



Messer Marco Polo

By DONN BYRNE

Drawings by C. B. FALLS



V

THE times went by, and Marco Polo busied himself with his daily affairs, keeping track of the galleasses with merchandise to strange far-away ports, buying presents for refractory governors who did n't care for foreign trade in their domains, getting wisdom from the old clerks, and knowledge from the mariners; in the main, acting as the son of a great house.

You would think that he would have forgotten what the sea-captain of China told him about Golden Bells, what with work and sport and other women near him. You would think that would drop out of his memory like an old rime. But it stuck there, as an old rime sometimes sticks, and by dint of thinking he had her fast now in his mind—so fast, so clear, so full of life, that she might be some one he had seen an hour ago or was going to see an hour from now. He would think of the now merry, now sad eyes of her, and the soft, sweet voice of her by reason of which they called her Golden Bells, and the dusky little face, and the hair like black silk, and the splotch of the red flower in it. She was as distinct to him as the five fingers on his hand. It was n't only she was clear in his mind's eye, but she was inside of him, closer than his heart. She was there when the sun rose, so he would be saying, "It 's a grand day is in it surely, Golden Bells."

She was there in the dim counting-house, and he going over the great intricate ledgers the clerks do be posting carefully with quills of the gray goose, so that he would be saying: "I wonder where this is and that is. Sure I had my finger on it only a moment ago, Golden Bells." And when the dusk was falling, and the bats came out, and the quiet of Christ was over everything, and the swallows flew low on the great canals, she would be beside him, and never a word would he say to her, so near to him would she be.

And she wrought strangeness between him and the women he knew, the great grave lady with the large, pale mouth, her that was of his mind, and the little black cloak-maker with the eager, red mouth, her that was closer than mind or heart to him. The first found fault with his poetry.

"I don't know what 's come over you, Marco Polo,"—and there was a touch of temper in her voice,—“but these poems of yours show me you have n't your mind on your subject. Would you mind telling me when I had bound black hair?” she says. “And you say my bosom is like two little russet apples. Now, a regular poet once compared it to two great silver cups, and that was a good comparison, though in truth,” she says, “he knew as little about it as you. And my hands are not like soft Eastern

flowers. They're like lilies. I don't know where you do be getting these Eastern comparisons," she says. "But I don't like them. Tell me, pretty boy,"—she looks suspicious,—“you have n't been taking any of the strange Egyptian drugs the dark people do be selling in the dim shops on the quiet canals? Look out, pretty boy! look out!"

And the little cloak-maker grumbled when he was gone. "I don't know what's wrong with him," says she. "Or maybe it's something that's wrong with myself, but this delicate love is n't all it's cracked up to be. It's all right in books," she says, "and it's a grand sight, and the players doing it; but I like a hug," she says, "would put the breath out of you; and a kiss," she says, "you could feel in the soles of your feet." And she lay awake and grumbled. "Let him be taking his la-di-da courting to those as favor it," says she. "It's not my kind." And she grumbled through the lonely night. "I wonder where my husband is now," she said. "And was n't I the foolish girl to be sending him off! Sure, he drank like a fish and beat me something cruel, but he was the rare lover, and the mood on him. Sure, a woman never knows when she's well off," says she.

And Marco Polo did n't miss them any more nor you'd miss an old overcoat and the winter past. All his mind was on was the Golden Bells of China. And he thought long until his uncle and father came, so that he could be off with them to the strange Chinese land.

"But there's no use to me going there," says he. "I could n't marry her. She would laugh at me," he says. "She, who refused the son of

the King of Siam, with his hundred princes on a hundred elephants, what use would she have for me, who's no better nor a peddler with his pack? But it would be worth walking the world barefoot for to see that little golden face, to hear the low, sweet voice they call Golden Bells."

They came back in due time, his Uncle Matthew, the red, hairy man, and his father, the thin, dark man who knew precious stones. And he told them he wanted to go with them when they made their next expedition to China.

"We could be using you, after your training in trade," says the father. But Marco Polo could take no interest in barter. "Sure, you'd better come along," says his Uncle Matthew. "There's great sport to be had on the road, kissing and courting the foreign women and not a word of language between you, barring a smile and a laugh."

"I have no interest in the foreign women, Uncle Matthew."

"Then it's the horses you've been hearing about, the fine Arab horses faster nor the wind, and the little Persian ponies they do be playing polo on, and the grand Tatar hunters that can jump the height of a man, and they sure-footed as a goat. Ah, the horses, the bonny horses!"

"Ah, sure, Uncle Matthew, 't is little I know of horses. Sure, I know all about boats, racing and trade and war-boats, but a horse is not kin to me."

"Then what the hell's the use of your going to China?"

"Ah, sure, that's the question I'm asking myself, Uncle Matthew. But I have to go. I do so. There is



something calling me, Uncle Matthew—a bell in my ear, father's brother, and there's a ringing bell in my heart."

VI

I shall now tell you how it came about that Marco Polo went to China with his uncle and father, though he had no eye for a bargain, or interest in courting the foreign women, or sense of horses.

Now, as you may know, this was a great religious time. The Crusaders, feeling shame that the Sepulchre of the Lord Jesus should be in Saracen hands, had come with horse, foot, and artillery to Palestine to give tribute of arms to Him who had died for them on the Bitter Tree. And great feats were performed and grand battles won. And kings became saints, like Louis of France, and saints became kings, like Baldwin of Constantinople. Mighty wonders were seen and miracles performed, so that people said, "Now will be the second coming of Christ and the end of the world."

And a great desire came on the Christian people to tell the truth of Christ to the strange and foreign peoples of the world. So that every day out of Jerusalem you would see friars hitting the road, some of them to confront the wizards of the Land of Darkness, and some to argue theology with the old lamas of Tibet, and some to convert the sunny Southern islands, where the young women do be letting down their hair and the men do be forgetting God for them. And all over the world there was spreading a great rumor that the truth of all things was at last known.

Even Kublai Khan had heard of it

far off in China, and he had charged the uncle and father of Marco with a message to the Pope of Rome. Let the pope be sending some theologians to his court, and they'd argue the matter out; and if he was satisfied that this new religion was the true religion, then he'd turn Christian and tell his people to turn Christian, too. And let them be bringing back some of the Oil of the Lamp which burns in the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem and is a cure for all the ills in the world.

And when they came to the city of Acre, sure the pope was dead. And they waited a long time, but no new pope was chosen, so they decided to go back, because they had a good business there, and they did n't want to lose it. And yet they knew there'd be trouble with the Grand Khan, if they did n't bring back the news of the true religion and people to argue it.

"I've been a long time trading," says Nicolo, "and it's a queer thing, but the more trading you do, the less religion you have. The arguing of religion would not come easy to me. And I'd be up against experts. I'm not the man for it," says he. "How about you, Matthew?"

"Oh, sure, they'd never listen to me," Matthew laughs—"me that's drank with them, and deludhered their women, and gambled until I left them nothing but the sweat of their brows. I'd be a great one to preach religion to them. Why, man, they'd laugh at me. But I tell you what, Nicolas. There's a bishop in Negropont, and I know where he lives, and I know his house and everything. What do you say, Nicolas? We'll just throw a bag over his head and tie him on a horse. Oh, sure, he'd give grand discourses to the Great Khan!"



"Have sense, Matthew; have sense. You're always too rough; always ready to end an argument with a knife, or just lift what you want. Have sense, man; you can't kidnap a bishop like you'd kidnap a woman."

"Well, I don't see why not," says Matthew. "It would be easier, too, because a woman will scratch like a wildcat. But if you're set against it, I won't do it," he says. "Well, then, how about young Marco?"

"My sound man Matthew! my bully fellow! Sure you were never a loss yet! Young Marco it is; sure, 't is the elegant idea. There's not a man born of woman is better for the job."

Now, all the Christian world had gone religious, and young Marco was no exception; for 't is not only the old are religious. The young are, too; but there's a difference. The religion of old men is reason and translation; the religion of the young is just a burning cloud. The tragedy of the Bitter Tree is not a symbol to them, but a reality, and their tears are not of the spirit, but of the body, too.

And there are no half-way houses, no compromises, in a young man's creed. It's swallow all, or be damned to you! It's believe or be lost.

And thinking over the little girl in the Chinese garden, there had come into Marco's heart a thought past enduring. If little Golden Bells did not believe, then little Golden Bells was lost. She might have everything in this world in this life, an emperor for a father, kings for suitors, a great poet for a minstrel, a wizard for an entertainer; but once the little blue shadow left her body, she was lost forever. And the sight came to him of lit-



tle Golden Bells going down the dim and lonely alleys of death, and weeping, weeping, weeping . . . Her eyes would be shot with panic, and the little mouth twisted, and the little flowery hands twitching at each other. And it would be cold there for her who was so warm, and it would be dark there for her who loved light, and the Golden Bells of her voice would be lost in the whistling and clanging of the stars as they swung by in their orbits. He to be in the great delight of paradise, and she to be in the blue-gray maze between the worlds—what tragedy!

Kings might bring her presents, a husband might bring her happiness; but if he could only bring her salvation! If he could only tell her of the Bitter Tree!

The body, when you came to think of it, mattered little. All the beauty in the world could not endure more than its appointed span. Helen was dust now, and Deirdre nothing. What had become of the beauty of Semiramis, Alexander's darling; and Cleopatra, who loved the great proconsul; and Bathsheba, for whom David of the Psalms fell from grace? And Balkis, queen of Sheba, with her apes, ivory, and peacocks? Dust and ashes! dust and ashes! And Scheherazade was but a strange, sad sound. Beauty increased and waned like the moon—a little shadow around the eyes, a little crinkle in the neck, the backs of the hands stiffening like parchment. Dust and ashes, dust and ashes!

But the little blue shadow would glow like an Easter morning. Or it would be a poor, lonely, unlit shadow in the cold gloom of the clanging worlds.

Poor Golden Bells! Poor little weeping Golden Bells! If he could only tell her about the Bitter Tree!

And then what happens but his Uncle Matthew claps him on the back.

"How would you like to go to China, Marco Markeen," says he, "and preach religion to the benighted people?"

"How did you know, Uncle Matthew?"

"How did I know what?"

"That I wanted to go to China and preach religion to the—the people!"

"Well, if that does n't beat Banagher," says Matthew Polo, "and Banagher beats the devil! Tell me, did you ever hear an old tune called 'Bundle and Go!'"

And so the three of them leave upon their journey, but at Layas, where the King of Armenia had his castle, they heard of the election of a new pope, so they came back to Acre to get his instructions and blessing.

VII

The pope said a grand mass for them, and at the gospel he enters the pulpit, a burly figure of a man with sad eyes.

"The blessing of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost be with you and about you, Amen.

"It is not to you, Nicolo Polo, that I wish to speak, nor to you, Matthew Polo, for neither of you are my ambassadors to the Great Khan. Merchant and sportsman, I honor you, and you have my blessing, but you have no hopes of mine. The dirty diversions of the world are between your eyes and glory," said he. "It's only myself, an old and sorrowful man, and this child, a young and hopeful one, can understand; old men having sight of visions, and young men dreaming dreams . . .

"Now in the matter of converting the Great Khan and his numerous millions, first let wisdom speak. I

have little hopes. He wants to be argued into it, you see. Religion is not a matter of argument. It is a wisdom that surpasses wisdom. It drifts in men's souls as the foggy dew comes unbidden to the trees. It is born before our soul, as the horned moon is born before our eyes.

"And now, my child, you might say, 'What is the use of his sending me to China if he knows I cannot bring these millions into the fold?' My dear son, there is the wisdom surpassing wisdom. A great and noble thought must not die. Things of the spirit we cannot reckon as a husbandman reckons his crops. There is a folk on the marches of Europe, and they are ever going into battle, and they always fall. Their results are nothing. But their name and their glory will endure forever . . .

"My dear son, God has put wisdom in my head and beauty into yours. Wisdom is needed for the governance of this world, but beauty is needed for its existence. In arid deserts there is no life. Birds do not sing in the dark of night. Show me a waste country, and I'll show you a brutal people. No faith can live that is not beautiful . . .

"The beauty God has put in your heart, child, you must always keep . . . How much I think of it I'll tell you. I'm an old man now, an old and broken man, and in a few years I'll stand before my Master.

"What have you seen on my earth,' He'll ask me, 'you who followed Peter!'

"Lord! Lord! I'll tell Him, 'I've seen mighty things. I've seen the bridegroom leave his bride and the king his kingdom, the huckster leave his booth, and the reaper drop

his hook, that they might rescue your holy sepulcher from pagan hands.'

"And anything else?" He'll ask.

"And I've seen a young man go out into the desert, and over his head was a star . . .'

"You may think you have failed, child, but remember that in the coming times your name and fame will awaken beauty, and many's the traveler on the hard road will find his courage again, and he thinking of Marco Polo. And many's the young man will dream dreams, and many's the old man will see visions, and they reading the book by the golden candle-light; and many's the young girl will give you love, and you dead for centuries. But for this you must keep your dream.

"Now you'll think it's the queer pope I am to be telling you things like this instead of demanding converts. But the wisdom that surpasses wisdom comes to you with the Anointing of the Oil. 'I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago,' writes Saint Paul, '(whether in the body I cannot tell, or whether out of the body I cannot tell. God knoweth.)

"How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words that is not lawful for a man to utter.'

"Now you see there is a wisdom surpassing wisdom, and it is out of this fount of wisdom I am drawing when I speak to you these words.

"Child, I will not keep you any longer. Only to say this, and this is the chiefest thing: never let your dream be taken from you. Keep it unspotted from the world. In darkness and in tribulation it will go with you as a friend; but in wealth and power hold fast to it, for then is dan-

ger. Let not the mists of the world, the gay diversions, the little trifles, draw you from glory. Remember!

"Si oblitus fuero tui Jerusalem,—
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,—

*Oblivioni detur dextera mea,—*let my right hand forget her cunning.—

*Adhaereat lingua mea faucibus meis, si non meminero tui,—*if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth—

*Si non proposuero Jerusalem, in principis laetitiae meae,—*if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

"I shall now send a prayer to Heaven," he said, "to keep you safe in the strange foreign ways, to protect you against wind and tempest, against pestilence and sudden death, against the powers of darkness, and him who goes up

and down the world for the ruin of souls."

And he turned to the high altar again, and now you'd hear his voice loud and powerful, and now low and secret, and the bell struck, and the acolyte intoned the responses, and all of a sudden he turned and spread forth his hands.

"Ite! Let you be going now. Missa est."



VIII

And so they set forth with their great train of red, snarling camels and little patient donkeys and slender, nervous horses toward the rising sun. Behind them the green hills of Palestine died out as a rainbow dies out, and now there was sand before them, and now bleak mountains, and by day the wind was swift and hot and by night it was black and cold. And moons were born and died . . .

And they passed through the land of the King of Armenia, and they passed Ararat, the mountain where Noë brought his ark to anchor, and where it still is, and where it can be seen still, but cannot be reached, so cold and high and terrible is that mountain.



And they passed ruined Babel, that was built of Nimrod, the first king of the world, and now is desolation. They passed it on a waning moon. And out of the ruins the dragons came and hissed at them, and strange, obscene birds flapped their wings in the air and pecked at them, and over the desert the satyr called unto her mate.

And they passed through the Kingdom of Georgia, whose kings are born with the mark of an eagle on their right shoulder. They passed through Persia, where the magicians worship fire. And they passed through the city of Saba, where sleep the three magi who came to worship at Jerusalem, and their names were Kaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior.

And they passed through Camadi, where great ruins are and robbers roam through the magical darkness. And they passed northward of the Perilous Valley, where the Devil's Head is in black stone, and that is one of the nine entrances to hell; and passed the Valley of the Cockadrills, where there are serpents five fathoms in length; and passed the Valley of Cruel Women, who have precious stones in place of eyes . . .

And they went through the Dismal Desert, where no stream sang . . .

And in the desert they passed the Trees of the Sun and Moon, which speak with the voices of men. And it

was from the Speaking Tree that Alexander heard of his death. And it was near there that he and Darius fought. And they passed the *Arbre Sec*, the Dry Tree, which has a green bark on one side and white on the other, and there are no trees within a hundred miles of that tree, and it is sprung from the staff of Adam.

And they passed through Balkh, the Mother of Cities. And they passed through Taihan, where the great salt mountains are. And they passed through Badashan, where the mountains of the rubies are. And they passed through Kashmir, whose women are very beautiful, and whose magicians weave the strongest spells in the world . . .

And moons were born and died . . .

And they came to Alamoot, the fortress of *Senex de Monte*, the Old Man of the Mountain, the King of the Assassins, the greatest wizard of all time . . .

Now this is the tale told of the Old Man of the Mountain.

Whenever within his dominions there was a fine young horseman, the



Old Man would put a spell on him and draw him to the Castle of Alamoot, and outside of the castle sleep would come on him. And when he woke up, he would be inside the castle, in the wonderful gardens. And they'd tell him he was dead and in paradise. And paradise it would be for him, what with the lovely women and the great playing on the flutes, the birds singing, and the sun shining, the crystal rivers and the flowers of the world. And after a while the Old Man of the Mountain would call for him, and tell him he was sending him back on earth again on a mission to punish Such-and-

Such. And the Old Man would put sleep on him and a knife in his hand, and when he woke he would be outside the Castle of Alamoot. And he would start on his mission. And when he came back he would be readmitted to paradise. And if he did n't come back, there were others to take his place.

The Old Man of the Mountain always kept one hundred and one assassins and four hundred and four women to tend them.

Now when the caravan of the Polos had come to rest for the day, the Old Man of the Mountain put out white, not black, magic, and he drew Marco Polo to the castle as a magnet draws a needle. And Marco Polo galloped up to the castle in the waning moon, and the Old Man looked down on him from the battlements and stroked his long white beard.

"Do you know me, Marco Polo?"

"I know you and I have no fear of you, Old Man of the Mountain."

"And why have you no fear of me, Marco Polo?"

"Because the cross of the Lord Jesus is between me and harm. Because it protects me night and day."

"I know Eesa ben-Miriam," said the Old Man. "He was a great prophet. But whether he would have protected you from me, we will differ about that. I've often thought of you, Marco Polo, and you coming this way. I could have used you in my work of keeping the kings and chieftains of the world in fear and subjection."

"Then why am n't I in your garden, Old Man of the Mountain?"

"The four most beautiful women in the world are in my garden. There is a tall, black-haired woman, and she is fairer and more adroit than Lilith,

who was before Eve; and there is a tall, blond woman, and she is like a queen; and there is a slim, copper-colored woman, and she is like an idol in a shrine; and there is a little brown-haired woman, and she is like a child. But none of those women could make you believe you were in paradise while there's a face in your heart. Not the cross of the Lord Jesus is between you and me, but the face of little Golden Bells of China."



"But I am not going to China to woo Golden Bells, Old Man of the Mountain. I am going to convert the men of Cathay."

The Old Man of the Mountain laughed, and stroked his beard.

"You had a sermon from Gregory before you came away. Did he tell you you were to convert the men of Cathay?"

"He did not."

"Ah, Gregory's a sound man. He knew you can't make saints in a day. Why, child, I've seen the beginning of the world, and I've seen the end of it. I've seen the beginning in a crystal glass, and I've seen the end in a pool of ink in a slave's hand. I've seen mankind begin lower nor the gibbering ape, and I've seen them end the shining sons of God. Millions on millions



on millions of years, multiplied unto dizziness, crawling, infinitesimal work, overcoming nature, overcoming themselves, overcoming the princes of the powers of darkness, one of whom I am. But this is too deep for you, Marco Polo. Now, you can go on your way without hindrance from me, Marco Polo, because of the memory of an old time,

when the courting of a woman was more to me than the killing of a man, when beauty meant more nor power.

"Let you be on your way, Marco Polo, while I sit here a lonely old man, with wee soft ghosts whispering to him. Let you be hastening on your way before I remember I am a prince of the powers of darkness and should do you harm . . ."

X

And so they went on eastward, ever eastward, and the moons were born, grew, waned, and died . . .

They passed through Khotan, where the divers bring up jade from the rivers, white jade and black jade, and green jade veined with gold. They passed through Camal, the shameful city, whose women are fair and wanton, whose men are cuckolds. And they passed through the province of Chitingolos, where are the mountains of the Salamanders. They passed through the city of Campicha, where there are more idols than men. And they passed through the great city of Samarkand, where the Green Stone is on which Timur's throne was set . . . And moons were born and died . . .



They passed through Tangut, where the men will not carry the dead out through the door of a house, but must break a hole in the wall. And they passed through Kialehta, where there are snow-white camels. And they passed through the lands of Prester John.

And now they were in the Tatar lands. There passed them lowing musk oxen. There passed them the wild asses of Mongolia. There passed them the barbarians, with their great

tents on wheels. There passed them the black-jowled, savage idolaters. There passed them the pretty white-faced women. There passed them huge, abominable dogs.

And they came to the town of Lob, and a new moon arose, and they entered the Desert of the Singing Sands.

XI

Wherever they went now was sand, and a dull haze that made the sun look like a copper coin. And a great silence fell on the caravan, and nothing was heard but the crunch of the camels' pads and the tinkle of the camels' bells. And no green thing was seen.

And a great terror fell on the caravan, so that one night a third of the caravan deserted. The rest went on in silence under the dull sun. And now they came across a village of white skeletons grinning in the silent sand. And at night there was nothing heard, not even the barking of a dog. And others of the caravan deserted, and others were lost.

And now they had come so far into the desert that they could not return, but must keep on their way, and on the fifth day they came to the Hill of the Drum. And all through the night they could not sleep for the booming of the Drum. And some of the caravan went mad there, and fled screaming into the waste.

And now there was only a great haze about them, and they looked at one another with terror, saying: "Were we ever any place where green was, where birds sang, or there was sweet water? Or maybe we are dead. Or maybe this was all our life, and the pleasant towns, and the lamplight in the villages, and the apricots in the garden, and our wives and children,



When a burning wind came, and the sand rose,
and the desert heeled like a ship.

maybe they were all a dream that we woke in the middle of. Let us lie down and sleep that we may dream again."

But Marco Polo would not let them lie down, for to lie down was death. But he drove them onward. And again they complained: "Surely God never saw this place that He left it so terrible. Surely He was never here. He was never here."

And now that their minds were pitched to the height of madness, the warlocks of the desert took shape and jeered at them, and the white-sheeted ghosts flitted alongside of them, and the goblins of the Gobi harried them from behind. And the sun was like dull copper through the haze, and the moon like a guttering candle, and stars there were none.

And when the moon was at its full, they came to the Hill of the Bell. And through the night the Bell went *gongh, gongh, gongh*, until they could feel it in every fiber of their bodies, and their skin itched to screaming with it. They would stop their ears. But they would hear it in the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet. *Gongh, gongh, gongh*.

And when they left the Hill of the Bell there were only six of the caravan left, and a multitude of white-sheeted ghosts. And the caravan plodded onward dully. And now the warlocks of the desert played another cruelty. Afar off they would put a seeming of a lake, and the travelers would press on gladly, crying: "There is water! water! God lives! God lives!" But there was only sand. And now it would be a green vision, and they would cry: "We have come to the edge of the desert. After the long night, dawn. God lives! God lives!" But there

would be only sand, sand. And now it would be a city of shining domes in the distance. And they would nudge one another and croak, "There are men there, brother, secure streets, and merchants in their booths; people to talk with, and water for our poor throats." But there would be only sand, sand, sand. . . . And they would cry like children. "God is dead! Have n't you heard? Don't you know? God is dead in His heaven, and the warlocks are loosed on the land!"

And on the last day of the moon they were all but in sight of the desert's edge, though they did n't know. And the goblins and the warlocks took counsel, for they were now afraid Marco and his few people would escape. They gathered together and they read the runes of the Flowing Sand.

And suddenly the camels rushed screaming into the desert with sudden panic, and a burning wind came, and the sands rose, and the desert heeled like a ship, and the day became night.

And young Marco Polo could stand no more. That was the end, the end of him, the end of the world, the end of everything. There was red darkness everywhere, and he could see nobody. "O my Lord Jesus!" he cried. "O little Golden Bells!" The wind boomed like an organ. The sand screamed. "O my Lord Jesus! O little Golden Bells!" And the voices of his father and uncle were like the tweeting birds. "Where 's the lad, Matthew? Where 's our lad?" "Mark, Mark, where have you got to? Lad of our heart, where are you?" But they could n't find each other. The sand buffeted them like shuttlecocks. "Boy Mark!" The sand snarled like a dog; the wind hammered like drums. "O

Golden Bells! O little Golden Bells!
O my Lord Jesus, must it end here?"

And the fight went out of him, and
a big sob broke in him, and he lay
down to die . . .

XII

I shall now tell you of Golden Bells,
and her in the Chinese garden.

XIII

I would have you now see her as I
see her, standing before Li Po, the
great poet, in her green costume. And Li Po, big, fat,
with sad eyes and a twisted
mouth, uncomfortable as
bedamned. The sun shone
in the garden, the butterflies, the red
and black and golden butterflies, flitted
from blossom to blossom. And the
bees droned. And on the banks of the
green lake the kingfisher tunneled his
wee house, and the wind shook the
blossoms of the apple-trees. And Li
Po sat on the marble slab and was
very uncomfortable. And in a dark
bower was *Sanang*, the magician,
brooding like an owl. And Golden
Bells stood before Li Po, and there
were hurt tears in her eyes.

"Did my father or I ever do any-
thing to you, Li Po, that you should
make a song such as they sing in the
market-place?"

"What song?"

"The Song of the Cockatoo."

"I don't remember."

"I'll remind you, Li Po. 'There
alighted on the balcony of the King
of Annam,' the song goes, 'a red cocka-
too. It was colored as a peach-tree-
blossom and it spoke the tongue of
men. And the King of Annam did to
it what is always done to the learned
and eloquent. He took a cage with

stout bars, and shut it up inside.' And
was n't that the cruel thing to write!
And are you so imprisoned here, Li
Po? Ah, Li Po, I'm thinking hard of
you, I'm thinking hard."

"Well, now, Golden Bells, to tell
you the truth, there was no excuse for
it. But oftentimes I do be feeling
sad, and thinking of the friends of my
youth who are gone. Yuan Chen,
who might have been a better poet nor
me if he had been spared; and H'sien-
yang and Li Chien, too. Ah, they
were great poets, Golden Bells. They
never sang a poor song, Golden Bells,
that they might wear a fine coat. And
they'd write what was true, wee mis-
tress, were all the world to turn from
them. And I'm the laureate now,
the court singer, living in my glory,
and they're dead with their dreams.
I'm the last of the seven minstrels.
And, wee Golden Bells, I do be think-
ing long.

"And sometimes an old woman in
the street or a man with gray in his
hair will lift a song, and before the
words come to me, there's a pain in
my heart.

"And I go down to the drinking-
booths, and the passion of drinking
comes on me—a fury
against myself and a fury
against the world. And
the folk do be following
me to see will I let drop
one gem of verse that they
can tell their grandchildren they heard
from the lips of Li Po. And when my
heart is high with the drinking, I take
a lute from a traveling poet, and not
knowing what I'm saying, I compose
the song. Out of fallow sorrow bloom
the little songs. You must n't be hard
on an old man, wee Golden Bells, and
he thinking long for his dead friends."





I hear drums calling the Gatar tribes... I
hear the slap of saddles.

"Ah, poor Li Po," she said, and she had grown all soft again. "Is it so terrible to be old?"

"Now you asked me a question, Golden Bells, and I'll give you an answer. Besides, it's part of my duties to teach you wisdom. Now, it is not a terrible thing, at all, at all, to be old. I see the young folk start out in life, and before them there's the showers of April, there's wind and heat and thunder and lightning. But I'm in warm, brown October, and all of it's gone by me. And in a little while I'll sleep, and 't is I need it, God help me! The old don't sleep much, wee Golden Bells, so 't is a comfort to look forward to one's rest after the hardness of the world. In a hundred or more years or five hundred, just as the fancy takes me, I'll wake up for a while and wander down the world to hear the people singing my songs, and then I'll go back to my sleep."

And she was going to ask him another question when the *Sanang* came up. The magician was a thick man with merry eyes and a cruel mouth.

"Golden Bells," he says, "there's rare entertainment in the crystal glass."

"What is it, *Sanang*?"

"The warlocks of the Gobi have a young lad down, and they're waiting until the soul comes out of his body. Come, I'll show you."

And in the crystal glass he showed her Marco Polo, and the knees going from under him in the roaring sands. She gave a quick cry of pity.

"Oh, the poor lad!"

Sanang chuckled. "He started out with a big caravan to preach what he thought was a truth to China. I've been watching him all along, and it's

been rare sport. I knew it would come to this."

"Could n't you save him, *Sanang*?" she cried. "O *Sanang*, he's so young, and he set out to come to us. Could not you save him?"

"Well, I might." *Sanang* was not pleased. "It'll be a while before the shadow comes out of him. But it would be rare sport to watch and to see the warlocks and the ghouls and the goblins set on it the way terriers do be setting on an otter."

"Oh, save him, *Sanang*! Save him!"

"Now, Golden Bells, I might be able to save, and again I might n't," said *Sanang*.

"Save him, *Sanang*!" Li Po broke in. "Save him the way the wee one wants. For if you don't, *Sanang*, I'll write a song about you that'll be remembered for generations, and they will point out your grandchildren and your grandchildren's grandchildren, and they'll laugh and sing Li Po's song:

"There was a fat worm who considered himself a serpent—"

"Oh, now, Li Po, for God's sake, let you not be composing poems on me, for 't is you have the bitter tongue. Promise me now, and I'll save him. We'll send for the keeper of the khan's drums."

And they sent for the keeper, and *Sanang* gave a message to be put on the Speaking Drums.

"Let you now," he told his helper, "get me the Distant Ears."

And the helper brought him the Golden Ears, which were the like of a great bird's wings, and he put them on his head and he listened.

"I hear the drums of the battlements," he said, ". . . and I hear the Drums of the Hill of Graves . . ."

And he listened a while, and Golden Bells was white.

"I hear the Drums of the Dim Mountain," . . . and for a while he said nothing.

"Those would be the drums of Yung Chang . . ."

"I hear the Drums of Kia Yu Kwan," he said.

"Yes, *Sanang*, yes." Little Golden Bells was one quiver of fear.

"I hear the Drums of the Convent of the Red Monks," said *Sanang*. "I hear drums calling the Tatar tribes . . . I hear the slap of saddles. I hear the jingle of bits . . . I hear galloping ponies . . ."

"Yes, *Sanang*. Oh, hurry, *Sanang*! hurry!"

He listened a little while longer, and then he took off the Distant Ears.

"Your man 's saved," he said.

Then little Golden Bells laughed and

then she cried. She caught Li Po's hand and laughed again and again she cried. *Sanang* shook his head to get out of his ears the deafening noises of the world. And Li Po smiled out of his sad eyes.

"I think I'll go and write a marriage-song, Golden Bells."

"Whom will you write the marriage-song for, Li Po?"

"I'll write it for you, Golden Bells."

"But I'm not going to be married, Li Po. There is no one. I love no one, Li Po. I do not. I do not, indeed."

"Then take your lute and sing me the 'Song of the Willow Branches,' which is the saddest song in the world."

She shook her head, and blushed.

"I cannot sing that song, Li Po. I don't feel like singing that song."

"Then I must write you another song, little Golden Bells . . ."

(The end of the second part of Messer Marco Polo)



The Wise Woman

By SARA TEASDALE

She must be rich who can forego
An hour so jeweled with delight;
She must have treasuries of joy
That she can draw on day and night;

She must be sure of heaven itself.
Or is it only that she feels
How much more safe it is to lack
A thing that fate so often steals?