

PROMENADE DECK.

by Ishbel Ross

TENTH INSTALLMENT

They dined together, Angela in highest spirits. Her wit flashed the tip of her tongue; her laughing rang like the thin chiming of bells.

"You're very bright tonight," Macduff told her.

"Yes. I've had news from home today."

"Oh, that's it!" His manner was changed. "It must have been cheerful."

She laughed behind her champagne glass. "It was something I can't expect," she said.

They strolled out of the dining-room and took two rickshaws to the Street. At last they went into the tiniest and blackest of all the shops, and a wrinkled old Chinese came forward to ask in a squeaky voice, what they wanted. She explained that she wanted a jade bracelet, very rare, very choice. The man studied her with attention; then he closed his shutters and bolted his door.

"I show you something very rare, Missie," he said, moving majestically through the small square of a shop. He pried at the drawer of a lacquer chest, which swung open and revealed an inner compartment. Angela fancied she caught a gleam in the whites of his eyes. His fingers moved mysteriously at the back of the chest, pressing on secret springs till he reached a long black case. From its velvet folds, which seemed to hold the dust and dead odor of centuries, he drew out a bracelet and displayed it with a clash before her eyes.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, in admiration. "That's it!"

Macduff was impressed. He took the bracelet in his hand and passed through his fingers, bluntly, without the caressing fondness of the Chinese. Five carved Buddhas of dark jade were strung together in an intricate silver chain. An elegant bracelet, a bracelet one could remember. She could not have dreamed of a better choice. The merchant named his price. It was absurdly high and twice the value of the trinket. She did not care. "I want it," she said to Macduff, "and I won't haggle at all."

"Are you glad to be homeward bound?" Macduff enquired. She did not answer.

"Angela, I asked you a question."

"I know, Macduff. Forgive me, but I'm wondering whether I'm mad or not."

"What happened, Angela? I know that something hit you hard."

"How clever of you!"

"I thought you'd be glad to get back to your husband and home."

"I'm not going back to my husband." She spoke as calmly as if she were flickering a speck of dust from her clothes.

Macduff looked at her suddenly and dropped his pipe from his mouth. "You're not going back to your husband?" he repeated, stupidly.

"No. He doesn't want me back. He wants a divorce."

"And you're going to give it to him?" His voice rose from its deep rumble to a peak of surprise.

"Why not? You see, he's fallen in love with a girl of seventeen, and youth must be served."

"Well, I'm damned!" Gently he touched the back of her idle hand.

"I'm double damned! The swine!"

"Hush, Macduff." Her fingers covered his lips.

"The bracelet, then? I'm sure it had something to do with your news."

"Yes," said Angela, simply.

Macduff wanted the bracelet for the girl he loves.

"Angela, you're a fool!" said Macduff, suddenly.

"Yes, I'm afraid I am, a miserable fool. But let's move on."

It was one of the red-letter days in Miss Mudge's life. When they were back on the Marenia, she looked up Mr. Charlton, feeling that her pleasure was something she must share with him.

"I wonder if I shall be able to settle down when I get home," she was saying. "I've always thought it better to feel planted in one spot."

"I shouldn't suspect that from

knowing you, Miss Mudge."

His voice was teasing, but it passed over her like a caressing wind.

"Why not?"

"I can't believe you'd bang the door shut on adventure. If you were that sort, you wouldn't have come on this trip around the world."

"I think you're discovering things about me that I didn't know myself. But, you see, there hasn't been much chance for me to do anything but stay put."

She leaned against his sleeve, her quaint, small face thrust up into his. Dick feared that she wanted to be kissed, that she wanted very badly to be kissed by him, yet did not know it. He held her hand and felt it burning in his cool clasp. Miss Mudge caught fire under his touch until all of a sudden he was holding her, shaking, in his arms. O God! he thought. Though he hated tears, he was moved by the desperate note of hysteria in her voice. She shuddered and clung to him. He was shocked by the fervor of her embrace.

"I'm so ashamed!" she murmured into his ear.

"Ah, don't say that. It's stupid for a woman to be ashamed of her feelings. They're really the most charming thing about her."

"But I wouldn't do this in Ohonto," Miss Mudge went on. "I wouldn't be so abandoned."

"You must forget about Ohonto. You're very far from there now, and you must know by this time that there's a broader, freer world than that."

Dick laughed.

Miss Mudge listened, entranced. Perhaps it was true. His words sank sweetly into her consciousness. Suddenly she buried her face in his collar.

"Mr. Charlton!" she mumbled.

"My dear!" said Dick, catching her in a firm and sustaining grip and laughing at himself for a fool. He turned her face up, dripping with tears. He saw her drenched eyes and the eager, tremulous curve of her lips. Bending over, he kissed her so slowly and thoroughly that she fainted against his chest. With a quick surge of concern he put her back in her chair and bent over her, wondering what he could do to revive her, but he saw that her hysteria had been wiped out in a deadly wave of inertia.

After a while she got up and scuttled along deck without a word—a ridiculous figure, with ridiculous skirts, flying towards the companionway. She had called him Mr. Charlton, even when he had kissed her! Dick wiped the sweat from his brow. Never again. He regretted everything that had happened, everything from the very beginning. This had been different from all his other experiences; it left him with a self-disgust. He was strangely touched, thinking of Miss Mudge's lonely pillow.

The Marenia was steaming across the Pacific with her homeward-bound pennant flying from the mast. Captain Baring was having a cocktail party in his quarters.

Miss Mudge was talking to Dick Charlton. Her sparrow face was aglow, and she was drawing on a cigarette in the ridiculous, inadequate way she had. The chief officer seemed to be rather embarrassed for once in his life. The Foster girl, who had been drinking cocktail after cocktail with her attention fastened on him, was leaning over in their direction now. Her expression was glassy and determined. Angela saw her step between them and catch Miss Mudge by the shoulder. Heavens! Was she going to make a scene? She was drunk enough for anything. Suddenly Joan's voice rose, strident and hysterical, over the babel of tongues, arresting the attention of everyone in the room. Miss Mudge was blinking at her, not knowing what it was all about. Joan, a blazing fury of red locks and dishevelment, was bending over her and shouting things that made Angela's heart stand still.

"You think Dick loves you, you poor little simp!" she cried. "Well, you're mistaken. He loves me. Do you understand? He loves me. He's

laughing at you. Yes, I saw him kiss you on the deck at Yokohama, after you had thrown at me into his arms. I saw you faint, you silly little crow. You didn't see me in the beach chair, did you? Why did you ever leave Ohonto, or wherever it is you come from? Why did you ever think you could come around the world and behave like anyone else? Don't you know you're a sketch? Take a look at yourself!"

Joan threw back her head and laughed. Dick tried to intervene, but she pushed him off and took firmer hold of Miss Mudge, on whose face a slow realization was dawning.

"You think because Dick dances with you that he's in love with you and not with me. Well, he's laughing at you up his sleeve. Everybody knows he's making fun of you, but you're too simple to know it. He knows you're forty-three and never had another man in your life." ("Stop her, stop her, some one!" Angela was murmuring through pale lips, but everyone seemed to be rooted to the spot.)

"He knows you say your prayers at night and help to support the missions. He knows you're a Dry who's cheating, a silly little school-teacher trying to be a sport, smoking cigarettes, painting your face like a harlot, swigging at a drink—yes, and no doubt sleeping with him, too."

"Stop it, Joan! You're mad."

Dick was joining her in a shen fury. He caught her by the arms. She pulled herself free and slapped his face.

"Don't speak to me! I haven't finished with her yet. She wears cotton nightgowns with necks like this. (Joan gestured from shoulder to chin.) She sleeps with curlers in her hair. I've seen her, on her way to the bath. Won't wear her glasses, for fear they might spoil her appearance. Bumps into chairs.

Falls over tables. Chatters, chatters, chatters, to everyone who will listen to her. All about Ohonto and the wonderful children she teaches. 'Swonderful! Thinks the world is full of glamour. . . . Oh, I've heard her by the hour. Loses her money at Monte Carlo. Thinks Dick's Sir Galahad. Ha! Why is Dick good to her? Dick's good to her because everyone on the boat knows she's used up her savings and can't go ashore. Dick's sorry for her. Dick's mad with me. . . . Little school-teachers should stay at home and keep their pennies in their cotton stockings. . . . Shouldn't be a nuisance to grown-ups. . . . Shouldn't think that a Spanish shawl will make them fit to kiss. . . . Poor little Miss Mudge.' . . .

Everyone tried not to look at Miss Mudge. At first her cheeks had burned. Now they were ghastly pale, except for the dots of rouge, high up on her cheeks, that made her look like a wax model. Once she had raised her hand to protest. Then it had fallen limply. What was the use? Captain Baring stood as if he were carved in rock. He regarded a drunken woman as the final debasement of human nature. Hell of a mess for Charlton to get into! His favorite officer, and he wasn't a fool with women, either. He'd have to haul him over the coals, though it probably wasn't his fault at all. Dick had been cold to more attractive women than Miss Mudge. The captain knew all about him. But a scene like this—before passengers! It wouldn't do.

The chief officer had turned his back and was hastily swallowing a drink. Angela and Macduff stood in appalled silence. No one knew what tack to take, but Miss Mudge herself took hold of the situation. Ignoring them all, she put her arm around Joan's drooping shoulders and said in a clear, high voice: "Come on, you foolish child. Come down with me."

(Continued Next Week)

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