LOVE-BIRDS IN THE COCO-NUTS

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CHAPTER I

LOLINA, want to write a novel, an irresistible, fascinating novel, a novel for readers old and young. I should like to win the approbation of your archdeacons, of your actor-managers. I want my photograph to be exhibited in your shop windows, and a place for me reserved in your Westminster Abbey. I want, in short, to write a novel that will make me famous among you. But several are the obstacles.

For one, not the plot. I have a story to tell, a true story, a story that may bring tears to many an eye. It may also call forth blushes—the story, not the telling of it. If it does I shall be sorry. Can I—little acquainted with the manners and thoughts of English ladies—hope to avoid blundering into the region of the better left unsaid? The boundaries of that region are invisible to the untrained eye of an Eastern woman. I can only tell the truth and hope for the best. But if I tell the truth I shame the devil, so your proverb says. So difficult is the path of the novelist, it seems to me. I feel like a maiden standing shivering on the
steps of a bathing-machine with all the ocean in front of her.

I will be brave.

At Sudora there are no bathing-machines. Farther down stream, where the big, smooth river makes a final bend and sweeps in the grand manner out to sea, bearing on its bosom trunks of palms, nipa husks, torn branches, brown leaves of giant ferns, the debris of forests, on a ribbon of silver sand which the warm clear water laves but never lashes, there certainly is an old bathing pagar. Beside this Europeans are wont to picnic on Saturday afternoons, revelling half-naked in the sea air, the sun and the sand, beating up snipe and plover on the flats, drinking the milk of green coco-nuts obtained from the grove of palms close at hand, where brown-skinned Malay fishermen and their none too timid spouses dwell in huts of yellow reed under the shade, and extend to all a generous hospitality.

But the port of Sudora itself knows nothing of such amenities. It is a place dedicated to the great god Work. Mangrove swamps border the immense lagoon on whose edge it lies. A flat and rather uninteresting country is spread out at the back, a country made for the spade, where planters plant, and miners mine, and tin and rubber and gambier and coffee flow like milk and honey down to the water to be shipped.

Sudora is the port of shipment. That fact explains its existence and also perhaps its ugliness. For it is ugly. There it lies, a scar on the face of nature, an honourable scar perhaps, earned in the battles of civilisation, but a scar, nevertheless. And the jungle
hates it. The jungle daily, ceaselessly, strives to envelop and efface it, sending hosts of matted creepers crawling towards the houses, hordes of white ants tunnelling underground, fleets of submarines in the shape of teredos to undermine and weaken the timber jetties. But so far these efforts have been unavailing. Sudora stands erect, its yellow embankments garnished, its red painted iron godowns smiling hideously on river and on railway station, like the face of the good Queen Bess, arousing respect but not desire. Although no longer young as age goes in a new country the town looks new as ever. Like many of us, it has spread with the passing years. The jungle, far from conquering, has been beaten back, in some places for miles. And at these points have sprung up suburbs where the turf is orderly and trees and palms form bowers, wherein are established certain quiet places of entertainment, at which the youth of the district are wont to assemble of an evening in order to play billiards or listen to the gramophone under the light of the yellow moon.

And when I write "youths" I do not mean the red-haired, pale-eyed strangers who flock to my country to seek wealth, but rather the young Eurasians born in the place, whose dark brows, raven hair, pallid, dusky complexions and slight but interesting figures must ever win a certain interest from the traveller who wanders thither.

Ferdinand Fernandez! What a name! Lovers' blushes, Spanish castles, mantillas, elopements, duellos, cathedrals, united for ever, O my Ferdinand! Does he know how close to romance his name brings one? It seemed not that afternoon, at any rate. "You
may wager your tall hats on thatt," he called out to those in the rickety little bungalow in answer to some remark or other, stopping at the palm-sheltered garden gate and waving his topee. He could not see those within: a huge purple bougainvillea hid the veranda. But their eyes were on him and he seemed to know it.

"Dear Ferdinand," murmured Amy to her mother, putting aside a branch with a plump yellow hand in order the better to observe him. "How his teeth glitter in the sunshine. I hope he won't stay out for tea."

"You will be in to tea, won't you, Ferdinand?" cried Mrs. Fernandez in a voice which, although shrill, accorded well enough with her comfortable person.

"You may wager your tall hats on thatt also," he replied gaily with a last flourish of his topee.

"What funny remarks Ferdinand makes now sometimes," observed the girl, still staring out towards the gate.

"He learns every day from his European friends," returned the mother complacently. "I hope, though, his progress in English language will not make him proud."

They watched him mount his bicycle and glide off down the road.

Business called him to town every afternoon except when there was work in the surrounding countryside to be attended to, an event that occurred but seldom, for the plantations were in the habit of undertaking their own building operations, and Fernandez & Co., Contractors, relied principally on odd jobs given them by the Government in the town for support.
Mr. Fernandez, senior, was the firm, Ferdinand its right-hand man. Youth as yet prevented him from being eligible for a partnership, in the firm's opinion; but not in Ferdinand's, so his friends gathered. Ferdinand believed, it seemed, in young blood, in up-to-dateness, in discarding the slow, casual methods of the Portuguese half-caste and adopting something a little more American. But Mr. Fernandez, senior, like many other old men, like most old trees, was firmly rooted, difficult to budge, refusing altogether to grow. He would not, for instance, move his office from over that Chinese general store in the main street. Ferdinand did indeed manage to get a large brass doorplate put up, similar to those used, so he had heard, by contractors in the Strand, London. But, on the first day after erection, the dazzle and novelty of the thing had caused a pair of Government bullocks to lose their customary calm, and dash along with the lorry they were drawing, headlong into a shop opposite. And, in consequence, the old man insisted on having the plate taken down, in spite of the fact that the firm obtained the contract for the repair of the damaged shops.

It must have been galling to a youth of Ferdinand's temperament to be yoked to such unprogressiveness, but to give him credit he seldom showed the world his impatience. A flash of his dark eyes now and then, a faintly sarcastic smile often visible as he looked at the older man, a chance word, meaningless to those not well versed in his affairs, these alone pointed to an inward chafing.

It was not, so his friends understood, that he wanted
the business to expand, that he wanted more work, in short, but rather that he wished to see the firm and the Fernandez family occupy a higher plane in Sudora, that he wanted them to follow him in his flight towards things European. Work! There was always enough of that to keep him busy going round on a bicycle, to tie the old man for a goodly portion of the day to the large drawing-board which, flanked by formidable T-squares, level, rule, and compasses, occupied a place of honour in the office. Work!

Sometimes the old gentleman himself would complain of being tied, declaring a wish to spend the day at the Grotto—that was the name of their bungalow—in slippered ease. But Mrs. Fernandez, who believed in employment for men, and who possessed an all-compelling tongue, would always drive him forth, nevertheless, after breakfast into the blinding sunshine. She must have known that the habit of work in an Eurasian is easily broken, and taken her measures very early. At any rate the old gentleman held a reputation for steadiness and industry unique among the Eurasians of Sudora. He was, too, a religious man at bottom, though he swore sometimes after the manner of the Portuguese, which is not a bit English. He dressed neatly in threadbare but scrupulously clean white duck; and he wore glasses on a nose that might have been Don Quixote's. Ferdinand considered that he was rather too friendly with Si Hock, the Chinese shopkeeper underneath, their landlord. But then Ferdinand did not like Chinese shopkeepers, who seemed always to look through him or past him with their sluggish, penetrating eyes, and smile.
Si Hock, standing at the colonnaded shop front, just out of reach of the hot sunlight, was smiling now as it might have been at the white, dusty street. The sound of a person engaged in an annoyed soliloquy proceeded from the window above, a sound perfectly audible to the entire neighbourhood. Ferdinand, looking shocked, drew up by the curb, that is, on the other side of the large cemented drain that skirts the pathway, a drain into which all the Chinese shopkeepers are accustomed to throw garbage in spite of the warning of the sanitary authorities, stood his bicycle against a brick column, and with a curt nod passed into the shop.

He ran upstairs. "Father!" he said in a pained voice.

"I've lost my glasses," explained Mr. Fernandez, who, with head bent, was walking about the little office. "Everywhere have I looked." He certainly seemed to have. Paper, books, and instruments strewed the boarded floor, flotsam after a gale. "Where in the name of the apostles I——" began Mr. Fernandez again, mopping his forehead in excitement.

Ferdinand surveying him, smiling faintly, did not let him proceed.

"Keep your hair on, father," he advised, interrupting. "Let me see what I can do for you." And he too, gingerly because of the dust, joined in the search.

"I put them on the drawing-board half an hour ago," muttered the old man.

"Perhaps the rats have eaten them," said Ferdinand
rather testily. A hot place this office, calling forth perspiration! And he had on a clean white suit.

Presently he straightened himself, and going to one of the windows unlatched and pushed open the rough plank shutter that covered it. Sunlight at once flooded the room.

"We shall see better now," he remarked, blinking. But though the cloistered gloom in which the old gentleman delighted to work was now gone, though every little defect in the office from insect-bored rafters to mouldering floor now stood out, looking brazen and horrible, the search was as fruitless as ever.

"What shall we do?" asked Ferdinand. "I can't stay here all night. I have my engagements. Great Scott and Dickens! Let us leave the glasses! Tomorrow we will search again."

"But I must get them to-day," returned the old man. "I have a letter to read."

"I can read that for you, father," pointed out Ferdinand. But this letter seemed to have been mislaid too, and for quite another minute the old man was busy again. Presently he rescued it from a heap of papers on the floor and handed it to Ferdinand.

"It is from Mr. Pawker at the rubber estate, about this new contract, I think," he remarked. "That is why I was so angry. I wanted to see what was in it, quick. And my glasses had disappeared."

"He says he has almost decided to give the contract," said Ferdinand, reading. "And will let you know for certain by hand messenger before six o'clock to-night. This, I perceive, father, from the stamp on the envelope, came by the post."
"You are quite right."

"This will be a long way out at the estate, this work, if we get it," murmured Ferdinand, a shade despondently, perhaps.

"You have your bicycle."

"That is true, father. But my legs have to shove it, and the days are warm ones. I get to feel rag-like after too much bicycle."

"You know our Government work is falling off," pointed out Mr. Fernandez. "We must do some business for our coolies. This new magistrate, Mr. Baylers, seems to be against giving work to contractors. He wants the Government men to do it all themselves. They are all grumbling, I hear. But it always is the same with these magistrates. A new broom makes a clean sweep!"

"I heard somebody call this Mr. Baylers a dirty sweep," said Ferdinand moodily, fingering his downy upper lip. "That was the chief clerk. The chief clerk does not like him. He says he is always shouting and bullying at the office, trying to make people work."

"Then he will be very unpopular with the community here," prophesied Mr. Fernandez, beginning to straighten up the office again.

Ferdinand did not offer to assist in the task, but stood rubbing one foot to and fro over the dusty floor. After a while he yawned and announced that he had engagements elsewhere.

"You will come back here before six o'clock to arrange for the work of this new contract at Mr. Pawker's?" urged the old gentleman. "I know he wants the work begun without delay."