When "Lof" Comes

I REMEMBER the lush softness of the grass under my bare legs, and the marvelous radiance of the golden stars peeping at me through the quivering leaves of the mimosa tree under which I was stretched. Through the velvet stillness of a tropical summer's night I heard the low rumble of the old consul's voice, as he talked reminiscences with my father on the wide, low veranda of the bungalow near by. Now and again I caught chance words of some experience through which the old man passed in his long years in the East, and sometimes his full laugh boomed out, reinforced by my father's quick chuckle of amusement. Occasionally the noiseless Chinese waiter, clad in his long, bluegrass-cloth gown, stepped gracefully about, as he brought fresh ices and cigars. I can feel on my face now that peculiar softness of the atmosphere that belongs only to a June night in the East—the scarcely stirring breeze; the delicate scent of blooming flowers and grasses, and now and again the dull, musical clang of the great temple bell, half a mile away, lingering upon the night air in long, mournful echoes.

I was a youngster then of twelve or so, my head full of dreams and romances, and my soul full of the mysticism of the East where I had been born and bred. I remember that night that my head was full of some marvelous romance, as I lay there flat on my back, gazing up into the wonderful royal blue of the dusky sky—a romance about a fair lady and a castle and the inevitable prince. Suddenly the face of my old Chinese amah appeared at the door.

"Bath allee leady, time sleepy-by," she announced.

"O Daddy!" I begged breathlessly, "I'm just waiting for the prince to come, and he's riding as fast as he can—please let me stay a little while longer, Daddy!"

The light fell full on my father's profile as he turned to the nurse with an amused smile.

"Come back in half an hour, amah," he said, and she disappeared.

The prince approached, but, someway, I must have dropped half asleep, for almost in a dream I heard the consul's deep voice ring out:

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"No romance in the East? Don't you believe it, sir! I've seen as pathetic a love story happen right here in Yieu-chow as could happen back in old U. S.!"

Romance! Love story! My dreams vanished suddenly, and I sat up at the magic words. There was a moment's silence as the old man shook the ash from his cigar. I waited patiently, leaning against the mimosa tree.

"Yes," he continued reflectively, "I reckon people can love over here as well as anywhere. Customs they have, to be sure, iron bound and immovable, but their hearts are underneath still. I used to think these yellow men and women hadn't any hearts—couldn't imagine their slant eyes showing feeling, somehow—but, Lord! I got over that fifteen years ago—tell you how it happened." He puffed slowly at his cigar for a few minutes, then continued:

"It was that year of the massacre at Sieuchow—you remember that horrible business—and I was having the dickens of a time fixing up the matter with the viceroy—one of these ceremonious old liars, you know—and the confounded way I have of brushing straight into things didn't suit him. Well, I had a fine secretary that year, named Wu, a nice, straight, young heathen whom I'd gotten out of a school in Shanghai. He helped me out—you remember all that, don't you?"

My father nodded, gazing dreamily out into the starlight.

The old consul continued:

"I liked the chap—never had caught him lying or anything, you know, and that's pretty unusual for these Chinese beggars,—but I never thought of him as anything but a sort of a machine. I never thought of his having a heart or soul or anything like that—thought he was like the rest of these Chinese, sort of cold and calm and fishy.

"Well, sir, one day I happened to surprise Wu alone in the office, and he was sitting there at the desk, his head in his arms, and when he started up at my coming, there were tears in his eyes. I was surprised, but said nothing, and later forgot all about the thing. He was sort of down-in-the-mouth, I noticed, but I was too busy just then to think about a little thing like that.

"One night I left my account book on the desk and went back late to put it away. As I approached the door I thought I heard the sound of voices in the office, very low, but still distinct. I walked in. The room was dark;

there was a slight scurry, and then the light went on. Wu was standing there alone, red, but still imperturbable. I was surprised, to say the least.

"'Well,' I said, sharply enough, 'what are you up to? Who's in here?'

"I was provoked, because I had been boasting to the consul-general that very day about Wu, and it was disappointing to find that he was in mischief just like any other heathen.

"He flushed again, and then answered in his precise, half-broken English:

"'Master, do not fear; I am accomplish nothing wrong.'

"'Who the mischief was in here?' I demanded.

"Wu started to leave, but I grabbed him, sure now that I had caught him in some thievery. He called out a few words hastily in Chinese, and, reaching for the switch, turned out the light. Before I could get it on I heard a quick rustle, the patter of feet, and then quiet. When the light came on again Wu was master of himself, and I could not get a word out of him. Finally, out of patience, I warned him that he would be discharged if I caught him in any such predicament again.

"When I got home, however, the more I thought about it the queerer it seemed, until finally I determined to go back to the office and see if anything was missing, or at least question Wu again. You know these Chinese beggars—you can never trust them far.

"Well, I went back and saw the light shining through the transom. I approached the door quietly, listened a minute, and heard again the soft murmur of voices. I threw the door open and rushed in. I saw Wu, and by him stood a girl!"

My father uttered a quick exclamation, and my bare toes curled with the sense of a delightful mystery. Bred in Eastern ways, I knew the unusualness of a girl even speaking to a man. Romance, indeed, this was; my poor prince seemed quite threadbare beside it.

"Yes, a girl," repeated the old consul impressively. "She screamed faintly, then went quite white under the usual paint and powder of a well-bred Chinese lady. Instead of fainting, however, she straightened up bravely and edged closer to Wu. I was speechless with amazement. Finally I found my voice.

"'Wu,' I demanded, 'what in the dickens does this mean?'



"Wu stood motionless for an instant, evidently deciding what to do. Then, throwing back his head, his face crimson, he said:

"'I am wa't you call lof this lady.'

"And she, the little piece of daring, slipped her fingers into his, and said in a soft, little voice with a pretty, broken accent:

"'An' also I lof 'im.'

"Well, you can imagine *me*, Sotherland; I was absolutely at a loss. I knew how unconventional the whole scene was. You know the wretched customs they have over here—the young people never seeing each other, and everything arranged by the parents, and all that. Why, it is the ruination of a girl to even look at a man, much less speak to him, and here was this ridiculous pair going on like a couple of twentieth century lovers in old U. S. A. I was aghast.

"'See here, Wu,' I exclaimed hurriedly, 'you can't do this sort of thing, you know; it will ruin the girl's name, and, besides, it's all wrong——'

"'We do not care,' interrupted Wu firmly, 'we lof!'

"'We do not care; we lof,' echoed the little girl, looking up at Wu blissfully.

"Well, sir, if you want to know, I'll be switched if my throat didn't ache a bit, and I thought of myself when I was a young fool like that. Still, I knew something had to be done, and so I cleared my throat and started on her.

"'See here, you know, my dear——'

"And then Wu said something to her in a low voice, and she smiled happily, a perfect child-smile, and pattered away on her absurd little feet. Wu never took his eyes off her until the door shut; then he stood respectfully before me as I sank dumfounded into a chair, waiting for the explanation of the matter. He cleared his throat several times, then said huskily:

"'Master, it is no other way. I am engage by my father to one very ugly lady. I no lof this lady——' here he stopped.

"I waited. Bit by bit he told me the story. It seems his parents had engaged him to a widow, considerably his senior, whom he did not wish to marry. Of course *his* wishes had nothing to do with it. He didn't refuse to obey his parents—you know how filial duty is ingrained in these people through generations of training and sentiment, Sotherland. But one day

in the street a lady's sedan chair passed, and he glanced up at it. Just at that moment the inmate lifted the curtain and he saw the face of the Tao-tai's daughter. Well, to use his words, he instantly 'had the lof in his heart,' and she reciprocated. Of course conventions forbade them speaking or even looking at each other, but he followed her to the *yamen* gate, and some way whispered a word to her as she passed. She had been to a mission school and could read and write. In some unheard-of way they actually corresponded. It seems she was betrothed to an official, whom of course she loathed, and all that. Finally they arranged a meeting place, and chose my office as the safest place. Mad? Maddest thing I ever heard of, but they were both absolutely insane.

"Well, the upshot of it all was, they were arranging to run away to Japan, and since, of course, they could get no one to marry them so irregularly, they were going to take fate in their hands and masquerade as man and wife, when I appeared. Lucky thing it was no one else—they'd have been socially ruined forever!"

The consul was still for a minute or two. I leaned forward, breathless with interest, dreading lest my amah would appear before the tale was told.

"And then?" asked my father.

"Well, then," answered the old consul slowly, "well, then, Sotherland, I didn't know what to do. But I got to thinking, and in the face of all the traditions and conventions of the past I advised Wu to stop. You know it's not like the West—here the past hangs on to the present like an old man at sea. Wu would never have been safe or respected in his own country, and as for the girl, she would have been a social outcast.

"Of course I told him all this, but he stood fast for a long time—until I told him she would be an outcast. Sotherland, he broke down at that—great, hard sobs. I flung my arm over his shoulder as if he had been my own brother. Then, after while, he looked up, the tears wet on his cheeks.

" 'You t'ink,' he asked slowly, 'you t'ink I lof her more if I do not take her?'

"Sotherland, if he could have married her I might have told him differently, but you know, some way, how respect depends on things like that, and love depends on respect, and—well, I *knew*, and for the sake of the pretty doll face of that innocent little woman and her child-soul, I answered:

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"'Yes, I think you'd love her more if you didn't take her.'"

It was very still on the old compound. The deep-toned temple bell sounded its one, long, reverberating stroke. The moon had come up full, soft and silver. The rising night wind lifted the hair from my temples and rustled the leaves of the mimosa trees faintly. Up on the veranda I could see two tiny lights where the men's cigars burned. I climbed slowly up the stone steps to the veranda, my heart full of dreams.

"Good night, Daddy and Uncle Jim," I said softly.

But neither answered. I lingered at the door a moment, hoping to hear the end.

"And then?" my father asked quietly.

"Then?"—the old consul started. "Oh, then—well, the boy married the widow and the girl married the official, and it was all very proper. Only he has rather gone to the bad, I am afraid—smokes opium horribly, you know. The girl died of black cholera a year or two ago."

He walked to the edge of the veranda and stood there an instant looking at the stars.

"Do you know, Sotherland," he said abruptly, turning to face my father, "if I had it to do over again I'd have said, 'Hang the conventions! If it's *"lof"* go on to Japan!'"

PEARL SYDENSTRICKER.

