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THE LIBERAL SHORT STORY

RED SEA ROMANCE

By Edmund Leamy

The young man leaning over the rail of the P. & O. liner as slowly it pulled out of Tilbury Dock, was running away from himself, because if he had known it he would not have been running away. Terry Marquis was that kind. None-the-less he was running away from himself, a smashed fortune, and Gloria Robbins.

The smashed fortune hadn't mattered so much. What had mattered was Gloria's golden coldness when the blow fell. For all of her background and bearing, Gloria's little rounded chin, with the dimple in it, was what sports writers call "glass". She couldn't take it. And the "it" was Terry without a bankroll that makes the wheels go round.

"I'm terribly, terribly sorry," Gloria said, prettily.

There was music at the moment and the dancers on the floor were like high-plumed flowers swaying in a synthetic wind. "I'm terribly, terribly sorry," Gloria said.

"That's all right, kid," Terry said. His voice had a funny, stranger ring amid the clink of silver, and the battle of laughter, and the swing of the music in one of the most favored night spots in New York.

"Scotch and soda, two," Terry said to the waiter.

Gloria and he had another drink. "But Africa! Of all places!" Gloria said.

"Yep," Terry said and stirred his glass. He liked the sound of the glass against glass. It was brittle, like life. "Africa of all places. Teddy Farnsworth told me what I can do out there. I can buy a shamba and raw coffee, and stand on my own feet. It'll be funny for Terry Marquis to stand on his own feet." He didn't look at the girl beside him. His eyes were on the dancers. "Funny—and great. Sorry you won't come along."

"Don't be a damned fool," said Gloria.

And that is why Terry Marquis

was leaning over the rail of a P. & O. liner as it pulled out of Tilbury dock in London, a few weeks later, early in 1916.

Early in 1916 coffee shambas in Africa could be picked up for a quarter of their value, for their owners were being picked off in a war. Terry didn't believe in war. If he had believed in war, he'd have run up to Canada from New York and joined the Royal Army Flying Corps. He was six feet two, was handy with his fists and was lithe as a panther. But he didn't believe in war. He believed that growing coffee on a shamba in Uganda was the thing he wanted to do. And then he met Gladys Starr.

Gladys Starr was also leaning over the rail, a few feet from Terry, as the liner pulled out of the dock. Gladys was little, as trim as a gunboat, and the sort of a girl that turns the Terry sort of man into speechlessness.

Neither of them will ever recall just exactly how they met. They think it was over the unconscious antics of a plump missionary woman who was trying to shout something in Hindustani to East Indian troops on the dock—who knew only Gujarati. Anyway they met. And that was the beginning of the end.

Neither of them knew it was the beginning of the end, for Gladys was running away, too. Gladys was running back to Melbourne, where, when a man proposed to a girl he meant marriage, and not something else.

There were people who might have said—and did—cruelly unkind things about Gladys. There had been one unfortunate episode in her life. They pick on that, made mountains out of it, and Gladys had no defense except to run back to Melbourne, after a pretty tragic time of trying to be a hit on a London stage.

The whole thing was as inevitable as the tides and the phases of the moon.

"Beautiful!" Terry said, without knowing he was speaking.

"Handsome," Gladys said. And suddenly they were hand in hand looking over the rail, and chuckling at the plump missionary woman shouting Hindustani to men who knew only Gujarati.

From then on they talked in the clouds. They went ashore together at Gibraltar and Marseille and Port Said, where they bought trinkets, and paid baksheesh to a fakir who called Terry "Mr. McGregor," because they liked the idea. Down the Suez Canal they held hands, laughed at the laundry hung out to dry on a couple of French cruisers in the Bitter Lakes, and thrilled to a sunset over Egypt. Together they watched moonlight over the Red Sea, shining on the Twelve Apostles, those rocky sentinels which stick up like fingers from the water. Under the stars, and the Southern Cross, they clung to each other, and kissed. They were gloriously, madly in love.

"Marry me," Terry said, his lips against the soft brownness of her hair, that last night on board, before the barren rock that is Aden loomed up off the starboard bow, and he had to change to a boat for the African coast.

"No, darling," Gladys said. She said it very softly, as though she wasn't sure of herself. But it was a positive "no," at that. "Don't ask me why," she said. There were tears in her blue eyes. Please don't ask me. Just think of me always as 'the Girl of the Red Sea'—" Her voice broke on that. It was one of the pet names he had given her. "—and then forget me, you growing coffee in Nuganada and I out in Melbourne.

She tugged herself from his arms then, and then went back into his arms. "Kiss me, Terry. Kiss me hard so that my lips will hurt, and I'll always remember that sweet hurt. Kiss me, Terry."

He bent his mouth to her mouth. "I'll never let you go," he said. His kiss was tender and adoring and sweet. She crushed her lips against his lips, hungrily, heart-brokenly.

"I'm not good enough for you Terry," she said, as suddenly she pulled away. "You're too grand."

Before he knew what she was doing she turned and ran down the deck, and through a door. Terry couldn't find her. Where she had hidden herself he could not discover. No amount of bribing of stewards helped. When he left the boat at Aden, early the following morning, it was without a last good-bye to Gladys Starr.

That hurt. It hurt far more than what Gloria Robbins had done to him, because Gladys Starr was real. "Not good enough for you, Terry," she had said. What did she mean by that? Didn't the dear nitwit know she was the loveliest thing that had ever come into his life?

He thought of rejoining the boat. But there was such a prosaic thing, as cash. He had practically no money, just enough to pay his fare down to Mombassa, and his fare from there to the shamba outside Kampala.

Teddy Farnsworth's friend from whom he had bought the shamba was to meet him at the boat. There was a balance of a payment to be made. When that was done there would be nothing left but a few rupees. He was gambling on a long chance; and for the second time in his life Terry Marquis was realizing what it is to be without money.

He plunged into his new life with a vigor that surprised himself, and surprised old settlers.

"Take it easy, lad," they counselled sagely.

But Terry Marquis didn't want to take things easy. He wanted to forget a slip of a girl with a trim, slim figure.

He couldn't forget. How could he forget the wonder that was Gladys Starr?

The months went by, and he knew there would never be rest for him again.

Came April, 1917, when the United States jumped into a conflagration called the World War. This was something he hadn't thought of before. He hated war, but he hated life worse. He joined up. For the World War was raging in Africa, too.

It wasn't difficult to get a Commission out in Uganda and British East Africa in those days, especially, long-legged, clean-living bronzed young planters like Terry Marquis. The King's African Rifles was glad to have him. They sent him out to Bombo to train. They sent him down into the field. And he knew the whine of bullets, and thirst, and foot-slogging, and dust, and all the varieties of hell that go with a tropic-country war.

He seemed to have a charmed life; probably because he didn't want to have a charmed life. He came through malaria, dysentery, blood-poisoning, and enteric. Then a bullet got him. It got him very nicely,

for it was a soft-nosed bullet, and it pulverized the thigh bone of his right leg.

They were kind to Terry in the hospital. But it isn't pleasant to lie in a hospital without your right leg, and to wish that the bullet had gone higher and hit your heart, and the job would be all over. For now there was nothing to do but lie in bed and think. Nothing to do but lie and think of Gladys Starr.

There was another thing, too. In the charge, when he had been hit, his eyes had been grazed by sword-grass. There were bandages over his eyes. They told him he'd see all right some day; but in the meantime he was in darkness. And that wasn't pleasant either.

Because of the darkness he didn't see a new V.A.D. worker when she came to the hospital with a draft from Australia. He didn't see and he didn't care. He cared so little about all women except Gladys that he had not bothered to let an orderly shave him. He looked like a bandaged prophet out of the Bible.

The new V. A. D. worker went into the officers' ward in the hospital. She spoke to Terry Marquis. She said, purely routinely, "Can I get you a glass of water, or something?"

Terry Marquis struggled into a semi-sitting position as though he had been hit. No one but one person in the world had a voice like that, soft and throaty, and kind and throbbing. No one but one person, who was in his thoughts night and day.

"Darling," he said. "Darling. It's I. Don't you know me? I'm Terry Marquis."

Her response was as electric as his own recognition. She dropped to her knees by the bed. "Darling," she said. "Darling, what have they done to you?"

He bent down and kissed her tawny head. "Nothing to what you did to me when you ran out on me on the ship," he said.

And then, they were in each other's arms; and men in near-by beds picked up magazines and newspapers, and became like pukka gentlemen, tremendously interested in magazines and newspapers.

"I'm not good enough for you," she said shakily, and told him, what she should have done in the first place, about the episode in her life. "And that's why," she said, "oh my darling, that's why."

"Is that all?" he said. "Why that's nothing to losing a leg. But I'll be getting around soon, and back to the shamba. You won't need two legs to run a shamba. I've got a swell place. Want to marry an old cripple, and help him grow coffee?"

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Her lips against his ear were as caressingly soft as rose petals. You'll never be an old cripple to me, darling," she said and choked. "And—and, I love coffee."

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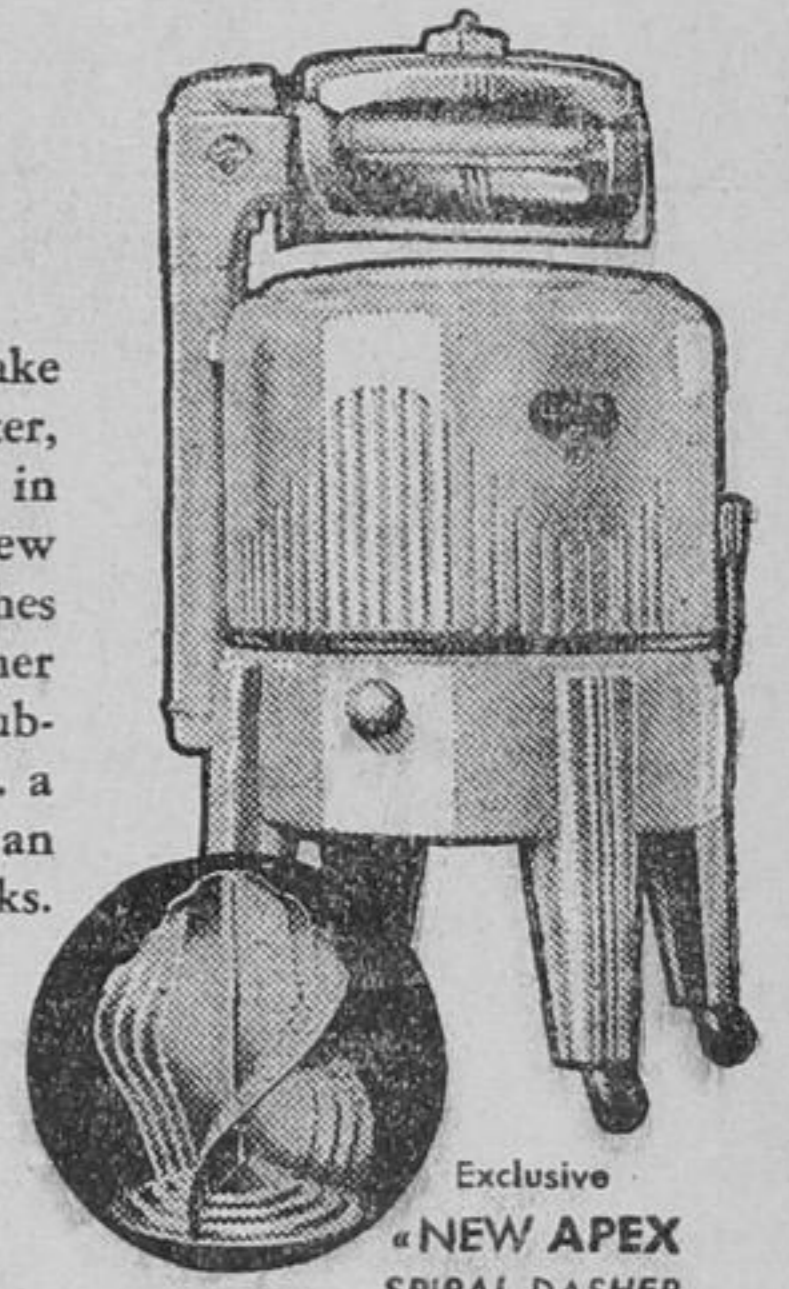
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