

FALITO'S FORGIVENESS

By Maurice Walsh

Falito strode down the jetty like a king; children scattered before him and dogs ran with side-long glances and barked from a distance, but he smiled upon the pleasant prospect. Falito had the sleuth-like movement of the jungle-bred man as well he might, for it was there he was reared by a Papuan mother after her encounter with a drunken white man on the waterfront of Port Moresby, thirty years before. His feet had the tripping movement that goes with the men who tread the planks of a ship. A lamp-lit pavement was no place for him; his personality cried out for a river-girt plantation with scores of singing natives.

The riding-light of the schooner, which he owned with a partner, shone dully in the dark water at the jetty, along which were the close-drawn figures of men and women trafficking in handshakes and embraces, which are the stock-in-trade of the sirens who greet men from the sea.

Falito hated them. The monotony of the sea had bred in him a few fixed ideals and a love of his wife and hearth, and it was this love which had kept him from the shallows of the wine cup, which lead to the deeps where the sirens play. His love of his own was the tiger's love, playful and kittenish, yet behind it was white-toothed menace of the carnivora.

The news of his schooner's early arrival had not had time to reach his wife, her absence was proof of that. Like Falito, Juanita was a half-breed but, having been reared and schooled in Port Moresby, was of a better class than he, so Falito thought, and it was a condescension on her part to have married him. He looked up to his passionate wife and eagerly did her bidding. And, when their little daughter had come along, his man's worship of the woman had gained something of the devotee's worship of his divinity. And Juanita loved him, too, though she hectored and scolded him. Falito accepted her rule as meekly as her love, and was grateful for both.

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Turning into a narrow street, he strode past garden-fronted cottages where children played and women crooned in the dark of the verandahs. He began to

wonder if little Esta had forgotten him in his two months absence around the islands, visiting the sea villages to the north and it occurred to him that a seafaring life, although profitable as he had found it, was not conducive to his domestic happiness. The lonely sea and the sky oppressed him at times and he craved for his wife's presence and for the dimpled caresses of his little daughter. And he had only the wild seas hammering at his boat's side to comfort him. Although Juanita and little Esta were so far from him he thought he knew how they felt in his absence; how they were filled with a great gladness when he came home.

Some day, Falito thought, he would sell his share in the boat, give up the sea and open a shop where he would sell all those things of the boats which his many friends on the waterfront would need. Juanita, with Esta, could sit in the sunshine at the front of the shop and watch the world go by. They were both very pretty, with lovely eyes. Ah, that was something to bring a man home from the sea.

A thin cigarello took sudden refuge between his teeth and its immediate incense cheered him as his hand in his pocket closed over a small necklace which he had bought in a store in a far-off Papuan village for little Esta. He thought of how ^{her} face would light up when she looked upon the shining pearls.

He turned into a lane where children were playing. It was blocked by a high wall at the end and under the wall stood his cottage, which had a garden bordered with seashells, which Juanita regularly tended. He raised his hand to the knocker, but a thought stayed it. Why not surprise his two darlings?

Instead he turned the door knob and pushed the door open quietly. The unwelcome darkness of the interior chilled him. Juanita's bedroom was at the far end of the passage and a thin slice of dim light came from the edge of the door, not quite closed. She had evidently lit a candle, he thought. My, how surprised she would be!

He threw off his heavy sea coat, and his roar shook the house. "Juanita! Juanita! I have come home. I, your Falito, have come home to you and our little Esta!" He moved towards the doorway, and then stood still, for he heard a terrible oath answer him. Then he heard Juanita sob, and the thud of feet on the floor. The door was flung shut.

Falito leaned against the door and a cold sweat took him between the shoulders. "Who is in the room with you, Juanita?" he asked almost childishly. "I have been away and have come home. I do not understand".

A silence followed - the kind of silence which grips a hanging-judge by

the throat as he prepares to intone the fateful words.

"Juanita"! Falito spat with dry lips as a flood of blood rushed to his head.

His wife's answer came in the soft whimper of a desperate woman. "My God, and all the saints". And there was a man with her! She was lost. There was no pity for her now. "Dear God ---".

Falito heard the rest and there was a sound like the booming of the surf in his ears. Again he felt the loneliness of the ocean and a silence in which some men measure eternity. Tick, tick, tick. He heard the sound of his watch as though it were speaking to the old-fashioned pistol which was lying beside it.

Juanita wailed like a sick child. Falito spat out his cigarello and braced himself. "I have been away. You do not care. Very well, I do not reproach you. Tell this man to come out".

The voice of the unseen guest answered him.

"I reckon you've bailed me up, old feller. What's it going to be? ~~Money~~ Money, a fight, or drinks together?"

Falito wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "I tell you I do not reproach. My wife does not care, so I do not care. Come out!"

"You're going to let me go?"

"Yes, damn you. But come out!" He scratched the door with the foresight of his pistol. "I will let you go this time, mister, but this is my house and this is my wife".

The door opened and a big man came out. Beyond his outline Falito could see his wife sitting in the bed, with a sheet clasped to her bare body.

"Show me your money for the price of my wife. Quick, the money!" and he flourished the pistol.

From his trousers pocket the man produced a fistful of notes and some silver, among which was a new shining ten cent piece, which Falito took with a trembling hand.

"Now out you go, and don't come back, or, by God, I'll shoot you".

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By morning light the little front room looked neat and clean as Juanita, with trembling hands, poured coffee into Falito's cup. He had left the house early to savour the clean morning air, and had visited a friend who worked in a small jewellery store. He had not been very long away and, since his return Juanita had not dared to meet glances from his half-closed eyes.

Falito stirred his coffee thoughtfully. Earlier he had seen his little Esta with her small brown arms around the neck of her mother and, at that moment, the vision had held him between love and hate. He seemed to stand apart from them. The mother might sin against the universe, but their little child would still cling and love and cry with her. They laughed together and understood their own little gestures and their unrevealed thoughts.

Falito himself must always stand apart from them, a being only half understood, a man who brought them money at irregular intervals. They did not know how he worked, tramping his schooner across the seas in the choking heat, oftentimes with a scratch crew who allowed him little time for rest. But it was all in a day's work — and all for them, who were so close to his heart.

He shook himself suddenly for Juanita, sitting opposite to him, was speaking and there were tears on her cheeks. "You are going to forgive me, Falito? I was so lonely. No one ever came near me ... all the days and all the nights while you were away from me. I had money, but what is the use of that when you are not with me? He came, only once. I was lonely like you have been lonely out on the water, Falito. Can you wonder?"

"I say I do not reproach you. That is enough".

"But you are terrible, Falito. And you have suffered from the loneliness, too, in your ship full of men. If a woman had come to you in the night and touched you with her lips ... Ah! by your eyes I know you will kill me, for you will never forgive me, and that will be my death".

Falito sipped his coffee and mumbled through cracked lips: "I love you, Juanita, and I will never go away again. I will sell my share in the boat and open up a shop as I should have done before, and I will love you and little Esta for ever".

The door opened and a small brown child came in and stole behind her mother.

"Come to me, my darling little Esta", said Falito, and he held out his arms to the child. "I have got a present for you", and he moved to where she stood behind her mother.

From his pocket Falito withdrew the necklace which he had carried across the seas for her and fastened it around her neck.

At the child's gurgle of delight, Juanita turned around slowly and saw, pendant from the pearls, — a bright shining ten cent piece.