

ATMOSPHERE *By Archibald Sullivan*

THEIR motor boat was cutting through the passionate blue of the Southern sea with the keenness of a razor. From its bow the foam fled away like a new wedding veil with bobbing clusters of white flowers. The island behind them was a mere smudge and before them the sea a desert of motionless sapphire whose limits no one could tell. When the woman spoke there was a little catch in her breath.

"It seems almost blasphemy to break into the silence. Like putting a pin prick into the biggest blue balloon ever made. It makes me feel so horribly humble. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one could take a ripple of the sky, a ripple of the sea and weave them into a prayer mat? If I could do that I'd kneel on it under a palm tree and confess all my five, and fifteen-cent sins. I don't count the big expensive ones such as being here with you, but—"

His free hand went up to her chin, caught it and held it steadily.

"After a year does it seem so very expensive—are you sorry you paid for this—for me?"

Her mouth trembled a little, but her eyes looked steadily ahead, drawing in the immensity of what lay before them as though it were wine.

"I just emptied the purse of my womanhood for you and this, and then I threw it over one shoulder for my friends and the world to rend to tatters. Perhaps if I went back I would still find shreds of it in half a dozen drawing-rooms. Women never let women alone—not even when they're dead. They keep on exhuming them from one generation to another. And I'm dead. I died the night we left—morally died, but my resurrection with you has made me feel that unless heaven is a tropical island and the crystal sea colored as this is, I shan't even wait to try on my wings."

His grip on the propeller slackened and the slim white boat became almost motionless.

"Then it's been worth while?"

"Worth while?" she repeated; "you know it has. I don't hear the noise of the world any more. I couldn't walk on anything except saffron colored earth—couldn't sit under any tree but a palm—couldn't be with any one but you!"

"Then you don't miss it all—the tumult—the taxis like baby elephants tooting their way up Broadway—the electric signs—"

"My dear," she said, "when I saw that first flight of little green parrots outside the house, I realized everything. They'd turn upside down advertising any brand of soap or motor tire I cared for. I'm not missing a single thing except the minutes we're not together. I think I shall sue for a divorce and name your bath as co-respondent."

She expected him to laugh, but the lines of his mouth hardened and she felt his shoulder quiver a little against her own.

"I always thought that so funny of you. You never wanted to get a divorce and it was so easy—so simple."

"Honey"—and her hand went out to find his—"Honey, you don't understand women so very well after all. I thought you did. Some of us want our happiness to suddenly burst into flower like an exquisite lily. I couldn't take any lily into a court room and have it pulled to pieces, petal by petal. That's what the judge would do—the lawyers—the reporters. Then what would I have to give you? Just a withered flower—court stained. I can't stand flowers that people have over-handled. They're different—all the heart and soul's gone out of them."

"But I wanted you in a different way—wanted to feel I had the legal right—the lawful power of possession, but you'd never give in to it."

She leant over, trailed one hand in the salt, salt water and drew it across her lips. It was the action of a woman utterly unconscious of what she was doing.

"You never said anything quite like that before. I wonder why you said it today? There's not a cloud anywhere—please don't make them."

"Clouds? There's only one cloud—your hair. It's the cloud that my dreams come through. It's good of your hair to give them passports isn't it? When your hair lies loose on the pillow I think that the bleached, white-faced, downy thing has been stitched with gold. Then I grow terrified. Am afraid that my dreams going home have knotted your hair in the pillow case and you'll have to go through life wearing a pillow instead of a hat."

She laughed—kissed him and slipped two of her fingers inside his collar.

"Aren't the silly little bits of life wonderful? The baby touches—the things that everybody else except a lover is ashamed of?"

The boat was a mere pearl half sunk in sapphire.

"I'm not ashamed of anything. I've drawn so many clean-stemmed palms into my blood I could face a universe of accusers and still keep my branches upright."

"Accusers?"

"Yes. We did a very wicked thing, as far as the eyes of the world are concerned. I was married—you were not. I left my husband standing tense and white-faced in the hall and met you at the station wearing exactly the same expression. But that look's all been wiped out now. The island's done it. With palms and parrots, and those never-grow-tired rubies on the hibiscus bushes. We knew the moment we looked at each other. There weren't any walls to the house that day. Everything was battered down flat. I knew my fate was to float on a tropical sea with you!"

She was conscious of exactly the questions he would ask and went quickly on:

"A woman always senses when a man wants her; you wanted me and I couldn't resist you. You called to me over tea cups and cock-tail glasses, and even across the top of the Spanish comb Mrs. Mercune had stuck at a hopeless angle in her hair. Every prong of that comb ran into my heart when I looked at you. I felt that everything in the room was whirling about me. The macaroons were pearl earrings that insisted on being worn—the fireplace a red-tongued dog that was begging to go for a race in the park, and oh—her voice dragged down to a whisper—"everything was different, and new and strange, and nothing had its proper shape or size, all because I saw your eyes, whistling to me from the other side of the room."

"And I thought every moment you'd be arrested for coming out in day time disguised as a night flower. I don't know what the flower is but it's got a hushed crimson to it, a secret scarlet and the purple the violets use for cushions when they kneel down to say their prayers. I suppose your dress-maker called it chiffon or something, but to me it was just one dream wrapped round another."

"Dear," she said, "a woman loves to have her dresses remembered. Now take me home. Don't talk to me—don't say anything. Just take me home. And when we get there put your big arms around me and lift me into the long wicker chair I love. I don't want to sleep because I'm not tired, but I want to drowse. If you keep your little finger linked in mine I'll feel we are actually married, and I've actually got the ring."

The white boat swerved and curved like a gull, then darted towards the hazy mist of palms that stretched a dull finger across the edge of the sea.

"You can see it already," she said, pushing aside the tangle of creepers that clouded the veranda. "It looks like something very tired coming home. I suppose even big ships get tired—just like people. It must be awful to keep on carrying a freight of hearts and emotions year after year.

They'd be enough to sink anybody—anything, even a ship. That's why ships go down so often without any tangible reason. They just can't stand it any longer."

Far, far away the bobbing speck was drawing closer and closer. It began to assume shape and form. Gave birth to trim lines and shapes that up to now had been mastered by the hazy distance.

"You're coming down of course to see her in. It's amusing. People always look at us as if we were wild animals; part of a South Sea circus. The women regard me only as something without contagion. But that's all. On an island trimmed with parrots and hibiscus, a woman with my coloring and a man with your profile doesn't stand a possible chance of a reputation. Even if we were married the ship people wouldn't believe it."

"Don't think I'll come down," he said, smiling lazily. "When I've got you, why should I worry about other people? It's always the same kind of crowd anyway—same captain—same purser and the inevitable woman who buys a string of beads at every port. I know 'em all by heart, dear."

"Selfish," she said, ruffling her hair. "Then I'll have to face that barricade of eyes alone in a simple white—"

"There isn't a woman in the world who wears white the way you do. I always think of you dressed in Easter lilies."

"Then I'll carry a scarlet parasol to counteract the funeral effect."

She tilted one as she spoke across one shoulder and went down the steps into the garden. And yet, it wasn't a garden at all, only a mere tangle of exotic colors held together in the great, green, clutching hand of the shrubbery.

Over everything towered the palms. She stood perfectly still for a moment, as though she were looking at it for the first time. Between the tracery of the creepers that clouded the veranda like curtains of carved jade, she could see the long line of the man's body in the bamboo chair. Then, for no reason at all, she began to

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