By Soochow Waters

LOUISE JORDAN MILN

BY SOOCHOW WATERS

By
LOUISE JORDAN MILN

FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
NEW YORK MCMXXIX

Copyright, 1929, by
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

To
DONN BYRNE

"Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."

"On gods or fools the high risk falls."

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.co

CHAPTER I

NOT every White and Yellow marriage is a failure. The wedlock of Wung Pi and Caroline Dempster—the woman at whose balcony Mrs. Carew had looked so long last night—had been greatly happy and greatly successful. A Chinese man and an English girl had shown their small world an ideal marriage. But it had had its thorn, for it had been childless, deliberately childless. They had defied all else—his people (she had none), international convention, two religions outraged, prejudice shocked, all history's relentless pronouncement—but they had not dared risk the mixed birth-stream, and forbore to parent the children for which they both longed.

Why Wung Pi Zu-chiu and his wife had succeeded, notably and honorably, in what others, almost without exception, fail in so hideously, is as inexplicable as it was unprecedented. No one living understood why their marriage from first to last had satisfied them both, unless Mrs. Wung did. She never spoke of it; no one knew her well enough to question her. Few knew her at all. But let that go; it is no part of this story—or only indirectly an unessential thread of it.

Wung Caroline—such was always her signature—lived the life of a social recluse. She received few, welcomed none except only Man Ling. A letter or note that was not too pointed an intrusion she would answer, a visit (accomplished or attempted) she never returned. Even the missionaries could not reach her.

After their marriage, and until Wung Pi Zu-chiu died, they had welcomed gaily and impartially such acquaintances as sought them: European and Chinese. The food she had offered had been Chinese food, the rooms and courtyards in which she had received had been Chinese, and

always her dress had been the dress of a Chinese woman, at home and abroad. For Wung Pi's wife had not been a shut-in, and had not pretended to be. But after her wedding day—a proper wedding in a proper church—no one ever had seen Wung Caroline in European garments. She wore no paint, no nail shield, she rarely carried a fan or opened one that hung at her girdle, but in all else, except her hair, she conformed in dress to the centuries-old custom of the Wung women.

There was no mystery about Mrs. Wung. Every one in Soochow knew her story—and, except her own Chinese servants, almost every one, both native and white, disapproved her. Those who remembered Wung Pi Zu-chiu testified that he had been charming and a gentleman. But he had been Chinese. English education, European sojourn had not lowered his cheek-bones or bleached his yellow skin. He had been rather darker than the Chinese of fine birth are apt to be. His black almond-shaped eyes sat in his face on a slant—not the exaggerated slant that Chinese eyes are reputed to have, but undeniably a slant. The dead man had been handsome, upstanding, graceful, but Caroline Dempster had been the first and only European who ever had thought his face beautiful. His nose had been insignificant, and broad over his lip. The English girl—his widow now—was lily-fair, as emphatically Anglo-Saxon as he was emphatically Chinese.

"Infatuation! Madness!" and things that are worse, their two worlds—hers and his—had exclaimed and believed. "They have nothing in common. It won't last—the unnatural attraction—because it can't. Sooner or later—no; sooner, very soon—she'll realize what she has done; and her life will be nothing but misery and shame—a tragedy, and not a nice one. It's a crime."

They had had much in common—breeding, fine taste, character, aristocracy of soul and of mind as well as of ancestry, sincerely good manners.

And they had loved.

They had had education—his the greater, as a husband's

is in the happiest marriages, and his had been a dual education: Chinese and English; it included the girl's own. He knew her books, had seen her pictures, had listened at Queen's Hall and Covent Garden as often as she had, had traveled the Continent of Europe more and farther than she had. He was Chinese enough not to resent his wife's unacquaintance with Chinese letters.

In the essentials of character they had been oddly alike. And which virtue, great or small, is not an essential of character?

Loyalty, the sweet grace of deliberation, quick and bubbling sense of humor, sunny good-nature, dignity, natural and unforced contentment, strict and staunch sense of justice, they had shared almost equally. Both had been full of violent, unalterable dislikes. Dislikes and distastes hew and mold character splendidly, perhaps oftener than they mar and taint it.

And they had loved.

There are loves—a few—that defy, persist and grow with the years, push through the thorns and strangling moss of human experience, survive and increase.

They had loved so. It had lasted, unimpaired, while he lived. It would have lasted no matter how long they both had lived. For it was greater than they, and yet they were worthy of it.

They belonged together, and had had the good commonsense to know it. Not creed, not nationality could separate or alienate them—still less relatives, acquaintances, gossip, scandal, protest. There had been abundant protest; but no one to interfere effectively. In China, as elsewhere, much money gives a rank of its own. Wealth everywhere is powerful. Wung was wealthy, and, though young, was the head of his house. Caroline had no relatives in China, no close relatives anywhere. The decision lay with them, and they made it uncoerced, unhampered.

The chances had been all against the happiness of such a marriage, and very much more against their happiness lasting, if they knew it at first.

Not once in a thousand times does any such marriage prove happy, or can. As an all but unexceptioned rule, such marriages are doomed to crash—to crash or worse.

And in spite of all the much else that they had in common, it is almost certain that this Wung marriage would have crashed to disaster or have dwindled to sour discomfort, discontent, but for one other asset that it found and developed. They were greatly companionable. They enjoyed being together from the hour they met until he died with her hands in his. They were congenial, and the congeniality grew. They laughed together a dozen times a day. A few days before he died, he desperately ill, she stricken with fear, he teased her, and she instantly made a teasing retort, and they both laughed.

It had been said when they married that Wung already had two wives, appropriately Chinese ones, on the other side of the Yang-tsze. Caroline never knew whether it was true, nor cared. It didn't matter. If he had, Wung Pi Zu-chiu neglected his Chinese wives cruelly—if they cared—after he met Caroline. (It has happened in other countries.) Certainly he never saw them after his English marriage—unless they joined and served him down in the Yellow Springs. From their wedding day until she covered his dead face when he lay in his costly coffin, Wung Pi Zu-chiu never left his yellow-haired, white-skinned wife for a day, not often for an hour.

The two white women of Soochow often saw each other. Their houses faced, across a narrow canal. Each liked to sit on the balcony, watching the water below, the boats and foot passers-by, watching roofs and sky, or what else she could see. Sometimes they passed on the streets. They never had spoken. Wung Caroline never had shown by a glance that she saw Mrs. Carew, or had seen her before. Wung's widow was unwilling to make new acquaintances, reluctant to recognize old ones. She had come, in her pride of Chinese wifehood, to look down on all Westerns. Like Miriam herself, she never had been a woman's woman. In

her absorption in Wung Pi Zu-chiu she had come to dislike women, feel out of place in their society. And, except in her persistent physical good health and in her vital memories, she had died, too, when her man had died. And in some fey way she sensed Mrs. Carew for a spy.

Miriam Carew was a spy. Every writer is. She wished to know Mrs. Wung, longed to wring new and novel "copy" from acquaintance with the English widow of a Chinese gentleman—a widow who clung so unalterably to Chinese house and Chinese ways, declined to mingle with the aliens in Soochow. Mrs. Carew had fled from London because London would not let her work. But she was not improvident enough to turn her back upon novel copy. But Mrs. Wung gave no opening, and accepted none. Miriam Carew was professionally curious about Wung Caroline. Wung Caroline had no curiosity about anything. One small thing had made the American woman acutely curious about the English woman—personally interested quite apart from her writer's interest. Mrs. Wung reminded her of some one, of some one she had known well long ago. Whom? It nagged and troubled her, pestered her mind as such things pester most of us sometimes. It haunted her, delayed her sleep, but she could not find it.

It is probable that the two women never would have met —not to speak—if Margaret Rivers had not come to Soochow.

But Margaret came.

CHAPTER II

THE new moon hung like a sickle of silver and gold over Soochow—Mang-Shên's reaping-knife, the Kiangsu peasants called it. On the Grand Canal most of the water-people slept in their mat-domed boats. Here and there a skiff shot off hurriedly, carrying a lover hot-oared to a forbidden tryst, or to one more innocent which could only be kept in some sweet fragment of time filched from slumber-hours, since all the long daylight must be sweated away in ceaseless, grinding toil. Except where the moonlight caught and beamed an edge or turret, the old dusky walls were lost in the dusk of night. The cobbled streets and water-streets of China's Venice, the antique capital of the great Kingdom of Wu, were silent and shrouded. Stray temples, high-perched, wore diadems of silver light. The Great Pagoda, highest temple of the gods of China, glittered far above the sleeping city, its spiral crown a cap of jewels. A shooting-star fell and shattered in flame on the Temple of Confucius.

Alone on the veranda that jutted out over the canal that was her house's "street," Miriam Carew, lounging on her rattan couch, her hands clasped behind her silken-cushioned head, her eyes wide on the rising crescent, sighed—a long sigh—in utter contentment.

It was delicious to be here again: back in China, free and alone; free to live her own life instead of an inconsequential patchwork of other lives even more meaningless than her own; free to write.

She knew what they were saying about her in London now, or at least knew what sort of thing. "Gone off again with the Count Servelli!" Poor Luigi, he always fled London when she did. She easily enough could have made him stay on in London without her, for she knew that Luigi

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.co

would obey her as long as they both lived. But it was better fun to let Luigi make his own disconsolate tracks, in whatever direction he disliked least, whenever she went, than to leave him a prisoner in London to establish for her a moral social-whitewash and alibi to which she was quite indifferent. Let London think its worst, say its worst. London would welcome her back—as it always did, for she was rich, "the well-known novelist," and an unusually attractive asset to any hostess whose invitation she would accept.

Thick-headed London! Not to know that she could be Contessa Servelli any day she would, and could have been any day since her second husband's death. Luigi had no other prayer. He lived at her feet—he the one human creature in whom she unreservedly believed, whom she trusted implicitly, and who never offended or bored her.

But she never would give him his great wish. He might go on loving her until they tottered into their graves; Mrs. Carew had no doubt that he would. But Miriam Carew was done with love and marriage. Sooner Luigi's mistress than his wife!—if she had cared for him in the essential way. Two men had made marriage a corruption and stench in her soul: to be Luigi Servelli's wife after having been theirs would be to do him an odious thing. Marriage was unclean, unloveliest of all unlovely things, and would be just that to her always, no matter how long she lived, because of her own marriage experience. The woman was seared. She was radiant socially, but for ever now indifferent. Any intimacy a whit closer than the almost careless friendship she gave Luigi would have revolted her. She never again could *enjoy* anything but freedom—freedom, her dearest possession, and at least partly because she found her most perfect freedom there, China.

Nor would Luigi have accepted from her marriage-intimacy without formal marriage. Luigi was a stickler, and he held her high and sacred. To have become his mistress was, she knew, the one thing beyond her power to achieve with Luigi Servelli.

This is her story, squeezed into a few scant words: At eighteen she had married Nelson Swales in Cincinnati, he an American as she was: a love match. The result had been wretched and shameful. She had prayed that childbirth might give her the release of death, and that her baby, whom unborn she loved passionately, might die with her, lest it lived to be as its father. Half her prayer had been granted. Her baby had lived only a week. Eight years of human purgatory had ended suddenly with her husband's death. She was a widow, and because she was, almost joyous again; but too disillusioned, too bitter, she believed, ever to be really joyous again. Swales left nothing but debts. Two years of galling poverty, then a small legacy. She took it to London, not because she wished to travel, but because she longed to get as far as she could from where she had lived with Nelson.

Mrs. Swales met Wilford Carew at Lady Anderson's, and married him a little more than two years after her first husband's death—more deeply in love with him than she had been with Nelson Swales. Thirty feels intensely and actually what eighteen dreams but fumblingly and indistinctly, if at all. And to such natures as hers then still was, disappointment whets the edge of appetite.

A paradise year, then three years of hell. But this time she punished. She refused to divorce the man who could not divorce her. He was killed in his own wrecking of an unpaid-for car. And he left neither more nor less money than Swales had.

Except for five hundred pounds—all that was left of her aunt's legacy, and which she had had the sanity to secrete when she realized that her English husband was no more manly than her first husband had been—Mrs. Carew was destitute.

She took the cheapest room she could find in a respectable part of Hammersmith, and tried unsuccessfully to get work of any sort at any wage. More in loneliness than for any other reason she began to write. Almost at once she earned

a guinea. Before long she earned three—three all at once. She believed that she had found her work, her livelihood. And, perhaps because she believed it, she had. Little by little she was lucky; and the luck grew. Miriam Carew had the grace to be thankful. She did not overrate her own gift; she knew that it was small, knew that literally hundreds, if not thousands, of women in London who wrote many times better than she, never had had a line accepted for print, and probably never would.

Fortune did not swoop down upon her by any means. For several years it was financial struggle, more than once the remnant of Aunt Ella's five thousand dollars was threatened. That didn't matter; they were quite cheerful together, and the best of friends, she and her pen. She didn't mind occasional hunger very much, she scarcely minded occasional cold; neither were often or much. She tried her hand at a short story; no one would take it. Her fourth attempt was printed but never paid for, she couldn't sell her fifth, her sixth brought her thirty shillings. Luck is not always in the odd numbers. Her first novel was accepted. It did well enough to get her second published. The third did better. Then a small "hit" came her way. Luck went on growing. A novel was called a "best seller" —which it wasn't, but it sold well. A film of it brought her a thousand. Then, not till then, she left her one room in Hammersmith and took a little house in Kensington. The curate called. The nearest doctor's wife called. She enjoyed knowing people once more. Before long she knew too many—social hangers-on of Fleet Street and Paternoster Row many of them; hungry, idle souls others who, having nothing substantial of their own to do, impertinently and pathetically forced their parasite company upon the novelist who "talked even better than she read, talked just like her own novels." Social success followed hard upon the woman's success as a writer; she was not ill-bred or ill-educated, the loveliness of eighteen was not less but more now, she had a gift of hospitality far greater than

her knack of writing popular stories, her rooms were charming—and her tiny shady garden—and she had an admirable cook.

But presently her "friends" drove her out of London. It did not—in one sense—matter now what she wrote or how. Readers are more persistently loyal than most husbands are. And she need not have gone on earning. She had a fair competence prudently invested, and the Count Servelli was not her first suitor. But she knew that she was writing less and less well, and it grew more and more difficult to secure privacy in which to write. Women who do not work are merciless to women who do.

She intended to go on writing; it rarely bored her, and most other things often did. And she secretly hoped that some day yet she might write a much better book than she had; an essential, not-to-be-ashamed-of book; a simple, truthful book, free from elaboration, as guiltless of padding as of bunkum. She realized that to do it, even to try to do it, she must be more alone, unmolested, have personal quiet and simplicity.

But, too, she relished London and her life there too well to be willing to break with them altogether.

Authorship or social amusement? Which? There were scores of writers who lived the two lives at once. She could not, not to her own satisfaction. Determined to have both, stubbornly determined to forego neither, how was she to adjust them? Nor should either rob the other. How? Easily enough, she found, when, after a long time, she had thought it out to her own satisfaction.

Every year, or two or three, as her whim was, she suddenly disappeared off the face of the Western Earth; returned as suddenly as she had gone and at as irregular intervals. Questioned—there are women in London society who will cross-examine the archangels in Heaven, if they ever get there—asked, "Where have you been?" she invariably laughed, and shook her head, or quoted Tennyson: "That is my secret, Thomas." And that was all any one ever got out of her—even the Count Servelli. Not that

Luigi ever questioned her. He never did, content to love and obey.

No one ever saw her go, or ever saw her return. Miriam Carew was an extremely clever woman. A good many American women are. She was in London, or she was not; that was all.

In Soochow she arrived as unexpectedly, and left as she came. In Soochow she was Mrs. Clarke, "the White mystery woman."

The sparse White Colony willingly would have inspected and investigated her, and—if sufficiently pleased—taken her into its fold. But she would none of them. She never was "at home," and she did not return calls, or even acknowledge them by so much as a servant-sent card; she ignored them, even the Padre's and English doctor's wife's.

Her Chinese servants knew nothing about her except how she passed much of her time, and so could report nothing. Chinese servants tattle, at least to one another, if they dislike you; but they do not invent—not unless they adore you. When they do that, they invent, and boasting, adorn you with every heavenly virtue, immense learning, boundless wealth.

Mrs. Clarke's Chinese servants neither disliked nor adored her; she never gave them cause to do either. She paid and treated them well, never overworked or overindulged them.

Stay though—one thing they did know of her, and could have told. But though they respected and envied her for it, they never did tell. She wrote a great deal.

One room—the best room in her house—was sacred to her work, if it was work that their foreign mistress did. She spent hours there almost every day, there were days in which she scarcely left it, there were nights she stayed there until another day's light came, and did not always come to interrupt her. What proportion of time she spent writing, what proportion she spent looking from window or balcony at old Soochow, they did not know. But they knew that the piled pages of her queer foreign writing grew, and

grew amazingly. Perhaps she was lonely, though she never seemed so, they thought, and tried to pass her solitude and improve her handwriting at the same time. She was not a student, they knew, for she never pored over books, nor treated them with respect. Novels came to her at intervals from Kelly and Walsh's Shanghai office, but she read them carelessly, handled them rudely, turned down the pages, left them lying about open, face-down, and when she had read one tossed it into a wastepaper basket, if one were near enough. Often she did that before she had read and yawned over many pages. No student, no well-behaved person would have done that. Not even an uncouth, uneducated Chinese would have done it; no Chinese would have failed to reverence printed words, the very paper they were on, or have failed to handle the mere binding of a book with unaffected homage. Her treatment of books marked her mean of soul, uninstructed in manners, ill-born, uneducated. They despised and pitied her for it.

That she was a creator of books never could have occurred to them. She did not even sit respectfully when she wrote. She wrote on her crossed knees, on the arm of an easy-chair, anywhere, anyway, quite without ritual. But she did practise making the poor English characters almost every day and for hours at a time. That was something. It was shocking that she did not do it more reverently, but what could be expected of a Western, foredoomed to inelegance, and a woman unattached to a man! But that she did spend so much of her days, and sometimes all of the night, practising the writing of characters was greatly to her credit, proved her better than other White women. And because they respected her for that, but did not care enough for her to boast about her, they did not prattle about her at all.

Concession society might have thought better of the mysterious Mrs. Clarke, gossiped of her less unkindly, if her native servants had told of her the little that they could, might even have jumped to a correct conclusion. It is not often that our reputations suffer from the reticence of our

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.co