

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

De Long's

By LINCOLN COLCORD



WIFE

ONE of the most interesting men I ever met in the East was De Long of Old Anjer. He was a Dutchman, but his manner was peculiar, and with my usual luck for seeing things through, a year after the destruction of Old Anjer 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 *Reinhout*. Nichols began. We anchored at Anjer for mail and fresh provisions, and I was bow 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 recollected as De Long. 'Come with me,' he said, 'grabbing one of my hands in both of his. 'Listen to me, Captain. That Dutch is no good. He is a rascal, a robber! Come with me, Captain. 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 wait 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 casual tone of voice. 'Whenever a mouth is open, a lie is on the tongue.' Then he turned to me and said a very illuminating thing. 'If I lie, I also believe nothing,' he announced. 'You believe a good deal, 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 as if on familiar ground. I saw that they were a white man and a girl, an Eurasian woman. She seemed to be young and beautiful, in a quiet half-native and half-European dress. I wanted 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 walking 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!'

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

"I nodded. 'If that's your bark, it's a beauty. It's a beauty,' I answered.

"Yes, he said, evidently pleased. 'But a witch. She talks like a witch. Wouldn't you like to supper with me?'

"No thank you, I snapped. 'I'd like a steady dislike to the man. He was so fat and sullen, and his eyes watered.

"Well, then, I'll be moving,' he said. 'Goodbye, De Long. Goodbye, Missus.'

"She had turned away with a gesture of irritation. Woman-like, she'd taken the opposite tack to De Long's. 'You make trouble. No, I'm going home.'

"That scared De Long,' he said. 'He said, 'Take no notice, Captain. He's almost blind. There is no hard feeling. Call and see us soon. We'll have ready the chickens and the wine. He followed the man down the steps, and I was alone with the woman.

"She was laughing like a child. 'Don't you cry softly. Now she turned and walked away, my presence for the first time. Her eyes were over me and finally rested on my face. 'You're a minutes we gazed at each other. 'You're a dangerous business, this crying,' she said. 'You seemed to gather and leap in the air. 'You're a man, and I watched it, fascinated. Suddenly she took her hand and took a step in my direction. 'You stay?' she asked, a little breathless.

Nichols paused, and suddenly looked at De Long. 'He was standing on the steps, and watching us with a singularly steady and unobtrusive expression.

"Look here, De Long,' I said. 'This is a thing in a mighty wrong, or you are a big fool. What do you know?'

"He surprised me by flying into a passion. 'Don't ask me! Don't ask me! I don't know anything! I don't know anything! I don't know anything!'

"Yes, I said, but you don't know anything. I thought, 'You're making the mistake of a man, and more than that. You're mistaking her with out foundation.'

"Foundation? Foundation? he repeated. 'What do you want? Watch when she looks at you, and then at me. It is plain.'

"Wait,' I interrupted. 'You can make me of this.'

"I was but speaking in a phrase, he said. 'I have seen it. It was hard on the woman, but she was a look at it. She seemed sweet, but she was a But such qualities couldn't last long in that atmosphere.

marked that he ought to be well off. His prices were high enough, Heaven knows.

"Me? he inquired, scowling for a time. Then he decided to be frank. 'Captain, he said, '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'd 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.'

"It touched a leather pocket sewed into his vest. 'Diamonds?' he whispered. 'I couldn't believe him for a minute. 'Diamonds?' I exclaimed.

"Heavens!" I marveled. 'I should think you'd die in this hot weather, lying that around. Why don't you put it in a bank?'

"He shot a glance at me out of his cunning, secret eyes. 'Too many banks have I seen break,' he said, waving his hands with a gesture expressing dis-solution. 'No! I will my own bank!'

"The woman on the floor laughed again, a childish laugh of mere animal amusement. 'He sleeps with it,' she said.

"Quite a number of years passed before the opportunity of seeing them again came my way, but when I did finally reach Old Anjer for another visit, it was as if the world hadn't moved while I'd been gone. De Long met me at the landing and ushered me through the aisles of the banyan to his house. He didn't seem any older; the banyan had always been so tremendous that if it had grown it was impossible to mark it; and when we reached the house, the woman stood on the veranda, as young and pretty as I remembered her. She greeted me in a disinterested manner, the coolness of it struck me at once.

"The woman, as I said, was indifferent. Not that I wanted it otherwise, but in my heart I suppose that I was a little pleased at her attitude. I imagined that she scorned me. You see, I'd rather disappointed her once before. No doubt she thought me foolish, or perhaps she didn't think of me at all. It hurts to be passed over by a woman.

"After supper we sat on the same little veranda and blew smoke into the silent night. The woman didn't come out as she had done the time before, and finally I asked De Long where she was. He struck the veranda railing with his clenched fist and swore.

"How do I know?" he cried. 'She went toward the shore. His words brought back the past; it seemed incredible that the old smoking of herbs had been going on in that solitude.

"I made a feeble effort to switch him off to some other topic. 'Is Shute still in the business over there?' I asked, nodding my head to the store across the way.

"It was the very thing I shouldn't have said. De Long leaped up, then, and, hunched a string of filthy names in the direction of the rival store, he said, 'The damned Dutch! My wife!'

"The word 'wife' was new to me. I had never heard it before. 'What's the story?' I asked.

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a world of years and sorrow. I talked to some one about it, till I remembered that night, when I was leaving him over the weight of his diamonds, a gold and diamonds. He was sitting in a chair, the kind of his worldly collateral, I fancied that the string of the boat was going down.

Nichols broke off for a time, thinking, and then the deluge. He began suddenly. 'I was up the China Sea when I learned. What was the effect of the wave? It was a great one, though so many sailors thought they were in the line in open water. But we knew that the direction of the atmosphere that something was going on. At first we thought that it was a meteorological disturbance. The clouds were dark and the sky was positively terrific. The reports came drifting in—reports of ships and reports of a cataclysm of nature, reports of towns totally destroyed, of towns inundated, of sea waves to land and land turning to sea, of ships that drifted against the Java hills. The East was wild with it.

"Of course I concluded that De Long was dead, everyone in the coast villages had been killed. I was thinking of him as I sailed up the Straits, and approached the place where I'd seen him go out of sight among the palm trees, where I'd looked up and said good-bye to Old Anjer. The ship rushed through wide fields of punice stone that dashed like gray reefs on the muddy surface of the water. The land had a barren appearance, and from that distance it

banyan tree. He told me that it was gone. It seemed impossible! Thousands of roots and branches as strong as iron, covering acres of the shore, filling the sky with its magnificent—gone!

"Where? I asked.

"No one knows," he answered, waving his arms toward the sea. 'The wave came, and it was gone!'

"I closed my eyes and tried to picture the scene. 'Where were you?' I suddenly inquired.

"On the hills," he said. 'High! He held his hands aloft to signify a great altitude. 'The wave reached out for it was spent,' he said, with a gesture of the hand.

"Did De Long get away? I asked for the third time. He shook his head.

"I passed him in the village," he murmured. 'He was already dying. Many have searched, but without avail.' Changing his tone, he put a question abruptly to me. 'Was it true that De Long had gold and diamonds about him?' he asked.

"Yes," I said, shortly. 'So that's why you're so anxious to find him? The man left at once, and they all went over the side in violent conversation.

"I filed away as soon as the natives had left the ship. There was nothing, nobody to stay for. Death reigned throughout the Straits of Sunda; you can't conceive the sadness of the place. I literally fled from the sight of it, and tried to think of better things. I was bound to Batavia, and had to fight my way around St. Nicholas through punice stone.

"I was sitting alone one evening in a certain public cafe in the heart of the town. Dusk was coming on,



"My wife had not been there I'd have gone to her."

What had happened? I hesitated to ask. 'How did you escape?' was my first question. 'Had you left Anjer before the eruption?'

"She caught her breath, and seemed struggling with a deep emotion. 'I was there,' she said abruptly. 'I went into the hills.' The inevitable answer! All who escaped had gone into the hills.

"De Long isn't in Batavia, is he?" I inquired. 'They told me at Anjer that he was never heard from.'

"Ah, De Long," she cried, in a low voice. 'No, no! They all were lost. All! She looked straight ahead with a tense expression, as if into the mouth of hell. 'I alone escaped,' she said, bitterly.

"Should have died also, but the fear of death was upon me, and I ran. He told me to save myself, and left me for De Long. I was mad, and I ran, and God has cursed me with life yet to live!'

"They—they both died? I asked, dumbly.

"Yes," she answered, without moving. 'De Long, and the other—both are gone! She struck the table with her clenched hands. 'Gone! Gone! Gone!' she cried. 'What do I care? I love him no longer!'

"I was shocked at her vehemence; I couldn't seem to comprehend. 'Why didn't they get away with you into the hills?' I persisted.

"The fortune delayed them," she said in a hard, passionate voice. 'De Long could not run. His fortune was too heavy. One wave had come already, a big wave, but small before these which came after. I ran to the other, and urged him to fly with me. I thought that he loved me. Ah, I was blind!'

"She closed her eyes and held her head erect, like one waiting for a blow to fall. Suddenly she cried out in a language I didn't know. 'He wished to save De Long,' she said. 'He wished to save the fortune—the gold which De Long kept here, the diamonds—God! I went in him, thinking still that he loved me. He was angry. He was angry, and struck me on the breast. He bade me save myself. He and De Long fought together and rolled on the ground. Then I saw!'

"She rose and gripped the table, raving a little as she stood. A great sound was in the air; she could do. 'The heaven was full of thunder, and fire streamed from the clouds. I feared death, and ran.' She stopped and seemed to be listening, as if the echo of that night had come to her. After a while she spoke again. 'I stood on the hills and looked back,' she said. 'I do not remember—I was thinking that he did not love me! All below vanished, and the wave came to my feet. It had caught him! Ah! She covered her face with her hands, and bowed her head. 'Why was I spared? I heard her cry.

"I can fancy them starting to escape, an odd trio: the woman, light and full of the courage of love, casting the man to fly with her; the man, stilled in his insolvency and fear at last, striking her off in anger and turning to help De Long; and old De Long, fat, breathless, crumpled with fear, staggering under a load of gold and diamonds, clinging to his fortune in the face of death! I can see the fight later, when the man realized that De Long couldn't get away; struggling, tearing, snarling, the one hugging his board closer, the other pulling him about on the ground.

"We sat in silence for a long time. At last I took her hand across the table. It was the least that I could do. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Did you make any search for the bodies?'

"She nodded for an answer. I saw her eyes shining, as a woman's will when she's fighting tears. 'I searched for days,' she managed to get out. 'How long, I do not know. My life was gone—with the wave. But they have searched night and day for De Long, on all the shore, because of the fortune. He, too, cannot be found.'

"But she didn't want to remember. You should have heard her voice when she said, 'The fortune!'

If it had appeared on the table between us she could have thrown it down. She wanted better things—truer things. Don't forget that when you think of her.

"Her hand lay in mine, and she clasped my fingers wildly. 'I am alone,' she cried. 'Ah, let me talk to you! I have no friends!'

"I've got to go soon," I answered, as gently as I could.

"She didn't understand. 'No, stay,' she said. 'In the old days you would not talk to me. Ah, how I loved you, when De Long was watching! I remember. Suddenly she leaned toward me. 'But he is now dead,' she said.

"I must go," I answered, shortly. 'Was I fighting very hard? I don't give myself credit for it. Something had changed. I can't explain it in any other way. You ought to see. I pitied her from the bottom of my heart; and God knows she needed a friend. And yet—oh, it was impossible!'

"I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out all the money I had. It wasn't much. 'Here,' I said. 'This is yours. You must take it!'

"She pushed it back across the table. 'No,' she answered. 'I cannot. Why, I loved you once! I have not forgotten.'

"You must," I commanded. 'Please—for the sake of what we remember.'

"Two large tears came in her eyes, and she brushed them sharply away. 'You are kind,' she said. 'I would not—but I need it so much! You do not know how I need it. I may not see you again. Again. Can't you do anything?'

"My dear woman," I asked, taking her hand again. 'Can't you do anything?'

"Nothing," she said, defiantly. 'I shall never love again.'

"Can't you marry? I kept on.

"Without love it is hard to gain love," she replied. 'Who will marry me? I am an Eurasian. Will you marry me?' She laughed wildly. 'It is not a question,' she said. 'I would not curse your life.'

"But you are cursing your own," I told her.

"No," she assured me. 'You do not know me. I am not unhappy. Perhaps some day I shall dare to kill myself, and then all will be well. I should have died at Anjer. I was a coward.'

"It was getting late, and I rose. There was no use in staying any longer. I was afraid that she'd make a scene as I left. I should have known better. Women like that are brave. She stood up beside me, and touched my hand.

"Goodbye," she said. 'I shall remember you in my prayers.'

"I pressed her hand. 'Goodbye,' I said, and left her standing by the table. A whiff of the night breeze came through the door, and I went out into the moonlight, to forget her—if I could. Copyright, 1919, by Metropolitan Newspaper Syndicate.