting he cannot reckon even with missions of mercy.... This—last night—here in the court—has taken me almost like death takes a man—as the cups have taken him in there—something resistless—"

He saw one hand leave the table between them. It was held out to him, palm outward, as if trying to stop his words. Her eyes were wide with terror.... Now a change came. She turned to the forward room, listening.

"Hush," she whispered.

Strangeness was all about them. Romney came down from his story, with the sense that he had not done well. The silence crowded in again, as if from the desert.

"Perhaps he is awake," she said quietly. "Go on."

"That's all. I learned a great deal last night."

"You say that a day or two would make no difference, and yet this morning you were up very early. You ordered the camels—"

"I thought only of myself."

"You thought it would be easier to go to-day—though the camels needed rest—"

"I could not hold it in the night that the meeting meant anything to you."

"You were out on the quest and I appeared in the way—" she smiled and added, "a dragon to be overcome."

"I have not imagination enough to make you that—"

"A dragon to test the courage of the quester. A man must never forget his mission—must remember first of all the little ones, the many little ones, who require a sign."

In spite of the tearing-down, it was a pinnacle moment to Romney. She was lovely as he had not seen her before. Her swift and absolute understanding liberated his whole nature upon her. Had she chosen to captivate him, there could not have been conceived a more perfect design. Had she met him level-eyed, weakness for weakness, it would have sounded, temporarily, at least, the knell for his infatuation. Had she clung or pressed him to linger, it would have become a mere episode.

He arose, his lips smiling, his eyes burning with tributes to her—moved about the table, placed his hands upon her shoulders and bent his lips to hers.

"Won't you come with me?" he whispered.... "We will go to the Temple together. We will bring forth a sign to the people."

... Her fingers closed gently upon his wrists, lifting his hands outward from her shoulders and letting them fall. Then she arose and looked at him tenderly.

"You are dear—I think you could not be so dear if you were not bewildered.

These meetings are wonderful, but don't you see—that you are dreaming? Don't you see that a man must travel alone on his quest? It's like the old stories—he must slay the dragon that stands between. A man does not take a woman to the Inner Temple. A man who passes the threshold of the Inner Temple cannot have a woman in his eyes or heart. They would say, 'Why, this is a mere mortal. He cannot enter here.' Do you not see, do you not see?"

"Anna Erivan."

She smiled and put down his hands that lifted to her.

"You are the quest," he said intensely. "It was our meeting. The Gobi—why, it was but a means of bringing me to you. Last night, as I stood in the court, I knew that. Today, when in a sentence you made all the meanings of my life clear, taking up my story and completing it briefly—today, just now, I saw that I could never look beyond you—"

"Don't say that. I should not have let you say that. We are asked to renounce nothing that lasts. You must not fail through me. This is not a good beginning for our story. You know this. You are only bewildered."

Romney began to understand her strength. She had risen above him. Her vision was clearer. In getting down from the camel he had become altogether human. The fury of his ardour was for the woman. Because he was moved with desire, he was not at his best. He took her in his arms, the tempest of emotions blinding him....

Women with a touch of the savage left in them, may be captured with strength, but he had given her a dream of greater days than these.

She did not resist, but the wonder of their first kiss did not come again. Instead, through his mind, crippling his arms, flashed the picture of his own red passion—and that in his arms chilled him to the heart. Utterly passive, she had allowed him to wound himself in a way that would never be forgotten.

He felt suddenly small and altered before her. He drew back, lowering his eyes from her face, his hand reaching behind him until he found the arm of his chair. He sat down, covering his face.

Presently she came and touched his hands, whispering:

"Do not grieve—I was thinking of something. Do not grieve. I do not care for you less. A woman loves the boy—the boy-tumult in a man—"

"You were in my arms—and yet I was alone," he said strangely. "I never knew such a sudden loneliness—all that I had for you—flung back to me—"

"I would not have hurt you so. But suddenly as you held me—I thought of the many little ones waiting for a sign—"

He was still shocked at the lifelessness which had confronted his passion. The shame of his untimely bestowal did not pass.

His life had seemed full of perfect gifts for her, and a sudden desire had

blinded him, bringing down upon his head a rebuke more magic than any blow.

"You have made me afraid," he said dully. "It could never happen again. I could not go to you so again—unless you held out your arms—"

"After you have entered the Inner Temple," she whispered.

The seven words numbered and registered themselves in his consciousness. He looked up at her and there was something endless in her beauty.

"You must not be hurt," she said tenderly. "It is the man in you that is wounded. You must know that you cannot really be wounded, unless I am wounded, too—and oh, a woman is not wounded by loving, by passion—that's why we are women. It was only the others I thought of. Believe me, all is well—"

"Would you have me go to-day—now—into the desert?" he asked.

"Wait," she answered. "I do not hear him. It would seem that he would be about—now that we hear him no longer—"

6

Romney arose, but did not follow her to the door. He watched her as she opened it, a breeze seeming to take it from her hands. He saw her hands lift quietly, tighten and press across her lips. She seemed to become less in height. She ran to him, and for the briefest instant touched her forehead to his breast—the queerest murmuring little cry from her throat. Something of the picture in the other room had come to him from her mind. They did not speak. He did not draw her closely, merely sustained her.

Romney saw it on the floor, the face flattened against the stone, the arms out. His hand went out to her and pressed upon her breast to keep the shock from rending her—as if she were carrying a child. The look of her face frightened him so that he drew her away; yet all the time he had the sense that the tragedy had somehow set them free.

"You will let me take care of him—come," he whispered.

She followed, obediently. He did not know the way to her room, but took her to the one he had used, pressed her to lie down. She covered her face in the pillow where he had lain. Romney feared she was not breathing and turned her face outward. There he knelt a moment. Her eyes were open, but did not seem to hold him. Moments passed and then he heard her words:

"You said you would go to him."

"Yes, but I thought you needed me more, just now," he said.

"You said you would go to him."

Romney left her.

The Russian's body was heavy and still hot. The silence of it was almost unbelievable, with the great damp chest still radiating heat. The weight was dead, but disgustingly soft. The American had a fear, with the feet dragging across the floor, that the body might break and cover the stones. He laid it upon the couch and listened again for the heart. It was still, as if pinned to the walls of the chest. Romney wiped his brow and found that there was a door into the street. He went forth quickly.

Bamban, so constantly in evidence, was queerly enough not so easy to find this time. He had to go to the Rest House and ask questions. At last he could not go further, but bid them to send his servant to him and hastened back. The face of Anna Erivan, as she had looked into the open door, was still held in his mind. Bamban was running behind him before he reached the Consulate. He understood quickly and took charge of affairs in the Forward Room....

She had not stirred. Romney shut the door and knelt beside her again. It was a moment before she realised his nearness.

"Did you go to him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"He is dead?"

"Yes. Everything is being done for him.... Anna Erivan, if I could only do everything for you! I suffer for your suffering. I feel it all—"

Her hand came out and touched his cheek, her eyelids closed.

"Dearest stranger," she whispered.... A moment later she repeated with a smile, "Stranger."

Her face changed. The unspeakable thing to Romney was that part of the smile lingered, though her eyes opened and white rays of purest horror shone in them. Her lips parted, the smile holding to them, as something holds to life, her fingers plucking his cheek.

"To-night—don't go away from me to-night! I will hear them. They always come when any one dies. I knew they would come for him, that he would die or go mad, and they would come.

"They are out in the rocks and sand, they come closer where death is.... And he was good as a boy; a good brother. I came to him and he was changed. I knew he would never go back. When I heard them the first time and saw how they affected him, I knew they would come for him."

Romney crushed her leaping fingers in his hand.

"Listen," he said sharply. "Tell me what you mean."

"Oh, have you not heard them laughing and sobbing at night?"

"The hyenas—"

She shuddered full length, hiding her face in his arms.

"I could not have spoken the word," she cried.

He repeated, "I shall be with you, I shall be with you—"

"They always come to the lonely," she whispered. "They would have come last night, only you were here. No one will ever know what they bring to me. They are the spirits of the waste-places. They are the darkness that moves around the night-fires. Where there is death, they come in. They cry so—where there is death. They know. They are living death. They are the spirit of the Gobi—"

"No," he said. "They are just fright-things, the saddest of all beasts, mere cowardly night-roamers. It is only human nerves that make them terrible. You and I, alone and well, could laugh at them, as at coyotes and jackals."

"You are but saying that. Have you seen them when the moon-light is upon the sand and rocks? They have passed death. They are going the other way. The yellow men understand, but they bring madness to those who are white. Have you heard that it is not food they want from a corpse? Have you heard that?"

"It is food that they want," he said softly. "I have seen that. Please don't think of them. I will be here—"

"Always when he drank, I seemed to see them around him. When he shut himself in there, I could hear them. Do you know what frightens me? It is not the poor body that they will find in the desert. They always find the bodies. One cannot dig so deep, or cover so heavily with stones, but they will find them. It is not that. I think the drink has brought something like them to his soul! Perhaps he is meeting them now. He feared them so, when he drank."

"Listen," said Romney. "He has done no great harm. The desert is too much for many men. He did the best he could. The desert was too hard for him. I think he has taken up already the old good that you knew, the good that you came out here to find in him."

"Oh, do you think that?" she whispered. "Or do you just say that for me? Tell me, if you really think that."

7

Anna Erivan had arisen. She moved about her work in the house, accepting the fresh ordeal, as one accustomed to darkness and difficulty. Romney, in the afternoon, saw the sudden triumph of her will after hours of utter prostration, an almost irresistible force of spirit. Bamban had done all that mortal yellow man could do. The day had been very still and hot; the town had shown an unreasoning curiosity. In the lull of evening they were very weary. The tea-table

was drawn near the open door by the court. Shadows moved softly between them.

"To-morrow you must go on your journey," she said.

Coldness and premonition came to the American. He had met her will before. This from her was a sort of "I have spoken." He seemed to recognise it in the silence as an old familiar. She had strength, an integrity terribly-earned and delivered in fulness and order. It was something hers so absolutely that even her lover could not impinge upon it. Perhaps it was the sacred thing about her; the essence of a character, rapidly unfolding to him in the twenty-four hours; a character that would meet all crises and that had formed itself by ancient acquaintance with grief.... In the stress of the moment, Romney tried to evade the issue, but realised the futility of that. His own volition was upstanding. Very rarely in his life had he felt its power as now. It was without variableness, too. There was no shadow of turning in his heart.

"I cannot leave you," he said.

She was very quiet. "I was weak this morning. It was so wonderful for you to come. When I think of your coming just at this time, I am in awe before life—the deepness and strangeness of life. We knew each other; we did not need words. I haunted and tempted you this morning. You were strong; you would have ridden away. I caught at your foot quite as a woman does. I asked you twice a question designed to make you linger. And I knew the answer before the question. I knew that you could not tell me, without showing how hard it was for you to go; that you had not trusted yourself to tell me. I knew it all. I loved your courage. I should have let you go. That was my failing—"

"You would have been here alone to-day, had I gone. You would have opened the door to the forward room and there would have been none to stand behind you—"

"Yes," she whispered.

They were silent. She looked out apprehensively at the creeping darkness.

"But that is past. Perhaps I was meant to have help this one day, but I cannot take more time from your journey. I think I must have kept some one from his quest—some time. I must have learned some terrible lesson that way, for it is so close to me! The price one pays, for keeping a man from his quest! It is untellable. You must not think of me. You must not think of staying with me now. When you have finished your mission, then you may come—quickly."

"I cannot leave you," he said.

"Don't say that again. That hurts me. I can never have a sense of innocence for my weakness this morning if you hold to that. Won't you give it back to me?"

"Do you think I would leave you here alone—a white woman in this place, to arrange your own journey of so many days to Europe, to pass the nights alone

here, till you are ready, to start all alone?"

"I should not leave here for a journey to Europe till I am relieved. There should be a Russian to attend to all the papers here. The little but imperative work day by day—I have done most of that heretofore. There is no one but me to do it now.... I shall be safe enough here. At most, my part is a little thing. My fears at night-fall—they are not to be considered now. You are the one to be considered. Do you think I have failed to comprehend the significance of your mission?"

He followed her eyes into the darkness, thick upon the little court.

"It is not only that," he said. "You have comprehended everything. You always know before I finish a sentence. I could be with you years and never explain a meaning.... My mission does not call me to-night. If I were to go, I should never be able to see past your face, your frightened face, the face of you here alone at night-fall. I think I was guided here to be with you through these hard days. Many have said, 'Put love away,' but the greatest have said, 'Give all to love!'"

The night seemed heavy upon her; her words came from the heart of it:

"Can it be that you would lower the meaning of the great ones who say, 'Give all to love'? I'm afraid they do not mean the love of man and woman. Give all to the love *of the world.* Give all to the love of the weak and the little ones—that is the meaning of the great ones. No one knows that better than you. This is the place of meetings and partings. You know that. Was there ever a lingering together of lovers here that was proof against *ennui*, against satiety? It is only the weak who linger, who make their beds at the meeting-places. The great ones go on."

She had arisen. She was farther from him, but higher to his eyes.... And just then there came from out the darkness of the desert, a horrid puking laugh—like a jangling of stones in a thick glass bottle. It had nothing to do with distance. From near or far it reached them, and seemed to linger in the room like an evil odour.

It broke the woman for the moment. She caught him in her arms and cried out words that were like a command:

"... You cannot, you must not leave me now!"

8

It was not capitulation. The clinging of Anna Erivan was but momentary.

Though they had already talked together almost from the first as if the relation of man and woman were old and established, nothing of the exterior obstacles had been removed. In each of the three days that followed, Anna Erivan asked him in a different way to continue his journey. He refused. They spoke little otherwise. There were occasional passages of kindness between them, when they seemed to touch the great yearning of heart for heart, but their emotions were not brought to words. Toward evening they would draw together a little, but separate early to their rooms. The second night, soon after he had entered his room, the laugh of the hyenas came again from the desert. He went to the living-room, and stood near her door.

He saw the knob turn from within—knew she was pressing against it—but the laugh was not repeated. She mastered her terror.... These nights were hard for him, for he slept little; and the days were hard. Though he was near her, the woman was very far away. He had the sense of carrying a broken courage; that he was a weakling remaining in camp with the women, while the warriors went forth for the hunt. He missed nothing of the pull of the task, but the holding of the woman was greater.

His will did not change. Nadiram was all that was sinister and detestable. He could not leave her there alone. Sometimes he yearned for the mission, the perils of it, subtle and open, the worst that it could bring in exposure and famine and fear. Her presence haunted him with every beauty and mystery. He found himself dwelling for many rapt moments on the scenes of their meeting—the first night and morning. Sometimes he felt that this was only a door that was shut between them; that all the love was there, waiting for one will to break. Sometimes again he was in the utter darkness that came from the conviction that he had forfeited everything by remaining. In the main, she gave no sign.

It was a very still place in his life. He had no thought of food, though to pass the time he explored the town to purchase little delicacies for the table and comforts for the house. He did not go near the Rest House. In the sight of the resting camels was something both indolent and insolent. Bamban was ever within call—apparently true and uncritical, though sometimes Romney fancied a reproach. The forward room where the brother had lain, was opened and clear. The few callers were received there, the woman attending.

Romney ate little or nothing. He thought he would see more clearly, and all his inclinations were against food. On the third day, though she did not speak, he saw that he was making her suffer. The fear came that she might think he was trying for her pity—that nauseated him. He fell to—and perceived her relief.

"I thought it was a good chance. A man ought to fast occasionally," he explained. "Especially a man who does not work, should not eat."

"A woman sees something personal in a man's fasting," she said with a trace

of a smile.

They laboured again that third night at the old subject—but all had been covered. Their eyes were weary. She would lift her eyes to him, saying that his mission awaited; and he could only reply that he would not leave her.... The fourth night something hard and resolute was in her eyes. He knew that she would speak when the tea was poured. He waited, more afraid than he had ever been before:

"Do you know," she said steadily, "it is not just the thing for you to be here with me. I am alone. One does not live alone in a house with a man—"

Her finger was tapping the table. She saw that he regarded it and dropped her hand to her knee. It was the hardest moment since their first trial together. It did not seem to belong to her. They had needed no laws. They were human adults. They were a universe apart in the same house. It hurt him to the core—such words from her. Many times of late the sense of his own smallness had come, but he had never fallen so little that he could not ignore a sham of this kind.

"I did not think of that. We seemed to be under a law of our own—"

"But the others," she said steadily.

"You mean Nadiram?"

"Yes—you see I have the office—"

"Ah, yes—the office.... I shall go to the Rest House, of course. Shall I go to-night—or to-morrow morning?"

"To-morrow morning."

"Very well."

She was whiter than ever. There was no word at all at breakfast. Bamban came for the bags.

"Please," he said, as he was leaving, "don't fail to use me. We are not enemies. Do you know—it is hard for us to remember—that all there is between us is a difference of opinion—each for the other's good. We cannot go far astray that way. Please use me. The days are so long."

Her lips moved. They moved again into a smile. It was one of the bravest smiles.

"Of course, I shall try to think of something—"

That night he came to her court a little before sundown. There was a stone there by the west wall, and he sat and smoked until long after full darkness. As a rule the hyenas were heard early in the evening, when they were near Nadiram. She came to the door several times before dusk, smiled and waved to him. When he turned away in the full night, it was as if there was some part of him that refused to leave; and when he pushed on, straightening his shoulders, this part tore loose from him with numbing pain.

Bamban sat on the floor across the room at the Rest House. Bamban's eyes gleamed.

"Since there are no orders here, and to-morrow is the fifth day, it might be well for the messenger and his servant to push on to Wampli tomorrow."

"It might be well," said Romney, "But I don't think I shall be able to clear to-morrow. Your country and your countrymen have taught me how to wait, Bamban.... I recall Tushi-kow when I was very impatient and the delightful Fai Ming would not let us even talk about the matter of our journey for nearly as many days as we have waited here in Nadiram—"

"Might it not be well for the messenger's servant to travel on to Wampli alone if the interval of waiting is still to be extended, in order to ascertain the orders there, or to be there if orders come?"

"Would orders be delivered to the messenger's servant?" Romney asked.

"In case the messenger is unavoidably detained."

There was no longer any doubt in the American's mind that Minglapo had given him more than a servant.

"I may think more about that," said he.

But he didn't. He thought about the woman. His faith was shaken now, and his pride was harshly wounded. The devotion he had come to know was a madness and a martyrdom. Compared to it, all the things that men do with their boundaries, ambitions, conspiracies, and sundry national businesses, belonged to a lower dimension of life. He saw all his activities of the past as little and lesser movements. He could not have lived through them had he known how futile they were, how empty his heart was.

The great burden now was this meeting of the old world in her heart—her sending him away because they were man and woman alone. Man and woman, as he had thought, in the strangest and deepest moments of their lives. He loved the quest spirit in her eyes; he loved her capacity to sacrifice; he loved her mighty will for him to go and the cry of her most human heart for him to stay in the fright from the hyenas. He loved her now with this taint of the old upon her—that was the torturing truth. But he was disappointed.

He had been so far from the truck of convention, that he had neglected to speak of this point first. Had he spoken of it, he would have expected her to deny any cause for his changing from the Consulate to the Rest House in so far as a convention was concerned.... He felt himself in the old madness. These were the days of Hankow again, with all the added forces and energies of his life making hell for him. He was like an engine thrashing itself to pieces with its own power, because she had cut herself from him. He saw ahead a redder rending than he had known before, and which had brought him close to death.

He felt at rage with the world; capable even of telling Anna Erivan how vin-

dictive was this hurt for a man who would die for her. But Romney unfrequently spoke in his rage. It came very seldom, and he had made it a law to laugh and speak of other things until it passed.

"Bamban," he said, "you Chinese men do not consider a woman."

"Ah, yes," said the wise little man.

"You do not consider the interests of the heart of man or woman comparable to the interests of one's country or business—"

"We keep them apart."

"That does not answer. If one's country or business demand the man, the woman must wait—"

"Yes."

Romney laughed. Bamban waited for him to speak.

"You keep them behind lattices. You do not give them the breath of life. You feel that they belong to a man's weakness rather than his strength. You do not see that the girl is equal to the boy; that the two are one so far as the future is concerned. You think that all women are wanton, unless they are repressed."

"We do not consider that women belong to the larger affairs of man's life," said Bamban.

Romney laughed again.

"That's why as a nation, the Chinese Empire is ninety-seven hundredths putrified," said he.

There was not a look in Bamban's clearly-formed face to denote if the depth and delicacy of his regard were shaken.

"You are the messenger of our country," he said.

"Hardly that—a messenger of the remaining three per cent," said Romney.

9

The next morning he went to the court of the Consulate, without anything in his hands. The night had been so rough for him that he was uncentred enough to seek the woman for a moment—just to look upon her, to ease off the mighty ache across his chest. He had become very humble from wanting her. Last night he had been touched with the coldness and hatred that seemed close to destroying the attraction between them, but the emptiness and irony of all life without her, had come in the hours following the talk with Bamban. The thing that he had called a taint diminished to one of the minor mysteries of womanhood, and Anna Erivan, brave enough not to quibble about the wonder of their meeting, and of

spiritual force to forget her own longing and passion, stood forth with augmented light and lure.

As he waited a mere moment within the gate of the court, it seemed that he would die if she did not come quickly. The pain that he had learned to identify with her in moments of their separation in presence or thought—a pain that began in the pit of his left arm and stretched to the centre of his breast—awakened to burning and agony in that moment before he heard her step. Words were on his lips to say that he loved her, that nothing mattered but that to him, that he wanted to die if he could not have her, that her own terms were his, that he could not take his thoughts much less his presence again from the place where she abode—a rush of confession and revelation altogether unlike the man that others knew or that he had hitherto known himself.

She had been in the Forward Room. He heard the door and her step in the living-room; then at last she came to the door of the court, and all that he could say was:

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

She looked so white that he was awed by the frailness of her life. He could not speak, and the sense of hanging there, impotent, presently prevailed upon his pride, and he went away. During the day Bamban twice mentioned the town of Wampli, and each time Romney turned away and smiled.

Always when driven to the last ditch, he smiled. One can best survey the humour of the world from the last ditch. And this day moved on, hour by hour, the slowest caravan in the reach of mortal conception—hours to the dusk, deadly, crawling. And when the dusk came on, he went to the court of the Consulate and sat upon a stone by the west wall, and smoked there, waiting for the full night. Once the woman came to the doorway and waved at him. And that night, leaving, he was torn again. As he stretched out on his blankets, Bamban brought a candle.

... Romney suddenly reached for the yellow hand. At the touch of it, a sob came from him, and for an hour he apologised. Still an hour later he awoke, sweating, with a start, dreaming that the laugh had come. Bamban was still sitting by the candle.

"Was that the hyenas?" the American asked.

"No, there has been silence. You were dreaming."

"Ah, yes."

Bamban watched him for a time.

"You do not eat. You do not sleep. You are losing strength for your journey. Will not the woman wait for you?"

"I feel as if I needed some new power," Romney said strangely. "I feel the need of a master."

"When that comes to a man, the master is near," Bamban said quietly.

"What do you mean? You see I have stopped talking to you as a servant."

"I am your servant," Bamban responded simply.

"But what did you mean about the master being near?"

"It is a saying among the Buddhists that the master is ready when the man is; but I wonder if he will find his disciple with great joy, when that disciple delays his mission for a woman. Remember I am talking still as your servant."

"I appreciate you, Bamban."

"You are the chosen one. I wait for you to remember your mission, and to have done with the lesser drawing principle—"

Romney laughed. "It's a clash of the East and West," he said.

"But they thought you were of the East. They are waiting now in Peking—in the conviction of your loyalty—"

Romney turned away as if to sleep again.

The next morning when he shaved he cut himself twice, for his face was all unfamiliar with bone; and that evening he sat on the stone by the west wall of the court. There was no sound. The full moonless night came over him. The woman waved in the doorway. He arose at last and went out of the court, for there was no sound from the desert.

It was exactly so the next night, and during neither of these two days did he see Anna Erivan. On the third night he arose and left the court as usual, but there was a light speeding foot behind him, and her hand touched his sleeve.

"Oh, come back—send Bamban for your bags and come back!"

"My God—why?" he stammered.

"Do as I say—"

"But what have I done?"

"Oh, I cannot let you live another hour with the thought that I was afraid of what they would think—of your being here. That is a lie. You must have known I care nothing for that. I thought that sending you away would make you start on your mission—I used that. It has almost killed us.... Come in.... Since you will not go—come in to the house with me."

She brought the candle to his face. "Oh, you poor—poor—"

She seemed not to know whether to say *boy* or *man*—"how you have suffered—and for me! ... I do not understand it. It seemed weak for you to stay. It has been my greatest anguish that I caused you to stay.... And yet, there is something deathless about it—something I do not understand."

There was something about it also that Romney did not understand. Nor could he speak. He watched her in the light of the single candle. Again and again, the face of flesh that he knew, faded into a kind of dream before the intentness of his regard. It was she, and yet another face might have been painted upon it without changing the real identity. And all about it was a vapoury white, different from lamp-light. It was like a visitation from the other side. Out of it her words came to him, but he did not answer at once. The fact is Romney had banked his fires of late in such a heavy and draughtless fashion, that they were in danger of going out.

And queerly enough now, certain hardly remembered passages of strangers through Nadiram recurred to mind: wild nomads from the Khingan Mountains driving their scanty flocks to the sparse pastures of the south; Tartars, the true descendants of Genghis Kahn; Buddhist holy men gaunt from their days of fasting in the solitudes; once a skeleton troop of Cossacks that stole in on a mysterious errand and vanished; and the merchants, the everlasting wigglebrows—all strangers on the long road through the days of wasting heat and nights of drawing cold.

... She came to him because he did not speak. There seemed a movement around the room above her head; and the face in the centre of the faint white ray was at his knees. He felt vaguely that if he spoke, the face and all would vanish.

"There is something greater than I knew about your waiting," she whispered. "It belongs to the future ... as all that I thought I knew belongs to the past.... I see it differently ... not that you should stay for my sake, but that you felt a woman's need and remained.... Won't you speak?"

His head swung to and fro like one to whom breathing is a burden. His hand had gone out to her. He could not be sure, but he felt that his hand touched her throat, that her chin nestled in his palm for a second.... There was a step in the court—Bamban coming with the bags. Oddly enough, this aroused Romney from the lulling presence of the woman. Alone in the room with her now he had found it irresistible. It was as if he had come home after incredible travail.... The fact is he had treated himself rather badly; there had been many hours of self-hatred. He had felt the whole outer world, (which he cared for second to her)—arousing itself in scorn for him.... He would have been unconscious before her, had not his servant come.

"Bamban," he muttered, "help me into that room. I am to stay—to stay here, I believe."

At the door of the room, Romney's back turned, Bamban stood before the woman a moment. She bowed her head until the servant passed on. Then she moved swiftly to the fire, stirred it into flame and put on the kettle.... Through the open door in the candle-light, she saw the man struggle with his shoe. He

seemed unable to see, and his body swayed weakly as his head bent forward. He gave it up for a moment and sank back on the cot. She went in to help him. He tried to push her away, but she resisted:

"Please, I must help you—"

A picture of her brother in the Forward Room had come before him, hunched and helpless, and he would not.

"Just sit down—if you will," he panted. "Just a little while—so I can be sure. I am better—"

There was silence.

"... I was leaving the court," he said in an expectant tone, as if ready to be corrected. "You came after me—"

"You came three nights to be near me at the time of the hyenas—"

"Yes.... And this is the Consulate—the room I first slept in, and you are here."

"Yes."

"And why did you ask me here? ... Or did you tell me already? ... You see, I wasn't quite all here for a minute."

"I asked you to come, because I was torn with the faith and the will you have shown. It seemed to me suddenly as great as the quest—something modern, added to the old dream of going forth—as if you knew that the quest was *nearest*—"

"I didn't know anything like that. I only knew I loved you," he said rigidly.

"You felt a woman's need and remained," she said. "Against her will, and all."

"It was not a woman's need," he muttered. "Everything is out of me, but naked truth. I loved you—that changed all. I had work. You made me forget it. You held to the dream. My dream turned to you. It is you now.... I think I shall not pass this way again. If there is something more important here below than this love—very well. Let them have it, who say so. As for me, I love you. I think the great man who said, 'Give all to love,' meant me."

"Wait—"

She went to the fire, her eyes gleaming. The thing there was not finished. She brought water to him in a basin.

"No—let me," she said, as he would have arisen. "I want to.... It will make me happier."

He sank back and closed his eyes. The figure of her brother fled from his mind, as the cool cloth laved his forehead. Bamban had kept his clothing in order. He had never come to the court at evening other than as a man who comes to see a maiden. Her will now was to serve him. There was a magic in the ministry that sent him to the borderlands again.... Then she brought food, and would not

let him help himself.

"I shall be with you to-night.... When you sleep I shall be here. When you wake you shall find me here.... You must rest ... and every little while you must have food. You have not taken care of yourself since you left me—"

The splendour had to do with the spontaneity of it all. Her every movement was an improvisation. He heard her words separately and as a whole. He weighed and looked at them—as at coloured lights, studying the background and distances between them, in that strange altering of time that one who touches the dream-border knows. Then more words came:

"I shall always serve you now. My will is not broken. It is blent with yours. I am proud and glad—for yours was greater than mine. It should be so. But I should have seen it before—"

He was wondering what he would say; at times afraid lest it break some words of hers; at times unable to think of words.

"Don't try to speak," she whispered.

The old wonder of her understanding recurred to him. It would always be so.... Two or three times the thought came, almost the words, to ask her not to lose her rest; that he would do very well now—replenished as he was, and absolutely comfortable. She left him presently to bring another sup of the hot liquid hastily prepared; and then it was as if he had spoken, though he could not remember. Her answer remained in mind:

"You would not deny me the joy of helping you back to strength—you who have given me so much—"

... Once he opened his eyes and knew by the candle that he had slept.

"I think I must have been looking at you and woke you up," she whispered. "I won't look at you that way again. Wait—"

She brought something different, hot and in a cup.

... Then long after he heard her say "Yes?" questioningly, and opened his eyes.

Her head bent toward him. "Were you dreaming?" she asked.... "I answered because you said, 'Anna Erivan, Anna Erivan.'"

Another candle was upon the table....

Again, much time elapsed, when he started up hearing the hyenas, but her face was calm and untroubled.

"I must have been dreaming," he said.

"Your dreams should be peaceful. All is well. You must rest, rest."

His hand was taken. After that he did not sleep at once, though his eyes were closed. He felt his strength coming back into his veins, new life creeping through him, a resuming of interests in living; all interests centring in the woman and yet radiating far from her, out into the world. He thought of the whole story

since the night of their meeting.

It unfolded like a wonderful flower, his mind at peace, his breathing steady.... And now he knew that the new life was coming to him from her hand—rare essence of vitality, something finer than he had known. His mind was full of unfoldings. There was a vision of days ahead—desert mid-days, desert evenings, with her beside him, the superb magnetism of her hand and presence. He would not take her strength as to-night; he would be strength to her. She said her will had blent with his, and yet in the days to come he would make her will his law.... The position of her hand did not change and yet she was nearer. The huge blanket that had overhung from the cot to the floor was lifted to cover her knees. Then he thought the candle expired, but it was only shielded from his eyes. The warmth of her was healing and fragrant.... There was a touch upon his cheek, and it was day.

11

Romney washed and shaved, listening to her step outside. It gave him a joy that he had never known before. The morning sun was bright and warm, and the wind that came steadily through seemed less of the arid Gobi than on other mornings, having for his replenished heart the freshness of grass and fruitful valleys.... Her step—the step of a man's woman in the house. He laughed at himself; no one could understand but the man. It would sound banal if he tried to tell what it meant to him—the step so light and swift and for him. Presently he made haste; was quite concerned about moments that continued to pass apart from her, so that his hand trembled in the last small tasks.

The little table was spread in white; the kettle steamed; the sunlight crossed the stone flags almost to the fireplace. She was standing by the table, her shoulder bent a little to the right, something shy in her smile. He moved closer and she turned—the way free between them. Romney's arm lifted but fell again. That other old moment bewildered him—the moment he took her and it was not right. He had said that she must hold out her arms. It was from this mental turning that the big thought came....

"You are better," she said.

"I shall be ready to travel to-morrow," he answered.

She turned away and he was close to her shoulder, but behind.

"I'm strong enough for anything—after last night," he added. "I suppose we must put our house in order now."

She went to the fireplace and returned, pouring the boiling water on the tea. They sat down together.

"No one goes to Wampli from here," she said at last.

"It's the orders I received—three days into the west—"

"But the desert tribes—"

"I have certain credentials and money to pay their tariffs—"

"Life is terrible," she said strangely. "Sometimes I am afraid of the intensity of life. I saw your face last night—white it seemed in the dusk—and suddenly I found myself running after you and all I had thought before looked wrong. I think we were dying because we were apart in this thing.... Isn't it strange? We have spoken none of the little things, that lead up to these deeper revelations between man and woman.... Running to you, I felt something great and new in your holding for my sake. I could hardly breathe until I told you that the sick and hated convention was a lie. I think now a lie is always wrong. Yesterday I thought it a good and worthy thing if it were powerful enough to help you on to your journey."

He leaned forward listening. She had so many things to say, the order was slow in coming to them.

"Now I see that a lie is always wrong. The truth would have sent you forth before this. It is the truth that makes you ready now. And yet last night I did not change in order to make you go."

Romney spoke slowly:

"It did not come to me until just now. You have said it. We are given just so much intensity—then there is a rest. It was like reaching the top of a mountain—last night—"

"But we have to begin all over again to-day," she said dully. "The truth starts you on your journey. Yesterday I wanted you to start. It seemed a test. I could not see the truth I wanted about you—with your staying on here. I felt that I was the cause, and that some ancient wickedness must adhere to me. I did everything to make you go—but first of all I made you stay—clung to your stirrup that first morning. I do not understand myself—"

"That first morning held a very real moment to me," Romney said.

"But that's not all," she went on, appearing not to hear.

"What more?"

"Now again, I want—oh, it's hard to have you go."

Romney was silent.

"Must we always be apart?" she asked in the same dull way. "Last night it all looked different. You said such an incomparable thing to a woman. You said that you had turned from your work to me—that your dream had become me. I never shall forget your face—dazed, not realising hardly that I had brought you

back into this house. It was as if you were on a ridge between heaven and hell, and but one true thing remained for you to say.... 'I think I shall not pass this way again. If there is something more important here below than this love—very well. Let them have it who say so. As for me, I love you. I think the great man who said, "Give all to love," meant me.'"

"A thousand times I have re-pictured that night coming into the court," he told her. "Who would have thought of such a meeting in the Gobi? I once heard that it wasn't a matter of place, but of time—"

The thought of Moira Kelvin had hardly recurred with her in the room, and there was something strange about this, considering the proneness of the human mind to make contrasts. Moira Kelvin had been his master—perhaps that was the secret of her falling away so cleanly from his heart. His first thought that her capacity of appeal was so largely histrionic, scarcely recurred in the later days of their fortnight, and left only a memory. There had been an early sense of her ruthlessness, but that had not lived out their period. He held her to splendour. Finding her with Nifton Bend fastened it forever in his mind. Her quest was the certain spirit of a man—and yet he remembered the passion of her. He felt that great natures are built upon such passions, and considered it nothing at all to his credit that he had held her passion sacred since she had nothing else for him.

She had shown him in a thousand ways that there is a new order of conduct in the love-relations of the world—that man in general is very much in need of learning to wait, to hold and to serve. He held Moira Kelvin as a great friend now—one to reverence and to rely upon among the rarest passages of his life. All that she had said had proven true. He had brought Anna Erivan a different treasure because of that meeting. It had proved an initiation, and the one dark moment of Nadiram was his taking Anna Erivan in his arms at the wrong moment. He would pay for that in good measure....

She had been silent, and spoke now as if the words escaped: "Do you think that because you were so ready—because you had been waiting and had pictured the one woman—that I more or less fell into it?"

He leaned forward longingly. Her shyness in asking such a question quickened her attraction.

"That first night—that night of fighting—I thought there must be something insane about me—to let you take hold so utterly. Why, it was as if everything else were done—a new era entered on. The whole world would say I'm yellow to stick here—instead of pushing on for that which I was sent. I sat in the court during those nights apart from you—or thinking I was apart on that conventional thing—and felt Bamban, Nadiram, the Big Three and all of New China pouring scorn upon me. Yet what hurt me more was being apart from you. You see, that seemed a difference we couldn't overcome."

She seemed to be looking into his heart and finding something there which had little to do with his words. She felt the silence again, and it was plain to him when she spoke that she had taken up some secondary matter less hard to broach.

"I have sometimes felt that you were not sure of the work you were on—as if you doubted, perhaps, since you were out here, the wisdom or the goodness of those who sent you."

Romney was startled at the foreignness of the observation at this moment. Nothing seemed normal that had not to do with their story. He found himself telling her hastily of the suspicion he had encountered in regard to New China's idea of waging war—if she were called to war; and also of the incident of the Japanese spy.

"That was hard to take," he added. "I thought I was pretty well orientalised, but the old western training cropped up. I tried to make myself believe that I wasn't responsible for his capture, but I didn't make a very good job of that. I had run him down. Perhaps they would have got him, but the fact is, they got him where they did because of my efforts. It broke me for a moment—the little man being put out that way at my feet—"

"You speak of things as they happened—not making them less to save yourself," she said.

"That would be short-sighted and unsatisfactory."

"What must you have thought of me for telling you an untruth to make you go on?"

"I didn't think of it as an untruth. You wanted me to go for the good of others—and that way came to you—"

"But you would not have descended to such a trick—"

"Trick!" he said impatiently; "don't speak of it that way. Who am I to forget what you said—about the little ones needing a voice and a sign? ... And I want to add about the men who have sent me: they are pure. They hold their own lives as cheap as those whom they find necessary to put out of the way.

"They loved the little spy, too. They have a dream of a purer world. I don't think anywhere on earth the dream is so close to coming true as it is in the minds of those men. I am proud to serve them."

"I cannot see you running after the little spy, through the streets—"

"I'm sorry you have to see it at all."

"I had to ask, as if its presence in your mind made me draw it forth. I will help you forget it—"

"There's something very dear to me in that," he answered. "You—yes, you can make me forget it."

There was a pause, and Romney laughed. "I show you things I never could

show any one before," he said. "Why, a man doesn't talk of such compunctions. I think we go about the world without telling each other—I mean the men we meet—any more than the foam of reality. A man's woman takes everything—"

"A man's woman," she repeated. "There's something primitive in that—and something that is ahead, too.... I don't know exactly what thrilled me so last night as I ran after you. I believe that the patience and wonder of your staying and coming to the court each night had something to do with that primitive thing which 'a man's woman' suggests.... And also with the big stories of men and women as they will be lived in the future. The wonder does not pass. The thought was with me all night—as I watched near you. It made me want to ask something else—"

"What—?"

"It may make me seem less to you—"

"That cannot be."

"I never thought I would feel like this—but I seem to feel her about you—some woman you must have loved greatly—"

12

Romney forgot the Gobi. Rarely were they altogether out of its influence in Nadiram and this room, but the story that was called stirred him to the old beat of the world. He felt distantly as he had during his tests in the house of Minglapo. This killed out instantly any idea of policy. The truth was all he knew, but the truth here was a different affair from dealing with Chinese who might take or leave what he had to offer according to their whim. Here was a tense face of a woman who had crushed her pride to ask such a question.... He told her how the big devils and virtues had opened in him from the encounter with Moira Kelvin, what he had been before the meeting on the deck of the *Sungkiang*—and what he had been since.

He told her in ten minutes how he had cast all into the Great Drift, and had been spared in spite of himself—how the thrall of Moira Kelvin had gone out of his heart, and how he had met her again in the presence of her mate.

"She made me know that there can be no doubt in a great love-story," he added. "She made me know that there is no such thing as a triangle; that a man or a woman in doubt between two, loves neither as the world shall presently know love. She made me know that love cannot be altogether on one side—that mine could not hold because she had not the same for me. The mystery of its falling

from me in the Great Drift revealed that. She opened my heart for the woman I was to find. I did not believe when she told me that, but I have come to believe it. After I saw her behind the low shoulders of Nifton Bend—I knew that my heart's desire was still a-field, and that all she had said was truth. The power of this truth was opened to me the night I rode into this little court—"

Her eyes were turned out to the sunlight.

"It seemed that I had come home that moment," he added. "I did not want to leave you that night. I never did a harder thing than to call for the camels the next morning. And when you put your hand on the leather at my foot—it was not until then that I knew what our meeting meant to you. Realising that—the transaction was finished, so far as I was concerned."

"I never thought I would feel like this," she repeated.

"It was like a review of all the hells," he said, meaning the Drift. "I look at the years before that as a kind of semi-sleep. I moved about only partly conscious—studying, watching, laughing at things, fancying I was somebody, thinking I had done something when I got into the pulse of China. The fact is, the Romney of those days wasn't ready to come into the court of this little Consulate—"

Her face was still turned away. Very quickly the flaw appeared in his last sentences. He was making very light of a wastrel period—a period without will and organised manhood of any kind.

"Don't think I fail to see the other side," he said hastily. "Something of quiet and power has seemed to come out of it, but it was abandonment. It was weak. A better man would not have thought of letting go as I did. Even if he didn't want to live he would have put himself out of the way in a clean-cut abrupt fashion—"

She shook her head quickly, as if pained at some picture in her mind.

"A real man would have done neither," he added. "He would have taken his medicine and not thought of death. There is always a yellow streak in letting go.... I'm sorry to bring you such a story. It has no virtue save that of being true. Also it is back—finished."

Her silence was destroying him. The panorama of his abandonment rushed past in a kind of red dark. His voice had a whimper, for his own ears, as he said:

"At least, it was all in the year. I drank little before, I drink nothing now."

The absurdity of it now prevailed. His story had taken her away from him. Much thinking had made him lose the ugliness. He had told her matters which were so horrible as to break the spell between them. She seemed to be slipping away, and just now he thought of the man in the Forward Room in relation to that year in the Drift. She was not the first woman who had reached the end of endurance in this business. The laugh formed deep within him—the laugh of a man at the last ditch again. What a fool he had been to tell her what had happened—to forget the part that this particular devil had played in her life! ... He

would go on to Wampli now—without a woman waiting. The laugh was twisting in his lips, and he had the sense that if it came it would slay the last hope.

Anna Erivan turned and started at the sight of his face.

"I wasn't thinking of the months in which you held yourself palms-up to death, and drifted along the water-fronts," she said quickly. "Oh, any one could see that has nothing to do with you now."

Romney gasped, and, leaning forward, placed his wide-stretched hand near hers, which went to it.

"I was thinking of the woman," she said slowly. "I never thought I would feel like this."

He was still shaken from the illusion he had suffered, in high voltage. It suddenly occurred to him what it would mean if she had brought a story of an affair with a man—an affair that meant as much to her as Moira Kelvin meant to him. The very thought was torture. There is a touch of insanity in the best of men on this ground. Romney was amazed at his own feelings and at his own simplicity; and over all was a contaminating something that seemed to emerge from his deepest nature—a gladness for her primitive emotion regarding him where another woman was concerned. He wanted to take her close in his arms. An uncertain memory of the night before when he was half-asleep, recurred queerly.... He had not spoken, and yet he knew that in her case, he would want to ask and ask—also that to ask questions meant to bend a mighty pride. He was using his will to be fair—holding that woman is as free an instrument in the world as a man.

"I love your truth," she said hoarsely. "I think that is all that saves it—saves me—the sense that what you say is true."

"There is no more," he whispered. "I have told you all."

"I love your truth—but I hate myself—"

"Anna Erivan, you are superb to me. I think—there is a bit of madness or martyrdom about two coming together this way. I didn't understand what my story could mean to you, until I thought of it the other way—as if you brought it to me—"

"I have nothing interesting like that," she said with a smile. "I think if I brought you a story like that, it would change me in your eyes."

"I would not let it," he said.

"Your will could not save me," she answered. "A man might say and believe (until his own heart was touched) that a woman has all the rights of man to diffuse herself before her mate arrives, but in his own heart, he would see her differently if she did. Oh, it is not the pressure of centuries of man's possession of women—not altogether his instinctive sense of conservation. That's only physical. There is something back even of the patriarch idea about women. She

cannot give herself to one and be the same again—not even in her own mind. There is something sacred about that, which men do not know—and which only great women know—"

"Then you think a man big enough to place a woman on the same moral footing as himself has not come to the end of the subject?"

"I think when men are tolerant enough for that, they will be great enough to accept woman's idea of herself, which is greater still."

"What is it—can you tell me?"

"Just so long as a woman has not the spiritual power to formulate her ideal of the one man of her heart, she must accept the nearest, the first or second or third, and must suffer her horrors of mis-mating. But all the time her dream is forming, literally making the one who belongs to her and no other. It builds out of her suffering. It comes out of agony and diffusion, even out of promiscuity. It is the ascent of woman's character into an integrity which can only be touched by one human being. It is not touched if he does not come—"

Romney stood before her, looking into two flashing points her eyes had become.

"It does not play a fortnight—to find out if the man is the one. It does not play at all. It does not suffer from waiting because it does not live in sex. It does not meet its own on any basis of sex—not at first, even though it has passions powerful enough to fire the world—"

"Anna Erivan—have I lost you—am I too far from the dream?"

She arose and came nearer, the table no longer between them.

"I tell you I hate myself because this has hurt me—"

"And I tell you that this morning I feel abysses below you—that you are revealed to me higher than I knew and dreamed."

"That first night, I thought it was he who had come to me ... and last night, running after you, I was sure—"

He started forward, his arms outstretched, but remembered and fell back.

"I said I would wait until you held out your arms—"

Her face turned a little to the side, and he saw a smile suffuse with colour.

"I did last night," she whispered.

13

That noon Bamban came and sat in the court for a little period, awaiting any word from his master. It was in Romney's heart to tell him that he meant to start

for Wampli to-morrow, and yet he had not spoken of that to Anna Erivan since morning, and he decided to wait until the last judgment of the woman was heard. Bamban smilingly departed, but back of the glittering eyes of the little man, the American fancied an expression:

"You are a tarrier with women."

An Oriental expresses his deepest scorn in a statement somewhat of that nature. It touched Romney very lightly on this day. He was not himself—something lifted and expanded far beyond the man he had been; and yet apart from Anna Erivan he was but a creature of listening and turning. On this day, Anna Erivan had entered a domain of his heart which Moira Kelvin had not found. A questing woman brave enough to wait, a woman above playing with senses, who required no experiments to uncover her own. And her head had lain a moment on his breast, her waist in his hard lean arm.... He wasn't untrue to Moira Kelvin in any thought. Even in the illumination of Anna Erivan, there was still a laughing splendour about the other. He could view the yellow-rug woman now with a man's generosity, though he recognised that there was no answer to Anna Erivan's point. He was proud to the very spirit of his being that it was so.... They strode out into the desert together, when the sun was at its highest. She stopped and caught his arm. It was almost as if the cry of the hyenas had come to her:

"What is it? What is it?" he asked.

"Was she very beautiful?"

Her art was somehow revealed. Anna Erivan had waited until they were far from the village before asking that question.... He was almost well again—not so robust, perhaps, as when he had come to Nadiram, but healed and glowing to-day, as one filled with light. It was only gradually that he dared let the full light in. Sometimes he seemed to be holding a door against it, lest it be too much for his heart. He had followed her about the house that morning until he was amazed at her power over him, and forced himself apart in the room where he had passed the long night. He had waited with every ounce of will-force, and holding was possible so long as he heard her step, but the moment she was silent he rushed forth as one coming up from deep water.

The day was dazzling bright though the heat was not dangerous. She had never been out of the court before in his presence, and something of the gold-brown of the desert came to her, as if all the wasted energy of the sunlight, deluging fruitless rock and barren sand, gathered about her to animate the delicate promise of her being. Desert gold was in her eyes, and noon warmth in her cheeks, her lips parted with joy and ardour and low laughter he had never heard in the house. Clouds were massed into gilded mountains in the low west. The dry heat came up from the sand and the living heat pressed down from the sun. Nadiram was silent behind them, their voices free now in the open, their hearts

drinking the power of the light.

"Think of it," she said halting, "think if we should go on and on—you and I. The nights—"

"I thought of that before I came to your door—on the road to Turgim. I thought of journeying on and on through the desert with the woman waiting somewhere—"

"I should be dangerous in a desert-night—"

"Dangerous?" he laughed.

"I should be myself at last. You'll find that dangerous. A desert night would set me free. Perhaps I should find a nature very old and abandoned—"

"In me?"

"In myself."

"Suppose you should hear the cries?"

Anna Erivan laughed. "There would be no Forward Room out here. It is the houses and the presence of men that make me afraid."

... He did not care much to speak, but regarded her face as he had never used his eyes before. Several times during the morning, she had reverted in her talk to incidents of the night before, when he lay in exhaustion, with only a waver of consciousness from time to time.

"Did you know that a woman finding her beloved, looks for a man but finds a child?"

Romney peered closer, his eyelids all but shut in the vivid light.

"This morning as the dawn came in, I saw the child so clearly that I had to touch your face. I would have wept had I not run away for a little time."

After a moment, she added in whispers and falterings:

"Did you know, toward morning, but before the light—when the cold came in—that I was very close to you, leaning forward under the edge of your blanket? ... You were still. Your breathing was like a child's. And then I thought again of your coming in the evening to the court—to the west wall. I don't know how I could have been so hard. I should have broken down in fright, had you not come."

"I only knew that I could not leave you," he said.

"But to-morrow morning—"

He was silent.

"We need not think of it now," she said slowly. "Not until to-night. We shall know best to-night—"

She was staring away into the gilded mountains of cloud in the low west. Romney's eyes followed hers. There seemed a movement there, something filmy white like a great bird, against the brilliant horizon. He could not get his mind away from Wampli. Every moment with her, and the parting seemed harder. The larger consciousness that had come from her, at the same time bound him

to her.... Leaving her in Nadiram—alone under the Russian flag. It would take seven days at least to get back, even if his mission made it possible for him to remain as short a time as a day in Wampli. That was not likely. The chances were, if he were not held there, his orders would be to push on. The last packet of orders, designated for reading in Wampli, might contain the open orders for a farther journey of weeks. Romney shivered. There was little mercy in the facts. The great continent of Asia was like a dead weight against him. She touched his arm.

"Look—"

What he saw presently, low upon the sand, had the look of a turtle of large size, the head uplifted from time to time. The strangeness of the creature and the way it moved stirred him oddly.... The thing was yellow—the noon light showed that, the deep satisfying embrowned yellow of some object in which the sun has sunk for ages and ages. This is the yellow of the Gobi at a certain moment of evening. It was the yellow of Moira Kelvin's rug—and this was a robe of a Chinese Holy Man. In India they would have called him a Sannysin.

Hastening forward, they saw that the head, lifted from time to time, was shaven and literally fallen in from emaciation. The gray of death suffused the brown skin, especially where it was thinnest, in lip and temple and nostril. The creature crawled; his age must have been very great, his grasp of life a miracle, yet the robe he wore was woven from the breasts of young camels and coloured, as the priests would say, with God's own light. This is a colour princes dare not wear. It trailed upon the sand and took no hurt or stain; it was fine as leather can be, a protection from the sun and a saving grace from cold.

"He is my Ancient!" Anna Erivan cried. "He is the one who came to the court long ago, and left me such strength. He is very dear and very wise."

This robe was first to show Romney the quality of his guest, but he was soon conscious of something beside, that made him very tender, so that he knelt and gently lifted the ancient ascetic by the shoulders. The chin now rested in the hollow of his arm. The old man leaned there as if in peace. Presently Romney's eyes were called back to the town—a mere low jagged contour behind in the blinding stillness. Bamban was running toward them. At a little distance, he halted, dropped to his knees, and thus came forward, the expression on his face altogether new. Indeed, it was dissolute with devotion.

And now the old Father appeared to sleep in Romney's arm, and thus was carried between the men, a light burden, back to the Consulate in Nadiram.

They brought a cot to the living-room, Anna Erivan joyously preparing food, filling the begging-bowl with the choicest that her house afforded. Yet it was hours before the old priest awoke, and during this time Bamban never moved from his devotional posture by the door of the court. It appeared now that the

aged Buddhist had pushed his austerities somewhat farther than usual, almost extinguishing the flicker of life that remained in his wasted breast. His opening speech had to do with the absolute rightness of all things, especially with the excellence of the universe and the exceeding rightness of right knowledge, to all of which Romney attentively agreed and Bamban degraded himself to accept. The Sannysin advanced deeper into the thought, enunciating his conviction that all was well in Nadiram and in the house. He spoke briefly of his all-readiness for departure from this life, saying that he had been ready three days before in the desert, that he was ready now to pass or presently. Having impressed his readiness, he ventured to add his personal point of view to the effect that he considered it a misery to be called back into life through the medium of strong food, but qualified this opinion by inquiring if he had not returned to the hideous pressure of the flesh with some slight degree of calmness and cheer. Romney encouraged him to believe this, hastily translating for the woman; and Bamban projected himself in abasement, whereupon the Sannysin slept again.

Toward evening, the ancient head was once more raised into the hollow of Romney's arm. Bamban had scarcely left the Consulate for a moment throughout this extended interval. The Buddhist raised his eyes to Romney's face, saying that he was now acquainted with the deep reason for his misery in being so relentlessly called back to the coils of matter; that he recognised in the white man a younger brother, a true Brahman, whereupon he gave Romney a small bit of parchment, the size of three postage-stamps, upon which was written a Sanscrit phrase, having to do with the inspiration of the soul, and a few further marks which even Romney, though he deciphered them, could not understand.

Thus was the coming of Rajananda and his passing likewise, for he asked that he be carried forth at sundown, to the exact spot where they had first seen the upraised head. There they placed the body upon the sand, accepted a cold claw and a gesture to return to Nadiram. The Buddhist then slept, the withered yellow cheek pressed upon the breast of his old Mother, the desert.

The disquieting part of the whole affair was that Bamban appeared to have acquired the habit of abasing himself in Romney's presence, though more than ever his eyes avoided Anna Erivan's. The three returned to the Consulate in the early darkness and Bamban's impulse to kow tow again asserted itself on the flags of the court.

"Come, come, Bamban; get up and go to the Rest House for your supper. I'm the same friend of yours—as always."

The Chinese obeyed, and Romney turned from where he stood in the court, to the door-way. Anna Erivan stood there—as on the evening of his arrival.

14

They sat down together in the deep shadow, for a time not thinking of talk or food. Each felt a singular relief with the passing of Bamban, and the excellent calm that the presence of Rajananda had left behind.

"Did you know he is not Chinese?" Romney said at last.

Anna Erivan shook her head.

"I just thought of it now—the name Rajananda, the Sanscrit on the little parchment, the character of his sayings, though he spoke in Chinese. Then he said I was Brahman.... There was much to say, much to ask him. I don't see how I could have let him go without words—"

"One only thinks of listening when a holy man speaks."

The man smiled at her. "But the thought comes to me again and again that he might have put me straight on the mission—that he is very high in power, possibly of the Inner Temple—"

"You may meet him again—perhaps at Wampli. To-morrow you must go on—"

Romney did not resist the thought at this time. He looked about the low stone room, at the forward door, toward the inner room and at the door to the court.... It was like a call, a trial of strength. He had found his own. It would be weak to tarry with a task undone.

"I will be safe," she said, as if following his thoughts.

"I think you will see me differently—if this thing is well done," he told her. "I remember this morning in our misery over the old story, the need of doing some great thing to show you that I was not that man now, but I didn't relate it to going on to Wampli—"

"You are not the man of the Drift, as you call it. I see that, as you said—a quick review of all the hells of life. You needed it. Nothing so low as that which held him—" she pointed to the Forward Room, "—could hold you.... You must go on to-morrow, but the separation is not for you alone. Perhaps there is a dream that I must form in readiness for action. It is hard for you to go—but as hard for the one who must stay. No harder thing could be called from us. I think I could not have endured it, except for the coming of the Holy Man. He brought me strength before."

"But if, from the desert, that laughter should come at evening—"

She knelt before him an instant.

"I shall think of you and Rajananda—of your bringing back a sign for the little ones. I shall think of the days ahead—our journey out of the desert together—two on the dromedary—the task done—Nadiram behind forever—"

The thought of the hyenas had unsteadied them in spite of her courage. Hyenas meant Nadiram to Romney—and one white woman alone in the midst of a town full of Orientals—bands of desert men passing through—nothing but a Russian flag. He shivered. Anna Erivan arose to get supper. They ate in silence. The thought of to-morrow was like a gray mist between them again. They found themselves very tired; the power of Rajananda slipped farther and farther from them. Often they started to speak, but lost the impulse before the words came. Wampli was inexorable. If Romney failed now, he knew he would find himself less a man.

"It's no use. It's got to be done," he said impatiently at last, "but they seem to be binding us closer to-night rather than making it easy—"

"They?" she whispered.

"Did I say *they*? I think I must have meant the Fates or something of the kind. It isn't all wonder and exaltation—a meeting like this—and yet if I fail to-morrow, I am not what I thought. My work seemed here until you came to me—came running after me last night. Now that I have you, I know that I must go—but there's something impassible in the thought. I can't get over it. It's like walking along the edge of a canyon—no wings, no bridge—"

"You will go," she whispered. "To-morrow you will see the way. It will come with the morning sun. We are very tired to-night. We have been everything to-day. It's like the little picture of a whole life. Why, think of it—last night you were unconscious from weakness.... You must go to your cot now—"

"Leave so soon—the last night?"

"We will arise early. We are helpless in the dark to-night. We can't think. We are like two desolate beings, lost to each other.... I will call you early—"

"My God, don't go so soon!"

Romney didn't know his own voice, didn't know the weakness that had come to him. Her face seemed to be receding in the lamp-light.

"We are not sane!" she whispered. "Have you thought—that it is going to be too much for us? You must go.... Oh, what shall we do?"

"Let us sit in silence together," he asked her.... "The last night—to go apart so soon—"

"Do you not see that we must sleep to be sane? You must feel as I do. We are wearing—wearing. The day has been terrible. This morning, as you told me of that woman, I thought I should die. Even my Holy Man only healed me for a little while. I think it is a madness—a man and woman yearning like this. Words don't help. I look at you—and feel far off. Your hand that I reach for only tells me that to-morrow you must go. It seems nothing will do but—oh, I don't understand—I want to lose myself in your arms. It seems as if all nature were driving me to you—and that you were going away—"

He held her fast and understood it all as only a lover could, for she seemed to be speaking from his own heart. Any separation between them was poignant agony. He wanted to become identified with her—to lose himself, as she expressed it—yet the horror of the coming day prevailed upon his mind, making thoughts and words and even the movement of his hands an indescribable heaviness.

"It seems there should be but two in a world at a time like this. Our walk in the desert must have maddened me. I want some hill-country for our Meeting. I want the desert ... I must go. If I do not sleep, I shall not be strong."

"Do you think you can sleep?"

"I shall try. Perhaps—we are so exhausted."

They stood apart as if by common impulse, searching each other's eyes. It was the deep look that passes but once between a man and a woman. She drew back a little, saying quietly:

"It is not our hour."

And then a sudden pity seemed to come to her, akin to that which he had met the night before—something from his face. She came to him.

"Oh, don't think it has anything to do with the world. I would have no mere man tell us when we are one. It is nothing like that. Our marriage must be made in a better place than earth—or else we are very far apart and mad indeed. No man—none less than a saint, a master—could tell me when I am your wife—oh, yes, our Holy Man—but I would not wait for him. But don't you see—this is not the hour? Our hearts are broken. I feel Nadiram heavy upon me like a low and appraising eye. This place is full of the *old*. It belongs to the cries in the night—it belongs to him of the Forward Room.... Listen, to-night we must rest, or we will break to-morrow. I feel as if nothing mattered but strength for to-morrow. Go to your room—yes, go to your room and bring your cot here—"

"Anna—Anna!"

"Yes, and I will bring mine beside it—here beside it.... Yes, and we shall lie down, hand in hand, and call upon our strength—and rest—don't you remember?—like little children—"

It was in a kind of ecstasy that he moved about his room, making ready—the sweetness of the woman overcoming every other thought. He was hastening, yet he knew she would be longer in coming to the living room. His love went forth to her, often his hand and his step stilled to listen for her movement in the house. With a queer laugh, he realised that she was calling forth from his heart a force that could never come back to him—that she was necessary for life, that his days would be very few if she were taken. He was forced into the lover's establishment of every thought on an immortal basis. "Give all to love"—he had not known what that meant, even last night.

His hand touched something soft and clinging in the saddle-bags. He did not draw it forth at once, but knelt beside it, covering his eyes with his free hand. It was the crumpled bit of chiffon that he had carried so long and forgotten so remotely of late.... He held it in his hand. It was very dry and thin—a little dusty from the bag. Many pictures rushed through his mind—from Longstruth's to the house of Dr. Ti Kung. It had gone down into the Drift with him, and come up to this hour. It was done. It was good. He touched it to his cheek, and held it to the candle-flame, breathing a blessing upon the woman who had stood head and shoulders above her beloved in the doorway of Minglapo's house.

He folded the blankets and carried forth his cot to the living-room. The little dining-table was thrust back to the wall. The open fire was burning low, the lamp was set apart.

"I am almost ready," she called.

"May I not come to help you with your cot?" he answered.

"In a moment. I will let you know."

He went to the pitcher and drank a cup of cool water, then stood motionless beside the table until her trailing voice:

"Now you may come in."

It was a little white-washed room, a silver cross on the plaster above her pillow. He dropped to his knee there for an instant, his thought for her care while he was gone. She stood apart watching, her hands reaching back against the wall, her eyes burning upon him.

He placed the cot beside his and turned to the door. She came forth, very little in her bare feet and white robe, a shawl about her shoulders, holding something in her hand.

Romney waited for her to come forward, put out the lamp, and found his place. There was a moment of stillness, and then her hand came forth to meet his, and he found that it was the little silver cross that she held.

The door to the court was open, and the moonlight lay pale upon the stones.

15

Romney thought at first that it was a flutter of wings that aroused him. The room was cool and touched with gray, not of moonlight. Many vague images passed through his mind before the actual realisation of the present. He turned to find the pillow empty at his side.

He felt the cold of morning, and a silencing dread. A dark shadow hung

before his eyes like the tangible presence of fear, and then a hand lifted from the blanket close to his breast and patted him softly.

Now he saw her face, low in the cot. It was turned to him, and Anna Erivan slept. He moved slightly and the hand patted him again. Romney then lay very still, reflecting upon the miracle of her mothering instinct. Without awakening she had felt his sudden stress. It was like a babe's cry, and her hand had brought it peace. The presence of her soothed him again. She was resting so sweetly that he could not arouse her now. Contemplating the magic of it all in the thin dawn light, he fell asleep again.

... Some one had come with a great message—the perfect word for him. The lips moved close to his with the story—touched his with a kind of imperishable wonder. He opened his eyes to the full sunlight, and Anna Erivan's face was close to his.

"Take me with you!" she whispered.

She was dressed and kneeling beside him. His arms went out to her.

"Take me with you!" she said again.

"It is done," he answered, yet even as he spoke he felt that he would have to suffer for that.

"You will take me with you—on your camel—into the desert!"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Yes."

Again in his consciousness came the sense that what he promised was a failure for which he would have to pay.

She stared into the west. "No one goes that way from Nadiram," she said. "I have been here a year, yet Wampli is but a name to me. Even you, coming from Peking, know that desert bands watch the ways around Wampli. We shall have no escort—"

"We shall pay the tariff demanded. I have credentials that worked before."

"The little parchment of Rajananda shall help us!" she exclaimed.

"Also we have Bamban, a camel-tender, good compasses."

"You think there is no danger of getting lost?" she asked, and he did not search in vain for her smile.

"I have been afraid to leave you here," he said. "There is danger, but it is here—it is everywhere, in the desert and out—if they want to bring us danger—"

"*They*—again," she whispered.

"I do not feel that we could be lost *together*. Are you afraid? Would you rather stay?"

She laughed and leaned toward him. "Those who have met our kind of fears, are not afraid of mere men and desert distances.... It will be—it will be

almost too great a thing—to leave Nadiram and all this—and go out into the desert with you—"

He saw she had not said all:

"Yes—I would go without food or drink. I would go with you—for you are all that faith means.... Better and better I understand. I do not think we are to die soon—but if that is so—it will be together—a rapture in that." ....

"I have thought every day of our going out in the desert," he said.

His eyes kindled from her nearness. "I saw it the first night here—and every night as I sat at the west wall—"

"We will start to-night!"

"Yes."

"I have tea nearly ready. You will put the cots back—and this—you know where it hangs. We will take it with us tonight."

She gave him the little cross.

"Hurry now and dress, and breakfast will be ready. Don't mind me. I shall be at the fire—"

"I wonder that I did not waken when you did—that I did not hear you."

"I was very quiet."

"I awoke once in the night—and when I stirred, you patted me as if I were—"

"I was dreaming," she said softly, her face turned from him. "I was dreaming—and once I awoke in the night."

Romney felt the very core of the mystery now—his passion not to take or seize, but to give her his life. All the difference between the old and the new was in this—the difference between flesh and spirit, death and life. The thought came that this which he now knew had to do with the romances of the coming age—the passion to give one's self, not to seize something for one's own. He wanted to give her every beauty from his past and the high conceptions from the future, one by one. He had loved her spirit, her understanding mind, her presence, somehow as detached principles until this moment. Now they seemed one. All had come to the very earth of her being. He had knelt to her. The touch of her lips was the whole mystery. Nothing seemed impossible. He went to the door. Her word "to-night" was ringing through his whole being.

He sought Bamban early, to remark that they would set out for Wampli at noon.

"There is some extra baggage at the Consulate, including some provisions. We will need an extra camel and driver. In adding to the provisions in stock, arrange for four persons, Bamban, and don't spare on the little matters of extra comfort and accommodation—"

"Four persons?" said Bamban.

"Anna Erivan is going with us to Wampli."

Romney had a peculiar sense of hatred for an instant from his servant, who a moment before was inclined to prostrate himself, at least in effect. Bamban's hands were lifted, his head thrust forward from his shoulders, thin lips protruding, and a kind of dusk about his features.

"It would be better for us to return with her to Turgim in case she is not safe here, rather than to have a woman on the next part of the journey. Any delay is better than taking a woman—"

"I think we'll be able to manage according to the plan—"

"You will forgive your servant, but our mission is endangered by this plan. The solicitude of those represented by the master who came yesterday is withdrawn from any party which contains a white woman. It would be wiser for you to give up the mission and return to Peking—"

Romney coloured a little. "The master who came yesterday is friendly," he said.

"I am afraid you are taking the woman to her death—to say nothing of your own."

"Bring the camels toward the end of afternoon, Bamban."

Romney turned and walked back to the Consulate. He had met nothing of this sort before from his most excellent *boy*; and the fact that Bamban's resistance tallied with a fear in his own mind, added to the coldness with which he regarded the venture. He recalled his first swift rejection of taking Anna Erivan forward on the mission. So utterly had he put the thought away that it had not returned even in the great stress at the thought of separation. Yet when she asked to go, there had been no question; only the instant sense of warning which he had put from him steadily.... His step quickened. The braver way would be to change now—to explain his fear and ask her to remain. The force to accomplish this, however, did not arise in him. He had always been stubborn. He regarded his stubbornness now as something before which he was powerless.... She had asked to go. He had agreed. She was preparing even now. The journey to the desert was a part of her dream—their dream. It called him now. Rajananda—a queer sense of the old priest's love and tenderness and guardianship came to mind. Romney shared with Anna Erivan a horror for Nadiram. He did not accept the thought that he was taking the woman to her death, yet an icy draught came to him somehow from the thought, a certain grim finality. He did not know how he loved her until he was near the court. A gust of warmth, an indescribable elation, swept over him, as he perceived her against the doorway.

"You are pale," she said.

"It is a strain to be away from you," he answered.

"Bamban is Chinese. He does not understand," she said, with a touch of mirth. "I knew he would do his worst to make you go alone."

Romney found that he had hoped she would change of her own accord, but this was out of the question.

"I have locked up all his papers, and locked the Forward Room. My bags are almost ready—and yours. I helped a little in your room. I could not miss that thrill.... Ah, do not be troubled. I would die here.... Bamban does not know everything. Perhaps I will be a good omen, instead of evil. I think Rajananda would not make me stay."

"Now that's queer; I had the same thought," said Romney.

Anna Erivan was standing by the table, waiting for him to come to her.

"There should not be any mission—any task at this time," she said strangely. "There should be only two in the world—two and a desert—"

"They have given us power," he answered. "All these obstacles make us only cleave together more furiously. I think I could not have known you as I know you now, if everything had been smooth for us. Perhaps it is in the Plan. There are always rapids where two rivers come together."

For an instant her eyes burned passionately into his.

"You are wise," she whispered. "You fill a woman's dream. Last night you were like a priest. To-day you are like an adventurer—"

"To-night?"

"To-night—who knows what the desert will do?"

The camels came when the shadows were long. Bamban's face was wistful.... Romney's lips moved as one wonder-struck, as Anna Erivan emerged a last time from her room in riding-garb—starry-eyed and silent. They saved their words for the desert. Vile Nadiram was in a sunlit stupor, and did not stir as three camels crossed its face like insects—a dirty face in the late day.... They looked back. Nadiram lay still in the midst of thin sharp shadows, not a voice, not a movement—just a sprawl of lifeless browns and thin dark lines, and all around it the desert in the gold of sunset.

The woman spoke:

"A good-bye to that—the rooms, the beds, the streets, the Chinese," she whispered. "Oh, how I have hated it all—but a good-bye to that!"

They halted soon for supper, glad of the fire in the quick chill of dusk, glad for the cheer of the kettle and food. Bamban and the camel-driver sat apart. Romney raised his hand and his servant approached.

"We will set out as soon as the moon rises. And, Bamban, fill the water-cans now, and all you need from the water-hole."

This was done, and Romney led Anna Erivan to the water, and drew apart, waiting. The dusk crept in, and he thought of Bathsheba taking her bath in the fountain on the roof-tops.... All the magic of the old East opened again as he waited, but the moments were unbearably slow. His heart quickened, as af-

ter months of separation, when she appeared from the hollow—exquisite to the finger-tips, even in the desert..... The last of their fresh milk was used in that supper, and they fared very well indeed with perfect tea and dried fruit and loaves of her own baking at the Consulate.

"Are you rested for a hard night's journey?" he asked with a laugh.

"I have not been so rested since a little child," she answered.

... They were standing in the darkness by the camels, all prepared for departure, when there came out from the darkness of the desert that insane laughter, the mouthing of stones in thick wet glass.

She caught her breath and clasped his arms. She was laughing, as one who has been drenched with cold water.

"I had forgotten," she said. "It's quite all right, only I had forgotten. I'm not afraid at all.... Why, they are nothing more than jackals—"

The moon was two-thirds full and in meridian. Three nights—and moonlight all the way. Ahead, in the east, the great planet arose. Her eyes were lost in that rising. It was then Anna Erivan sang her song, like the ancient Deborah at the end of conquest:

"A star in the East—" she whispered, leaning back to him. "Our quest—by swiftest camels.... I love it. I love the night and the cold wind—-the smell of the desert and the smell of the camels. This is our flight—and what is at the end, Beloved? ... You know, you know, what it is we journey to by swiftest camels—the risen star before our eyes—"

"A little child," said Romney.

For a moment, she clung to him.

16

They were in a country of rocks. It was late afternoon of the second day's travel, and Bamban had just found a suitable place for camp. Anna Erivan's eyes had been turned toward the south for a moment. Now her hand pressed Romney's sleeve. He followed her eyes and discerned a black movement in the distance.

Silently they watched a single black figure which presently appeared more clearly, not on account of an approach, but because of an eminence gained. They saw a signal as of a wind-blown cloak. A moment later a party of horsemen appeared upon the slope of a rolling waste of sand, halted before the figure that had signalled—then all were in the saddle and sweeping forward.

Romney's eyes turned to Bamban. The little chap was kneeling in the midst

of the camp-kit, but watching the horsemen. Similar parties of horsemen had been met on the out-journey, but there had not come to Bamban's face before quite such a look as now. He stepped forward to Romney.

"It is the Dugpas," he said. "They are devils."

"I think we'll take care of them all right," Romney said lightly.

Anna Erivan fixedly regarded the approach of the desert-men. There were a dozen or fourteen, riding at a gallop in a semi-circle about their leader—the faces bent forward, their black cloaks blown full behind.

"We met this sort of thing coming out," Romney explained.

His hand crept under his blouse to the place of the little parchment. She did not answer. There were no further words between them, just her quick look, haunting and tender, and his movement slightly nearer.

"Greeting—*Amitabah*."

Romney's salutation was returned by the leader. He came forward alone. He was old, very lean and sharp of face, singular in his preservation of wiry strength. His face was a surprise, also, since it might be called cruel or kind, according to the moment; but it was in no wise heavy with brutality. The ponies were given over to the charge of a third portion of the party and were left some distance from the camels. The relieved riders came forward in twos. The significant thing to Romney and the woman was that these were mainly men of years, a queer phantom grayness about them, gray in the black of their skin, a touch of gray in the dulled red of their lips. Life had shown them more than comes from mere desert-riding. Bamban strode in closer. The leader loosed a strap at his throat, the black cloak falling back from his shoulders. It was retained at his hips by a girdle. He shook his arms with a queer spasmodic movement, as if to straighten out a cramp of hard riding from his muscles. There was a thin line of white foam on his lips and he spat twice—pointing first to the woman, then to the camels.

"He does not want her here when we talk," said Bamban. "I will take her there."

He was back in a moment. The usual questions as to direction and motive of the journey were passed. Romney was then informed that he would not be allowed to go on to Wampli. The American drew forth the usual passports, also Anna Erivan's credentials from Russia, and had them thrust back into his hands unopened. The native leader spat again. Romney now offered the parchment from Rajananda. The other took it in his two hands, pressed it to his lips, then turned away, bowing his head close to the paper.

At this point, Bamban undertook to say something to his master, and called upon himself a look of peculiar ferocity from the second in command.

Now certain of the followers came up with long sharply-pointed poles,

which were driven into the ground in the form of a square. Before the final stake was driven, Romney and the woman were bundled in. The whole enclosure was then woven with leather thongs, and the sides covered with skins and cloaks. Soon all was quiet about, the chill of night increasing.

Romney called. Bamban was summoned from the camels to interpret. The white man asked for his blanket rolls. Bamban was allowed to serve his master to this extent.... In the early darkness, a twist of dried goat's-flesh and a tin of tea were passed over the pickets.

Romney was quiet many moments, subdued with reflections of his own stubbornness. The woman's hand had come forward from the dusk, touching sometimes his hand, sometimes his knee, or patting his cheek. At last she spoke:

"I know that you are thinking that you might have done differently. You are troubled that this happened with me here, but really I do not mind. I have been many times more miserable—ah, night after night, when you came to the west wall, scores of times before you came to Nadiram—much more miserable. This that has come to us—somehow I cannot lose the great joy and beauty of our meeting and mating. I cannot think steadily of these lesser things. They come to mind, but this wonderful thing we have known routs them forth—"

"You do not falter," he whispered. "You rise and rise, Anna Erivan. I should not ask more of the Gobi, or from Earth itself, than this meeting with you. You said days ago that this was but a place of meetings and departures—perhaps you were right. But I had glimpses of a longer journey than this—that is all."

"That will come to pass—if not to Wampli and beyond—then a still longer journey together.... I am very close to you. We are warm. The thongs give easily to one's back. Will you not lie down a little?"

... His head was upon her knee, her hand lightly touching his temples.... Full darkness had given way to the moon-glow, but the orb itself had not risen for them to see. They heard a sudden restlessness from the picket-line of the horses, a movement as if the natives had started up quickly from the fire—then the soft tread of camels and a hail. The coughing snarl followed from their own camels, as the stranger-beasts came to a halt near-by. The desert greeting, "*Amitabah*" from the Dugpa leader now reached their ears. Another desert party had joined the camp.

For a long time the leaders intoned by the fires; then voices dwindled and the flame-shadows on the picket-wall died to the red glow of embers.... Romney was wondering if the parchment would be of value.... Anna Erivan was not asleep. The slightest movement of his hand and her pressure answered. She was so frail and yet so strong; absolutely courageous, yet so tender. This fragrance that came to him from her was like a breath from home. He was not ready for the end. He wanted earth with her, more than heaven; yet the sense of peril

was somehow lost in the peace of her presence, and the madness of any human adversary was less than her power....

Romney's eyes stung with the dawn. The cloaks had suddenly been removed from the pickets and he was staring straight into the rising sun. He turned softly to greet the woman. She sat up laughing like a child. The morning air was keen and bright, the wood-smoke fragrant. Nothing from these black strangers appeared to dismay her, though the impending evil became acute in Romney's mind. The party of later arrival, consisting of a dozen horsemen, was already prepared to depart, standing at the head of their mounts, with the exception of the older men who were conferring with the leader of the original party. Bamban had been called into this conference. Romney saw him bow his head and hold his palms out, a matter of uncertain significance to the white man, though the suspicion arose that the *boy* was expressing himself to the effect that he had done his best to prevent the woman's coming. Queerly enough the whole spell was broken for an instant as a pair of horses, belonging to the original party, stretched their tethers too close to the camel pickets. There was a tangle, and vicious squealing of beasts, through which Romney observed that his camel driver conducted himself with singular calm.

"What a perfect night's rest," said Anna Erivan.

Romney regarded her with awe. She held up her frail arms to the light and smiled. Her girlish breast seemed moulded of new wonder for that day. It was only in detached fashion that Romney could *take* the facts. Neither of the parties seemed to have the slightest concern about food. The halting place of the night was clear of unpacked provisions of any kind. Apparently Bamban was not permitted to serve his own. The sun was rising. The rock-strewn desert was like a dream. The sand was drinking in its false life; the rocks were touched with morning red; the horizon was a ring of pearly azure with one flaming jewel of rose-gold. Romney turned his eyes from that rising radiance to the woman, and touched her hand.

The leader of the first party and two others now approached. Romney realised that talk was finished; that what was to be done was to be done now. Then like a thrust their purpose came to him. It was like a physical horror crawling nearer and nearer. Anna Erivan was not slower to grasp the meaning of the approach. Her arms went to him, her face close to his:

"They can only separate us a little. I am yours, body and soul, remember that—yours—yours—my Beloved."

The full madness really came to him when he understood that the woman recognised as coming to pass that which was the most rending fear of his life. It happened very quickly. Two of the pickets were pulled out, the thongs slipped, and the leader stepped back, bowing his head in sign for them to come forth.

Romney was first to obey and was ordered to stand with the two desert-men at the right of the opening. Anna Erivan was beckoned to the left by the leader's side. They moved forward, not largely separated, but Romney was halted—a brown hand on each arm—by his own camels; and Anna Erivan was led forward toward the second party of horsemen, which stood in readiness to mount. Whether it was the restraining hands or the obedience of the woman—her face turned back to him—which broke Romney's control, he did not know himself, but leaping forward, he was caught and held, and the battle was on.

He heard her voice. Nothing that he did prevailed; nothing that a white man could do with his body counted against this silent pair of spine-twisters. Knee or knuckle, he could not tell, but it seemed a steel bolt was hurled into his back. He sprawled like a frog, her face and a certain amazement at his own futility queerly blended in his last flash of consciousness—his open mouth pressed into the sand.

PART THREE: THE GOBI
RAJANANDA

1

At times Romney thought he was insane. There were stretches of desert miles, and hours of travel in which he knew only the waver of a brassy film before his eyes—no sand, no sky, just a slowly moving brazen curtain that was like an emanation from burning metal.... He had awakened to the rock of the camel, and day was high. Bamban was nearest, beyond him the Dugpa leader and six of his party. They were on the western trail. Vaguely to Romney's mind came the word "Wampli." Bamban waited for him to speak.

"Did the other party give her the third camel to ride?" Romney asked.

"Yes. Also one driver is with their party."

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know. We turned out of the camp before they left. I think they went back toward Nadiram."

"Was she hurt?"

"No. They treated her with every care."

"Did she say anything—after I fell?"

"No—only for me to take good care of you. She covered her face. After that she was calm."

"Do you think they will do her harm?"

"No. They are not like that."

"Is it a matter of ransom?"

"Not in this case. They greatly reverence the little parchment from Rajananda. They gave it to me to restore to you."

"Did you tell her I was not hurt?"

"I could not. I did not know what had happened. It was at the very worst, when she seemed to know the feel of fresh power."

"You were with them, Bamban, when they made the plan to separate us. What brought it about?"

Bamban's whole concern seemed to be to answer in a way that would be exactly true and at the same time relieve his master's agony. "They asked me many questions as to our work in the desert—why we had come west from Nadiram. I told them of the mission as I know it—of the waiting leaders in Peking. Then they asked me about the woman, and I said that I was not in the knowledge of your concern with her. They asked if the woman had come from Peking with you. I said no. They asked where you had found her. I told them in Nadiram. They asked what I thought of your bringing the woman with you on this mission. I said I was your servant and that I had no authority to think. They did not make their plans regarding the separation in my hearing."

"Thank you, Bamban."

Romney could not feel his real life. The pain across his chest had returned. At intervals he talked with the *boy*, who answered patiently, but could give no more than has been said. The white man felt the repetitions, halted in shame, remembering suddenly that he had asked in regard to certain matters many times before—yet his mind would come up from its black depth with the same question again. At times he was childish. He would have taken Bamban's hand if it were night. He thought often of Nadiram as a safe place. It would be heaven to ride on to Wampli—if Anna Erivan were safely back in the Consulate. He had not been strong enough to leave her there! ... Now Anna Erivan was in the hands of the Dugpas, at the mercy of a desert band—carried away by dark men who frothed at the lips.... Often his face turned back. Once he broke out laughing. It was toward the end of the day....

Bamban talked to him after that—told the story again and again without questions, making him listen. Their little band halted for the evening. They meant to reach Wampli the next afternoon. The sun was down, but the sky filled

with afterglow—the south still brazen, the east dull, the west ablaze, the north a cool blue-green of pasture-lands. Many times Bamban asked his master to sip the tea. Food was not to be thought of. At last the servant followed the white man's eyes, which were lost in the south.

"What do you see?" Bamban whispered.

"It has the look of a low-flying swan to me."

Bamban saw the flash of white against the sky. It was like developing a plate. A superb camel cleared in the heightening glow, all shadows and distances falling away—a mighty dromedary, pure white, lean and tall in dull gold trappings. Bamban could only think of the words of his master—a low-flying swan.

The Dugpas arose in strange formation. Straight to them that long snarling head—then the voice from the basket, the halt, the kneeling.... It was a huge round basket like a bowl. The driver touched his forehead to the ground before them, then toward the east, then toward the camel. He arose and, stepping lightly with bare foot upon the shoulder of the dromedary, glanced with deepest reverence over the rim of the basket. At that moment, Romney saw again the shrunken, shaven skull—touched with evening now, the eyes lifting dully from deep sleep.

"It's Rajananda," eagerly whispered Bamban. "It's quite all right now for us. It's as I thought—he is the master of all in these parts!"

"Rajananda—" Romney repeated.

The driver, still standing upon the camel's shoulder, caught the hem of the great yellow robe in his hand and beckoned the American to stand beside him and take the other. It was thus that Rajananda was lowered to the ground in his blanket—very gentle that delivery, as two storks would perform upon unsuspecting parents in the stillest hour.

It was the hollow of the white man's arm that presently took the chin of the Ancient, who spoke at once of the Five-fold Reason and the Nine-fold Order, cosmic and terrestrial; the plan of the Universe admitting of no imperfection, and the absolute rightness of right conduct and right emotion—all of which Bamban accepted as if eating from the ground, and Romney took with impatience until he could speak of the woman.

Rajananda was coming closer with the thought. All was well with Turgim; well with Nadiram; the desert slept in its great peace. Alone of the earth, the heart of man faltered and fell short of perfection. Black misery brooded over the heart of man; soon he, Rajananda, would pass forth from this misery, but the sufferings of the sons of men swiftly again would call him back. This coming by camel was but a symbol of his entrance by the dark way of woman's womb into the world of men again....

Romney heard the words. It was that queer listening on his part, to mean-

ings that would unfold and become clearer afterward. Something of beauty and order came to him from the old master's presence. Rajananda now appeared to see the white man as one detached from the rest. Romney bent closer to the face in the hollow of his arm.

"There was a woman," the saint observed. "Once, before you came, she rested my head and filled my bowl in the stone square at Nadiram."

"They have taken her away from me. It was this morning, Father, two parties separating after the halt in the night. It was the hour of our mating. We were journeying on to Wampli together—"

Romney spoke softly. His voice surprised himself, for it was steady and sane.

"I am listening, for you to help me," he added in the silence.

Rajananda seemed to sleep. Romney held himself with such tensity that sweat came to his face.

"You have met. You will meet again. Nothing is lost. Man cannot put asunder that which Holy Breath has joined together. Man goes alone to the Sanctuary, and woman waits. In going alone, the man is strengthened; in waiting, the woman is purified.... And now you will sleep. Rajananda, your father, will be here beside you, and these, my desert children, will watch over us through the night."

The ancient withered hand swept slowly from one to another of the Dugpas. All had turned at the sound of Rajananda's voice. Each man bowed low as he was designated. Romney felt that sleep was utterly gone from him. And yet the night passed without breaking him—a kind of passage from one numbed dream to another.... Rajananda journeyed on with them the next morning, the dromedary abreast, held to the slower pace of the white man's beast. Questions came often to the white man, but his awe of the old priest forbade. Rajananda talked when he was ready. As the day rose, Romney met the brazen curtain again.

The picture of yesterday's dawn recurred at intervals with unabating horror; and the steady consciousness that he was moving farther and farther from his own. Sanity was difficult in this suffering, but always as it reached a certain pressure of destructiveness, its voltage seemed queerly lowered, and he lost the sand and sky, and travelled through the deadly glitter that had neither surface nor line. This emerging at the moment of shattering always had to do with Rajananda. Somehow the old master would break the spell, and Romney would hear voices and feel again the swing of the camel's tread. Presently all would sink away but the voice of the Ancient, who affirmed again and again neither the past nor the present, but what was to be:

"Your work is not done. This is the stone death that you feel. It comes to ease the pain, and the pain comes from the red of flesh. When you have faith, all

will be well—"

"They tore her from me!"

"All is well with her. You have chosen the way to God through a woman. It is the harder way. When you love enough, you will find peace—"

"It is because I love her that I suffer so—"

"My son talks as a child. It is because you do not love enough. In the great love there is no separation, save that of limbs and lips and hands. You have been taken for a brief season from that, in order that you may rise to the great love which laughs at death and distance and the intervention of men. Long ago you learned this, but my son has forgotten. The woman will remember more quickly and wait with serenity. Hold your hands to the sun. Rise to the love of the Long Road—and the lesson will soon be finished. She is waiting—"

"Where—"

"In good time you shall know."

"Is there not to be a love on earth?"

"Yes; the great races of the future—the races that shall heal the world—are to come from the love of earth—"

"I want her here on earth. We had only met when she was taken away."

"You cannot know the blessedness of the valley until you have crossed the heights—"

"But we only just met, Father. All our lives we were apart."

"There is another range of hills for you to cross—"

"But she saw me carried from her as one dead—"

"Even so, she is at peace in this hour. The faith of woman comes more quickly than the faith of man. She is one of the mothers of the new race. Her children cannot be borne alone among the little valley shrines of men. Her children must breathe the strong air of the hills."

"But tell me, shall I meet her again here—down on the good earth?"

"Your master cannot speak of that. If I should tell you what you ask, you could not turn your eyes upward from the dream of the valley-shrines.... Hold up your palms, my son. Master the red of flesh that will not let you wait in peace. So long as you can be destroyed by that, you are not ready for the greater meeting with the Beloved—"

"I could die, but it would not be better than this—"

"The true Brahman speaks in that saying. We shall not know the Holy Breath in death, if we fail to find it here in the life of flesh."

There were hours of this—backward and forward. Rajananda, who seemed hardly strong enough to hold his life to the withered body, could speak and answer tirelessly through the blinding day.

"But tell me," Romney asked at last, "has she a master to make easy these

hours—a master to tell her the way to meet this hardest of all lessons—to wait?"

"She has a master," said the mystic, "but not an old man like Rajananda. She does not need to be reminded by a voice from without. It is easier for a woman to wait, my son. The faith of woman comes more quickly."

2

At Wampli that night, Romney read the last of the documents given him by Nifton Bend, the one designated to be opened at this point. As he had dimly anticipated, the papers concerned Rajananda who proved to be the power of the Asiatic section in the East, the guardian of the Eastern Gate to the alleged Inner Temple, and the highest of the forces in touch with Peking, politically. Of all the Gobi hierarchy, Rajananda was alone in retaining a name and personality used in the outer world. How close he was to the great Lohan, Romney's information did not even hazard.

The American was ordered to await the coming of Rajananda in Wampli, to place his case before this priest and to accept the judgment of the latter as to whether he should journey on farther for the ultimate decisions. In a word, if Rajananda cared to close the issues of the mission, either for good or ill, so far as the Big Three were concerned, Romney's out-journey was ended. On the contrary, if Rajananda refused to act, and advised him to carry his plea for the new party in China still higher, Romney was commanded to accept the advice and to continue his advance into the desert as directed.

There was a singular nobility about the second paper, which contained the story of the dream and forming structure of New China. Romney was familiar with this study of the coming civilisation, and felt the mighty and beloved spirit of Nifton Bend in every line of the writing. The China which the Hunchback pictured for future years carried the wisest and most modern conceptions of super-national development and the brotherhood principle in the comprehension of apostles of the new social order. Romney was asked in a personal note to place the salient points of this document before Rajananda, one by one. This he was prepared and, in fact, eager to accomplish.

The third enclosure contained a sealed envelope which the American was asked not to open for the present. The accompanying sheets of this document had to do with the menace of Japan. The peril of the Japanese aggressiveness was traced, during the past two decades, to the present snapping point. Japan was shown in her position toward China and the other powers, in relation to the

present world-war. The Japanese ambition was set forth from both the conservative and the more perilous angles. Nifton Bend erected in rousing outline the future of Asia under Japanese dominance, in contrast to the vast yellow peoples gathered in a fabric of fraternity and turned outward in benevolence toward the other races of the world.

There were moments in which Romney forgot his own tragedy. The old power of Nifton Bend returned to his heart, the deep thrall of service under him. Something of the breadth of force that comes from self-immolation touched his zeal afresh and brought nearer and clearer the dimension of faith and divine fire which Rajananda had laboured all that day to impress upon his torn and fevered heart. Romney was confronted with the need of drawing upon some higher potency to endure these hours. He could not change the facts of yesterday. He could not turn back until the old master and his desert children made the journey possible. In justice to Anna Erivan, he could not cease to live unless death came to him from an exterior agency, and he was sufficiently imbued with the mysticism of the Orient to believe that death, self-inflicted, would not entirely release him from the struggle and agony of the present separation. Again that night came the queer impulsive passion to transcend these limitations—instead of to bow before them; and more clearly that night he realised what Rajananda had repeated so often through the day: that the limitations were set upon him for the sole purpose of forcing him to rise in his strength and transcend them.

... Nifton Bend had found his own in Moira Kelvin, but only after he had given himself utterly to the service of a foreign people.... Romney turned back to his reading. Bamban was watching him from a shadow—that strange and sleepless *boy* farther from the white man's comprehension at this moment than when they had set out together from the house of Minglapo.... Just now, Romney encountered a personal note in regard to the sealed envelope:

> "My dear Romney: The contents of the final envelope which is sealed are matters which need only be used in case Rajananda or others higher inquire regarding the specific means by which our new party plans to overcome the aggressiveness of the Japanese in case of their war on China. We know that this is uncertain ground for you personally, but trust that in case you are called upon, you will open this letter and state the contents to the religious masters, without bias. Perhaps you will be surprised to find that they who hold all life dear, having a deeper knowledge of the meaning of life than we are given to know, will look with philosophic calm upon the methods we plan to use, to overcome the strength of this young and brutal people. Our

whole case is in your hands.

"You will be interested to know that I had intended to take this journey into the desert. I felt that my services could well be spared for so important a mission. The change of plan came as a result of that extra case against you in the police station. During the hours that elapsed before we could secure your freedom (after we had accomplished your release from the first charge) conditions arose here that demanded my remaining in the vicinity of Peking and Tientsin indefinitely. Had the Chinese officials turned you loose when we expected, your service for us would have been carried on in Japan instead of the Gobi. As it stands, we are all breathless for the issue of your travel.

"A last word: If our methods of dealing with Japan in case of war are not asked, do not open this envelope. I would spare you from it personally. On the eve of your return journey, whether it is successful or not, burn the envelope unread, and hurry home to us. There is much for you to do here. Men of your class are rare. The woman who has come to me, bringing the full cup of life, has quickened our spirits toward you afresh, and you know how animate we were before...."

Romney brooded long. He could feel the world a little—the different pulse that the Gobi had made him forget. He felt his relation to the Big Three and the world at large once more. The timeless repetitions of Rajananda came and went in his brain like the sounding of breakers; the letter from Nifton Bend contained intrinsically the fervour and courage that he held most dear from men of the world. He was called to a longer view of life than this present pit afforded. The great plan of it appeared. Out of the sorriest fall of his life had come the great meeting with his own woman. He pictured the wastrel in flapping white clothing that had sunk into the stoke-hold of the *John Dividend* in Manila Harbour. Upon that day and that ship depended the night of the Cross in Nadiram and the night of the Crown in the desert—upon that darkest of beings, McLean, hung an issue of starry light, for had he not borrowed five pounds from that fence-faced marine, he would have been sent to Japan instead of the desert, where his woman waited.

It was only the Terrible Now....

Romney slept. Anna Erivan came and went in his dreams. Once she was singing her *magnificat* in the hill-country.... The next day, Romney told the story of his mission to Rajananda. For many hours they sat together on the mud-floor of the clay-walled and palm-thatched hut in Wampli. Rajananda lay covered in

his yellow robe and listened, marking the symbols of God and the Holy Breath upon the dirt of the floor with a finger-nail like a twisted kernel of dried corn. Toward evening they broke their fast together, and Romney covered his face in his hands as he listened:

"My son, you are strong. Yesterday you wanted death, but knew too much to die in the midst of gray hate and red desire. All is well with you to-day. Your eyes hold the light that sees afar off. That which you bring to me from the capital of the Empire is too great for the like of Rajananda whose thoughts are of God and not of men.... I see strange things. I see the empire of brotherhood as your white master envisions it, but it is not so near as he thinks—and his figure is not in the midst of it. We will journey on and place our story at the feet of Tsing Hsia, my stern brother in Rhadassim—a journey of five camel days into the west. Your heart is strong, my son. Your woman waits for you—"

Five camel days.... There was an instant in which Romney almost asked for mercy. He would have done this the day before, but somehow he had turned back from the last ditch once more, clutching the very substance to live on from the Unseen—a bigger and silenter man than went out from Nadiram.... He asked the stars if his woman still lived. The next morning as the sun came up, he saw himself in the tin water basin—a darkly-wasted face, beaked like a Hindu of caste, and the eyes asked the same question.

"Five camel days," he muttered. "Romney, they don't give you a chance to choose or to fight. You've either got to go on or lay down—and you can't lay down...."

He turned a look back to the East as the camel knelt for him, and sent forth the best he had of love and courage to the woman. So much surged from him that moment that an answer seemed to come back—nothing he could be sure of, nothing that had to do with actual words, perhaps illusion altogether, but his face wore a thin smile, and there was a humming about his heart.

For another whole day at Rhadassim, Romney talked, and the next day Rajananda offered his observations. All the time the stern and stolid Tsing Hsia listened, and at the end announced that one more Father should be called to the matter—Chi Yuan of Kuderfoi, a three days' journey westward by camel.... Romney felt in this accession that his last debt was paid to life.... It was Chi Yuan, on the second day after the arrival at Kuderfoi, who asked by what means the new Chinese party planned to make Japan sue for an early peace in case of struggle with China. Romney asked permission to withdraw for an hour. It was granted and he read the sealed letter from Nifton Bend.

... For a long time he sat in silence. Ten minutes was all that the reading required. He rejoined the three Holy Men, no longer impassioned for the cause of the Big Three, but merely to state the case without bias, as Nifton Bend had

asked.... Romney always remembered the three bowed heads, as he entered the little tiled court where the yellow lilies grew. This was the end of his out-journey. He knew it now and was very calm. That for which he had been sent would be answered this day. The rest was but the return of the message—then Anna Erivan, if grace were still in the world for him.

Romney felt aged like the three. A little spray moved a pool of water before them. The lilies were lotus-sweet to the white man's nostrils after an eternity of desert-sand. The green cooled his brain like a dear hand. He stood with bowed head, a little at the side, and waited for them to turn from their meditation.

"Speak," said Chi Yuan.

"The new party of China is prepared to fight Japan with pestilence. Their plan is complete. Their chemists have been working for several years. I have the data here to outline to you how the servants of the Empire expect to meet the landing forces of Japan, as well as literally to impregnate the Island Empire with the germs of incurable disease—"

"The outer world of men is truly crushed in the coils of matter," said the gentle Chi Yuan.

"It is the darkest hour," said Tsing Hsia, the stern. "The dawn might be hastened by the innovation of this demoniac contrivance. Japan is young-souled. If allowed to master China and rule Asia, Japan would bring into the world a repetition of the pitiful and unholy civilisation which is destroying itself in Europe now. On the contrary, these men of New China appear to be pure. As I understand, they mean only to defend themselves and their country in case of Japan's insistence for war. I believe that their messenger should carry back from us written word of our good will—the message that we are watching with great ardour their sign of Empire, and that if they preserve their sign in purity, more and more will we carry to them the strength of the Inner Temple. In a word, I, Tsing Hsia, perceive nowhere the promise of national exemplarship for the new order of humanity as in this dream which the white man brings—"

"But warring with pestilence—" said Chi Yuan.

"It is but bringing a greater destructiveness than fire and steel," answered Tsing Hsia. "War will end when its full hideousness is perceived by the many. Pestilence will but hasten the day."

Romney was amazed that these saints who would not have crushed a worm, who knew not the taste of red meat, could thus sacrifice an empire for the good of the future as they saw it. Awe held him, at the completeness with which they ignored the individual life personally and nationally, regarding spirit and not flesh in every thought. They had not even asked for the details which had so harrowed his own heart. To them, the globe was the plane of a spiritual experiment, and not property for a group of divided peoples.

Rajananda seemed very little and dry. His hand came out to the American. He asked to be lifted a little nearer the pool. He dipped his hands in the pure water and covered them again in the Sannysin robe. The faces of the two brethren were turned to him, waiting for him to speak. After long preliminary, he said, perceiving only the future as was his fashion:

"The dream is in the world. Man will unite with his brother, race to race; and war shall be no more. Nowhere in the world has this dream, that broods upon the planet, come nearer to finding its expression in action than through the labours of this party of which our son brings tidings. But this party shall pass without knowing the material fruit of its clean desire. Its business has to do with conception, not with birth. The time of birth is not far as men reckon years, but it is not so near as these dreamers and toilers of New China believe.... They shall pass. The ancient order of Empire shall overpower them. Even now they are in the folds of the night that still lingers upon the face of the world. Asia shall be richer for their thought, but from others shall come the action. Carry to them, my son, by word of mouth the message of peace and good will from the desert. Our approval in script may find no hands to accept it, at least no party to profit by it."

Rajananda now spoke directly to Romney:

"Our westward journey is ended. To-night we depart once more, each for his own country. It has been good to see these brothers again in the flesh. In spirit we have been one these many years.... Chi Yuan, will you see to the preparations for travel, for the night is coming quickly. Our messenger must make haste in returning or he shall not find ears to pour our blessing into.

"I will return with you to Rhadassim," said Tsing Hsia.

"And I," said the plaintive Chi Yuan, "shall sit many days by this pool, meditating upon the coming and the departure of my beloved companions."

... That night, Romney smiled into the starry dark. The great northern stars burned near—Vega, Arcturus, Antares, Altair. No Inner Temple, no arcanum; just waiting and travel, broken sleep of nights and unbroken journeys by day; no phenomena, just sand and sky and low villages, flat upon the desert and burned gold-brown; no miracle but that of love, no mystery but the deep mystery of life. The white dromedary sped forward in silence, making the pace for the rested camels.... It was all haste now. The old master paused not. His desert children had been repeatedly enjoined for more rapid speed on the way to Rhadassim.... Romney's mind sped forward, beyond, to Wampli, almost to Nadiram ten days away—to the point in the desert where the Dugpas had divided, where his heart had met the hardest human test, and pulsed on.

3

The speed of the journey had not abated after Tsing Hsia was left behind at Rhadassim. A different party of desert men met them for conduct to Wampli, and the journey that had required five days coming out was made in four on the return. Rajananda's hand was seldom raised above the rim of his basket during the hours of travel. Steadily Romney's wonder increased toward the old ascetic, his place and power. It was he at the last who had spoken regarding the mission; it was Rajananda to whom all the leaders and forces of the desert bowed in reverence and fealty. Rajananda concerned himself not only with the Peking business, the worship and well-being of the Gobi tribes, and the races of the world at large, but had time and authority for the direction of a white man's romance.

The old master seemed anxious for the Big Three to have his word in the shortest possible time. Romney was worn to the bone. Every hour devoured him as they neared Wampli. To his surprise, Rajananda did not remain there, but signified his wish, after a few hours' rest, to continue toward Nadiram with the American. The utterly emaciated old body seemed to hold its ultimate force together quite as easily *en route* as during a period of rest in one of the settlements. In fact, it appeared to Romney at length, that Rajananda had somehow learned to master the elements of his physical being; that death would not be accidental in his case, but a kind of relinquishing sleep—a passing forth, in order and without pain. This was only a thought, but many strange powers were glimpsed from time to time in this companionship.

The Ancient was the cleanest of men. His bath each day was a desert rite, and, like all else that touched him, the food that he partook of was kept with holy care by his servant. There was not the faintest taint of senility about the old body. It was withered and dry but like sun-dried fruit. Romney often recalled the impression that Rajananda had made upon Anna Erivan when he first came to the court of the Consulate—the strength that had come to her from his passing.

Romney lived in this strength. He had need of it. More and more he realised what Rajananda had meant in this crisis, and how, first and last, his reliance for the care and welfare of Anna Erivan was held to the authority of the old ascetic. Somehow he believed that the priest had been aware of the separation of the lovers before his arrival. No word was spoken regarding this. Two new camels were supplied at Wampli for Romney and Bamban, but the white dromedary continued the journey. The full day's work of even the tawny Bikaners did not wear down this priceless beast.

The party was rejoined at Wampli by the old Dugpa leader and a dozen

followers, and the journey eastward continued. Romney realised that the first camp out of Wampli would be made at the point in the desert on the road to Nadiram, where the separation had taken place.

He did not sleep during this night of travel. He did not ask what was ahead, but he heard the break in his own voice when he spoke to Rajananda of other things.

... Romney stood alone the evening of the day following at the place of the square of stakes.... Bamban called him in for tea at last when the quick dusk dimmed the faces around the fire. Rajananda had been let down from his basket in the yellow robe, and the withered old arm raised to beckon the white man near. For many moments Rajananda ordered his consciousness by prayer and the repetition of mantras, at last coming close to the matter so heavy upon Romney's heart:

"My son longs for his beloved as the heart of the *bhakti yogin* yearns for union with God."

"The days have been many and long, Father, nor did I leave the loved one in peace. Without you, I should have awakened from that first unconsciousness—to resist again and again until death."

"That would have been failure, my son."

"Yes; but we are not trained in the Occident to accept the tearing away of our women without resistance."

"In spirit you are true Brahman—very far from the Occident in ways of thought and life. That is why you are tested here. Had you not been ready to accept the healing of Rajananda, he should not have come to you. Our disciples are not tested more greatly than they can bear. The world had ceased to interest you. You had won the cold laugh. Only the woman of the heart could be used for lifting you to the plane of power. The plan is not to inflict agony upon you, but to burn and refine and whiten your soul. Only the woman could be used for that—"

Romney's face paled under its weathering and his lip hardened white.

"I would not make a woman suffer to test a man."

"You have a lingering of the Occidental in your idea of compassion," Rajananda said softly. "You have met a woman who does not need sparing from the truth. What you have won from these days, she has won, too. Your rising into the breadth of spirit and power has been her ascent also. Compassion does not mean to spare the beloved from ordeals. The thing called happiness so often means that content which is a kind of neglect by the gods. There is a right and a left hand to compassion. It is a unit made of the sternness of Tsing Hsia and the gentleness of Chi Yuan. It dares to wound, but it bathes the wound it makes. It loves, but always constructs. My son, you came to the desert for a greater thing

than to carry a message back to your leaders—"

"I think I came for the meeting with Anna Erivan. I am here again after many days, at the point where she was taken from me.... I have been able to live through the recent days because of you, because I have put my trust in you. My Father, I feel that I cannot go much further without word from her—"

Darkness had fallen. The old hand came forth slowly from the robe. Romney's sped forward to take it.

"I have lived in your devotion and it has been a holy thing, my son. You love well. She has become more than an earth-woman to you. She has become the way to God. It is the true *yoga*—this love of yours, when it is lifted from the lust of the flesh. Where there is love like yours, there is no lust. Without these trials you could not have known so soon the love you will bring in good time to her breast. The ways of easily-wedded pairs sink into commonness soon—the dull and dreamless death. It is those who are kept apart, who overcome great obstacles, who learn the greatest thing of all—to wait—who touch the upper reaches of splendour in the love of man and woman, and thus prepare themselves for the greater union and the higher questing which is the love of God together."

Romney bowed his head over the aged hand. Even in this hour, Rajananda had made him forget himself once more.

"You—" he said haltingly, "you, who have never known a woman—how can you touch the arcanum of romance?"

"The seer must know the hearts of men. Knowledge of love is the knowledge of God. Love is the Wheel of Life; love is the Holy Breath that turns the Wheel. The seer is far from ready for his work in the world, who has forgotten from his breast the love of man and the love of woman. And then, my son, we are almost at the end of the night of the world. The builders are coming in to take the places of those who have torn down with war and every other madness of self. These builders must be born of men and women—the new race—but of men and women who have learned what great love means....

"So you have come to the desert for a greater message, my son, than that which you carry to the waiting ones in Peking—"

"I hear your words. They always come to me again and again afterward. Do not think that I miss what you say when I bring the thought down to the personal thing that tortures me. Tell me: am I to see Anna Erivan soon?"

The last sentence was hoarsely uttered.

"My son, is there doubt in your heart in regard to Rajananda?"

"No."

"Do you believe in my love for you, as master to disciple?"

"I do not understand it. I do not feel worthy to be your disciple, but I have every reason to believe in it."

"Will you do as I ask—a hard thing?"

Romney felt himself smothering close to the ground. He arose to his feet. There was red before his eyes, a breaking tension in his throat. The strongest thing about him—the control of his temper—was stretched to the snapping point.

He paced a moment, with clenched hands, before speaking:

"You mean to ask me to go back to the Big Three without Anna Erivan—?"

"Yes."

"I cannot.... I cannot!"

"Come to me, and take your father's hand."

Romney sat down in silence. Something flooded over him that broke down all his resistance. He wanted to weep like a young boy who was pressed too hard. Instead, he laughed—his old trick when hard driven.

"I forget that I am powerless," he said bitterly. "Why do you ask my will in the matter? She was taken by force. I do not know where she is. I am in the hands of your men. I must do their will or yours. You say that I have gained great power by this separation, but it had nothing to do with will of mine—"

"You have accepted the destiny imposed—that is enough. It honoured you in being as great as your strength. A weaker man than you would have fallen—"

"But you ask my will now, when I see that yours is greater than mine. My will is to go to Anna Erivan now—to-night! She needs me—"

"Do not speak bitterly, my son. We will abide by your will in this thing—"

"You mean that?"

"Yes. But first I will tell you that it is not the greater way."

"Why?"

"Any delay on the road to Tientsin now endangers your chance of seeing your leaders in life again. You accepted their mission. It is the work of a true *lanoo* to fulfil it."

"You think I did wrongly to delay in Nadiram on the way out?"

"I have never chided you for that. Others felt it failure, but they did not understand. You did not fail there. There were three, my son, who went to the Manger on swiftest camels, bearing gifts to the Child whom they found; and another who found his quest by the way, and when he was old and the last of his quest finished, he met the Master face to face.... It was Rajananda who made his desert children understand about your tarrying in Nadiram and who made my son's servant understand. But that is finished. It is different now. Delay now will leave your mission unfulfilled, and that, my son, would not leave the future shadowless—"

"But Anna Erivan—in the hands of strangers—thinking me dead. If she still lives, I must go to her. A day, an hour—"

"My son, what words were the last that you heard from the lips of this

woman you love?"

"She asked me to remember that she was mine—body and soul—"

"Have you faith in that?"

"Yes—but the desert-men—"

"They are my children."

"But she has not had you for strength."

"She has not needed me for strength. My son, her faith is above yours. A woman rises into her faith more quickly than a man—"

A kind of moan came from the white man's lips.

"You mean she is at peace—that she is not crying out for me?"

"I mean that she is well and content to wait until you come. She is holding up her arms—for the white fire. When a woman is great enough for that, my son, her arms do not long remain empty."

"Do you mean to tell me that Anna Erivan would have me go to Tientsin and report this mere verbal intelligence—before going to her?"

Rajananda took his hand from Romney's and fumbled in his robe for a moment, drawing forth a little leathern packet pinned with a seven-fold swastika of gold. From an inner fold of this he drew out a paper which Romney took with a thrill of passionate joy. He had never seen Anna Erivan's writing, yet he knew that this was penned by her own hand:

My Beloved: Finish your mission and hurry back to me. Carry forth your sign even though it seems to fail for the time. I am waiting for you in the hills. They will show you where I am. Remember my last words. All is well. My love stands above all. Come swiftly to

Anna Erivan.

4

The dawn had come. Romney and Bamban were to go forward alone to Nadiram, the servant to remain there for his master to return from Tientsin. Rajananda's province did not include Nadiram, and in thinking of this, the American recalled that the famous white dromedary had not entered there. Twice, at least, he had appeared in Nadiram as a begging Sannysin.... The desert-band drew apart, all the animals in readiness for the trails; even Rajananda's servant removed himself to squat a short distance from his day-star. The old man lay upon his yellow robe,

adoring his God with many perfectly appointed sayings. Romney bowed before the mystery. At last, words were brought to matters of the hour:

"... In a few weeks, my son, you will come again to this place—this man with you, for he is a good servant and will not be parted from his master after his return from the province of the Capitol."

Rajananda indicated Bamban, who stood at a little distance, and quickly turned his face away as his name was spoken. More than ever Romney realised that blackness was ahead for the Big Three, at least for Minglapo. It had never been far from his thought that Bamban would return to his former master after the Gobi mission; in fact, Romney had thought at times Bamban was absolutely Minglapo's, even in his present service.

"... First to Nadiram," Rajananda intoned, "then the long road to Turgim, and the travel lines again to Tushi-kow and on to Peking.... You have breathed again, my son, and strength has come to you. You will set your face firm to the distance, knowing that the plan of life is for joy and for the evocation of divine spirit through the human heart. You shall know through nights and days that the woman you have found is in Sanctuary—that man goes alone upon his mission and that woman waits.

"... Listen, my son: in the elder days men put away their women to worship God. The prophets, the seers, the Holy Men walked alone, and left the younger-souls of the world to bring forth sons. The time was not ripe for the race of heroes, therefore the mere children of men brought forth children. And all the masters spoke of the love of God for man and the love of man for man, and the love of woman for her child, but no one spoke of the love of man and woman. All the sacred writings passed lightly over that—even the lips of the Avatars were sealed. But now the old is destroying itself in the outer world; the last great night of matter and self is close to breaking into light; the time for heroes has come, my son, and heroes must be born of this sacred mystery—the love of man and woman. So all the priests have this message now, all the teachers and leaders of men, even I, old Rajananda who speaks to you and who has never known the kiss of woman—all are opening to the world the great story, unsealing the greatness of the love of man and woman.... For the builders are coming—coming to lift the earth—the saints are coming, my son—old Rajananda hears them singing; the heroes are coming with light about their heads and their voices beautiful with the Story of God.

"... And now I must sleep. I go to my daughter, who waits for you.... Once, before you came, she rested my head and filled my bowl in the stone square at Nadiram. Even now she waits for you in the hills of my country—not far from this place, my son—"

The withered hand came up a last time. Rajananda's servant hurried for-

ward, and Romney helped him. Together they lifted the master in his perfect yellow robe, lowering him over the rim of his basket. The camel-driver took his place at the head of the kneeling dromedary, and his eyes shone with the risen day.... Another desert party had ridden in; they dismounted now in a half-circle opposite the escort from Wampli. It was like a pageant—the desert-men a circle of devotion. Romney watched the white camel rise and depart, the two desert-bands following. Then he called for his camels, mounted, and rode away toward Nadiram in the great wash of light.

PART FOUR: TIENTSIN
THE HUNCHBACK

1

Romney connected with Peking by telegram at Tushi-kow, and was ordered to report at the Hotel Nestor in Tientsin and to inquire for Dr. Ti Kung. At least, this was the information he drew from a long, vague and rambling telegram, the direct meaning of which was veiled, doubtless for political reasons. The whole affair was strange. He recalled how Rajananda had enjoined speed for his return, and how the aged one had been unable to see Nifton Bend in the big reconstruction activity of the East.

He reached Tientsin late at night, asked at the desk for the Doctor, and was taken upstairs at once, a boy leading the way. Several knocks brought no reply from within. At the desk again it was reported that no one had observed Dr. Ti Kung to leave the hotel—that his key was gone, that it might be well for the visitor to sit down and wait. Romney had his bags taken to a room.

It was midnight. For an hour the messenger from the Gobi sat rigid as an Oriental. It was not through effort or tension—this stillness of the American's. He had learned how to wait. He kept his back straight and his hands and head still, because he forgot them and turned his thoughts within, quite as if he sat in meditation upon a mat of *kusa* grass. He had to protect himself from the preying of the city—from sounds and odours and the shatteringly low vibration of massed human beings out of peace with each other. He had come from the

silences, which he had mastered.

He fell into the very deeps of himself, deeper than the desert mission and the cause of the Big Three, to an area where Anna Erivan alone could reach. For thirty days he had been apart from her. Sometimes he felt, as now, that it was too great a wonder ever to come into her presence again, at least on earth where perfections are not by any means guaranteed. He felt that such a mating enforces in the human mind the sense that mystic love goes on and on.... Yet his eyes stung often with the thought of being with her again—if not on desert-sands, anywhere with the good brown earth under their feet. He loved her spirit, felt some miraculous union with it; but he loved her step beside, her movement in the house, the touch of her hand and the lift of her breast; loved her lips and eyes, loved the dream of a child of her body and soul.

From the beginning to the end (sitting rigid near the desk of the Nestor) he went through the precious scenes of his romance—all the words and pictures, the meeting, the Forward Room, the hyenas, the kiss and the quest, the cots and the cross, the camels and Rajananda's coming, the desert and the dream of a child, the desert-men and the thonged stakes, until that moment of horror—separation—that would never subside. This last invariably shook him back to the dull drag of earth again.

It was the litany of a lover. When he looked at the clock it was one in the morning. He went to his room, leaving word for Dr. Ti Kung to call him if an interview was advisable before morning.... Romney felt himself fixing for a sleepless night. There was a curious heat in his heart at the thought of meeting Nifton Bend again. Was he in Tientsin? Would Ti Kung take him to Merchant's Square and the house of Minglapo in the morning? Where was Ti Kung to-night? Perhaps some call to conference at the dais—perhaps the Doctor had given up hope of his arriving to-night.

The Big Three drew a certain love from him. They were men. They rang true. They had trusted him and been lenient in regard to his tender-heartedness in the case of the little spy. Nifton Bend had been splendid about that.... Romney never ceased to wonder that three wise men in the desert had not agreed with him about the spy's death being an atrocity, or about the questionableness of the sacrifice of Japan for the greater good of Asia. Perhaps it was his own limitation, that he considered so strongly the personal side in all things. Perhaps a man impassioned with the glory of the future, who reckons not with the lives of his brothers, his enemies or himself in order to promote his dream of coming days into action, has the greater human heart.

Now the picture of the Island of Pestilence took sharper form and clearer colour. It literally hurtled into his mind.... They would have sent him to Japan had it not been for his delay in the Chinese police-station. Doubtless that mis-

sion concerned the Chinese agents there. The myriad Chinese working in the Japanese financial world were possibly lined up in the cause he had touched; perhaps they were bound together in Young China's system. They would have to leave Japan in case of war, but their work might be done before they left.... There was nothing missing from Romney's idea of the plot to end war in the world by making it too hideous even for the militarists. His present conception covered every fact. Each part fitted perfectly. He saw it far more clearly than when he outlined the form of it to the sages of the Gobi.... Ti Kung, working in the laboratories of the West, had brought back methods of producing and propagating the cultures of all the plagues. Perhaps the packet Ti Kung had thrust upon him, to carry from Shanghai to Minglapo, had contained directions for producing certain cultures, or added information for spreading the most loathsome infections.

Romney felt the sweat start from his brow and throat. Sleep was farther and farther away. When his head started to work at a pitch like this—it had to wear itself out, a process requiring many hours.... The plan would stop war, but the Japanese nation would pay the price in extermination. The strike would come possibly before the soldiers took the field; agents of the Big Three would start to distribute infections among the crowded myriads of Japanese, among women and children—typhus, yellow fever, cholera, bubonic plague.... A few hundred of agents might ravage the entire island in a night's work, and that which they carried would require no more space than a surgeon's bag. Was this what Dr. Ti Kung called using mind instead of muscle? There would be no heavy war engines—no noise, no reek of powder, no twelve-mile projectiles. That was innocent boys' play. Taking a citadel with charges of infantry under the cover of silencing batteries—a mere sport of picked sides! ... Yet this thought held him: In the greater economy of civilisation and the future of mankind, was it not a fair price to pay—to sacrifice one nation for the elimination forever of the international curse?

Romney smiled. He could see it, but acting on it was out of his dimension. When it came to putting even a spy out of business, he had quailed.... Hours passed, sleep coming no nearer. Once he lost himself in the possibilities of waging war upon the country of an enemy by means of spies alone. Every power had great systems of espionage at work in all rival centres—enough to ravage the land of an enemy with plague. Nations would have to protect themselves from each other by the establishment of an unalterable peace. There was a lift to the vision, but carrying baneful cultures of epidemic was no job for one Romney. Sorting the pastils—not for him.

... The room was breathless. At intervals from the hall he heard the creak of a board, as of some one's slow weight pressed upon it; and twice he tiptoed to the

window imagining at least that he heard the soft pad of a native foot on the iron balcony. After the second glance into the outer darkness, he shot the casement bolt, and the stuffy smell of the Chinese house thickened. Toward morning he really tried to sleep, but at the first departure he would meet a cloud of hideous rousing dreams. He was abroad early and in the street, a certain reality and grip of things returning with the movement and daylight.

Romney's heart was pumping rather fast for him. At the desk they declared that Ti Kung had not come in. His own message was uncalled for in the Doctor's box. The room-key was still gone. At breakfast he waited for word, watching the door of the dining-room. An hour later, Dr. Ti Kung not having joined him, he could no longer delay in carrying out the plans which had occurred in the night. No change at the desk, and he ventured to send a house-servant to Ti Kung's room. The *boy* returned saying that repeated knocking at the door had brought no answer. Romney, now convinced that something of grave importance had happened, insisted for the *boy* to try again. For many moments he was gone, before the *Nestor* people reluctantly whispered that Dr. Ti Kung had been found dead in his room.

In the street, Romney's quick step halted, his perturbation strangely broken by the personal issue. It was like the beginning of life again. He saw the passage into the desert as nearer than the night before. The Post Road from Peking was a portal to life of higher scope—romance with Anna Erivan instead of the romance of an ambitious Empire—love of woman instead of the old loves of men, peril, intrigue and adventure.... Now he wondered that he could be so heartless.... A hand touched his sleeve. Romney recognised one of the house-servants of Minglapo. He was led by him hastily to a second rickshaw. The coolies were bade to run.

2

Nifton Bend met him at the door of the shop, which was not yet opened for the day. The slim cold hand turned in his, and Romney felt as if it clutched at some inner part of him.

"Have you seen Ti Kung?".

Romney reported in swift brief terms.

"You did not sleep?" the Hunchback asked in a queer way.

"No."

"Neither did I sleep," he added slowly, "but our good Minglapo slept."

Nifton Bend touched his hand, led the way to the second floor, and entered there an apartment that was like a throne-room. In the centre was a huge canopied couch. Romney's eye sought the heart of this even before the lifted finger of the Hunchback directed.... The knees of the occupant were drawn up against the abdomen—this fact obvious before the cover was pulled back. The great face had taken on its ultimate gray and yellow; the wide mouth that had laughed so wonderfully was twisted in torture. Romney did not look far enough to ascertain the means of death.

"Fat men sleep so soundly," repeated Nifton Bend.

"But Ti Kung could not have been caught sleeping. I reached the hotel between eleven and twelve last night, and sent up word of arrival. He must have been in the room then—the thing already done."

The objects in the great room were lost for the moment in a brown mist before Romney's eyes. Then he saw that the wolf-hound head of the Hunchback was close to his own breast—the face turned up to his own face. His arm went around the low shoulder.

"The spirit of the little spy will rest easier," he whispered.

"You mean—"

"I was expecting this word from the *Nestor*. I expected them to find him—like our master here. As for me, I did not sleep—"

"That was my trouble last night," Romney said.

"They may not have wanted you."

Romney recalled the creaking in the hall and the fancied step upon the iron balcony.

"You think they have not finished?"

"I am sure they want *me*," the Hunchback said, his burning eyes upturned to his countryman's face. "We will have a cup of tea together—not here. Come—"

For a moment Romney thought they had turned to the room of the yellow lamplight, but this was not the plan. They entered the apartment which Romney himself had used—the same silken hangings so absurdly peopled with pink embroidered storks and lavender fishes. The Hunchback rang for a servant.

"I see that you have not brought all that we hoped for from the Inner Temple."

"I think they saw something of this day from the distance of the Gobi," Romney answered. "They bade me hasten back, as if the time were most precious—as if they wanted their servants Minglapo and Ti Kung to get their blessing before last night—"

"Their servants—?"

"They spoke of you and the two who have passed with love and reverence,"

Romney said.

Quickly he told the story of his meeting with Rajananda, Chi Yuan and Tsing Hsia—how they were gathered together at the pool in Kuderfoi, and how they listened to his own story of the work and the dream.

"They were more inclined to take your view of methods than mine," Romney added. "They did not quibble about the death of individuals, nor the manner of defense planned by Young China in case of aggression by the Japanese. They said Japan is young-souled and, if allowed to master China, would bring into the world more of the horrors known as *civilised*, which are destroying themselves in Europe now. They saw that you were pure. It was not necessary for me to impress my own conviction of that. In fact, the three Holy Men united in the belief that nowhere in the world was there such a promise of national exemplarship for the new order of humanity as in this beginning under your hand. They saw very far and very deep. I wish you could go to the aged arms of Rajananda now. He seems pure power to me. He bathed his hands in the pool and spoke at last, saying that you have brought the dream into the world. I think at times he saw you alone—the others only helping. He saw ahead that the time would come when man would unite with his brother, race to race. But he said that it was not quite time—that nothing of your work would be lost, but that your work had to do with conception rather than with birth—"

"Then he saw that we are to be overpowered?"

"Do you believe that you are to be overpowered?" Romney asked slowly.

"It is practically accomplished. Old China has already mastered us, but the vision cannot be covered long. The vision is in the world."

"Rajananda said that. He saw your work lost in the folds of the night that still lingers on the face of earth. That was almost his expression.... He bade me hurry to carry his blessing with the others to you—a message of peace and goodwill from the Holy Fathers of the Gobi. He said they were watching and waiting for the dawn, that they could not give you their approval in script, since it might find no living hands to accept it, no party to profit by it."

A servant had come to the call. Nifton Bend sent this one to find his own personal servant.... The former returned, saying that the General's *boy* had been sent on an errand into the street. Nifton Bend called for tea.

"... They saw a great deal from a distance—those three wise men," he added thoughtfully. "I should have been glad to go to them.... And you say they saw us as belonging only to the dream and not to the action?"

"Yes. That is what was said by Rajananda."

Nifton Bend's face was calm, something almost boyish in his smile.

"I should like to have my young men about me in this hour. I should like to tell them to watch for the working out of the great story which I shall not be

allowed to see.... *Story*—I think of everything as a story—a man's relation to his work and to his woman.... Romney, she thinks much of you. She will be alone. I'd like to live. She makes every day a quivering ecstatic thing. I used to think that death was the best thing that could happen to a man, but death is different now. Let me talk a little English and laugh with you.... Yes, death is different. I would rather be in hell with her than in heaven without. But, of course, everything is ordered better than I could do it. I think I shall be *asleep* when she comes. I was never a good sleeper here. I shall sleep well for a little—until she comes and wakes me. For she will come. I'm tired. I'm bending to the ground.... I talk to you of this sacred thing—"

His head came very close to Romney, but his eyes were mild and boyish.... "I liked you because you had an Occidental heart—a place for a woman. If my young men were here they would sit and talk with me about China. I love them. They are passionate countrymen—but I have finished with China. Only the woman is left in my heart. And you—you are a white man who can understand—"

"Yes, I can understand—" Romney whispered. "Where is Moira Kelvin?"

The Hunchback pointed forward toward the apartment where Romney had seen her in the yellow lamplight.

"You think there is danger, and you sit talking with me?"

"She sleeps. She knows nothing of these things. She sat and read to me all night.... She is young. She is so beautiful. I put her to sleep against her will.... You will see her to a ship. You will tell her that I had but one thought—that all dreams were merged into one—that I sat at the last contemplating her beauty and the tenderness—"

The tea was served before them. The Hunchback thanked the servant and bade him go. Romney absently reached for his teacup, but Nifton Bend's hand touched his:

"Don't drink that. My passage out is doubtless in it, if not yours. I don't think they want you particularly, though they would, if they understood.... Ah no, they have doubtless murdered my servant. No one but his master sends him on an errand into the street—"

Now the pinkish storks of the portieres had real moisture about their lower joints, a faint but veritable mist rising before them. Smoothly Nifton Bend had allowed the steaming contents of his cup to soak into the wall-hangings behind his chair. He did the same with Romney's cup. The fabric slowly sucked in the liquid.... The thrall of the great man deepened in Romney's heart. His own romance was near and vibrant in the room; yet he was touched by a dread which the other did not share, apparently had not thought of.... Was Moira Kelvin safely sleeping after her night of devotion to the sleepless one?

"Is it the Japanese secret agents that became active last night at the *Nestor*

and here?" Romney asked quickly.

"No. Our work never appeared to get to them—thanks to your part with the little old spy whom you liked so well. It is China punishing the younger generation."

"But did he not work in the laboratory—that same spy? I saw him coming up from there—a trap-door—"

"Only for a day or two, at the last. We were watching him before his knee-cap snapped. He could not have gotten in his report."

These were old matters. Romney was troubled about the woman, and burned with the peril of the man before him.

"Perhaps they do not want you," he said.

"Our enemy is in this house," the Hunchback answered. "I shall not be allowed to leave. At least, not to go far—"

"Do you think you would be molested if you walked out now—with Moira Kelvin and me?"

Nifton Bend seemed thinking aloud:

"They may have but one agent working here, but ten men, one after another, would die gladly for my life. They are not afraid. If it is not this tea, it will be another way and soon.

"They will watch.... But we have touched the vision. The young men will carry it through. What are three lives compared to starting the races of the world into a new wisdom, a new comeliness?"

"While you live, *you are Young China*—and what of the woman?"

"Ah, don't, Romney—"

"Is she safe?"

"What?"

"Are you sure that she will not be wanted?"

"China would not touch her—yet how strange I did not think, even of the thousandth chance! Still, don't you see, I carry to her the menace of myself. Romney, you must help me—"

Romney was hushed by the spectacle of Nifton Bend's sudden dread—and this from a man scarcely capable of fear for himself. He saw the great constructive worker for mankind turning helplessly to cope with a personal issue. He pressed the General's hand.

"You can count on me," he said quietly. "I don't think the game's up—"

"Romney, you bring me back the old romance of America—"

"Let us think.... Have the police been notified in regard to Minglapo?"

"No."

"If the police were called here, the work of any secret agent in our case might be complicated—"

"Vulgar detentions—a day of questions—a day lost—our enemy to organise. Remember, these killers are ready to die themselves—"

"Then let us go forth now—"

"Go forth into China?" The question came mildly. "Any rickshaw coolie—"

"To the American Consulate—" Romney interrupted.

The answer remained in Romney's mind as one of the high moments of life.

"I would not accept sanctuary from a country from which I have withdrawn my allegiance."

"Then I'll stay with you here, but I think we had better join the woman—"

"Yes—"

"Just a minute—wait," Romney whispered, touching the other's sleeve. "Let them think that the tea did it. Walk heavily, on my arm, through the halls. Let your legs reel a bit. It will give us time—"

"Yes, it might give us time—"

The utter hopelessness of Nifton Bend's repetition of his words brought to Romney something like an expression of Fate itself. The Hunchback, in accepting China, had accepted the code of her servants. The condemned never resist death.

But Romney did not share the attitude.

"Listen," he added. "They will be watching. They will think you dying from the poison—if they really fixed this tea. They will leave you alone in your rooms—possibly for hours. I'll go out and get your young men together. Don't you see? I am one of them. You are the Cause while you live. We'll come again and take you out—"

The expression upon the Hunchback's face deepened with pain.

"I love the thought. It is brave and strong—as young men are. But it would mean the deaths of all who came—yours and the others. My young men cannot be spared. It would not save me. We are in China.... There is this that you can do—I was almost forgetting. Here are two packets of papers. It is the whole affair that you hated so—the plan and all, in case of aggression by Japan. There is only one safe place for these, in case our cause is lost—the bottom of the sea. Certain of these parchments are fire and acid-proof. It's the work of years of Ti Kung and others. Japan would use them quickly enough against China. You must take care to prevent all that. Don't dare to die with these papers on your person, Romney.... And now may we go to her?"

There was a smile back of the tortured eyes of the Hunchback as he reeled through the hallway, holding heavily to Romney's arm. The latter caught a trace of the humour of the thing. He could not have reached this smile had it not been for the days in the Gobi. A man who had had his own loved one torn away, who has been forced to take his faith from the substance and place it upon the spirit of things, does not easily find himself denied a laugh afterward, when the world is at its worst.

There was another urge to realisation that came in that brief and laboured walk to the room where he had seen the woman and her own in the yellow lamplight. It seemed the nexus to an ampler power and a broader wisdom. Nifton Bend's part in Young China was already done. To a material mind, it was the darkest hour, but Romney lived and moved that moment in a larger world where brave unselfish thoughts have immortal potency. He saw that no task is finished with the conceiver—that Nifton Bend was merely the drawer of plans, that the builders must come, that matter must obey since the plan was in the world. He saw also a new power in the quick refusal of the Hunchback to bring his young men into this house of secret death. The dreamer would spare the builders.

The door was opened instantly. Romney stepped behind the Hunchback to keep the eyes of the hall from observing the change, for Nifton Bend was himself at the turn of the knob. Such men cannot be relied upon as actors....

"I have brought you back an old friend, Moira," he said.

Romney pushed the door shut behind him and stepped forward to the woman.... They did not speak. Nifton Bend asked with concern:

"You did not sleep?"

"I was asleep when you sent the tea."

The Hunchback's face was turned from her. Romney saw the broad bent shoulders sag a little. The woman did not see that, but sensed the recoil of the tragic shaft that had entered her lover's heart.... Her eyes instantly left Romney's face. She turned, almost running—her hands to the low shoulders. She was never more beautiful.... Nifton Bend lifted the little teapot from its wrapping in padded silk.

"How long since this came?" he asked.

The voice was calm again, but the tone was hollow.

"Don't drink that. I'll get some fresh for you both," she said. "It must be a half-hour since that came—"

"Moira ... don't call for more now. We will sit down together—we three. Romney has brought us the voice of God from the desert.... I hoped you would rest a little more. I was thoughtless to let them waken you—"

Romney could scarcely credit his listening.

The woman spoke:

"Indeed, I never felt more animate. I was fathoms deep when the knock came—deep, deep and dreaming. The knock must have repeated several times, for it became a part of my dream, before I awoke and answered.... The *boy* said that you were having tea and had sent some to me. I thought you would soon be coming, so I drank as I dressed—to be ready for you. I began to feel more joyous and light—like a little girl combing her hair for a great day. It was like a day of something-to-happen. It must have been your coming, Sir Romney. We hoped to see you last night—"

There was a blithe richness of vitality, a sparkle that made him remember the wine at Longstruth's, the Chinese girls twanging the *vina* in the bamboo clumps by the river.... Wine and song at Longstruth's, and a score of other thoughts, light and indistinct as the trailing movements of a vagary—with this concrete enormity in the room.

Romney suddenly whipped in closer to reality. His mind had been trying to hold off the truth from itself. Moira Kelvin turned to her mirror. The Hunchback, glancing to see that his face was out of range of the glass, directed one slow terrible look into the eyes of his friend. Romney took it all. For an instant there was an indescribable tightness across his chest and a sense of inadequacy to bear the drama. Nifton Bend had already accepted the death of his beloved. He would spare her from all knowledge of it. There seemed a dull gray shine about his face. The long hands were lifted a little, but steady. The face did not implore; it commanded Romney to be calm, to help in bringing happiness to the departure.

Romney was continually swept by surges of incredulity—that this thing was working out under his eyes. In another way it was like the last moment of a tragedy which one knows is coming. He wanted to leave before the end. He felt himself an inadequate third in this great hour.... He heard his own voice, telling of the three sages at the little pool of the lilies in Kuderfoi.... He was describing Rajananda.... She laughed and came close for an instant to listen. She caught the same magic that had been so dear to Anna Erivan.... He remembered a similar look from Moira Kelvin, though more imperious and passionate, when he told her of Nifton Bend and Young China.... He caught a glance of calmness and commendation from the eye of the Hunchback now.... He pictured the tranquil and compassionate Chi Yuan, the firmer and more balanced Tsing Hsia to whom the sureness of the retributive forces of life were as inevitable as gravitation. He spoke again of the little withered master lying between them—so vast, so calm and inclusive.... Always Romney's own story came in with its wonders and pictures, but he did not let them reach the point of words. His romance was something he might have brought to Moira Kelvin alone, if there had been hours. He longed for her sanction and to show her how wise and deep in life she had been, since all that she had said came true; he wanted her word on the chance of

finding Anna Erivan again—to help his faith. There was none to whom the story belonged as to her; but it was not for Nifton Bend in this hour....

He repeated instead what the three sages had said of the dream which was Nifton Bend's—what they thought of him ... and how the picture of Nifton Bend and herself, together in the lamp-lit room, had stayed with him through the days and nights of the desert riding.

Her movements were swift, her laugh sweet and low, her love and joy on the wing.... For a moment they forgot the Hunchback.... Something had come to them from their fortnight—something that had to do with the moths and the rice fields and the tea among the pyramids.

"You are wonderful, Sir Romney. You change so rapidly now.... You are sun-darkened. All waste seems burned away. You bring the breath of the desert nights—and something else. Your heart has known some great replenishment, and some great terror. I see the man who was a boy when I first looked.... All happens where Nifton Bend is. I think it must be the ignition of his mission and his service. The world will never know the wonder of him. Every one changes who touches him—the young men—"

He had followed her eyes to the Hunchback, who had poured a cup of tea and was drinking leisurely.

"You said you did not want tea," she ventured. "I could have had it fresh. That must be cold and bitter from standing."

"I like it strong," said Nifton Bend.

Moira Kelvin was speaking on, but Romney only heard the murmur of her voice. The picture of the next hour came to him—that all was done. There was something like a cry in his heart for the end of the mystic. And poignantly the sweetness of the woman before him returned—the last moment by the river when her fervent impulse to give him a token expanded his nature to its broadest reaches of emotion. Her splendour was lifted now, her whole being crowned with the spirit that can only come to one whose quest has ended.... The Hunchback came toward them. The calm that Romney saw upon that face was marmoreal, the calm of one whose circle is almost finished. He led her to a chair which the yellow rug covered, and sat before her upon a cushion, his arm across her knees.

"You are young, but very old," he said. "You are a child, a girl, a woman all lavish in her love, but more than all a mother. This—this Romney—is like a son to us—and those brave young men—our sons. We are ancient, Moira. We shall end our work to-day and depart. We have known the cities of men, and the fruitful valleys have been our meeting-places. To-day we shall go to the hills. We have talked much of the world. To-day we shall talk of God. Our work is finished. This is one of our sons who will carry on the work here. It is good that he is with us.... Moira—Moira—what a love it is."

She bent forward, listening, her face in a kind of noon glory.

"What has come to us?" she whispered. "Has Sir Romney brought us magic from the desert? Does he carry with him some power from the Holy Men? ... I think I was never so happy. All things that I have thought undone seem accomplished. Are all the rest of the days just for you and me? Shall we walk together—our tasks all finished? ... Ah, you have always had so much to do. I have been wasteful in the waiting hours. I have seemed always waiting for you to come to me—"

"I shall not leave you again," he whispered.

"But your work—"

"My work is finished."

"I thought when I found my own, that it would be like this—everything pushed away for our being together—and now it has come.... Listen, I have hated her, when you found her so very beautiful—"

The Hunchback turned with a smile to Romney.

"Her rival," he whispered. "She means the old Mother China—"

"She has taken you away from me—days and nights. I am terrible in waiting. You will go to her no more?"

"No more," he answered.

"Did she cast you out?" she asked softly. "Is it because she will not have you that you come back to me?"

"Yes," he said.

She thought he was carrying out her own whimsicality.

"Fancy my rival turning you out! You would not have been called to one so bereft of reason and vision.... I know *you*! No one knows you as I do.... I knew something of you when Sir Romney first spoke your name. It was a call to me. Did I not answer it? Did I not come at once? ... And you—when I came—what a moment!—that look that flashed between us like light across the world.... And your hand as you said, 'Come in!' ... your hand. It is the same now.... You are so powerful! Your touch brings me to the earth—"

"It is for you," he said.

"Is it not strange?" she was whispering. "All is changed in a day.... You know, in a way, it was Sir Romney who brought me you, and now he has come again bringing us our true life together.... I thought when I found the one, I should rise and compel all things. Instead I bowed and listened. You never knew how terrible it was to have you so lost in affairs—even of an Empire. But you have come home to me.... My thoughts are going away. Why is it? Closer to me—"

Romney was nearer to them. The Hunchback's left hand was thrust back. It closed upon his in an iron clasp, commanding silence and peace. There was an intensity of power in the long gray face—an expression of invincible conquest

that to Romney was like the mastery which the men of the future are to know. He was holding pain from her by his force of will. The instant Romney realised this, it became actual. Her cheek was upon his shoulder now, her eyes like a drowsy child's. Often she touched the face so close to hers, once with her lips. Once her eyes fixed for a moment on Romney's.

"Forgive me, my friend," she said with a smile, and added as if confident he would understand all: "The day is strange. I must be very happy.... You are a good omen, Sir Romney—"

There seemed a certain wickedness, apart from time and motive, in the destruction of such beauty.

"Oh, I know! I know now! ... You are putting me to sleep again—"

"For our journey!"

And then Romney heard:

"... We are one. We will go on. There is no end.... I thought I was a terrible woman out in the world. But I was only a little girl looking for her true companion.... I came to him and he knew. We are mated and he is putting me to sleep.... It is deep, deep sleep, and he will be with me. Yet I almost hate to go. Beloved—your head a moment on my breast. I know only love.... Ah, closer to me.... He will not mind.... He, too, is searching for his own—"

It was her theme.

Nifton Bend did not arise from his cushion at her knees. With his free hand, he drew a purse and a pistol and a packet of bank-notes from his coat, and then he spoke:

"You will go now. You will rush forth into the hall as one maddened by pain. You see, I use your plan. They have seen me. I think you will be able to reach the street. Inasmuch as you are stricken, they will call their work done. But do not let a servant approach you. Be wary in the street, should they care to follow. The papers must be dropped into the sea—and then you have finished.... Use the pistol in the hall if necessary—all the chambers. But I think if they see the end upon you, they will let you die outside."

The free hand was raised to Romney, who bowed to his knee before the man and woman.

"You mean beauty and manhood to me—you precious two," he whispered. "The packets shall be sunk as you say. I have been proud to serve you both. Always I shall feel you above and beyond."

"Ah, America—so often you bring her home to my heart. Godspeed to you, Romney. All is well with us. All is better than the best we could know or ask for.... We will be alone together. We shall have silence here.... Yes, that is well.

Toss the yellow rug about us. Now we shall know the deeper dreaming."

PART FIVE: CONCLUSION
THE HILL-COUNTRY

1

With his hand on the knob of the door, Romney looked back. The whole hour he reviewed in a rush. He had not been heroic, nor even uncommon. His story had been stammered. There had been nothing to tell such a pair, lost in each other. Even the cause of China seemed little and unsubstantial compared to the splendour of their relation. The courage of Nifton Bend should always mean the arrival of man to manhood in Romney's thoughts. The far roving spirit of the quest-woman come at last to the home-nest of a great man's heart was a sort of pattern for the world's romance.... She who had been the ruling imperious mistress of a few flashing days of his own life, was a child, utterly feminine and receptive in the presence of the greater force.

The big secrets of life had come to him in this hour, to be unwoven and unfolded during the years that remained. Just now Romney felt himself small in that he had risen to no part to help or spare them. He forgot that the revelations were for him alone; that he had furnished complete understanding; that his own soul carried forth the message of their end. In this sense he was chosen. No man could have done better. He would have been crude, indeed, to resist their way. He had entered upon the heroism of abnegation.

The hush of their great story was in his heart as he stood by the door.... The face of the Hunchback was upturned to the bowed head of the woman. There was no sound, no movement. The leaves of an ancient mulberry tree lay tranced against the leaded window. The yellow rug was folded close. The lords of life and death were in that shadowed room.

An ironical smile came to Romney's lips as he turned the knob.... He was meeting the little world of men again. He must act. He must go on with his little part, after dwelling in the presence of those who were great enough to show the world their own immortal selves.... He must fight for his own life—what a

travesty. How little were the herds of mere men moving to and fro on the broad back of ample mother earth. For a little time longer he, Romney, must play his part—or die.

A last devoted look back, even as the substantial wonder of his own life recurred. To Anna Erivan now. Nothing but distance lay between—the task accomplished.... It seemed an unreckonable length of time since last night when he threaded the litany of a lover in the lobby of the *Nestor* waiting for Dr. Ti Kung....

He plunged into the hall—left hand to his brow, knees tumbling, his right hand in the loose pocket of the corded blouse he wore, the pistol in his palm. A pistol always made him laugh, gave him the sense of being less than a man.... No, the task was not quite done—the yellow packets to put away.... And a woman waiting in the hill-country. In that instant of outward bewilderment the reality of Anna Erivan was very close.... A servant with a tray met him in the hall near the stairs. Romney veered by, and turned quickly. The yellow *boy* had placed his tray on the floor and followed as if to assist a guest in the house. His face was troubled but innocent. Romney staggered on.

The broad curving stairs were empty; the lower hall. The white man saw a shadow move on the polished floor beyond the half-drawn portieres that led into the shop of Minglapo. Romney's way told once more. No hesitation, a leap through the curtains. The servant there stepped back in surprise, his hands quite empty. The other joined him behind. Their heads bowed together as if to consult as to the best way to do their duty by a totally incomprehensible guest. It was with difficulty that Romney held to suspicion and the part assigned.... The great front-door had not been opened to the Square. Romney reached it but stood aside:

"Quick," he called in Chinese. "Open. I go to a doctor. I have made a mistake and fear death."

He leaned his back to the sash, while they unfastened. There appeared to be no thought of detention. One of the servants was sent to call a 'rickshaw-coolie, another to explain his hurried departure to Minglapo. Romney merely wanted them away from the door as he passed.... He was in the street, and did not wait for the 'rickshaw. He had no panic, in fact, marvelled a little at his coldness, under the play of dissolution conducted exteriorly. The street brought a sudden bewilderment. He could not hold it all at once—Minglapo, Ti Kung, Nifton Bend, Moira Kelvin—and he who had served them, unscathed, unmolested, so far.

Yet foreigners in his case saw a drunken stranger or thought they did, and the Chinese watched in their queer way expecting anything.... Now he was in China, as the Hunchback had said. Any one of the hundreds of natives near him and in sight—merchants, students, coolies, boys or scavengers—might be the one deputised to get him. He crossed streets in the midst of Chinese. They searched his face, keen looks, glances of scorn and covert amusement. He had never felt a

native throng so powerfully before....

Doubtless he was followed. Doubtless they let him alone, believing that the assassination principle was satisfactorily at work.... The brush of a wadded coat against his own stung him strangely. He remembered the absolute acceptance of death on the part of Nifton Bend. There had not been the slightest expectancy of escape in that strange far-seeing intelligence.

The same calmness was Romney's now, and the realisation that he had passed through an episode that would ever increase in importance so long as he lived. He had been with the heart of new China when it ceased to beat; more than that, he had lost a man of his own heart and a woman who had shown him the way to power and glory.... From the first moment he had been drawn to the Hunchback—a kind of passion that seemed to awaken potentialities of his being, starting within strange premonitive urgings, that left him more and more dissatisfied with the smug and the small things of life. As for courage, he had seen much of the courage of the open with its laugh and flaunted arms, but this at the last of the Hunchback broke all the former models.... Romney halted wondering. He had passed days with Ti Kung and Minglapo. The former had lifted him from the wash of the gutter literally; yet all of the night's close-running horrors centred about the death of this white man and woman—and they were one. A grandeur, an isolation about them.

... For a moment he had forgotten himself.

His body straightened, his face upturned to the morning sun. Suppose he had brought Anna Erivan to Tientsin—to the house of Minglapo. He might have left her with Moira Kelvin when the tea came. Yes, it might have happened just like that.... The old sage Rajananda must have felt the flood of love that poured forth from the American's breast that instant. Where did he stand that he saw all this? ... Only the papers now, and the journey to the desert. He must watch. He must be sleepless. He would not be safe until he reached Nadiram, at least.

A deep sense of weariness gradually oppressed. He felt his own weight and the misery of life. The world seemed mad to him—his heart thirsting for the beauty and peace of a woman—and his master. Somehow he wanted Rajananda once more before the ancient one passed. Distance and time only increased the richness of this relation. He felt the hated packet against his breast. If it were found upon him, it would prove enough forever to rob him of peace, even if the assassin failed to strike. Romney smiled again at his own weakness in the midst of recent great affairs. He knew best of all his own inconsequence....

His hand touched the purse in his pocket, and he drew it forth. It was heavy with gold. The note-case contained English and native money to a large amount.... Now it came for the first time—the possibility of his arrest in connection with the deaths of Minglapo and Nifton Bend. The servants would report his

presence in the house. His steps quickened. Everywhere was the native crowd. His slightest movement toward making away with the packets would be noted.... He was hastening to the water-front.

He hailed a native rivercraft, pointing to one of the farthest of the ships lying at anchor.

In the middle of the stream, his back turned to the boatman, he drew the packets from his pocket, and loosening the long string that tied them, he fastened the small, blunt-nosed automatic pistol Nifton Bend had given him, to the papers. This was the only heavy object within reach. Then, as he directed the eye of the native to a ship at right angles to the present passage, he dropped the packets and the weight overside. The sense of ceremonial did not come to him until the papers had sunk from sight in the yellow Peiho. After that for a moment the American lost all interest in the finding of a certain ship, but as the boatman turned back toward the city-front, Romney encountered a peculiar dread of entering that crowd again, and at the same time remembered that the ship he had ordered the native to punt for was flying Blue Peter at the fore, and also that her lines had a strange familiarity.

He was thinking rapidly now. The packets were safely out of the way. He had tied them tightly to the weight, making a satisfactory use of the bit of a mankiller, its chambers all unused. Perhaps they had followed him to the waterfront watching even now for his return, or some word from this boatman regarding him. Romney turned and scanned the river harbour again.

There was Blue Peter surely enough, and the rusty tramp that queerly filled his eyes a second time. Now Romney laughed aloud. As certainly as he lived, it was the *John Dividend* at this instant drawing up her huge barnacled hook. His voice whipped the boatman about and with mutterings anent the proverbial insanity of foreigners, which the white man was by no means supposed to understand, the native began poling once again toward the smoking craft.... It meant down the river anyway and giving Tientsin the slip. If the tramp were headed south he could make the shore at Tongu at any rate and catch the Chinese Eastern across Shantung Province in the general direction of Tushi-kow.

There was no ladder overside. Romney had to shout, and this was hard for him. He did not know his own voice, and could not remember letting it out in this way since a boy. It was like calling up to an uninterested some one in a third floor window. The "old man" showed himself, spat overside, narrowly missing the lesser craft, and appeared to reflect whether he cared to be bothered or not. Perhaps he needed a hand. In any event the ladder came down, and Romney, grateful for the thickness of the *John Dividend* between him and the keenest possible eye on the waterfront, ran up the tarred threads calling the boatman to follow. The latter obeyed, though his expostulation was high-keyed.

The "old man" went on with his clearing. Romney had never had any truck with this person and did not care to begin now. He was aboard and the *John Dividend* was getting into the down-channel under her own steam. Straight to the engine-room where he had once trafficked with coal against his will, Romney made his way now and presently was measured head to toe by a single and most calculating gray eye.

"Where are you heading, Mack?" he asked.

"Tongu. Chifu."

"Take this river-coolie in charge. I'm healed. I go to Chifu with you. I want him to go too. Cut his boat loose from the ladder. I'll pay him for it. I'll pay him for his time and passage back. I'll pay you for managing the job.... How much?"

He felt light and fine toward McLean. If it had not been for that loan, he would have gone to Japan instead of the Gobi.

It was not a matter in which McLean was accustomed to make haste. He did not appear disturbed by the outcries of the Chinese, who thought the American was interceding with the engine-man to pay for his passage out from the water-front.... Presently the fence spoke. Romney would have paid many times the amount for the service. He found the steward and a berth.... They were three miles below the city when he went on deck. The ladder had been drawn up. No native craft was trailing.... The river boatman was easily placated later from the purse. Tongu was passed without misadventure. Presently the *John Dividend* was tumbling around the capes in the Yellow Sea, and Romney with quickened pulse, five days later, started inland from Chifu to Tushi-kow.

2

Romney was changed. The thing called civilisation settled back. Only the spirit of that which he had passed through remained with him from past days. All seemed closed, integrated. He travelled light. There was no menace, no apparent pursuit. He could not hold the continual wariness. Fear slipped from him before he rejoined Bamban at Tushi-kow. They were on the road to Turgim with two camels and one driver with provisions. Romney leaned forward.

Sometimes it was like a terrible thirst. The pictures of the past no longer fed his heart. They too were completely integrated. He wanted the living woman again—her voice and hands, her sweet and sacred mysteries. He was burned with waiting. The actual resistance of the miles of sand and rock against the tread of swift camels was a peculiar and persistent deviltry. His sleep was brief

and fragmentary. Only lovers and great workmen can endure such sleeplessness. Many times each night he awakened to see the greater stars moved but a short step westward.... Turgim, that had meant so much in approach, was nothing but a night-camp upon arrival. Ahead was another long barren stretch to Nadiram; every hour had to be wrestled back. His images all had to do with a certain coming hour.

From a white man's standpoint he had little to count on. His woman had been torn away by a desert-band—only the promise of a withered ancient creature whose next breath was less than a good gambling chance, yet Rajananda had bulked mightily in his heart. In his best moments he had faith—a priceless winning. From a white man's standpoint, he was on the longest possible chance, but only in the darker and more terrible passages could Romney accept this.... There was one moment of starlight, the last night of riding between Turgim and Nadiram, when he really had a great moment.

It was in solitude, as all such visitations arrive. Bamban was on the other camel with the driver, since provisions were down to small compass. He had fallen into a deep reverie and came-to with his hands out, palms stretched upward, eyes turned to the stars, his lips moving with a sentence like this:

"It's the love of the Long Road. I have found her. No man can spoil that. I will find her again—if not now, when the time comes—if not here, there—"

Romney laughed at the stars. He had been listening to his own soul, perhaps. It was stronger than he. He wanted her here and now; but the fact that the sentences had come through to his brain, had a significance that he was deeply-grounded enough in life to understand. And his palms had been stretched out. That meant submission, the world over.

He laughed again. He was very far from the world just now. Cities—even China—had distressed him. He must reach calm on that. He must go back and master that terror of men. The desert had given him a tithe of her mysticism and power. He would have to go back and make it tell among men. Would he have to go back alone?

Nifton Bend had mastered himself in the midst of men. Romney gripped a fuller understanding. The Hunchback had passed this barrier—after that his mate came to him. They were a completed circle—one even in their dying.... He would love to tell Anna Erivan that story.... In the very strength of his submission, his faith grew. The word of Rajananda returned. There had been no doubt in what the old master said. Anna Erivan was to wait for him in the hill-country. All that Rajananda had said about other things had been fulfilled.... And Nifton Bend had followed his own into the deeper dreaming. What did he mean by that? He seemed so glad to go, even though their lives were most beautiful together.

The next day Romney squinted up at the sun. Something of the same power

came to him again. There was a cross in the blinding light, and after that a full sheaf of golden wheat. Of course it might have been only the glare in his eyes, but he felt very strong and that he would bring something of different manhood to the woman who waited for him.

Romney leaned forward.

Bamban accepted him. There were no two ways now. He had bowed in silence long after the story of the end of Minglapo, even lamenting a little that he had not been there. But Rajananda had somehow put a seal on his service to the white man. Romney regarded the *boy* as he had never been quite able to do before, and respected the nature capable of such awe and reverence for the holy man. More especially admirable had Bamban proved on this last swift lonely journey.... They sat together during a long evening in the stone court of the Consulate at Nadiram (the door shut, the pole empty where the Russian flag had hung, and the hyenas whimpering afar off).

"I'd like to go on to-night," Romney muttered.

"It would kill the camels. They have been pressed as never before."

"Did you ask if there were two new camels here—exchange or rent?"

"Nothing of the kind."

"I shall wait."

"My master is parched," said Bamban.

When his servant went to the Rest House, Romney remained to contemplate his world a little from the west wall where he had sat so many nights. At last he arose and went to the door where she had stood—the place of their first meeting—and knelt a moment on the stone.

Even the next day the camels travelled but slowly. The same pair had come from Tushi-kow and they needed the rest of many days. From Nadiram to the place of the thonged stakes required two full days' travel; indeed, the night had fallen before they reached this point on the road to Wampli, and no desert-band was encountered on the journey.... The night was very still and hot. For two days a south wind had blown, and they breathed now the burning of the lower borders of the desert.

A deserted world. Romney could not eat. With deep strange kindness, the *boy* pressed him to drink his tea. The white man had come and there was no sign. His head was heavy on his breast. When his thoughts became too swift and torturing for stillness, he arose from the fire and walked to the place of the stakes. From there he followed the way to the point where he had fallen in his revolt against the natives.... They had taken her on from this point—just here he was carried to the camel.... The sentences of the old master on that last day

recurred persistently now.

"... He said that man goes alone on his mission and that woman waits. He said that the woman I had found was to wait in sanctuary.... He seemed to love her, too, Bamban—"

"Yes, he called her his daughter, and spoke twice of her filling his bowl in the stone square at Nadiram—"

"He said that he was going to her," Romney went on, his words heavy and slow, "—that she was waiting for me in the hills of his country—not far from this place."

"He will come soon," said Bamban, who was stretching out the blankets.

"He said there must be a new and different love between man and woman in the world. But, my God! they die! They seem to die when they love like that—"

"I do not understand," said Bamban.

"Why, I saw such a love—but there was no child. They died—in a room at Minglapo's house.... They did not have time—"

"You mean the General—"

"Yes—"

"His work was finished."

"But his woman wanted a baby. She told me long ago—"

"Perhaps she saw at the last that it was better to go—"

"I am afraid—afraid to-night—tired and done. I won't fail. I won't lie down—but I thought he would be here to take me—"

"He will come," said Bamban.

Romney was looking up at the lustrous film of night. His lips moved again:

"He said the builders were coming to lift the earth—that the saints were coming, for he could hear their songs—that the heroes were coming with light about their heads, their voices beautiful with the story of God—that they must come from the love of man and woman here—but they reach that love only to die—"

"My master must sleep," said Bamban.

"I am very far from sleep," said Romney; but the other pressed him down, and the small hard hand was in his, and there was no yellow and white between them. And almost instantly, Romney slept.

He awakened in a smoky red light, started up to see the heads of camels and horses against the east; then a voice:

"My son, all is well. You will arise and go to the beloved who waits for you in the hills of my country—not far from this place."

The ancient shaven head emerged from the yellow robe, so near that Romney had not perceived it until after the distance had unfolded its objects. Romney leaned forward and took him in his arms.

"Tell me again—is she well? Is all well with her?"

"Yes—her face turned to us. And now arise and break your fast, my son, for you are worn dark and dry from much fasting. I have brought you milk and fresh fruit, such as the desert does not furnish."

Straight north they travelled until noon was high. The white dromedary had an escort of eight camels, including Romney's pair, and some twenty desert horsemen. They were entirely off travel lines, and Romney realised that the way was kept closed to commerce between Nadiram and Wampli by the desert-parties, chiefly to protect this northern way to the country of Rajananda.... In the afternoon they followed for two hours the path of an ancient river-bed, and entered, when the shadows gathered, a land of rocky hills—the beasts quickened their pace under the scent of water.... At sunset, by a spring, Romney's camel kneeled. The escort vanished. Bamban unfolded fresh white clothing. Romney was granted the luxury of a bath.

Ahead was verdure and a temple. It was low, and there was a walled garden to the side, the green foliage hanging over the stones.... Beyond was a village that looked as if it had been born again from a ruin. It was strange as a dream—cattle feeding peacefully in the dip of land between the temple and the town. Night was creeping in.

Even Bamban had vanished. There was silence. Romney emerged from the sheltering leaves of the spring, his eyes fixed upon the temple.... There was a voice:

"Ah, do not keep me longer from him!"

... A strange altering of time and space—a wavering brightness in the dusk—a woman's figure in the gateway of the garden wall.

"My man! My man!"

She was running to him, her arms held forward. His own limbs stumbled, for the full power of his life went from him to her breast.... They were alone.... They entered the garden of the temple together.... Her arms did not leave him, yet they were about his knees, and words came to him leaning forward:

"... Remember—that night as we journeyed forward by swiftest camels—the risen star in our eyes—the quest in our hearts?"

Romney caught her up in his arms and stilled her whispering lips against his own.

THE END.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAST DITCH ***

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