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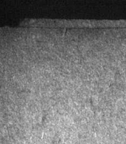

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## MORAN OF THE LADY LETTY...

By... Frank Norris...

"Yes. These are real beachcombers. I've heard of them along this coast—heard our Chinamen speak of them. They beach that junk every night and camp on shore. They're scavengers, as you might say—pick up what they can find or plunder along shore—abalones, shark fins, pickings of wrecks, old brass and copper, seals, perhaps; turtle and shell. Between whiles they fish for shrimp, and I've heard Kitchell tell how they make pearls by dropping bird shot into oysters. They are Kaigingh to a man, and, according to Kitchell, the wickedest breed of cats that ever cut teeth."

The junk bore slowly down upon the schooner. In a few moments she had hove to alongside. But for the enormous red eyes upon her bow she was innocent of paint. She was grimed and shellacked with dirt and grease and smelled abominable. Her crew were Chinamen, but such Chinamen! The coolies of the Bertha Millner were pampered and effete in comparison. The beachcombers, thirteen in number, were a smaller class of men, their faces almost black with tan and dirt. Though they still wore the cue, their heads were not shaven, and mats and mops of stiff black hair fell over their eyes from under their broad, basket shaped hats.

They were barefoot. None of them wore more than two garments, the jeans and the blouse. They were the lowest type of men Wilbur had ever seen. The faces were those of a higher order of anthropoid apes; the lower portion—jaws, lips and teeth—salient; the nostrils opening at almost right angles, the eyes tiny and bright, the forehead seamed and wrinkled, unnaturally old. Their general expression was one of simian cunning and a ferocity that was utterly devoid of courage.

"Aye!" exclaimed Moran between her teeth. "If the devil were a shepherd, here are his sheep. You don't come aboard this schooner, my friends! I want to live as long as I can and die when I can't help it. Boat ahoy!" she called.

An answer in Cantonese singsong came back from the junk, and the speaker gestured toward the outside ocean.

Then a long parleying began. For upward of half an hour Moran and Wilbur listened to a proposition in broken pigeon English made by the beachcombers again and again and yet again and were in no way enlightened. It was impossible to understand. Then at last they made out that there was question of a whale. Next it appeared the whale was dead, and, finally, after a prolonged pantomime of gesturing and pointing, Moran guessed that the beachcombers wanted the use of the Bertha Millner to trice up the dead leviathan while the oil and whalebone were extracted.

"That must be it," she said to Wilbur. "That's what they mean by pointing to our masts and tackle. You see, they couldn't manage with that stick of theirs, and they say they'll give us a third of the loot. We'll do it, mate, and I'll tell you why. The wind has fallen, and they can tow us out. If it's a sperm whale they've found there ought to be thirty or forty barrels of oil in him, let alone the blubber and bone. Oil is at $50 now, and spermaceti will always bring $100. We'll take it on, mate, but we'll keep our eyes on the rats all the time. I don't want them aboard at all. Look at their belts. Not three out of the dozen who aren't carrying those filthy little hatchets. Faugh!" she exclaimed, with a shudder of disgust. "Such vipers!"

What followed proved that Moran had guessed correctly. A rope was

*The two stood there facing each other.*

passed to the Bertha Millner, the junk put out its sweep, and to a wailing eldritch chanting the schooner was towed out of the bay.

"I wonder what Charlie and our China boys will think of this?" said Wilbur, looking shoreward, where the deserters could be seen gathered together in a silent, observing group.

"We're well shut of them," growled Moran, her thumbs in her belt. "Only now we'll never know what was the matter with the schooner these last few nights. "Hoh!" she exclaimed under her breath, her scowl thickening. "Sometimes I don't wonder the beasts cut."

The dead whale was lying four miles out of the entrance of Magdalena bay, and as the junk and the schooner drew near seemed like a huge black boat floating bottom up. Over it and upon it swarmed and clamored thousands of sea birds, while all around and below the water was thick with gorging sharks. A dreadful, strangling decay fouled all the air.

The whale was a sperm whale and fully twice the length of the Bertha Millner. The work of tricing him up occupied the beachcombers throughout the entire day. It was out of the question to keep them off the schooner, and Wilbur and Moran were too wise to try. They swarmed the forward deck and rigging like a plague of unclean monkeys, climbing with an agility and nimbleness that made Wilbur sick at his stomach. They were unlike any Chinamen he had ever seen—hideous to a degree that he had imagined impossible in a human being. On two occasions a fight developed, and in an instant the little hatchets were flashing like the flash of a snake's fangs. Toward the end of the day one of them returned to the junk screaming like a stuck pig, a bit of his chin bitten off.

Moran and Wilbur kept to the quarter deck, always within reach of the huge cutting-in spades, but the Chinese beachcombers were too elated over their prize to pay them much attention.

And indeed the dead monster proved a veritable treasure trove. By the end of the day he had been triced up to the foremast, and all hands, straining at the windlass, had raised the mighty head out of the water. The Chinamen descended upon the smooth, black body, their bare feet sliding and slipping at every step. They held on by jabbing their knives into the hide as glacier climbers do their ice picks. The head yielded barrel after barrel of oil and a fair quantity of bone. The blubber was taken aboard the junk, minced up with hatchets and run into casks.

Last of all, a Chinaman cut a hole through the "case" and, actually descending into the inside of the head, stripped away the spermaceti, clear as crystal, and packed it into buckets, which were hauled up on the junk's deck. The work occupied some two or three days. During this time the Bertha Millner was keeled over to nearly twenty degrees by the weight of the dead monster. However, neither Wilbur nor Moran made protest. The Chinamen would do as they pleased. That was said and signed. And they did not release the schooner until the whale had been emptied of oil and blubber, spermaceti and bone.

At length, on the afternoon of the third day, the captain of the junk, whose name was Hoang, presented himself upon the quarter deck. He was naked to the waist, and his bare brown torso was gleaming with oil and sweat. His cue was coiled like a snake around his neck, his hatchet thrust into his belt.

"Well?" said Moran, coming up.

Wilbur caught his breath as the two stood there facing each other, so sharp was the contrast. The man, the Mongolian, small, weazened, leather colored, secretive—a strange, complex creature, steeped in all the obscure mystery of the east, nervous, ill at ease—and the girl, the Anglo-Saxon, daughter of the northmen, huge, blonde, big boned, frank, outspoken, simple of composition, open as the day, bareheaded, her great ropes of sandy hair falling over her breast and almost to the top of her knee boots. As he looked at the two Wilbur asked himself where else but in California could such abrupt contrasts occur.

"All right," announced Hoang. "Catchum all oil, catchum all bone, catchum all same plenty many. You help catchum, now you catchum pay. Sabe?"

The three principals came to a settlement with unprecedented directness. Like all Chinamen, Hoang was true to his promises and had already set apart three and a half barrels of spermaceti, ten barrels of oil and some twenty pounds of bone as the schooner's share in the transaction. There was no discussion over the matter. He called their attention to the discharge of his obligations and hurried away to summon his men aboard and get the junk under way again.

The beachcombers returned to their junk, and Wilbur and Moran set about cutting the carcass of the whale adrift. They found it would be easier to cut away the hide from around the hooks and loops of the tackle than to unfasten the tackle itself.

"The knots are jammed hard as steel," declared Moran. "Hand up that cutting-in spade; stand by with the other and cut loose at the same time as I do, so we can ease off the strain on these lines at the same time. Ready there, cut!" Moran set free the hook in the loop of black skin in a couple of strokes, but Wilbur was more clumsy; the skin resisted. He struck at it sharply with the heavy spade. The blade hit the iron hook, glanced off and opened a large slit in the carcass below the head. A gush of entrails started from the slit, and Moran swore under breath.

"Ease away, quick there! You'll have the mast out of her next—steady! Hold your spade—what's that?"

Wilbur had nerved himself against the dreadful stench he expected would issue from the putrid monster, but he was surprised to note a pungent, sweet and spicy odor that all at once made thick the air about him. It was an aromatic smell, stronger than that of the salt ocean, stronger even than the reek of oil and blubber from the schooner's waist—sweet as incense, penetrating as attar, delicious as a summer breeze.

"It smells pretty good, whatever it is," he answered. Moran came up to where he stood and looked at the slit he had made in the whale's carcass. Out of it was bulging some kind of dull white matter marbled with gray. It was a hard lump of irregular shape and about as big as a hogshead.

Moran glanced over to the junk, some forty feet distant. The beachcombers were hoisting the lug sail. Hoang was at the steering oar.

"Get that stuff aboard," she commanded quietly.

"That!" exclaimed Wilbur, pointing to the lump.

Moran's blue eyes were beginning to gleam.

"Yes, and do it before the Chinamen see you."

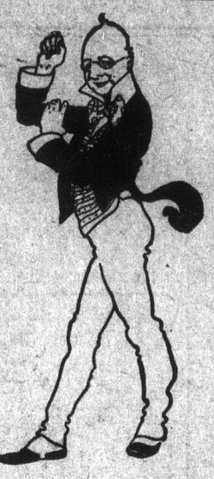
"But—but I don't understand."

Moran stepped to the quarter deck, unslung the hammock in which Wilbur slept and tossed it to him.

"Reeve it up in that. I'll pass you a line, and we'll haul it aboard. Godsend, those vermin yonder have got smells enough of their own without noticing this. Hurry, mate. I'll talk afterward."

(To Be Continued.)

Hope springs eternal in the human breast and the bald head.

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