

## **Under A Wine-Glass**

*By Ellen N. La Motte*

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A little coasting-steamer dropped anchor at dawn at the mouth of Chanta-Boun Creek, and through the long, hot hours she lay there, gently stirring with the sluggish tide, waiting for the passage-junk to come down from Chanta-Boun Town, twelve miles farther up the river. It was stifling hot on the steamer, and from side to side, whichever side one walked to, came no breeze at all. Only the warm, enveloping, moist, stifling heat closed down. Very quiet it was, with no noises from the after-deck, where under the awning lay the languid deck-passengers, sleeping on their bedding rolls. Very quiet it was ashore, so still and quiet that one could hear the bubbling, sucking noises of the large land-crabs, pattering over the black, oozy mud, or the sound of a lean pig scratching himself against the piles of a native hut in the village, that stood, mounted on stilts, at the mouth of the creek.

The captain came down from the narrow bridge into the narrow saloon. He was clad in yellow pajamas, his bare feet in native sandals, and he held a well pipe-clayed topee in one hand. He was impatient at the delay of the passage-junk coming down from up-river, with her possible trifling cargo, her possible trifling deck-passengers, of which the little steamer already carried enough.

"This long wait is very annoying," he commented, sitting upon the worn leather cushions of the saloon bench. "And I had wished for time enough to stop to see the lonely man. I have made good time on this trip, all things considered, with time to spare to make that call, somewhat out of our way. And now the good hours go by while we wait here uselessly."

"The lonely man?" asked the passenger, who was not a deck-passenger. He was the only saloon-passenger, and because of that he slept first in one, then in the other, of the two small cabins, alternating according to which side the wind blew from.

"You would not mind, perhaps," continued the captain, "if, after all, in spite of this long delay, we still found time for the lonely man? An unscheduled call, much out of our way--oh, a day's sail from here, and we, as you know, go slowly----"

"Three days from now, four days from now, it matters little to me when we reach Bangkok," said the passenger, largely, "but tell me of this man."

Upon the sideboard, under an inverted wine-glass, sat a small gilt Buddha, placed there by the China boys. The captain fixed his eyes upon the Buddha.

"Like that, immovable and covered in close, sitting still in a small space--covered in. Some one turned a wine-glass over on him, long ago, and now he sits, still and immovable like that. It makes my heart ache."

"Tell me, while we are waiting."

"Three years ago," began the captain, dreamily, still looking at the tiny gilt Buddha in its inverted wine-glass, "he came aboard, bound for nowhere in particular. To Bangkok, perhaps, since we were going that way; or to any other port he fancied along the coast, since we were stopping all along the coast. He wanted to lose himself, he said. And, as you have seen, we stop at many remote, lonely villages such as this one. And we have seen many lonely men, foreigners, isolated in villages such as this one, unknown, removed, forgotten. But none of them suited him. He had been looking for the proper spot for many years. Wandering up and down the coast in cargo-boats, in little

coasting vessels, in sailing-vessels, sometimes in native junks, stopping here and there, looking for a place where he could go off and live by himself. He wanted to be quite absolutely to himself. He said he would know the place immediately if he saw it, recognize it at once. He said he could find himself if he could get quite absolutely away. Find himself--that is, recover himself, something, a part of him which he had lost. Just temporarily lost. He was very wistful and very eager, and said I must not think him a fool or demented. He said he only wanted to be by himself, in the right spot, to accomplish his purpose. He would accomplish his purpose and then return.

"Can you see him, the lonely man, obsessed, going up and down the China coast, shipping at distant ports, one after another, on fruitless quests, looking for a place to disembark? The proper place to disembark, the place which he would recognize, would know for his own place, which would answer the longing in him that had sent him searching round the world, over the seven seas of the world, the spot in which he could find himself again and regain what he had lost.

"There are many islands hereabouts," went on the captain, "hundreds. Desert. He thought one would suit him. So I put him down on one, going out of my way to find it for him. He leaned over the rail of the bridge and said to me, 'We are getting nearer.' Then he said that he saw it. So I stopped the ship and put him down. He was very grateful. He said he liked to be in the Gulf of Siam. That the name had a picturesque sound, the Pirate Islands. He would live all by himself on one of the Pirate Islands, in the Gulf of Siam. Isolated and remote, but over one way was the coast of Hindu-China, and over the other way was the coast of Malay. Neighborly, but not too near. He would always feel that he could get away when he was ready, what with so much traffic through the gulf, and the native boats now and then. He was mistaken about the traffic, but I did not tell him so. I knew where he was and could watch him. I placed a cross on the chart, on his island, so that I might know where I had left him; and I promised

myself to call upon him from time to time, to see when he would be ready to face the world again."

The captain spread a chart upon the table.

"Six degrees north latitude," he remarked, "ten thousand miles from--"

"Greenwich," supplied the passenger, anxious to show that he knew.

"From her," corrected the captain.

"He told me about her a little. I added the rest from what he omitted. It all happened a long time ago, which was the bother of it. And because it had taken place so long ago, and had endured for so long a time, it made it more difficult for him to recover himself again. Do you think people ever recover themselves? When the precious thing in them, the spirit of them, has been overlaid and overlaid, covered deep with artificial layers?"

"The marvel was that he wanted to regain it, wanted to break through. Most don't. The other thing is so easy. Money, of course. She had it, and he loved her. He had none, and she loved him. She had had money always, had lived with it, lived on it; it got into her very bones. And he had not two shillings to rub together; but he possessed the gift--genius. But they met somewhere, and fell in love with each other, and that ended him. She took him, you see, and gave him all she had. It was marvelous to do it, for she loved him so. Took him from his four-shilling attic into luxury; out of his shabby, poor worn clothes into the best there were; from a penny bus into superb motors, with all the rest of it to match. And he accepted it all because he loved her, and it was the easiest way. Besides, just before she had come into his life he had written--well, whatever it was, they all praised him, the critics and reviewers, and called him the coming man, and he was very happy about it, and she seemed to come into his life right at the top of his happiness over his work. And she sapped it. Didn't mean to,

but did; cut his genius down to the root. Said his beginning fame was quite enough for her, for her friends, for the society into which she took him. They all praised him without understanding how great he was or considering his future. They took him at her valuation, which was great enough. But she thought he had achieved the summit; did not know, you see, that there was anything more.

"He was so sure of himself, too, during those first few years, young and confident, aware of his power. Drifting would not matter for a while; he could afford to drift. His genius would ripen, he told himself, and time was on his side. So he drifted, very happy and content, ripening; but being overlaid all the time, deeper and thicker, with this intangible, transparent, strong wall, hemming him in, shutting in the gold, just like that little joss there under the wine-glass.

"She lavished on him everything without measure; but she had no knowledge of him, really. He was just another toy, the best of all, in her luxurious equipment. So he traveled the world with her, and dined at the embassies of the world, East and West, in all the capitals of Europe and Asia, but getting restive finally, however, as the years wore on. Feeling the wine-glass, as it were, although he could not see it. Looking through its clear transparency, but feeling pressed, somehow, aware of the closeness. But he continued to sit still, not much wishing to move, stretch himself.

"Then sounds from the other side began to filter in, echoing largely in his restricted space, making within it reverberations that carried vague uneasiness, producing restlessness. He shifted himself within his space, and grew aware of limitations. From without came the voices, insistent, asking what he was doing now. Meaning what thing was he writing now; for a long time had passed since he had written on which called forth the praise of men. There came to him within his wine-glass, these demands from the outside. Therefore he grew very uneasy and tried to rise, and just then it was that he began to feel how close the crystal walls surrounded him. He even wanted to break them, but a

pang at heart told him that that was ingratitude; for he loved her, you see. Never forget that.

"Now you see how it all came about. He was aware of himself, of his power. And while for the first years he had drifted, he was always aware of his power. Knew that he had only to rise to assume gigantic stature. And then, just because he was very stiff, and the pain of stiffness and stretching made him uncouth, he grew angry. He resented his captivity, chafed at his being limited like that, did not understand how it had come about. It had come about through love, through sheer sheltering love. She had placed a crystal cup above him to keep him safe, and he had sat safe beneath it all these years, fearing to stir, because she liked him so.

"It came to a choice at last: his life of happiness with her or his work. Poor fool, to have made the choice at that late day! So he broke his wine-glass, and his heart and her heart, too, and came away. And then he found that he could not work, after all. Years of sitting still had done it.

"At first he tried to recover himself by going over again the paths of his youth, a garret in London, a studio off Montparnasse, shabby, hungry; all no use. He was done for, futile. Done himself in for no purpose, for he had lost her, too. For, you see, he planned, when he left her to come back shortly, crowned anew; to come back in triumph, for she was all his life. Nothing else mattered. He just wanted to lay something at her feet in exchange for all she had given him. Said he would. So they parted, heart-broken, crushed, neither one understanding. But he promised to come back with his laurels.

"That parting was long ago. He could not regain himself. After his failure along the paths of his youth, his garrets and studios, he tried to recover his genius by visiting again all the parts of the world he had visited with her. Only this time, humbly. Standing on the outside of palaces and embassies, recollecting the times when he had been a

guest within. Rubbing shoulders with the crowd outside, shabby, poor, a derelict. Seeking always to recover that lost thing.

"And he was getting so impatient to rejoin her. Longing for her always. Coming to see that she meant more to him than all the world beside. Eating his heart out, craving her. Longing to return, to reseal himself under his bell. Only now he was no longer gilded. He must gild himself anew, just as she had found him. Then he could go back.

"But it could not be done. He could not work. Somewhere in the world, he told me, was a spot where he could work, ... Where there were no memories. Somewhere in the seven seas lay the place. He would know it when he saw it. After so many years of exclusion, he was certain he would feel the atmosphere of the place where he could work. And there he would stay till he finished, till he produced the big thing that was in him. Thus, regilded, he would return to her again. One more effort, once more to feel his power, once more to hear the stimulating rush of praise, then he would give it up again, quite content to sit beneath his wine-glass till the end. But this first.

"So I put him down where I have told you, on a lonely island, somewhat north of the equator, ten thousand miles away from Her. Wistfully, he said it was quite the right spot; he could feel it. So we helped him, the China boys and I, to build a little hut, up on stilts, thatched with palm-leaves. Very desolate it is. On all sides the burnished ocean, hot and breathless, and the warm, moist heat close around. Still and stifling. Like a blanket, dense, enveloping. But he said it was the spot. I don't know. He has been there now three years. He said he could do it there, if ever. From time to time I stop there if the passengers are willing for a day or two's delay. He looks very old now and very thin, but he always say it's all right. Soon, very soon now, the manuscript will be ready; next time I stop, perhaps. Once I came upon him sobbing. Landing early in the morning--slipped ashore and found him sobbing, head in arms and shoulders shaking. It was

early in the morning, and I think he'd sobbed all night. Somehow I think it was not for the gift he'd lost but for her.

"But he says over and over again that it is the right spot, the very right place in the world for such as he. Told me that I must not mind seeing him so lonely, so apparently depressed. That it was nothing. Just the Tropics, and being so far way, and perhaps thinking a little too much of things that did not concern his work. But the work would surely come on. Moods came on him from time to time that he recognized were quite the right moods in which to work, in which to produce great things. His genius was surely ripe now; he must just concentrate. Some day, very shortly, there would be a great rush; he would feel himself charged again with the old, fine fire. He would produce the great work of his life. He felt it coming on; it would be finished next time I called.

"This is the next time. Shall we go?" asked the captain.

Accordingly, within a day or two, the small coastwise steamer dropped her anchor in a shallow bay off a desert island marked with a cross on the captain's chart, and unmarked upon all other charts of the same waters. All around lay the tranquil spaces of a desolate ocean, and on the island the thatched roof of a solitary hut showed among the palms. The captain went ashore by himself, and presently, after a little lapse of time, he returned.

"It is finished," he announced briefly; "the great work is finished. I think it must have been completed several weeks ago. He must have died several weeks ago, possibly soon after my last call."

He held out a sheet of paper on which was written one word, "Beloved."



