

I was at Pagan, in Burma, and from there I took the steamer to Mandalay, but a couple of days before I got there, when the boat tied up for the night at a riverside village, I made up my mind to go ashore. The skipper told me that there was there a pleasant little club in which I had only to make myself at home; they were quite used to having strangers drop off like that from the steamer, and the secretary was a very decent chap; I might even get a game of bridge. I had nothing in the world to do, so I got into
10 one of the bullock-carts that were waiting at the landing-stage and was driven to the club. There was a man sitting on the veranda and as I walked up he nodded to me and asked whether I would have a whisky and soda or a gin and bitters. The possibility that I would have nothing at all did not even occur to him. I chose the longer drink and sat down. He was a tall, thin, bronzed man, with a big moustache, and he wore khaki shorts and a khaki shirt. I never knew his name, but when we had been chatting a little while another man came in who told me he was the
20 secretary, and he addressed my friend as George.

'Have you heard from your wife yet?' he asked him.

The other's eyes brightened.

'Yes, I had letters by this mail. She's having no end of a time.'

'Did she tell you not to fret?'

George gave a little chuckle, but was I mistaken in thinking that there was in it the shadow of a sob?

'In point of fact she did. But that's easier said than done. Of course I know she wants a holiday, and I'm glad
30 she should have it, but it's devilish hard on a chap.' He turned to me. 'You see, this is the first time I've ever been separated from my missus, and I'm like a lost dog without

took (*take, took, taken*): got on (the steamer)

steamer: boat driven by steam □ **couple**: two or three

tied up: stopped, anchored □ **riverside**: by the side of the river

made up my mind: decided □ **ashore**: on land □ **skipper**: captain; he captained (skippered) the boat

make...home: use as my home □ **used**: accustomed (to doing)

strangers: not friends □ **drop off**: arrive by chance

chap: (*informal*) fellow; guy (*Am.*)

nothing in the world: nothing at all, absolutely nothing

bullock-carts: vehicles pulled by bullocks (= *bœufs*)

landing-stage: quay, jetty □ **driven** (*drive, drove, driven*): transported □ **nodded**: moved his head up and down (here = to say "hullo" without speaking; sometimes = "yes")

bitters: in plural = liquid mixed into a drink to avoid sweetness

occur: come into his mind □ **chose** (*choose, chose, chosen*): opted for, picked □ **tall**: ≠ short

shorts: short trousers, short jeans (N.B. plural) □ **shirt**: *chemise*

chatting: talking familiarly, like friends

addressed: spoke (to him); called him (George)

heard (*hear, heard, heard*): have news (directly) e.g. by letter, phone, etc. □ **brightened**: became bright, happy

mail: post, delivery of letters □ **no end of a time**: a very good time i.e. she's enjoying herself enormously

fret: be bored, worried, bothered

chuckle: half suppressed laugh □ **mistaken**: wrong; I had made a mistake □ **shadow**: dark shape projected by the sun; here = trace, sign □ **sob**: sound made by crying painfully, bitterly

glad: pleased, content, happy, satisfied

devilish: diabolically □ **hard**: painful, difficult to bear. Note the tense after: it's the first (second etc.) time...

missus: (*informal*) wife □ **lost** (*lose, lost, lost*); that has lost its way

her.'

'How long have you been married?'

'Five minutes.'

The secretary of the club laughed.

'Don't be a fool, George. You've been married eight years.'

After we had talked for a little, George, looking at his watch, said he must go and change his clothes for dinner and left us. The secretary watched him disappear into the night with a smile of not unkindly irony.

'We all ask him as much as we can now that he's alone,' he told me. 'He mopes so terribly since his wife went home.'

'It must be very pleasant for her to know that her husband is as devoted to her as all that.'

'Mabel is a remarkable woman.'

He called the boy and ordered more drinks. In this hospitable place they did not ask you if you would have anything; they took it for granted. Then he settled himself in his long chair and lit a cheroot. He told me the story of George and Mabel.

They became engaged when he was home on leave, and when he returned to Burma it was arranged that she should join him in six months. But one difficulty cropped up after another; Mabel's father died, the war came, George was sent to a district unsuitable for a white woman; so that in the end it was seven years before she was able to start. He made all arrangements for the marriage, which was to take place on the day of her arrival, and went down to Rangoon to meet her. On the morning on which the ship was due he borrowed a motor-car and drove along to the dock. He paced the quay.

married: he has been married *to* her...; he married her
five minutes: i.e. (I've been married for) five minutes

fool: idiot; don't play the fool (idiot)! □ **married eight years:** = (for) eight years; since 1970

for a little: for a little while, for a short time

watch: instrument for telling the time □ **clothes:** what you wear (N.B. plural) □ **watched:** observed (him) closely

unkindly: ungentle, unpleasant

ask: invite □ **as much as we can:** as often as possible

mopes: is bored, unhappy because he is lonely

pleasant: agreeable, nice

devoted to her: fond of her; (he) adores, dotes on her

ordered: he ordered (the boy to bring him) more drinks

hospitable: friendly, welcoming

took it for granted: thought it was only natural □ **settled himself:** made himself comfortable □ **lit** (*light, lit, lit*) □ **cheroot:** small cigar

engaged: affianced; engaged to be married; fiancés □ **on leave:** (for soldiers and administrators) = on holiday, on vacation

join: be reunited (with him) □ **cropped up:** happened, occurred unexpectedly

unsuitable: inappropriate

start: leave, set out; the start of a race, a film, concert, etc.

arrangements: formalities, preparations

arrival: ≠ departure

meet (*met, met*) □ **ship:** big boat □ **due:** timed, scheduled

borrowed: used temporarily □ **drove** (*drive, drove, driven*)

paced: walked up and down □ **quay:** jetty, landing-stage

Then, suddenly, without warning, his nerve failed him. He had not seen Mabel for seven years. He had forgotten what she was like. She was a total stranger. He felt a terrible sinking in the pit of his stomach and his knees began to wobble. He couldn't go through with it. He must tell Mabel that he was very sorry, but he couldn't, he really couldn't marry her. But how could a man tell a girl a thing like that when she had been engaged to him for seven years and had come six thousand miles to
10 marry him? He hadn't the nerve for that either. George was seized with the courage of despair. There was a boat at the quay on the very point of starting for Singapore; he wrote a hurried letter to Mabel, and without a stick of luggage, just in the clothes he stood up in, leaped on board.

The letter Mabel received ran somewhat as follows:

Dearest Mabel,

I have been suddenly called away on business and do not know when I shall be back. I think it would be much wiser if you returned to England. My plans are very uncertain.

20 Your loving George.

But when he arrived at Singapore he found a cable waiting for him.

Quite understand. Don't worry. Love. Mabel.

Terror made him quick-witted.

'By Jove, I believe she's following me,' he said.

He telegraphed to the shipping-office at Rangoon and sure enough her name was on the passenger list of the ship that was now on its way to Singapore. There was not a moment to lose. He jumped on the train to Bangkok. But
30 he was uneasy; she would have no difficulty in finding out that he had gone to Bangkok and it was just as simple for her to take the train as it had been for him. Fortunately

without warning: unexpectedly, suddenly □ **nerve:** courage
failed him: let him down, broke, collapsed
forgotten (*forget, forgot, forgotten*): did not remember
sinking: pessimistic feeling □ **pit:** bottom
knees: *genoux* □ **wobble:** tremble □ **go through with it:** face it
sorry: sad, apologetic
marry her: get married *to* her
engaged: when you are engaged, you are someone's fiancé

either: any more than for the first solution (= *non plus*)
seized: possessed (of), suddenly endowed (with)
quay: jetty, landing-stage □ **starting:** leaving, setting out
hurried: hasty, rapid □ **stick of luggage:** piece of baggage
clothes: a suit of clothes □ **leaped:** jumped, ran quickly □ **board:** N.B. go on board a ship or a plane □ **ran** (*run, ran, run*): here = said, read □ **somewhat:** more or less
called away: ordered to go away □ **on business:** note the preposition! "Business is business"; a stroke of business (*U.*)

your loving George: = Love from George; Love. George
cable: telegram (sent by cable)
waiting for him: awaiting him
Love. Mabel: = Your loving Mabel; Love from Mabel
quick-witted: rapid-thinking; he has quick wits; he has all his wits about him = he is not easily duped

passenger list: list of passengers
on its way: sailing, *en route* (for)
lose (*lost, lost*): waste □ **jumped:** leaped, got quickly (on)
uneasy: not at ease, uncomfortable

fortunately: luckily; he was fortunate, lucky

there was a French tramp sailing next day for Saigon. He took it. At Saigon he would be safe; it would never occur to her that he had gone there; and if it did, surely by now she would have taken the hint. It is five day's journey from Bangkok to Saigon and the boat is dirty, cramped, and uncomfortable. He was glad to arrive and took a rickshaw to the hotel. He signed his name in the visitors' book and a telegram was immediately handed to him. It contained but two words: *Love. Mabel.* They were
10 enough to make him break into a cold sweat.

"When is the next boat for Hong Kong?" he asked.

Now his flight grew serious. He sailed to Hong Kong, but dared not stay there; he went to Manila; Manila was ominous; he went on to Shanghai; Shanghai was nerve-racking; every time he went out of the hotel he expected to run straight into Mabel's arms; no, Shanghai would never do. The only thing was to go to Yokohama. At the Grand Hotel at Yokohama a cable awaited him:

So sorry to have missed you at Manila. Love. Mabel.

20 He scanned the shipping intelligence with a fevered brow. Where was she now? He doubled back to Shanghai. This time he went straight to the club and asked for a telegram. It was handed to him:

Arriving shortly. Love. Mabel.

No, no, he was not so easy to catch as all that. He had already made his plans. The Yangtse is a long river and the Yangtse was falling. He could just about catch the last steamer that could get up to Chungking and then no one could travel till the following spring except by junk. Such
30 a journey was out of the question for a woman alone. He went to Hankow and from Hankow to Ichang, he changed boats here and from Ichang through the rapids went to

tramp: cargo boat without a regular route

safe: in security □ **occur:** (the idea would never) come into her mind

hint: suggestion, implication; he hinted at the idea

dirty: not clean □ **cramped:** not spacious, not roomy

glad: pleased, relieved

rickshaw: a light carriage pulled by a man

handed: given by hand; hand round the drinks at a party

but: = only (rather literary)

break (*broke, broken*) **into a cold sweat:** begin to perspire, to sweat, not from heat but from fear or panic

flight: escape, attempt to run away. Verb: *fly, flew, flown*

dared not stay: also = did not dare (to) stay: did not have the courage □ **ominous:** menacing, sinister □ **nerve-racking:** bad for the nerves; it got on his nerves

run...into: meet by chance; run into trouble

do: be possible, suitable; provide a solution

awaited him: = was waiting for him

sorry: sad, regretful □ **missed:** ≠ met, seen

scanned: read rapidly □ **intelligence:** information services □ **fevered**

brow: hot forehead, as if with a high temperature or fever □ **doubled**

back: returned, retraced his steps

shortly: very soon, presently

catch (*caught, caught*): take prisoner, trap

falling: the level of water was going down □ **catch:** be in time for (≠ miss) □ **get up to:** arrive at, reach, sail as far as

travel: move from place to place □ **junk:** oriental boat

journey: trip; voyage (on water only)

rapids: very fast part of the river

Chungking. But he was desperate now, he was not going to take any risks: there was a place called Cheng-tu, the capital of Szechuan, and it was four hundred miles away. It could only be reached by road, and the road was infested with brigands. A man would be safe there.

George collected chair-bearers and coolies and set out. It was with a sigh of relief that he saw at last the crenellated walls of the lonely Chinese city. From those walls at sunset you could see the snowy mountains of
10 Tibet.

He could rest at last: Mabel would never find him there. The consul happened to be a friend of his and he stayed with him. He enjoyed the comfort of a luxurious house, he enjoyed his idleness after that strenuous escape across Asia, and above all he enjoyed his divine security. The weeks passed lazily one after the other.

One morning George and the consul were in the courtyard looking at some curios that a Chinese had brought for their inspection when there was a loud
20 knocking at the great door of the Consulate. The door-man flung it open. A chair borne by four coolies entered, advanced, and was set down. Mabel stepped out. She was neat and cool and fresh. There was nothing in her appearance to suggest that she had just come in after a fortnight on the road. George was petrified. He was as pale as death. She went up to him.

'Hullo, George, I was so afraid I'd missed you again.'

'Hullo, Mabel,' he faltered.

He did not know what to say. He looked this way and
30 that: she stood between him and the doorway. She looked at him with a smile in her blue eyes.

'You haven't altered at all,' she said. 'Men can go off so

desperate: filled with despair

four hundred miles away: N.B. no preposition in English

reached: arrived at, got to

safe: in security, out of danger

collected: recruited, gathered **chair-bearers:** men who carry

others on chairs **sigh of relief:** breath of relaxation after tension

lonely: solitary, remote, isolated

sunset: evening, when the sun was going down, was setting

snowy: like snow

rest: relax; have a rest

happened to be: was by chance (a friend)

enjoyed: took pleasure (in)

idleness: = farniente, inactivity **strenuous:** tiring **escape:** flight

lazily: idly, unenergetically

courtyard: open place inside a house **curios:** small decorative objects

knocking: loud tapping to attract attention

flung (*fling, flung, flung*): opened wide **borne** (*bear, bore, borne*): carried **set** (*set, set, set*): placed

neat: tidy, well dressed **cool:** ≠ hot **fresh:** ≠ tired

fortnight: two weeks (origin = fourteen nights)

pale as death: = white as a ghost; as pale as could be

missed: failed to meet, not managed to meet (you)

faltered: said in an uncertain, trembling voice

this way and that: in all directions

stood (*stand, stood, stood*) **doorway:** entrance to the house

altered: changed (for the better or for the worse) **go off:**

dreadfully in seven years and I was afraid you'd got fat and bald. I've been so nervous. It would have been terrible if after all these years I simply hadn't been able to bring myself to marry you after all.'

She turned to George's host.

'Are you the consul?' she asked.

'I am.'

'That's all right. I'm ready to marry him as soon as I've had a bath.'

10 And she did.

change for the worse **dreadfully**: terribly **fat**: ≠ thin, slim

bald: with no hair left on your head

bring myself: force, persuade myself; find the courage

host: the person who gives hospitality (≠ a guest, who receives hospitality) **consul**: person in charge of the consulate, the consular service

ready: prepared (≠ unready, unprepared)

have a bath: N.B. verb *have* in: have a wash, a cup of tea, breakfast, lunch, dinner, etc.