

Lady With Jade

a novel by

MARGARET MACKPRANG MACKAY

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Lady with Jade

To
HELEN BURTON
with
affectionate admiration

NOTE

The creative brilliance of Moira Chisholm has been suggested by that of the well-known and much-beloved person to whom this book is dedicated—whom, however, she resembles in no other way. The character and the personal story of Moira are purely fictitious.

The portrait of Mr. Wei, the ivory dealer, is indirectly derived from a Chinese merchant in another kind of business. The old amah, Wang Nai-Nai, is a vague composite of two servants of my own. Peking residents may recognize the old master carver, the sword dancer, and one or two beggars—figures which slip briefly through the background of the story.

All other characters are wholly imaginary.

MARGARET M. MACKAY

Tientsin, China

July 9, 1939

“In ancient times,” said Confucius, “men found the likeness of all excellent qualities in jade. Soft, smooth, and glossy, it appeared to them like benevolence; fine, compact and strong—like intelligence; angular, but not sharp and cutting—like righteousness; hanging down (in beads) as if it would fall to the ground—like (the humility of) propriety; when struck, yielding a note, clear and prolonged, yet terminating abruptly—like music; its flaws not concealing its beauty, nor its beauty concealing its flaws—like loyalty; with an internal radiance issuing from it on every side—like good faith; bright as a brilliant rainbow—like heaven; exquisite and mysterious, appearing in the hills and streams—like the earth; standing out conspicuously in the symbols of rank—like virtue; esteemed by all under the sky—like the path of truth and duty.”

—Legge: *LI KI, Book XLV.*

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Part One

GAMBLER'S LUCK



SHE FELT NUMB AND HOLLOW WITH THE COLD—THE JANUARY cold of Peking, as deep and thick as the blocks of ice which it made in the canals of the ancient city. It seemed to freeze her misgiving heart inside her body. Underfoot, the concrete platform of the Ch'ienmên Station breathed up through the soles of her shoes with a vibrating chill, as sharp as the highest pitch of a violin. Below the hem of her fur coat, knee-length in the fashion of nineteen hundred and twenty-eight, her slender legs prickled; the flesh showed red and raw through her thin silk stockings. The vast gray mass of the old Tartar Wall rose parallel with the train, its high battlements sliced off with yellow light by the knife of the winter sunshine. Echoes rang against the shadows—the shuffle of cloth-shod Chinese feet and the excited burr of Northern voices, the thump of bundles set down and bedding rolls hoisted, the scratchy squeak of wicker baskets, the whimper of babies clinging to their parents' padded coats with tiny chapped hands—men, women and children stuffing themselves anxiously into the hard wooden third-class coaches, all bewildered because they were going away on the train.

And she— It was the opposite with her. She was bewildered because she was *not* going away on it—suddenly startled and appalled by what she had done; by what, only two days ago, she had said to Ben. She felt like a little Chinese boy she had once watched who, rashly letting go the string of

his kite, had seen it fly off like a scarlet bird upon the wind.

Ben Chisholm's face rose above the hidden prism of her tears—still the handsome face of an athlete, though thicker and ruddier than it had been three years ago when she had married him. His broad American drawl was slurred a little with emotion.

“Well,” he said, and paused. “Well, Moira— Do you— Are you sure you haven’t—changed your mind?”

She shook her head.

“Well—” He shoved his large hands into the pockets of his overcoat, lifting up his shoulders against the cold. They were strong wide military shoulders, as befitted a lieutenant of the United States Marine Corps and a former football star of the Naval Academy. “Well—” he repeated helplessly.

Her hysterical thoughts bit down like the small sharp teeth of an animal upon his fumbling words. She hoped to heaven he wouldn’t say “Well” again. The habit had more than once made her unloose her quick redheaded temper upon him. His inarticulateness was one of the things that had come to irritate her most. Unless he was talking of polo, or the football season at Home, or the military and social trivia of the American Legation Guard, he seemed forever to be bumping his head clumsily against his thoughts, like a man too tall for the doorways of a house.

He cleared his throat. “If you should—if you decide later that you’ll—that you want to join me—why, you can always come on down to Shanghai, you know, Moira.”

The misery of his tone gentled her a little. His face looked as naïve in its unhappiness as a small boy’s—and almost as empty of character. “No, Ben,” she made herself say steadily. “I’m definitely booked to sail for San Francisco next week.”

A bell rang, shrill upon the icy smoke-tinged air of the station. The train lurched, and there was a scurrying and

shouting and scrambling among the humble Chinese in the coaches. A fellow officer of Ben's, who was also being transferred to Shanghai, came up to them. He shook Moira's hand heartily, trying not to look embarrassed by the tightened moment, and then clapped Ben on the back.

"I've got a flask of Scotch in my suitcase, fella, that'll warm us up as soon as the train gets going."

Ben's woebegone face lightened a little. "I'll say it will!" he agreed fervently.

Moira's lips narrowed. One could always be sure, she thought cynically, that Ben's griefs would be lessened by the prospect of a drink, even at half past ten in the morning. That was perhaps the chief cause of the trouble between them—his drinking too much. The gay white society of the Capital—its club life and leisure, its servants and late nights and abundant liquor—had had a weakening influence on the easygoing Ben. Little by little, she had seen the coarsening of the fresh-faced, clean-cut young chap she had married, with his boyish charm and his happy-go-lucky love of the out-of-doors, until lately, as she found that the body had largely crowded the mind out of his personality, her cool white flesh had shivered with distaste under his touch.

The train was starting to move, the coaches creaking in their couplings. He kissed her awkwardly, wretchedly, on the cheek. "'By, Moira," he mumbled, and she saw that there were tears in his blue eyes. "Take care of yourself!"

Then he leaped up onto the steps of the car, his big body leaning out toward her as he clung to the vertical rod, waving. The wheels clanked and rolled past, with the endless line of Chinese faces above them, gaping through the soiled windowpanes—the children grinning suddenly and nudging their parents, to make them look at her.

When the train had dwindled at last through a tunnel in

the old city wall, she turned and walked along the platform and over the ramp. The stinging sunlight filled the air like a clear gold liquid flung into her face. In the dazed hold of her thoughts, she passed under the great Water Gate, dim and dank as a cave of blue shadow.

She emerged into the Legation Quarter just as a little old-fashioned, glass-paneled Chinese coach was drawing up in front of the gate. Its wooden structure gleamed with black lacquer; its interior was fitted with mirrors and rich silk upholstery. It was drawn by a fat white Mongol pony caparisoned with a red harness and silver fittings, and driven by an old coachman with a queue, perched high upon a small seat. He pressed a bell with his foot, and a flock of full-throated chimes fluttered forth like little bronze birds. As the wheels stopped, a footman jumped from the step in back and opened one of the glass doors. An elderly Chinese couple climbed out—an old aristocratic gentleman and lady who might have come from the scroll of an ancestral portrait. Moira walked as slowly as she dared, trying not to stare at them too obviously.

The old gentleman was dressed in a padded robe of dark blue brocade, lined with sable. It was topped by a sleeveless jacket of plum-colored cut velvet. He wore a tiny skullcap of black satin, and a long mandarin chain of carved amber beads. His fine narrow parchment-tinted face, with its thin fringe of gray beard, was a scholar's face. And his beautiful old hands were a scholar's hands, with a great plain thumb-ring of transparent emerald-green jade upon the right one.

His wife's face, too, was worn fine by generations of breeding—like old ivory, above the high collar of her black brocaded velvet robe. Her tiny bound feet were encased in miniature shoes of the same richly patterned velvet. In the smooth knot of her hair, there were two hairpins of jewel jade

mounted upon gold, and at the lobe of each sculptured ear there was also a small globe of jade—like drops of luminous green water.

The footman took several pieces of old-fashioned luggage out of the carriage. The pompous coachman summoned a pair of station porters who were lounging before the Water Gate. The old gentleman and lady waited, quiet and erect. Moira opened her handbag and pretended to hunt for something inside of it, as an excuse for standing still. She had studied the Mandarin language with a Chinese teacher for six months after her arrival in Peking, so that she understood most of what was said.

"What time does the train leave for Tientsin?" the coachman demanded officiously.

"It's gone," one of the porters informed him.

"*Ai-yah! Tsou-la?*" The look on the old servant's face almost made her laugh aloud. Much less pompous than before, he turned to his master and sheepishly repeated the news.

A frown crossed the scholar's face. He spoke to his wife, and she too frowned slightly, with a small shrug. Then their expressions became calm and carven again. The old gentleman said something in terse command to the coachman. There was a little more talk with the porters. After a moment, with flawless dignity and poise, the picturesque couple climbed back into their carriage. The coachman flicked the red-and-silver reins on the fat white back of the pony, the bell chimed, and the little glass coach rolled sedately away.

Moira gazed after it, her mind twitching with all the restless thoughts that the scene had stirred beneath its surface. The Wagons-Lits Hotel, where she had taken a room now that her flat had been given up, was a scant block away. But somehow she could not bear to go there yet. Instead, she veered impulsively along Wall Street. In a moment she came

to a long ramp which led to the top of the huge Tartar Wall.

Up on the wall the full north wind struck her; it cut her flesh with the steel scissors of the cold. Hugging her fur coat closer, she walked along between the wide notched battlements, stumbling a little on the worn flags, with the bunches of dusty frozen grass squeezed out of the cracks. Her mind was busy with the picture of the distinguished Chinese couple in the glass coach, and the old classic civilization of which they were a vanishing symbol. She tried to imagine the antique home in which they must live—the many courtyards, with their pavilions and moon-gates and pools, and the handsome carved blackwood furniture in the rooms, and the camphorwood chests full of fine old rich brocades like those of which their clothes had been made, and the lacquer boxes filled with jade—like the plain priceless jewels they had worn. Somehow their jade had impressed her more than anything else about them. She never wore jewelry, herself, except her wedding ring. But since she had been in Peking and had seen the best, she had come to value the pure clear green jewel jade more than any of the other treasures in the old city. She loved it in the distant impersonal way of one who can never hope to afford it—unpossessively, as one may admire the moon.

“I haven’t seen enough of that sort of thing yet,” she said to herself rebelliously. “I haven’t had nearly enough of Peking!”

The thought of the wealth of art objects to be had in the Capital brought back a renewed grudge against Ben. During their two years in Peking, she had set herself—not extravagantly, but with the utmost taste and care—to buying a number of charming things which she had hoped that they could keep permanently; a few rugs and scroll paintings and embroideries and easily packed ornaments that were to have

given a touch of familiar color to the long series of Marine Corps quarters which they expected, through the years, to share. But when the news of Ben's transfer came, she found that he was seriously in debt. It had been necessary to auction off all their carefully chosen household furnishings in order to pay his club chits and liquor bills. He had been terribly sorry and apologetic about it; his lower lip had drooped all day, like a small boy's. But although, after the first quick sparks of bitterness, she had said little, Moira felt as if a bright part of herself had been sold away, with the lovely fabrics and tints and bits of carved legend that had been her greatest interest for two years. For she knew that never again, after she left Peking, would she find such an abundance of precious materials and skilled craftsmanship within her means. The scores of little dim Chinese curio shops, with their cold stone floors and their shelves crowded with beauty, had fascinated her above all else. Sometimes, half idly, she had envied the handful of foreigners who owned curio shops in the hotels and the Legation Quarter—thinking vaguely that if she could live permanently in Peking, she would like to have such a shop herself, and spend her life working with artistic objects. She had majored in the decorative arts in college, and had always been interested in such things. It would be fun to have a shop like Mlle. Boiret's Red Pagoda, perhaps—only still more elegant and luxurious. She had even thought a little about how she would start, and the kind of things she would like to design.

What a hope! she thought, with a cynical shrug. For in three days she would be leaving for Japan, to catch her steamer homeward bound to San Francisco. In three days she would be leaving all this behind.

She stared down from the top of the wall, across the outspread city. The lines of the low curved roofs stretched on

and on, gray and even, in endless lines like the waves of a sea. Here and there, on all four sides, the high gate towers rose above the city walls, with their bright eaves tilted against the ice-blue sky. To the north lay the vast roofs of the Forbidden City, a gold-tiled mass that shone in the sun, clear and strong, like a great bell ringing. Beyond the wide gray city stretched the wintry plain, and the peaked line of the Western Hills; they looked hard and blue in the frozen light, as if they had been carved of lapis. And engulfing her dimly, above the hiss and clangor of the locomotives switching in the station yard below, she could hear the noises of the ancient city blown up by the wind onto the wall; the cadenced cries of the strolling vendors, the laughter of children, the toot of motor horns, the slapping footfalls of the rickshaw coolies, the clash of brass, the murmur of a thousand voices; and somewhere, high against the sun, the silvery humming of the little bamboo flutes on the pigeons' tails, leaving a glistening trail of sound across the sky.

"I don't suppose," she thought wistfully, "that I shall ever hear a pigeon-whistle again."

An American Marine sentry, on duty on the part of the wall above the Legation Guard compound, saluted her. The abrupt encounter checked her thoughts. Her body unconsciously straightened into the attitude of slim vital poise which was common to it. Turning, she walked back toward the Water Gate again, breathing with the light shallow breaths of the high-strung person.

She blew her nose, which was red from the cold. "Dear me," she thought wryly, "I must be a sight, after all this emotional retrospection!" And she added, with a faint frown, "I hate to be emotional. It's so—messy."

When she was far enough away from the Marine, she paused in an angle of the ancient battlement and, pulling