

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

De Long's Wife

By LINCOLN COLCORD



WIFE

ONE of the most interesting men I ever met in the East was De Long of Old Anter," said Nichols. "Our acquaintance was peculiar, and with my usual luck for finding things through a friend after the destruction of Old Anter, I ran across the woman who had been his wife, and heard the ending of his story. It was in keeping with his life. Let me tell you about it. It won't take long."

"The first time I saw De Long was when I came out East a boy in the ship *Rainbow*," Nichols began. "We anchored at Anter for mail and fresh provisions, and I was boy man in the boat that took the captain ashore.

"It was years afterward that I really made the acquaintance of De Long. I'd been on a dozen Eastern voyages then, and had worked up to a ship of my own; but for some reason or other I'd never run across him.

"When we reached the little creek, my mind went back to my first voyage out East, and I found myself looking ahead for that big banyan tree. I remembered it all; and so I wasn't surprised to be greeted by a little fat man whom I recognized as De Long.

"I sat down with him, and after a while I told him all of my adventures, and he listened with interest. Then he turned to me and said: 'I am your Captain. That's good. He is a rascal, a scoundrel. Come with me, Captain,' he whined. 'I will treat you well.'

"It was easy to talk to him about personal matters; he was the sort of man you could say anything to. He'd answer you quite frankly and volubly, and then watch you to see if you believed him. In about five minutes I began to doubt everything he said. 'You're lying like the devil,' I told him after a while.

"He grinned, as if that was the basis he wanted to establish. 'We all lie,' he answered in a cynical tone of voice. 'Whenever a mouth is opened, a lie is on the tongue.' Then he turned to me and said a very illuminating thing. 'If I lie, I also believe it. You believe it good, and you do not always lie. We reach the same result.'

"I looked at him again, and wondered how deep he really was. 'But that spoils the world,' I finally said.

"While we were talking, two people came out of the shadow of the huge banyan and approached the house at our familiar ground. I saw that they were a white man and a Eurasian woman. She seemed to be young and beautiful in a quiet, half-native and half-civilized dress. I waited to see what was up, and in the silence heard De Long swearing to himself behind me. They came toward the little veranda where we were sitting, and I turned in time to see De Long get up with a movement of irritation.

"This is my wife, Captain Nichols," he said, when they had reached the steps. "My wife has been waiting with Captain Dodge. The woman smiled, holding me with her eyes. I was completely taken by surprise."

"Your wife? I questioned.

"De Long nodded. 'Why not?' he answered. 'You think she is my daughter? Captain Dodge knows.'

"You are an old fool," she cried, suddenly, at De Long. "Some day you will make me mad."

"The captain, standing on the steps, became red-faced and sullen, playing with his watch-chain. I suppose you're in the ship that came in this afternoon," he said to me.

"I nodded. 'If that's your bark in the woods, Sirs, it's a beauty,' I answered.

"'Yes,' he said, evidently pleased. 'Back to work. She sails like a witch. Won't you come to supper with me?'

"No thank you," I snapped. I'd made a violent dislike to the man. He was soft and gross, and his eyes watered.

"Well, then, I'll be moving," he said, coolly, De Long. Good-bye, Misses."

"She had turned away with a sense of my action. Woman-like, she'd taken the opposite stairs to the left.

"'Take no notice, Captain,' he stammered, as he cried after her. "I am your Captain. I'll be back."

"That scared De Long; he saw his last chance to take no notice. Captain," he stammered again. "All I am is no hard feeling. Call and see me as soon as we will ready the chickens of which we are so fond. He followed the man down the steps, and I was left alone with the woman.

"She was laughing like a child. 'Good-bye, Sirs,' she cried with a smile. "I'll be back to you."

"Nichols paused, and suddenly laughed.

"De Long had returned, white as the morning light," he said. "He was standing on the steps, and watching us with a singularly ferocious expression.

"'Look here, De Long,' I said. 'There's something mighty wrong, or you are a bad man. You know you know.'

"He surprised me by flying down the stairs. "I am in passion. Don't ask me! Don't say anything! I don't know anything," he cried. "I do not care! I do not care!"

"'Yes,' I said, but you don't care," I thought. "You're making life miserable for me, and more than that. You're mising me, and out of foundation."

"'Foundation? Foundation?' he responded. "What do you want? Watch when she looks at you! Watch then at me! It is plain—'

"'Wait!' I interrupted. "You can't make me do this."

"I was but speaking in a phrase! De Long had seen me."

"It was hard on the woman, who never once looked at it. She seemed sweet, but I could see that such qualities couldn't last long in that atmosphere."

"She came out to gather some fruit, and I watched the moon rise over the trees of the forest, and everything was so fragrant and peaceful that it seemed impossible in that land."

"I knew that she was looking at me, but I did not see her. Now and then I caught the gleam of her face, now under the darkness of her hair, now in the light of the moon. I had another insight into the man. I think I now

marked that he ought to be well off—his prices were high enough, Heaven knew!"

"'Mc?' he inquired, searching for time. Then he decided to be frank. "Captain," he confided, "I haven't fortune?"

The woman laughed in a low voice at his side.

"Show it to the captain," she said.

"De Long got up and came over beside my chair. He was fumbling at the buttons on the front of his coat.

"'Feel here—here,' he said. He unbuttoned his waistcoat and guided my hand along the lining. I felt bumps—some heavy substance. What is it?' I asked.

"'Gold,' he said. "Feel here."

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