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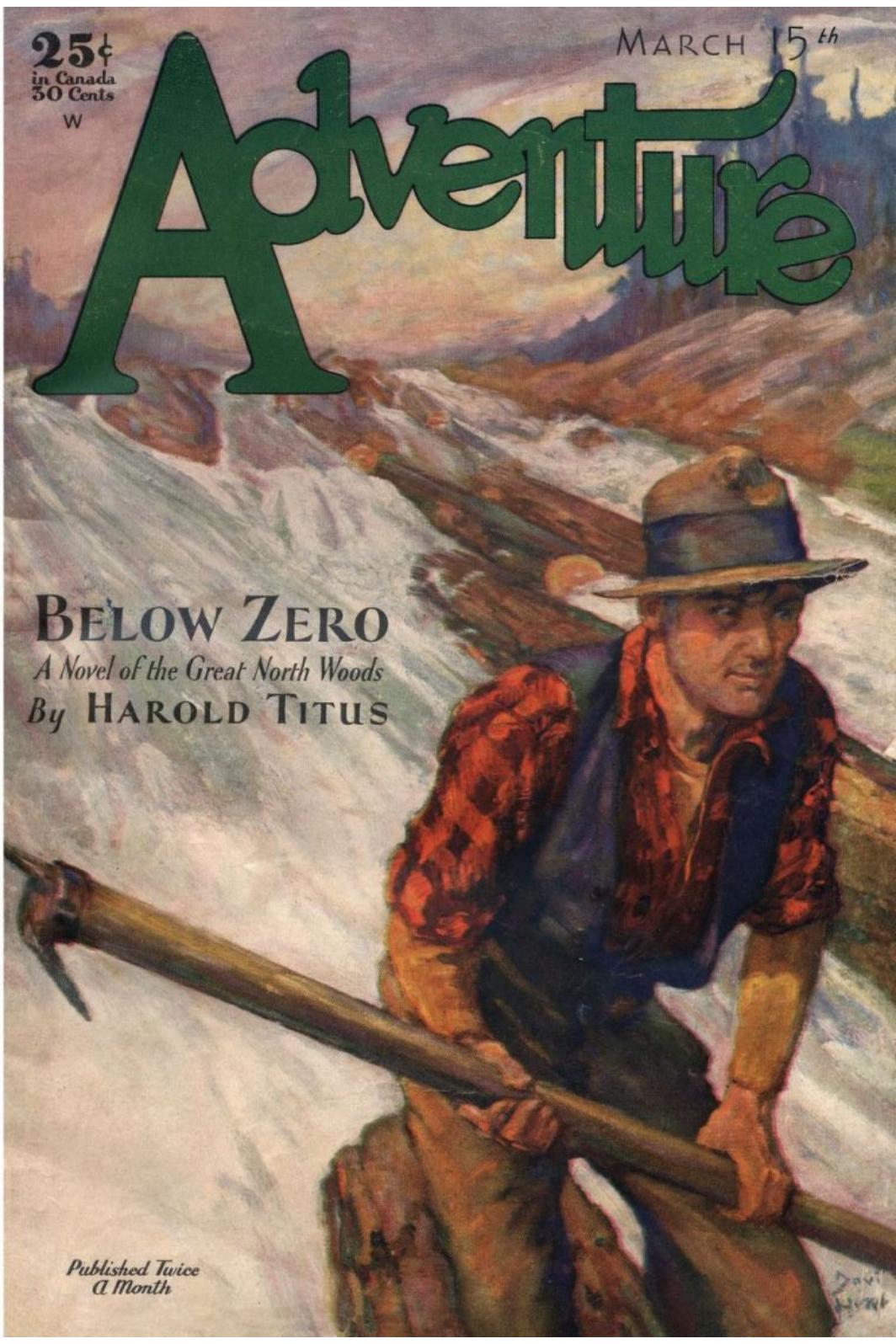
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ALL TALK

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES



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A Story of French Indo-China

Kennedy was a mystery, as he stood there in the Messageries office in Saigon, pocketing his ticket for Singapore; but his papers were correct and he was so evidently a man of the right sort that the polite Frenchman behind the counter took a chance.

“Messieurs, you will both be on the same boat; you are both alone—may I assume the honor of making you acquainted? Monsieur Kennedy—Monsieur Dudevant.”

The two men bowed, shook hands and adjourned to a table at the Café de Paris for drinks.

Kennedy scrutinized the Frenchman quietly. He himself was brown, level eyed, tight of lip and thin of nostril; a man of forty-five, to judge by graying hair and lined features. Lines or not, the innate strength of those features made women look twice. Even when he smiled, Kennedy’s face preserved a certain gravity, a hard and inflexible purpose. Yet he was extremely likable.

Dudevant was gay, carefree, handsomely dressed. His face was lean and sallow, with a long waxed mustache, gray hair at his temples, and alertly eager eyes, ever bright and dancing. For the past six years he had been upcountry, an official of the Compagnie d’Indo-Chine. Now he had resigned, was going home to Paris. He had made his pile.

Kennedy had been traveling about for a month past, seeing the country. He said no more, except that he was alone in the world; one inferred that, like many another tourist, he was seeking in travel to forget a loss. Of money, he had a great supply. He had been across the border in Siam and was now going to Singapore; after that, he did not know. Perhaps back home, he said with a shrug, perhaps on around the world. Life seemed rather a blank to Kennedy.

The Singapore boat would not be in for two days. Kennedy accepted Dudevant’s offer to put him up at the club; they drifted about together, became better acquainted, liked each other. Beneath Dudevant’s gay demeanor was a nervous hardness, a bitterness against the world; he told Kennedy many a tale of the hill-country, and they were cruel stories as a rule. Yet his bubbling vivacity, his eagerness for France, were good to see; he had enough money to see him through the rest of his life and he was joyously happy about it.

Dudevant spoke good English, liked Americans and made Kennedy at home in Saigon. He learned that Kennedy had been a banker—not surprising to one who noted the thin lips. By the second day the two men were good friends.

That afternoon, as they sat sipping *apéritifs* on the cool, tree shaded terrace of the Café de Paris, a young Frenchman went staggering past—a boy in the colonial infantry, fresh from St. Cyr and France. Kennedy watched him half cynically, half pityingly.

“Drunk, eh? Too bad,” he commented. “First time I ever saw one of your officers in that shape.”

Dudevant shrugged.

“Why not? The boy’s homesick, touched with fever, lost in some hell hole upcountry; he tries opium, perhaps takes a native woman, comes to himself, believes his life and honor are smirched, tries to forget it in liquor—and *voilà!* A bullet through his brain some day. The young fellows, they are made that way, my friend.”

“Not ours,” said Kennedy. “Not Americans. And yet—”

“Oh, yes!” Dudevant laughed, with a wry and mirthless grimace. “Youth is alike the world over. I remember—that is to say, there was—”

He paused, his gaze following the lurching figure of the young officer. Then he smiled and looked at Kennedy.

“But perhaps it would be offensive, this story about an American?”

“Not a bit of it.” Kennedy beckoned the waiter and laughed. “Why? I’m not taking offense where none is meant. You think you can prove your case?”

“That youth is the same the world over? Absolutely.” Dudevant settled back in his chair and lighted a *jaune*. “There was a young American who came out to Bangkok—his name, I believe, was like an overcoat; oh, yes, Mackintosh. That was it.”

Fingering the fine points of his mustache, his brilliant eyes fastened upon the passing figure of a charming golden skinned Eurasian girl, Dudevant sat half retrospective, half in dream. He did not observe the sudden sharp flush that leaped in the brown cheeks of Kennedy, to be gone next instant.

“You knew him, then?” asked Kennedy, his voice very negligent.

“I? Oh, no, not at all!” Aroused by the words, Dudevant laughed and turned. “No, but I have heard the tale from those who did. He came to Bangkok on some important mission for a teak lumber firm—a chance to open up his career. Three months later he was a wreck—and why? One night did it. You know, they have some remarkable gambling places in Bangkok, yes? You have seen them, perhaps.”

Kennedy nodded. He was fingering his glass, staring down at it, as though but half hearing the story. Puffing at his cigaret, Dudevant pursued the thread of his story.

“Mackintosh, it seems, got drunk one night, and gambled. He lost some enormous amount. He was hooked by some English or German chap from Canton, I think. He became very drunk. Well, that was all! A little thing, to you or me, a mere youthful trifle. True, he rather made an ass of himself and the American consul had to intervene; but in all, a trifle. To him, however, it was no trifle. He felt he had disgraced his whole life, himself and his family and so forth. So he, who until then had drunk seldom, plunged into gambling and liquor—perhaps attempting to retrieve the sums he had lost. Some woman, too, got hold of him.”

Kennedy watched the liquid in his glass intently. A deep crease had appeared between his brows; his eyes, beneath their lowered lids, seemed to flame and glitter.

“This poor young man,” pursued Dudevant, “had entirely ruined himself in another fortnight—entirely. He fought with two or three men, one the head of his company. He was fired from his position. He lost his own and the company’s money. His affair with the lady became scandalous, even for Bangkok, which is no ways particular. You have been in Siam; you have seen the temples there, the Golden Wat and the others, with their enormous treasures? Well, this Mackintosh probably became utterly desperate. One night, having laid his plans, he got into one of the temples, killed one priest and hurt another, and got away with bulging pockets—jewels of all kinds. He disappeared.”

Kennedy started to speak, checked himself, then asked an odd question.

“Was it known that he was the guilty party?”

“Oh, no! He was never suspected.” Dudevant laughed a little, ironically. “Others were suspected; there was a great scandal. He disappeared; and because no white man disappears easily in Bangkok, he was thought to have jumped into the river—killed himself.”

Kennedy looked sharply at the Frenchman, then lifted his glass and sipped at it.

“Odd,” he commented.

“Was it not? That a foreigner, an American, should have pillaged one of those temples, which not the cleverest thieves in all Asia have been able to enter!” Dudevant’s voice was admiring, his eyes were eager. “Weeks later, this young man turned up at one of our frontier posts, disguised as a native. He was in terrible condition—emaciated, wounded, starved; he died a day or two afterward. The official in charge buried him decently and kept his secret.”

“Where was this?” asked Kennedy, an odd steely inquiry in his tone.

Dudevant shrugged and waved his cigaret lightly.

“Who knows? I heard some gossip; but one does not inquire too closely into the doings of a brother official. It was at one of the hill stations.”

“And his loot? His jewels?”

“Ask of the jungle, of the natives, my friend; he had nothing left. You see how my case is proved? One little youthful folly, one evening gone wrong, and imagination led him on. He thought his life was ruined; so he went on and ruined it.”

Kennedy nodded. He produced a cheroot, bit on it and his eyes gleamed.

“By gad, you’ve got to hand it to him! He got away with a man’s job, eh? I’ve seen those temples and how they’re guarded. Then he lost everything, staggered into French territory and died from his hardships. That it?”

“So.” Dudevant smiled. “You see? And this young colonial officer who just passed—he drinks, he commits some trifling breach of discipline, he drinks more, and some day he is found with a bullet in his brain. All for nothing. Excuse me a moment. I will telephone to the club about the wine for dinner.”

He rose and strode inside, a tall, lean man who walked with lithe steps. Kennedy looked after him, face like iron, and took the cheroot from his lips.

“So!” he said, half aloud. The sound of the word was like an animal’s snarl.



The Messageries boat came in, took aboard its south-bound freight and passengers and went back downstream in the curious way boats have of leaving Saigon.

Kennedy and Dudevant had obtained a cabin together. As though the safe departure and the free air of the sea had unsealed his lips, Kennedy almost at once became less taciturn, treated his companion to little confidences, displayed a new and very pleasing side of his nature. He, a hardboiled financier, had his weaknesses; and the trust of such a man is always flattering.

He told Dudevant, for example, just what he had been doing in Indo-China and upcountry. The Frenchman listened, at first astonished, then with thoughtful, reflective eyes fastened on the sea horizon to port.

“So you collect gems, eh?” said Dudevant slowly. “For those who can afford it, a pleasant pastime, and perhaps profitable. And you had no luck?”

Kennedy shook his head.

“Not a scratch; never found a stone. Wasted my time and money, not to mention my arrangement with a customs guard at Singapore. You see, that’s how I could make it

profitable. No duty to pay here, no duty to pay when I got home. Such things can be arranged if you locate the right men. I had hoped to take home at least fifty thousand pounds' worth of stones—and I haven't found a dozen decent ones the whole trip."

Dudevant commiserated with him, and presently changed the subject. That evening they sat in a bridge game with two Englishmen, and Kennedy lost quite heavily. He settled up from an amazing roll of fifty-pound Bank of England notes, and Dudevant's eyes lingered on this display of cash with gathering cupidity in their dark depths. Some men are like that; the sight of much money seems to waken latent greed within them.

It was on the following afternoon, as they sat together beneath the after bridge deck awning, that Dudevant turned to Kennedy and spoke with very sober air.

"The compliment you have paid me, in your confidences, my friend, is not only deeply appreciated; more, it is an extraordinary coincidence. I know that you had no ulterior motive in telling me about your hobby—because I am the only living person who could know that I am interested in it."

Kennedy gave him a slow, surprised glance of interrogation.

"Eh? I'm afraid I don't quite get you, old man."

"No?" Dudevant laughed gaily and jerked his chair closer. "You desire to buy stones. I have stones, good ones. You could not know that, of course; not a living soul even suspects it. Listen, my friend. You know it is forbidden for officials to meddle with such things; they must live on their miserable pittance of pay, and hope some day to go home on a pension, when they are old and broken—but not many ever enjoy their pensions."

Kennedy shrugged.

"Naturally not. If an official is honest, he's damned to the extent of letting virtue be its own reward—a cursed poor one out here—while other men get rich all around him. If he's dishonest, so are most of the others; the only crime lies in getting caught."

It did not occur to Dudevant that this sort of philosophy was a bit strange on the lips of an American financier. Probably, indeed, it was just the sort of philosophy that coincided with his Gallic notions of American financiers. He nodded earnestly, shrewdly, and lighted a fresh cigaret.

"Of course, of course," he agreed. "You have expressed it exactly, my friend. You may not know the extent to which the life of a small official is plain and undiluted purgatory. The endless red tape, papers, papers, papers! The small salary, the fear and enmity of his superiors, the inability to trust any one around him, the secluded life off at some hill post surrounded by natives. Perhaps twenty years of it lies ahead of him, before he can hope for civilization, for repose, for France. Small wonder if that man seeks to feather his nest as he sees his superiors do every day."

Kennedy's face was quite blank as he nodded tacit approval of these sentiments.

"So—you comprehend."

The Frenchman spread his hands eloquently, leaned back, fingered his thin pointed mustache for a moment. Kennedy looked at him, then smiled thinly.

"And you've managed it, have you?"

Dudevant's expression was sardonic.

"I have come into an inheritance, yes," he said. "It allowed me to resign my post and go home; the explanation was sufficient. And now I am going to France. In another month I shall be comfortably established in a small *pension*. I shall set about locating a wife with the proper *dot*. I shall have ahead of me an easy and quiet life, with small luxuries in plenty, a few large

ones—all of life. But wait. I go to bring you something, something to show you, my friend. I think you will find it of great interest.”

He rose and departed with his lithe, sure stride. Kennedy darted one glance after him—one glance from eyes that were shaggy browed, fiercely grim.

“Yes, all of life—luxurious, easy, comfortable!” he muttered. “You’ve got it all ahead of you, sure; never bothers you a bit that other men had life ahead of them, too—well, you’re hooked, or I’m a Dutchman!”

He sat unmoving, looking out at the glittering horizon; their little portion of the bridge deck was to itself, cut off from other passengers.

Presently Dudevant came back, carrying with him a cane of square bamboo, a stick Kennedy had noticed him carrying in Saigon. It was lightly carved between the joints, which as in this variety of bamboo were quite far apart, and each joint bore a neat little ring of yellowed ivory about it, inconspicuous, but also lightly carved.

The Frenchman sat down, looked around to be sure they were alone, then took hold of the stick and turned. It unscrewed from the handle at the top joint; then a second and a third joint came apart in like fashion. It was cunningly made.

“Here we are.”

Sun helmet upside down in his lap, Dudevant placed in it little twists of paper which he took from the hollow sections of bamboo; each twist of paper held something. He fingered them, counting them over, and nodded. One or two he put aside in his pocket. Then he handed the helmet and contents to Kennedy.

“There, my friend,” he said with great frankness. “Look at these and tell me what you can give for them. I had that stick made, but I am not so sure about such a concealment. I fear it might not get me safely into France, after all. And, you understand, France must be attained. I have gambled heavily and can not afford to lose. I have, indeed, just enough money to reach Marseilles comfortably.”

“Stones, are they?” demanded Kennedy, his fingers fumbling at one of the paper twists. “Where’d you get them?”

“Here and there, over the past ten years.” Dudevant shrugged. “Some were pledges for loans made with Chinese traders. I had most of the Chinese in my district on the lookout for bargains. Others I got at odd times and places. They’re all native cut, if you’ll notice. May have to be recut.”

Kennedy’s face was like stone, giving no hint of belief or disbelief.

One by one he unrolled the paper twists; one by one he carefully examined in his palm the gems thus revealed; one by one he twisted them up again and laid them by. Dudevant sat smoking, watching him closely, nervously, all absorbed attention. There were only eighteen stones in all, but they were very fine ones—four diamonds of old cut, the rest rubies and sapphires.

When he had seen them all, Kennedy frowned a little and looked at Dudevant with the air of one who had expected great things, only to find small ones.

“Not bad, not bad,” he said. “Unfortunately, I would have to buy them all in order to get the diamonds. And I must confess to you that I seek diamonds above all else. Yes, I find stories in diamonds, queer tales, odd anecdotes—but I am not so fond of these antique cuttings. If you had picked up any more modern stones, now—”

Almost reluctantly, it seemed, Dudevant’s fingers went to his pocket.

“Well,” he admitted, “there is one such diamond here. I could not well remove it from its setting without risk of damaging it. I got it from a native chieftain a couple of years ago, still in the lump of gold that held it. The gold has value, and the stone is fine, though very small—so small that, on the whole, I left it in the gold. Look at it.”

Kennedy took the paper twist handed him. It was heavier than the others. He opened it and disclosed a bit of gold in which was set a small, fine diamond. He examined the gold attentively. What it had been was hard to say. Gouges in the back showed where initials had presumably been hacked out; yet there was a certain symmetry about it. Near the diamond in front were a few tiny flecks of black, which had escaped the file or knife scratching the whole thing.

Letting it fall among the rest in the helmet, Kennedy looked up. His face was very bleak and cold; his eyes glimmered strangely.

“My friend,” he said in a level, controlled voice, “this diamond indeed tells me a story—or do I fancy it? You got it two years ago, eh?”

Dudevant nodded.

“From a native,” he said, a little uneasily.

A harsh laugh broke from Kennedy.

“You are not acquainted with the customs of American universities? No. I thought not. They have societies which they call fraternities. The members have gold pins, some of them set with jewels. This was one such. It was worn by that young man of whom you told me in Saigon—you recall? Young Mackintosh. It bore his initials on the back—”

“No, no; impossible!” said Dudevant swiftly—almost too swiftly. He caught the gleam in the eyes of Kennedy and turned pale.

“Impossible, and shall I tell you why?” said Kennedy. “Because it was barely six months ago that young Mackintosh disappeared. You got this diamond two years ago; hence, impossible. Provided you told the truth. But you did not. You are the official to whose station this unfortunate young man came. These stones are the ones he looted in Bangkok.”

“My dear sir,” intervened Dudevant, coming to his feet, a deathly pallor in his face, “I do not understand why you talk to me in this manner. I do not understand your insinuations or charges.”

“Nonsense!” Kennedy laughed and leaned back in his chair, so that the Frenchman frowned down at him, puzzled by his manner. “You’ll understand them all in another moment, my dear fellow. You see, my name isn’t really Kennedy at all; I only took that name after hearing about my son’s tragedy and presumed death. I didn’t think he was the sort to commit suicide, and I was right. My name is Mackintosh.”

Dudevant took a step backward. His face was livid, greenish, and horror sat in his eyes. He tried to speak, wet his lips, could say nothing.

And in this moment Kennedy calmly lifted the sun helmet with its contents and flung it out, over the steamer’s rail.

A moment later Kennedy sat there alone, lighting a fresh cheroot, looking out at the horizon. His face was like stone, his eyes held no emotion. He remembered the low and terrible cry which had burst from Dudevant, how the Frenchman had turned and rushed below.

“Should have gone after him, I suppose,” he reflected. “But why? It’d do me no good to kill him. I punished him enough. He—”

He glanced up as a shadow fell; it was the purser of the boat, a kindly, bearded old Frenchman. Kennedy motioned to the empty chair, and the purser sat down. After they had

exchanged a few amenities, Kennedy turned to the officer.

“Tell me what you think about something, monsieur—what you think would be the reaction of a Frenchman under certain circumstances!”

“With all my heart, monsieur.” The purser laughed amusedly. “Your case?”

“That of a man of, say, forty-five,” said Kennedy slowly. “A small official out here, who has in a manner sold his soul to get sudden wealth. He gives up his post, burns his bridges, starts for home. He visions Paris, France, awaiting him—a life of comfort, of ease, of retirement. The fact that in order to get his future he has allowed another man to die does not worry him at all. Then, unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue, he loses every bit of the fortune for which he sold his soul. He also perceives, or rather dreads, exposure, vengeance, punishment. What would such a man do?”

Under the slow words, the laughing face of the purser grew very sober.

“Ah, monsieur,” he rejoined, “I am afraid, very much afraid, that such a man would see only one thing to do—*Mon Dieu!* What was that?”

A sudden sharp sound came from the cabins below them—the sharp, bursting crack of an automatic pistol. Kennedy took the cheroot from between his teeth.

“That, monsieur,” he said calmly, “was probably proof that your discernment is most excellent!”

The purser had not stayed to hear his comment, however.

[The end of *All Talk* by Henry Bedford-Jones]