

first night in Barang. Her cot had been placed in a big, bare room. Through the torn roof she could see a lone star. There was rice stored in the corner of the room, and giant rats thundered over the loose planking, squealed and fought, while outside in the scum of the ditches the beasts of humidity shrilled in rasping clamour. Then the arising in the morning, weary to death, shrinking in fear at the thought of the first survey, in the inexorable sunlight, of the place which was to be her abode for twelve long months at least; and that first look—the wide, grass-dishevelled plaza, with the carabao wallowing in the mud-holes, the ponies dying of sura at their pickets, the leprous-walled, crumbling church across, the thousand leaning, rotting nipa shacks, the misty mountains streaming in the east.

Afterwards she had had a pleasant surprise. A house had been engaged for her, the Presidente announced, by Don Francisco. She went right away to view it. It stood facing the plaza, pointed-roofed, post-elevated, between shimmering banana palms, a new nipa hut, clean and strong. The ground beneath was white with powdered lime, a reassuring carbolic odour hovered about, and she was pleased by the chance for picturesque decoration offered by the rich, nut-brown nipa of the interior. But while she stood in the centre of the sala, planning, a muchacho in immaculate camisa stood before her. "Don Francisco has sent me to you; I am to be your servant," he said in the precise English of one carefully instructed. He proved a treasure, that boy. Then pieces of furniture began to arrive, one by one. She did not understand at first, but the owners, salaaming behind their sweating cargadores, explained that they were to be hers during her stay. She offered money; they refused. Don Francisco had asked them to do this; they were always glad to obey Don Francisco.

This was the third time in as many minutes that she had heard that name. When she was alone with Vincente, the new muchacho, she asked: "Who is your master?"

"You are to be my master," he answered in the tone of one who knows well his lesson.

"But who was your master? Who sent you?"

"Don Francisco," he said.

"But who is Don Francisco?"

"Don Francisco, the Maestro," he answered, evidently astonished at her obtuse ignorance.

But she divined now, and her cheeks flushed. It was the Maestro of Cantalacan. Parker had introduced him as Mr Tillman. "Don Francisco" was much better, she reflected.

She had set briskly to work in her installation. She accepted a few pieces of the proffered furniture—quaint, old, hand-carved things of incredibly heavy woods; she performed wonders with boxes and chintz; Isio mats enlivened the meerschaum of walls and ceiling; the new pictures and flags left from her college days were hung; red narra boards tied with golden abaca along the walls made a place for her books; a big, square, severe table, with her blotter pads, inkstands, pens, and pencils upon it took an aspect inviting of studious hours. But when she rested and looked about her for the subtle feeling of cosiness and warmth which usually follows such toil, as it must to the birds having built their nest, she found with consternation that it was not there—the feeling of intimacy, of home, was not there. She changed the petates, she moved the pictures, she hung orchids at the windows, arranged a panoply of native hats and spears over the door rfringed the grass-cloth portieres. But it was useless. The feeling would not come. And she realised that it would never come; that all these efforts were puerilities before the great crushing assertion of the land—the grass dishevelled plaza, the ruined church, glistening in the white sun, the palms, the steaming mountain, the brown populations: that before this tranquil, brooding, all-powerful Presence, all her little defences of art and adornment shrivelled, dried into dust as cardboard toys in a furnace. It was like hiding behind leaves from God.

She turned to her work with enfevered zeal. She found a tumble-down nipa shed where some twenty half-naked, half-straved, miserable little beings, herded every morning by the municipal police, squatted beneath the stick of a slovenly, dull-eyed man, with a gibberish of English—the native teacher appointed temporarily by the military govern-

ment. The school supplies had not come yet; there were no charts, no books, no slates, no paper, no pencils. The children sat on the damp earth, crushed and apathetic.

"Well, I can at least love them," she said to herself.

It was easy for her to love children. She loved everything that was sunlit—babies, kittens, puppies, birds, and flowers (the latter she called "baby-flowers" when they were satisfyingly little). She taught the children trifles that did not count much; but beneath the tenderness of her presence these starved plants began to put forth blossoms. The dark eyes opened in wonder, softened in reverence. One day one of the little girls took her hand going home from school; and after that she was always followed by a dozen demure little maids who took her hand a few steps in turn. She taught the class a song, and since there was not much to do, with the dearth of what was needed, they often sang in their low, plaintive notes, their eyes fixed upon her in mute adoration.

They called her Mathilda, and she thought it very sweet.

But still the Presence weighed upon her with its crushing, tranquil malevolence, its external signs the sun, white and glastly, the mountains, steaming in mustiness, the fronds of palms, heavy, motionless, metallic. She felt the weight of it as of some physical thing there upon her breast; beneath it her sleep grew torpid, her gestures languid, her eyelids drooped heavy upon the unfading blue beneath.

This day the obsession had been more poignant than ever. For in the morning she had found the school-house deserted. The cosecha had begun, and the children had all wandered off early to a big hacienda ten miles off to pick rice. The hours had dragged, long as death, empty as Infinity. And now she leaned, a little limply, at her window, between the dark behind and the dark before. "Cheer up," she chirped valiantly, but her heart would not answer.

Then, far down the road, consoling, familiar, she heard the soft pitapat of hoofs. The sound neared, swelled, drummed in a crescendo that seemed to beat in her heart. Detaching itself suddenly from the shadow, as if of its impalpable substance, there appeared the vague form of a man in the saddle, plant-waisted, broad-shouldered. A singular panic possessed her; she drew aside behind the wall and peered, her hands upon her breast. With a rattle of stone and a spark the horse stopped there in the darkness in front. The shadowy rider seemed to turn in the saddle; she felt his eyes scrutinising the darkened facade, the lightless windows. She panted. The horse champed resoundingly; her lips parted as if to speak.

Then, very distinct in the silence, she heard the decided whirr of a quirt. The form in the saddle bent forward; the horse rose in a jump. For a second the shadow of horse and man rose and fell, then it plunged into the darkness of which it seemed a part. The drumming of hoofs sounded down the road, farther, fainter, became a mere vibration, ceased.

But she stood there listening long after the sound had died. And when she moved off toward her little cot, it was very wearily, and upon it she collapsed very suddenly.

She knew what was the matter with her now. She was lonely; God, how lonely!

III

And thus as a shadow, fitting, mysterious, almost incorporeal, she was to know him for a long time. It might be during the day, at school; her eyes, straying out of the open door saw him cross the plaza to the rapid pace of his bay pony, erect beneath the leaden downpour of heat, his sombrero firm down upon his eyes, his waist giving pliantly to the swing of the saddle. He slid off with what seemed to her singular speed, like a being unreal, elusive, legendary; he was across the plaza ere her eyes were fairly fixed upon him, was disappearing along the palm-lined road into the wilderness, into the bosom of the mountain seeming to await him, dark, brooding, inscrutable. And when the red dot of the saddle blanket had lost itself in the venomous green of the distance, she would turn, a little listlessly, to her class.

"Come, children, we will sing," she would say.

And they sang, in their low, weird

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