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"She swung her lithe body on the steering-oar and watched the bow of the boat."

This Example

By S. B. H. HURST

A tale of love that conquered all obstacles—of a strange voyage across the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal—a story of Burma and the Andaman Islands

THE noon of the steaming Burmese forest was broken by the shouts, the screams, the shooting, and curses in English and Burmese. The fight raged among the trees, drawing nearer to the tiny shack where lived Omane and her husband, recently married. The husband loaded an ancient rifle and stood ready to protect Omane. Bullets spat-

tered against the shack. The fight broke into the little clearing. Sixty dacoits [robbers and murderers] fleeing from a half-company of English soldiers, and fighting as they fled. The fight centered on the shack. The robbers used it for a fort. Finally, they surrendered. Those who remained alive were made prisoners, and compelled to dig graves for the dead.

A soldier seized the husband of Omame and made him dig. He protested he was innocent. Omame protested. She fell at the feet of the lieutenant in command of the soldiers. He was sitting on a fallen tree while the doctor extracted a bullet from his arm. He shook his head grimly. Omame's story was an old one. . . . She was a pretty little thing but her husband had been caught with a rifle in his hands.

"Ask the dacoits, sahib!" Omame sobbed.

The lieutenant shook his head again.

"An old trick," he said. "I caught forty dacoits once and twenty of them swore the other twenty were innocent—were strangers to them! I found out afterward that they had drawn lots to see which of them should plead guilty—to satisfy me!—so that the others could go free! Sorry, young woman. But you may come with us to Rangoon to tell your story to the judge. He has the last say. . . . Get them into line, sergeant!"

Then the soldiers and their prisoners and the sobbing Omame began their march to the Irrawaddy River. Sometimes the soldiers sang. And the chorus of their song was:

"This example is only a sample of what a woman will do for a man!"

Through the forest to the river. A paddle steamer "chunking" down to Rangoon. . . . The trial of the dacoits. . . . Just another gang of dacoits. The English had been losing men and money trying to rid Burma of them for years. Another gang, caught red-handed. . . . The pitiful pleas of Omame were an old story. Other pretty little Burmese women had pleaded for their men. *Guilty*, and the usual sentence: *penal servitude for life at the Andaman Islands*.

Next morning the convicted men were marched, heavily ironed, down to the wharf, where the steamer *Sbahjehan*

waited for them. Omame wept like a tortured child. They were taking her man away from her—forever. She would never see him again. How could anybody be so cruel? She was allowed to cling to him for one moment of agonized farewell. Then the convicted men were marched on board the steamer. The steamer left the wharf and worked to mid-river. Omame felt all her world breaking about her. Nobody would help her. Everybody had been bad to her. She would fight them! Fight them! All alone she would fight the great government. . . . She screamed to a sampan waller.

The man brought his small boat alongside the wharf. Omame jumped into it.

"Follow! Follow!" she screamed. "I will follow and bring him back to me!"

The boatman, who pitied but understood the futility, rowed madly after the steamer. Omame knelt in the bow and prayed to the captain.

"Oh, sahib! Oh, burra sahib, please give me back my man!"

"God!" groaned the captain. "I can't stand this! Full speed ahead!"

The steamer raced to full speed. The banks of the river crumbled in her wash. She left Omame and the sampan far behind. Omame sobbed and prayed. The boatman stopped rowing. Omame stifled her sobs and turned to him.

"Don't stop," she raged. "Go on, boatman! I will follow him to where they are taking him, and bring him back!"

The steamer passed out of sight round a bend of the river.

"Go on, boatman!" screamed Omame.

She tore open the pocket of her little jacket and brought out a handful of valuables—heirlooms of her family.

"I can pay!" she screamed. "Go on!"

The boatman was honest as well as sympathetic.

"To the end of the river I will take you," he said gently. "But it will be useless. At the end of the river you will see the great black water which is too wide and rough for such boats as mine. Many days across the water will they take your man—too far for my boat, and the government will allow no boat to follow where they are taking him. I will take you to the end of the river, where you will see for yourself. Put away your money. A man does not take money from a woman in sorrow!"

Across the low-lying paddy fields a cloud of smoke melted in the sunlight.

"See!" exclaimed the boatman. "That is the last of the steamer. With your man and the other men she has passed out of the river."

They both watched the smoke—Omane feverishly. Animists both, devout believers in all forms of divination; that last smoke of the *Shabjeban* must surely hold a sign! They watched. The morning breeze moved the melting smoke-cloud.

"See!" exclaimed Omane. "See! It takes the shape of a hand! A hand that beckons! Beckons me to come!"

She was smiling through her tears.

The boatman shook his head.

"It waves farewell," he said sadly. "See, it melts and is gone!"

Omane bowed her head, dry sobs shaking her.

"I will take you to the end of the river," said the boatman.

He worked with his oar, and with the tide the boat went on—far past the traffic of sampans. Omane crouched, staring forward. The boatman looked down upon her black, glossy head, and crooned *The Song of the Dying Queen*, which is the saddest song in the world.

TWENTY miles of generosity had this boatman given to a woman whose name he did not know when he put her ashore at a tiny village where the right bank curves at the mouth of the Rangoon River. Omane thanked him. He nodded but said no word. Then he turned his boat and began to row back to Rangoon.

It was a village of fishermen, and Omane at once sought the Headman. That one turned out to be a very ancient person, a wizard of repute, much given to divination, a withered father of his village, who not only knew all about the gods of Burma but was also intimately acquainted with them.

"Father," began Omane, "I want to buy or rent a boat. But not an expensive boat."

He looked at her with watery eyes across the smoke of a little fire over which he was warming a piece of fish.

"Why?" he asked.

"They have taken my man across the water to where they take bad men. I want a boat so that I can follow and bring him back!"

She spoke with the faith of a child.

The Headman stared at her. He could not think she was serious. Then he wondered if she was sane. He peered closely at her. Then he took her head between his hands, and looked deeply into her eyes. He had lived at the end of the river for ninety years, and while the Andaman penal settlement had not been established that long, and while no news ever came from it, he knew something about it. He knew that no man had ever escaped from there. He knew that the convicts were all natives of India and Burma—no white prisoners. He had heard that no man ever tried to escape. The Bay of Bengal was too wide a sea, and there were no boats in which even a desperate man might try to escape, even

if he could get away from the Sikh guards. He had heard, truly, that the irons were never taken off the legs of the convicts. And that the wandering bands of the terrible little natives of the islands, the Andamanese, were an added reason for men never trying to escape. It was said that the Andamanese were cannibals. There was also a guard of English soldiers. . . . All this had the old man heard. . . . And this pretty child wanted to hire or buy a boat to go to the convict settlement—to get her man! . . . Not an expensive boat, she had said.

The Headman released Omane's head, and sat back. She was very pretty. The old man smiled slightly, as if at some fair memory.

"You must be very much in love," he said gently.

Omane admitted it.

"The government will not allow wives at the islands," he explained patiently. "I have heard that sometimes if a convict does something very wonderful, like saving a life, then, after twenty years, the government will, sometimes, allow a man's wife to go there and live with him, and clear the land for the government. I have heard this, but never did I hear of any man's wife going there. It is but the word of the government. And in twenty years you will be too old to care, too old to love!"

"It is never too old to love, father," Omane answered.

"You always knows age better than age knows itself," he rejoined. "Tell me, child, how many others have you bothered with your questions about boats?"

"None," said Omane.

"It is well," said the old man. "Not that any Burman would betray you to the government, which, indeed, would only laugh at your idea as a lion might laugh at a baby mouse; but because I have my

pride, and do not wish to be one among many to listen to your tale. But do not bother me any more. It is true that you may *buy* a boat. No man will rent you one when he hears of your strange madness of loving, and of what you want to do with the boat. But what could you do with a boat? You know nothing about boats!"

"I will follow to where they have taken my man, and bring him back," said Omane.

"Yes, so you said. That was why I thought you mad. But your eyes are not mad eyes—except that love is always mad!"

Again he took her face between his hands. He studied her face and eyes for a long time.

"Your soul is set," he said slowly. "And you are a woman! You will get a boat somehow—if you have to steal it. And you will venture upon your mad quest, and you will die in the black water, unless some steamer picks you up and brings you back to Rangoon. Even then I believe you would steal another boat, and again try. I can not stop you! But I can and will tell you things you ought to know, because—I do not know why!—my heart beats for you! Aye, and I am far too wise to waste time trying to stop a woman who craves to rush headlong into folly. I have known too many women! . . . I will find out about the boats. Let your mouth babble about everything else but boats in this village! Say nothing of boats to any man, much less to any woman. Women chatter like monkeys, and would mock you. Go now! But come back to me one hour before sundown. Then I will talk with thee, but more particularly with the gods. Bring a live chicken with you. A chicken seven months old. Be sure it is seven months old. Do not let the seller of the

chicken lie to you! . . . Now go away, for my old eyes see the little gods watching beside my fire. I think they have something to tell me which is not for any woman's ears!"

OMANE went away, awed but happier than she had been for a long time. About the old Headman was mystery and the lure of one who can control the unknown. Her faith went out to him. He could do great things. Besides, she had found another friend who was, also, a counselor. The day dragged far too slowly. But at last the hour came, and Omame went back to the Headman.

"See how the smoke of my fire curls," he muttered. "Watch it curl and with your other eye watch the sun die, little child who would venture out on the black water for love's sake, hundreds of miles beyond where our bravest fishermen venture. Watch the smoke! . . . Are you certain about the age of that chicken? Who sold it to thee?"

"She called herself the woman of Shin-byu-sin!" Omame shivered with a mingling of dread and delight.

"She did, eh? Let me see! She is the one who . . . what does it matter? The world is filled with women who do not interest me! . . . Watch how fast the sun dies! The bats are waking. See—there they fly, where the shadows gather the fastest! . . . Ah, I hear the chatter of the little gods who tell me tales. The little Ones who peer for me with their keen eyes through that black veil which baffles strong men. And with the little gods is their Chief. Into the future can He go, into the past He can go! So His age never changes, because he can either lose a year or gain one at will! See, the smoke curls toward you, pretty child with the great heart! . . . And now—the sun sets and the smoke curls! Be ready! Watch carefully for the last of the suns!"

. . . See! A moment now! Watch! Ah! . . . Kill that chicken! Quick! Good! A clean cut! . . . Ha, he struggles with his head off! He struggles well when headless! A good sign. There will be much virtue in his liver! Watch, while I cut it out. Ah! Now, with the Chief of the Little Ones at my elbow I will see thy future as revealed by the liver of this dead bird which you bought from the woman of Shin-byu-sin!"

Perhaps the oldest form of divination in the world.

The Headman studied the liver carefully, his old eyes almost touching it. He nodded and muttered. He looked up at Omame, sideways at the smoke of his fire—or at whatever dread things watched him there! He smiled at Omame. . . . The bats whirled uncannily. The fireflies danced and great moths dashed into the light of the fire. Through a sudden velvet night peered all the stars.

"Aye," the Headman smiled again. "Aye, and the Chief of the friendly gods tells me, pretty one, that in some previous life I loved thee! Which must be true, else why do I bother with thee now? But the Chief will not tell me whether you were my wife or my daughter, or a love I did not reach—only that I loved thee deeply. . . . The Chief likes to tease me now and then! 'You loved her,' he says. 'When?' I ask. But he will not tell me, nor yet . . . why am I old? Oh, why am I old? . . . Love follows us from life to life! Now I will tell you what I see in the liver of this excellent bird. . . . What? No? But it seems too wonderful! A liver can not lie! And I never make mistakes. . . . And the Chief here with me! Such luck as this! . . . Child, love of other lives, for such a fortune as this others would charge thee all thou hast! But I will charge thee nothing, because in that other life I loved thee and, apparently, love thee still. For

the liver tells me that you will get your man and escape with him!"

"Oh, father!" Omani could scarcely breathe.

"Yet how can it be? From there? But the Chief says 'yes,' and he is smiling at me—and at you! Neither can a liver lie! Some may not be able to interpret its meaning correctly. But that is not the liver's fault. And I never make mistakes! . . . And the Chief nods his head again! . . . Go, my love of other lives, and of this. But speak to no man at all, so says the Chief, except me, until your eyes fall upon your own man. Then call him softly, and he will come to thee. . . . And take this file with thee!"

From among his few belongings he produced a file of English make—a valuable thing to a village Headman in Burma. He put it into Omani's hand.

"No! A gift! Do not insult me by offer of payment! We will pay for the boat. It is an old boat, for all our boats are old, and only the kindness of the gods keeps them from falling apart! But the liver says the boat will hold, that storms will avoid it—and the Chief of the Little Ones smiles. Neither can the Chief lie, for lying is a mania of mortals, and as silly as slapping your own cheek! . . . Those stars! See! . . . Give me your face!"

He took her head between his hands, tenderly. She felt him tremble, as if some echo of youth had touched him. He held her face upward.

"Fix your eyes on those stars! You know nothing of boats. How crazy love makes one! She can not even steer a boat, yet would venture across the water—so far! Fix your eyes on those stars, and remember. Steer for those stars, and, the gods aiding thee, you will reach the Andaman Islands. When you get ashore use thy wit, and do not be seen. It is mostly jungle, and the British are using

thy man and other men to clear this jungle. Steer for those stars—a long steering. I have been told that the distance is three hundred and fifty miles. . . . When you get your man, first file off the iron rings around his ankles. Those will not be heavy. Then the ring around his waist, from which chains run to the ankle-irons. Then hide the irons and run, leaving no trail. But do not try to come back to Burma. Continue to follow, in the old boat, those stars. There are other islands to the southeast. Their names I forget. . . . Be circumspect. Ah, the name of the other islands is Nicobar—free land. Go there with your man, and wait for the government to forget. Nay, it never forgets! So lie low until your children grow up, and you are old and no longer lovely. Then the government, which never forgets, will no longer be able to recognize your husband.

OMANE left the land in that frail boat with its one steering-oar and queer sail, in the night. And only the ancient Headman watched her go.

"Fare thee well," he mumbled. "Only mad love would try such a folly as this. Yet the gods—who must also be mad, else they had never made mortals!—the gods are with thee. And the liver of a seven-months-old chicken can not lie! . . . I have given thee much advice—which likely you will forget. For even if I loved thee, and do yet, thou art, still, a woman! But in thee is the *heart of hearts*, which the gods give to a few whom they love greatly. . . . Love! Love is. . . . Push away with that oar. Fare thee very well. God and the gods, and Buddha bless thee. Aye, I would even pray to the God of the Christians on thy behalf. For He is a strong God. God bless thee, oh pretty face that I loved long ago, when the world was younger! Farewell!"

"Farewell, father," whispered Omane. "May the gods reward thee!"

Then she pushed off. The little wind took the sail. The old man watched silently. Slowly the boat became a small blot upon the starlit sea. Now and then the mast creaked gently. . . . The old man could no longer see the blot upon the sea. He wiped his eyes and turned away, shuffling back to his lonely fire.

Upon Omane came a feeling of loneliness and fear. The great black water which she, a girl of the jungles, had always heard spoken of with dread. What a strangely acting thing the boat was! The wind increased slightly as the boat left the shelter of the land and the north-east monsoon took hold of her. Omane looked up at her stars.

"The liver can not lie," she murmured, bolstering up her courage. "And the gods are with me!"

She was faring forth upon what was likely the greatest and bravest venture ever undertaken by a lone woman. She did not know this. She swung her lithe body upon the steering-oar, and watched the bow of the boat. And then she was steering correctly, and panting with ecstasy as she steered. . . . Her stars swung low to the southwest, drifting with the night; but that was ancient knowledge and Omane made allowance and checked her rude navigation.

Two hours before the dawn a strange tangle of stars rose swiftly ahead. The little hands gripped the steering-oar apprehensively. What awful thing was this? It grew in size with terrifying speed, and bore down upon the boat like some angry dragon of the deep, raging at being wakened from ages of sleep. It made a thrashing noise as it came. Omane sobbed brave prayers of incoherent pleadings. This roaring thing of the night was coming directly at the boat. And now she

could see the awful eyes of the creature. One was green, the other was red. They glared. . . . The thing was almost upon her. . . . Then it was passing, like a shooting star with the voice of an angry tiger. Omane's boat rocked violently, threatening to capsize. A whiff of smoke reeked in her nostrils. She recognized it, and laughed weakly. The terror had been a steamer, its eyes the lights of the night. She told herself that she would not be frightened if she met another. She did not realize how close she had been to death, that her boat, unseen, had nearly been run down.

THE velvet night passed without further incident. The tide and the monsoon carried Omane far from land. Dawn came over the Bay of Bengal. There was nothing in sight. The sun rose, and Omane basked in it. Then she ate some *napi*, which is a species of intricately cured fish, took a drink of water, and lowered the sail. Under its almost lacy raggedness she crept and went to sleep.

And the day passed with the lazy wind moving the frail boat, idly drifting it in the direction of its goal. Some inquisitive fish came and looked at the love-laden argosy, but no other eyes saw it.

Omane wakened with the sunset, and saw omens of delight in the colors of the sky. She thanked every god who came into her primitively lively imagination; which took some little time. During these devotions she worked at hoisting the sail; for while, of course, religious observance was necessary there was something more important at the Andaman Islands. Then another night of steering and dreaming, undisturbed by steamers. And another day of sleeping under that sail of strangely assorted patches kept together by a miracle.

Yet the loneliness was becoming a

burden. Omane, in the way of the smiling affectionate Burmese, craved some one to chatter with, and her eyes sought something more human than the dreary monotony of the sun-drenched Bay, and a boat that smelled of many generations of fish. She yearned for the flowers and the heavy green restfulness of her jungles; even the bickerings of the parrots and the monkeys. . . . Many gods in the mind are hardly companions. In all her life she had never before been alone.

The burden became a weight, pressing on her faith, but not crushing it. . . . Her tired eyes strained for land, but only saw water. Sometimes a few fish. She had fared upon her quest with the lovingness and ignorance of a little child. With a child's faith. Had she not been as a little child she had never ventured. But the broad bosom of the Bay of Bengal was no place for children.

As the days went by, Omane found herself becoming afraid of it. It became the menace of some huge creatures from which she could not escape. Love and courage were still strong in her soul, and her stars were still in the sky, but the Bay of Bengal had become an enemy from which she might never escape.

The lazy wind lost interest in her. The boat did not move. It lay like a dead thing. And Omane watched her supply of water dwindling, drop by drop.

The torture of thirst. Sobbing and wild laughter, despair and deep dread. And the monotony and agony of that terrible voyage transcended time. Omane hardly knew night from day.

A brown speck upon the wide water, a brown old native boat, containing the most valuable cargo in the world. A woman's love . . . with the anciently evil fingers of death trying to steal it.

Omane no longer saw her stars. She could see nothing but a fog that burned

her eyes. She knew there was no fog there, but she was too weak to care—except when through the fog there came the mocking vision of the memory of a strong young Burman on whose arm she had slept through other delicious nights.

And presently she knew nothing at all. A gallant girl lying unconscious at the bottom of the boat.

Time no longer existed, but something roused her. Dimly, she wondered what had wakened her. Vaguely she sensed an unusual smell. . . . A smell. What was it? It seemed that somewhere, very long ago, she had known what that smell was. But that had been ever so long ago. It did not matter—she had forgotten what thing it was that smelled so nicely. It did not matter. She was falling back into unconsciousness, but the smell would not let her go. What *was* that smell? She roused the more, irritated by curiosity. She sniffed and the smell was a stimulant. And then, suddenly, she understood. Sobs broke from her tired breast. A great thankfulness to all the gods filled and lifted her. For the smell was the smell of the good moist earth. It differed not a whit from the smell of her jungles. For the smell was so new and strong that it blotted out the smell of the sea.

Omane struggled to her feet. The boat was aground in a tiny inlet, and branches of trees were hanging over it. Faith was justified. The inlet was one of the thousands of little inlets of the island known as the South Andaman.

Within touch was life, a matter of easy fruit, in a jungle as dense as Omane's home, where she was very much at home. But the infinite caution of the jungle-bred was not forgotten, even when laughter returned like a ghost seeking reincarnation, and finding it. . . . With her first fierce bitings of food she was watching for trace of the terrible little black

men, Andamanese, aborigines of the islands, about which the old Headman had warned her. Human animals, more subtle and deadly than tigers. . . . Fed, she carefully screened her boat, leaving it ready for the hurried flight when she found her man. Then, armed only with the file and a faith dangerous to mountains, she attacked the British Empire!

But where was the enemy? Here was jungle—miles of it. There was the sea. Where was her man? She did not dream how large the islands are. She went forward, remembering the words of the Headman:

"Nobody ever tried to do this thing before!"

It was dawn of the next day before she reached the first of the mangrove swamps. It proved easy crossing, hardly a swamp to one of Omame's training. She looked for a river, but there are no rivers on the islands. . . . She would have to rest that night. What about tigers? A fire was not to be thought of. A fire would keep the tigers away. But . . . she calculated the risks carefully. She could not afford to be killed, because she represented her man's only means of escape. But the fire would surely bring the government upon her. It would be as a signal that she had come to rescue her man. . . . She would have to take chances with the tigers. Magnificent decision of that heroic soul! But there are no tigers on the Andaman Islands. Some few species of wild pigs, one sort of wildcat. Nothing else.

Omane travelled with the caution of her kind. For the first two days she saw nothing but the birds. And no aborigines. She would have said that the gods guided her. They probably did. Be that as it may, the morning of the third day saw her on a rise of land. Below was the

harbor of Port Blair, and about the harbor was the penal settlement.

To the south, Viper prison, where the incorrigibles ended their days. And across the harbor, just visible, an old wooden wharf which had seen the assassination of a Viceroy of India by a Pathan convict. The large jails where the convicts slept. The house of the Chief Commissioner. The various offices. The small white barracks of the company of English soldiers. The barracks of the Sikh guards. The Royal Indian Marine steamer, the *Mayo*, at anchor. . . . Omame crept closer. She raised her head and looked again. She dropped and crouched, trembling.

A gang of Burmese convicts was clearing the forest less than half a mile away! With tall, bearded, armed Sikh guards watching the process.

With exquisite caution Omame crept closer. Again she looked. She stifled the agony of disappointment. Her man was not with the gang. She crept away again.

Only Burmese convicts worked in the forest. This to Omame would seem obvious. Yet the truth must have come to her intuitively. She told herself that she would have to wait—until her man came to work in the forest. She could never attack the jails. Surely he would come! They must shift the gangs. She would wait, and watch. When he came she could signal to him. She could see no other plan of saving him. . . . To take the foolish chance of going down to the settlement . . . but that was madness . . . would ruin everything . . . she would be seen at once—Burmese women do not wander about the penal colony at the Andamans . . . the logic of the jungle, which is an extra sense.

Omane crept back into the densest part of the jungle. She found a small cave, and there she made a nest. Here she would sleep. But she also needed the nest

for another reason. And she wanted that nest to be—a nest.

DAY after day she ventured forth and crept to where the gang worked in the forest. Day after day she sobbed her disappointment. There were changes in the gang, but never the change she ached for. Where was her man? The terrible thought came that he might be dead. And there was no one she could ask! She gritted her teeth. . . . She would wait there, watching forever if need be. Faith told her he was not dead. Faith said that he would come. All would be well. A softly uttered love call. His startled gaze. Her beckoning. His slip into the brush. Fast work with the file. Some stealthy running through the jungles. The boat. The sea. The Nicobar Islands. Freedom and delight. . . . But it was painful to watch the halting movements of the prisoners. The rings round their ankles. The chains leading to another ring around their waists. Somewhere her man was being compelled to walk like that!

So did the weeks pass. The high-beating heart of the morning. The keen scrutiny. The bitter disappointment. The dreadful loneliness. And a time was coming when she would more than ever need her mate.

Then, one afternoon she waited late. There was nothing to do, and the gang seemed some sort of company. The shadows fell, and the guards marched the gang back to their barracks. Omane started home—back to her hidden nest. She was not as cautious as usual. Weeks of immunity from any sight of danger to one so skilled in jungle ways as she was had made her careless this night. . . . The moths and the bats flying. The dense forest. . . . She was slowly nearing her nest. Then, suddenly, just in time, she smelt smoke. The smoke of a wood fire.

She dropped full length in the brush. She made less noise than a cobra makes.

A fire. Men! What men? The terrible Andamanese. Whom even the British had given up trying to tame. Who for centuries, for two thousand years, had had a dreadful reputation—given them by the few shipwrecked men who had ever escaped them. . . .

But Omane was not terrified. The girl who had made the only crossing of the wide Bay of Bengal in an open boat, who dared attack the sacredly guarded penal settlement—she was not one to be afraid. Wild men! But their camp was in her way. She would have to circle it to reach her nest. She crept closer and looked. A fire about which demons moved. A small picture of Hell, imagined by Dante, painted by Doré. Little black men, their origin a mystery to anthropologists. Lower in the scale of life than the Tasmanian bushman. . . . Omane sniffed with the contempt of the well-born for the lower bloods. . . . From what the Headman had told her she had expected to be afraid. Instead, she was annoyed. This dirty camp was in her way. She circled it widely and gained her nest.

Next morning the savages had gone. Omane inspected their camping-place curiously. There were no such creatures in Burma.

She never took the same trail two days in succession. That would be folly. And she always covered the trail as she went along, carefully, with bits of brush in ways she knew. But it began to seem that she would never see her man at work with the convicts in the forest.

So did the weeks pass.

One morning as she lay watching and softly sobbing her disappointment it came to her suddenly that to get back to

her nest in time might be impossible. She began to creep away, stifling her groans lest the Sikh guards hear. At nightfall she gained her nest. There, in the loneliness, her hour came upon her. . . .

Gasping in agony, she heard a sound and looked toward the mouth of her cave. Then she cried out aloud for the first time—in terror. Two eyes that gleamed at the mouth of the cave. . . . A tiger!

But the creature began to make soft murmurs in its throat. The purring of the great wildcat. . . . It purred! Then the eyes turned away, and the cat lay down across the opening of the cave, as if on guard!

A wonderful joy came to Omani. She tried to laugh at her forgetfulness. Had she not been told. Some other girls and herself, listening to the tales of an aged woman:

"And remember this. Should ever thine hour come upon thee when thou art far from home in the jungle, as sometimes it does, suddenly; remember my words and fear not the creatures of the forest. For they will never harm thee. Nay, they will seek to protect thee. Did not my own mother give birth to me this wise? And while she lived her great hour did not a tigress come? Came close and looked at her! And did not the tigress make soft sounds in her throat—even as one woman might encourage another? And then, while my mother gave birth to me, the tigress lay down near her—to guard her!"

Omani remembered and sent out her soul in thankfulness.

So did her hour pass.

And after, with the dawn, and the cat gone, Omani gave further thanks to the gods. In her arms was the most wonderful mite of humanity the world had ever seen. And it was a man child!

O. S.—8

YET never had a baby brought greater care. Omani, cherishing the morsel, crooning softly to him because she dared not raise her voice, could see herself as one apart from other mothers. Had ever any other mother of a first-born son brought him into the world under such circumstances? So she wondered now that her tremendous task had been rendered more than ever difficult.

There were fourteen monkeys in seventeen trees—
Crow, my precious one! Crow!
Who laughed so hard when they wanted to please
By telling the stories monkeys know
That the tears from their eyes ran down to their
knees!

Crow, my precious one. . . .

She crooned it, that ancient song of the mothers of Burma, and wondered why there seemed to be no monkeys on the island. She wondered where she would hide the baby, and how, when she went forth again to see if her man was working with the gang in the forest. Safe he would have to be. Where? For even the wild pigs are dangerous to babies. And he must be hidden where his voice, should he cry, would not attract attention. Not too far from where the gang was working, yet not too near. Did ever a mother face such a task? . . . So did her thoughts run as she gathered strength again.

Drowsing, she watched the fireflies tangle with the stars at the mouth of her cave, the eclipses of these as the bats sought frantic suppers. Ai! it was good. It was good. And soon she would find her man, and then—away to freedom in the boat, a very happy family. . . . Ai, it was good! . . . Drowsing, she thanked the many little gods. . . . A cloud of fireflies drifted across the stars. A face, benign and very wise. A figure sitting alone in eternal calm. A shame she had forgotten Him. A shame! She had thanked all the little gods, and even the ghost of the chicken, but she had forgotten the Blessed One. . . . So Omani very

respectfully gave thanks to Buddha, who so loved little children.

A few mornings later she left the cave, this little lady of Burma, with her baby in her arms. She had worked out her plan. She would not leave her baby very far from the place in the forest from where she watched the working convicts. Not more than ten feet! He was far too precious to be allowed out of sight. What if he did make one tiny cry—was not the forest filled with birds? What Sikh guard would suspect a baby, even if he heard the tiny sound? And when she freed her man—while the noble file rasped through his irons—would it not fill his heart with peace to be able to see his son immediately? . . . So she crept forward, whispering softly to the child and the minor gods, and gasped again with bitter disappointment when she saw that her man was not with the workers.

So passed several months. The gallant hope of the morning, so soon turned into bitter pain. The joy of the baby that cheered her. . . . Another day, another journey to her watching-place. The nights. And always a great faith. . . . Her clothing had long since gone, but she was clever with leaves—not that lack of clothing troubled her. Besides, it was an impediment to stealth. And the baby needed none. But when the rains came Omane was compelled to devise a tiny thatch for him—after the fashion of grown-ups who work in the paddy fields of Burma. The morning rains are chilly. But the baby became more cute in appearance and more divine in his ways. . . . The monsoon broke with a wet wind, gusty. Omane crept as usual to her spying-place. She gasped, and her heart beat so wildly that she feared the guards would hear it. There with the gang was the man she had dared so much in seeking.

Reaction momentarily weakened her. She lay down upon the wet earth. Her man was not very far away, but too far. Omane dug her nails into her hands. She told herself to be very careful. One slip now and hope would be shattered for ever. . . . Presently her man would come closer, when she could softly give the love call, and he could watch for a chance to slip into the brush. She waited in an agony of impatience. There, he was closer! Would it be safe now? No, there were too many others near him. She hated those others. . . . She waited. She waited all day. Until a guard blew a whistle and the gang was marched back to its jail.

Omame clutched at the earth, sobbing. All the wildness of her blood was running hotly. She passed beyond self-control, but the baby saved her. After all the months of sustained effort—after it all, this hideous delay. If the baby had not been there Omane would have dashed from her hiding-place in mad frenzy, and with tooth and nail and file attacked the guards. Some such madness. The baby, kicking its dimpled legs, saved her from this. Omane became calm again—as nearly calm as was possible.

Next morning she left the cave heavy with hope deferred. It might be more months, if ever, before her man came close to her place in the brush. How could she ever bear it? She laid the sleeping child on a bed of leaves, and crept to her spying-place. She looked. Could it be true? But even as she doubted she softly uttered the love call.

Her man was working alone, less than a dozen feet away. He heard the love call and shuddered. It could not be. He was going mad. The dainty, loved lips that used to make that call were far away in Burma. This was like the horrible, mocking dreams of the terrible nights,

when men babbled all about him in their sleep and the jail was full of ghosts. Lying awake through those awful nights. Thinking. Never to see Omane again. Other arms would hold her. . . . Never to see her again. . . . During those awful nights he had thought he would go mad. The love call had haunted his fitful sleep. Now it had come in the day. . . . He shuddered. He must be mad. . . . Then he saw her eager face peeping through the leaves. Smiling. Beckoning frantically—her little hand. . . . The guards were not watching. The man dropped his mattock and slipped like a cobra into the brush.

PRIVATE BRIGGS had been given three days' leave to go hunting. The short twilight became night as he made camp by the sea. A thin pencil of moonlight moved upon the quiet water. Private Briggs was moved to sentiment. He thought of a girl he knew in London. Then he began to sing:

"This example is only a sample of what a woman will do for a man!"

As he stopped singing he heard a little cry.

"Hell, what was that?" he exclaimed, startled. "Sounded like a kid. But wot would a kid be doing out 'ere? . . . However!"

He picked up his rifle and moved toward the sound. The pencil of moonlight pointed into a little creek.

"Gawd!" exclaimed Private Briggs. "It was a kid!"

Omane was panting like a hunted deer. Her man crouched, ready to spring. The baby, no longer silenced by a harassed hand, crowed gleefully. The moonlight showed the boat clearly.

"Gawd!" muttered Briggs, understanding all. "'Ow did she do it? Wot a woman! For 'er man she done it! For 'er 'usband—a convict!"

Private Briggs spoke to the husband of Omane.

"Don't go to making a bloody fool of yourself!" he warned, touching his rifle significantly.

The man understood the gesture. He still crouched, but he felt hope and courage leaving him. He was helpless against this soldier with the rifle. Omane sobbed. After all her effort, all her bravery, all her pain and all her loneliness—this! She broke down utterly. The baby continued to crow.

Private Briggs meditated deeply.

"It ain't my duty to guard convicts," he thought hopefully. "*That's* the Sikh's mucky job. I'm only here to protect the blooming government if so be a general uprising takes place. Besides, I'm on leave! . . . Gawd, and she come 'ere across the bloody Bay in that rotten old boat. Then she had her baby all alone in the woods."

He leaned down and patted Omane's shoulder. She stopped crying and looked up at him appealingly. Private Briggs swore horribly and tickled the baby's ear. The baby gurgled with delight.

"Gawd!" exclaimed Private Briggs. "Him what would stop her now wouldn't be a man at all. After all she's done and gone through with! . . . And it ain't my duty to interfere with the police and their mucky work! 'Strewth! . . . And if anybody arks me 'ow the 'unting was I'll tell 'em it was fair rotten—that all I seen was a few grubby pigs!"

Private Briggs stood up in the moonlight. He grinned at Omane and winked at her man. Then he bent down and kissed the baby. He snapped to attention and saluted. He gestured toward the sea and freedom.

"Pass, friend!" said Private Briggs. "Pass, friend! And all's well!"