

*Strange is the Love Tale of Nadine
As Told in This Story, and Stranger
Still is Its Unexpected Ending*

DEEP CALLETH

By GORDON BURNS

DUANE BALLINGER sat on a fallen mahogany log, alternately shaking with chills and wiping the sweat from his face, as he watched his native boys finish the fag end of his planting. One more year, and he knew his plantations would be well started, and he could leave a half-caste overseer in charge and go home for a year. His thoughts always stopped right at this point—going home—and he got up from his log. He had promised himself a few hours of uninterrupted thought, as he had some problems to settle with himself before he went back to the home plantation, but this was not the time for it. There were a hundred things to do before night, and he was short-handed.

The night before, the Tauregs had come down out of the bush and had caught his boys at the worst hour possible, when they were tired out after a killing day under the tropic sun, and were nodding over their cook fires. Their short spears were always at their backs, of course, and they had made a game fight. Ballinger still thrilled when he thought of it. He had fought side by side with them, the shining black bodies glistening in the glow of the fires, the blood streaming from a slash in his leg. At the last a very madness of killing had seemed to possess him, and he had thrust and slashed like the black beasts themselves, he thought, rather shamefacedly.

They had finally driven the Tauregs back, but not without the loss of fourteen of his men.

"They are probably roasting before the Taureg cook fires right now," he said to himself grimly.

In the islands one does not like to think of the fate of prisoners. The Tauregs are head-hunters.

It would have been a much worse disaster if it had happened a few weeks earlier, but now the planting was almost finished, and only about half a hundred remained of the nuts, sprouted for the planting, and by night it would be finished.

He would leave Daku, his native overseer, in charge, while he went to meet Karl, who would be back from New Guinea by now with the new field hands. How lucky it was, he thought, that he had sent Karl for the men. Always they needed new hands, of course, as the blacks never do well at plantation labor, but they would need them worse than ever now.

It was after dark as he gave his last directions to Daku, and heavy tropic rain was falling in lines straight as lances, as he was rowed out to his little tramp steamer which was to take him to the home plantation, as he called his larger place over on Vatou.

At the turn of the tide the little steamer slipped over the reef and headed out to sea, leaving behind it the quick tropic storm and the wails of his black boys who, with the coming of night, had begun their weird songs of lamentation for their slain.

As they cleared the lagoon and began to feel the heave of the long Pacific rollers, although the lightning still played in the west, the moon rose, a magic green lantern, the shimmering silver pathway leading to the little steamer, a dark speck in this remote world of moving water.

Ballinger always liked to sit where he could see the forefoot of his little steamer throwing back a double line of gleaming phosphorus, and tonight as he sat on a coil of rope, feeling the surge of the waves that seemed to come from the far rim of the world, a fragment of verse that he had heard a girl in Noumea sing, drifted through his mind:

When the phosphor stars are thrown
from the shroud,
And the far heat lightning plays
On the rim of the west where the
cloud bank rests
On a darker bank of haze,
I know that the years of our life are
few,
And fain as a bird to flee,
That time is as brief as a drop of
dew,
But you are eternity.

He was like his mother in that, he thought, fragments of verse always coming unbidden, to remind him, as she had so often told him, that with all its striving, all its unsatisfied longings, life was beautiful.

What had gone wrong with his life, anyway? A year ago all this—the ocean, the night, the singing of the trade wind through the rigging—would have been a sheer delight, and now he felt only a vague, restless unhappiness. What was it all about? He put his head in his hands and deliberately went over the last year of his life, which by all rights should have been his happiest, as he had had Nadine.

He thought of his first meeting with her. He had been walking up from the wharf at Suva, late one night, just in from his plantation for supplies, and he had heard the sound of a harsh masculine voice, and of a woman sobbing. The sound had seemed to come from a narrow side street, and when he reached the spot a man's figure disappeared through a hedge, but a girlish form in white had been crumpled on the ground. As he raised her a pair of soft black eyes were lifted to his, and from that moment something in his steadfast English heart had gone out to her, never to return.

It had been a mad infatuation on his part from the first, and in a month they were man and wife. Even now, after they had been married a year, he could not think of her without a beating of blood in his temples. She was beautiful and winsome, with the soft sensuous beauty of the South, but there was an air of subtlety, almost of mystery about her, which he had tried in vain to penetrate. He realized suddenly how little, how very little he really knew her. She had no people, and she had been raised in the islands—that was about the sum of it. He had never even been able to get a very clear understanding of what had happened that time when he had found her, late at night, crying. She was given to long periods of stillness, not sullen or sulky, but rather as though she had withdrawn to some inner retreat

where he could not follow. He remembered with pain the many little deceits she had practiced upon him, nothing harmful or really wrong, but why should she hide anything from him, her husband? He had the normal Englishman's horror of intrigue or mystery.

There was that morning when Captain Stayne had come up on their veranda when they were at breakfast, and Ballinger had caught a look that passed between him and Nadine. He could have sworn that it spoke astonishment on his part and entreaty on hers, but it was gone almost as soon as seen. He had introduced him to Nadine, and she had been her usual sweet self in a moment, and afterward as he had walked down to the wharves with the Captain he had deliberately mentioned Nadine, but without eliciting a response of any kind from him. In fact the good old trader had seemed constrained, and had shaken hands with Ballinger at parting without meeting his eyes.

He had of course asked Nadine about it, but she had laughed and pulled his ears, and told him that he had imagined it, and he had said no more, knowing how useless it was to question her. There was no harm in her having known good old Stayne. Why hide the fact?

Then there was his partner Karl Newmann. He had picked Karl up one night out of O'Halloran's place, the lowest sailor dive in Suva, and had nursed him over a broken head. Afterwards, being badly in need of help, and Karl seemingly having sloughed his drinking, Ballinger had taken him on; he had rested more and more responsibility in him, and for this last year they had been, in a way, partners.

Karl was a blond giant, of undoubted Teutonic origin, and handsome in his own rather obvious physical way. He was absolutely without fear, and a hard, steady worker, and Ballinger had found him a wonderful help. But he couldn't like him, try as he would. There was a streak of cold-blooded brutality about him that was always cropping out in various ways, and which had kept Ballinger from ever having the feeling of friendship for him that would have been natural between two white men in a world of blacks.

He had had to stand constantly between Karl and the field hands. He thought of the time he had come upon him whipping one of the blacks with his rhinoceros-hide whip. The man was unconscious and covered with blood, and there was a look on Karl's face that had been the definite beginning of his dislike

and aversion for his partner. And it had grown steadily worse.

From the very first moment of their acquaintance, however, Karl and Nadine had been congenial, and they spent much of their time together. There seemed to be a bond of friendship between them that, to Ballinger, knowing Karl as he did, seemed incomprehensible.

The little vessel struck a cross-sea, and a wave slapped across Ballinger's face. He got up rather wearily.

"I am just where I started in," he said to himself, "and I guess I am more or less of a fool. I have a lovely wife, a partner who is honest and hardworking, and two plantations that in a few years will make me a rich man, and I sit here glooming like a sick calf."

He shook himself and went into his little cabin.

The three of them sat that night in the twilight of a tropic day, the scent of hibiscus and crotons heavy in the air, and the great black-winged bats slanting here and there through the garden. The moon had not yet risen, and they were bathed in that magic blue light that lies between sun and moon, and which in these latitudes is as evanescent as a dream.

"There is my man Friday," said Nadine, idly, nodding towards the path down the clearing.

Ever since they had lived at the plantation they had seen with increasing frequency about the clearing one of the huge gray apes that live in the inner fastnesses of the islands but which are seldom seen at the plantations. He had evidently become more and more accustomed to their presence, and would stand at the edge of the clearing, his back to the jungle wall, staring unblinkingly at them. He must have stood nearly seven feet tall, with great, hanging arms.

There was something about him tremendously repellent to Ballinger. He often declared that he would shoot him, although not without a little secret feeling of blood-guiltiness, because in spite of his brutishness, the ape was, in many ways, so like a man. But Nadine declared she liked him, and was going to tame him for a servant. However, the ape had never allowed them to approach any nearer, and if they attempted it, he would slip into the bush. It was one of the mysteries of the country to Ballinger that into a wall of jungle absolutely impenetrable to a human, the ape would slip as soundlessly as if it had been water.

Tonight he stood as usual at the edge of the clearing, watching them.

"I'd give a good deal to know what goes on in his mind, if he has a mind," said Karl lazily. "I never saw an ape take so much interest in humans before."

"I'm going to dance for him," said Nadine suddenly; "and see what he thinks of that."

She took a step or two down the terrace and began the *upanahura*,—the "singing dance of love," as it is called by the Marquesans.

Words cannot portray this dance, filled as it is with all the magic of the tropics. She sang, as she danced, in her hushed, throaty voice, a little native refrain. All of the passion of love, all of the striving, the inarticulate longing, the elemental pain of life itself, were in the notes, and woven with it the wailing melancholy, which is in the very fiber of all native music.

The ape stood motionless, watching.

No one could listen to the haunting refrain and not feel its spell. Karl thought of the glistening, liquid folds of a python he had seen coiled under a causerina, one day; Duane, with a profound sadness, felt how a part of the very soil was Nadine; she seemed to breathe the spirit of the night itself. A wave of nostalgia swept over him, a longing for the cool green fields of his own English countryside. In one more year he would take her away from all this, from the islands, to England—home.

He reached a hand impulsively and drew her back. There was something in the whole scene, the impalpable blue twilight, the slender waving figure, the watching animal, that seemed to him suddenly grotesque, unreal.

"I don't want you to dance the native dances, Nadine," he said, shortly.

She rubbed her head against his arm like a kitten, and laughed up into his face.

"Let's walk a little," she said. "I feel restless."

"You and Karl walk," said Duane. "I have some figuring to do."

He walked toward the house, his spirit weighted by a nameless depression. He stopped a moment at the veranda rail, his eyes resting on a great red star, hanging low over the ocean.

"Antares," he said—

"Antares, heart of blood, how stir thy wings
Above the sea's mysterious murmurings;
The road of death leads outward to thy light—"

"What is the rest of that?" he murmured.

"The road of death leads outward to thy light—"

He stood for a moment with bent head.

"I need some quinine, I guess," he said sedately. "I'll go in and take it."

Nadine and Karl walked down the clearings and stopped under a bread-fruit tree, watching the silver lace of fireflies against the jungle wall.

"Oh, Karl!" she cried, pressing against his side, "If it weren't for you what would I do in this dead, dead place!"

His arm drew her roughly to him. The touch of brutality in Karl always thrilled her more than Duane's gentle chivalry had ever done.

He bent his head toward her upraised lips, when there was a swish of branches overhead, a green coconut struck with crushing force on his head, and he sank to the ground without a murmur.

Nadine stood petrified. She felt that she wanted to scream, to run, but her voice was gone, her limbs seemed paralyzed. Before she could speak or move a hairy arm swung her from the ground as lightly as a fallen leaf, and with one bound the great ape was across the path. For an instant he paused with working brows, the limp white figure slung across his arm; then the undergrowth parted, and soundlessly he was gone.

The green wall closed softly behind him.

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