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Golden Shower

By THOMAS POLSKY

MISS RICHARDS strolled toward the first vacant bench she saw. She wasn't tired, really, but she felt lazy. Warm and relaxed and pleasant. She'd had a pleasant morning constitutional through the sunny streets. And before that a pleasant breakfast, in spite of the ridiculous letter from Pauline. The *croissants* had been marvelous, and the fresh butter and the strawberry preserves. And the hot chocolate—marvelous. She'd been eating too much since she arrived here.

She sank comfortably onto the bench, then at once leaned forward. The sun-drenched metal had burned through her dress into the fleshy part of her back. She drew her lisle-stockinged knees up suddenly as she felt the heat on the backs of her thighs below her corset.

Gradually she was able to sink back again. She tilted her hat forward over her eyes and looked at the stretch of rumpled sand, the breakers, and the pale sparkling sea. It was a dazzling day.

People in bright bathing suits lay about on rugs, looking as if they had been flung helter-skelter on the beach. So much bare warm flesh, with arms and legs stretched out every which way. They all looked content—replete, even. And they all seemed to be banded together in groups. Those people around the phonograph, for instance, two of them doing exercises to a swing tune while the others watched and laughed. The children hopping away from the tiny overlapping waves at the water's edge. The people sunning themselves, their bodies jumbled together like new puppies in a basket. The young couple in the shade of the great orange umbrella, his dark hair against her breast, her fingers gliding back and forth along the curve of his back.

Everybody in groups.

The sun pressed down now on her shoulders and legs, an enervating, soothing weight. Her dress clung to her back. She unclasped the jaws of her big leather purse and reached inside for her phial of sunburn lotion. Her hand brushed against Pauline's stupid letter. She must answer it at once—the woman was hopeless. Miss Richards tilted the unstoppered phial against her finger, then stroked the oily finger gently along her nose. That was soothing too.

It would be pleasant to go into the sea, to feel the water curling against her arms and shoulders. The water looked warm and soft as milk, and the froth of the breaking waves was like fresh milk in pails. She watched two girls run along the beach, hand in hand, their bodies light and firm. Well, perhaps she could swim very early some morning, or at an isolated spot far up the beach.

She watched a group of young people, jostling, shouting, wrestling with a canvas boat. Suddenly, where the wave crests toppled and fell, she saw a lone figure.

A man was playing in the waves, diving through them, hurling his body along with them. All by himself. She watched his brown shoulders surge through the white froth. He stood, then, slanting his body as the wave withdrew, his long legs tensed. He was tall and thin. She could see the parallels of his lower ribs as he breathed. His brown body, darker than his tan trunks, shone with sea water. He waded into deeper water, his shoulders swaying as he hurled himself forward. Again he arched his back before a breaking wave and was swept along with the rush of foam. Again he stood braced against the receding wave, alone in the flat stretch of shimmering white.

Miss Richards' eyes smarted. Hurriedly she opened the big purse and reached down beside her passport for the bit of chemically-treated cloth bearing her oculist's name and address, which she always kept to clean her glasses. Pauline's letter. She unhooked the silver frames from behind her ears, held each lens horizontally before her mouth

and panted on it, then wiped away the moisture with the cloth. She put the glasses back on.

There he was, standing thigh deep in swirling foam. All at once his arms whirled through the air, scooping great handfuls of water high into the sunlight. His circling hands tore ragged chunks from the surface, which rose slowly, hesitated, then formed into thousands of tiny globes and swiftly fell. The drops fell about him like golden rain. Exultantly he swung his arms faster and faster. More and more water was tossed high in the air, and more and more shining drops fell.

He stood still for a moment. Then swiftly, as a wave poised high before him, he plunged through it and swam outward from shore. He swam easily, past the last of the breakers and on, until his head was only a dot among the million flecks of sunlight on the water.

She couldn't see him at all now. Nothing but the broken light on the ripples. She watched the flickering brilliance until her eyes ached, then shifted her gaze to the orange umbrella on the beach. But it had been rolled a little to one side, and now she could see only the young couple's legs, outstretched close together.

She reached into her purse for a cigarette—she was down to her last pack of American cigarettes—and again her hand encountered the letter. Well, she had come out here this morning for the express purpose of answering it. She sat up straight on the bench, her damp dress cool against her back, and re-read it, shaking her head once or twice with a quick, irritated motion. Quickly, then, she took her fountain pen and letter-pad from the purse, and prepared to write.

She looked at the paper for a while, then out at the empty sea. Finally, with another slight shake of the head, she thrust the pad into the purse and brought out a postcard, a photograph, garishly colored, of the beach, with the water an impossible blue, the sand bright yellow, and fuzzy unrecognizable people scattered about in groups. Miss Richards

turned the blank side of the card up and wrote Pauline's name and address at the right. *Etats-Unis*.

At the left she wrote "Pauline," then paused again. A girl with long slim legs and rounded breasts walked along the beach in front of her, accompanied by two men. People on the beach seemed sunk into lethargy, their bodies pressed into the sand by the weight of the sunlight. Miss Richards leaned against the metal bench and closed her eyes. Then suddenly she began to write, in a neat formal script.

"Pauline: Since you're incapable of taking advice, why ask for it? I thought you had a mind, but no. Just a tangle of female emotions. Emotionalizing means shilly-shallying, and you can't battle world problems with your glands. I give you up."

She stopped, holding the tip of the pen to her lips, and her eyes swept along the beach. There he was again. His brown arms cut the water with a slow tired motion. She watched as he swam in to the breakers, then floated in among the foam. In shallow water he stood up, his thin legs rather unsteady, and walked slowly toward shore.

Quickly Miss Richards finished her postcard. "Thanks for writing anyway. It's rather pleasant here. R." She dropped card and pen into her purse.

He was younger than she had thought. Very young, in fact. He came toward her up the beach, his shoulders sagging, panting as he walked, water dripping from his body. Miss Richards drew her feet back under the bench.

Only about fifteen feet away, he dropped to the sand and lay relaxed. His skin was darker than his trunks, much darker than the sand, except where his trunks had pulled away a little from his hip. There she saw a thin line of startling white. He lay quiet for a moment, then raised one closed hand. From between his fingers sand streamed down. Again he clutched a handful, raised his arm, and let the pale shower fall to the ground, bit by bit. A few golden grains struck his side, and clung there. Again the arm rose, again the golden shower fell.

The back of Miss Richards' own hand touched the hot metal of the bench beside her. She looked down at it with a sort of surprise. The palm was upward, the fingers and thumb curled in together to form a little cup.

She stared at the hand. Then quickly she straightened the fingers and pressed the palm tight against her thigh.

The sudden movement dislodged the purse from her lap. As she recovered it she saw him still lying there, still raising his arm to let the sand stream between his fingers. She opened the purse and drew out the card to Pauline. Watching him, she crumpled it in her fist.

The young man sprang suddenly to his feet. He walked down the beach with a long easy stride. Sand, clinging to his back and trunks, fell away from him as he walked away. She leaned forward, watching him, until he began to run, until, far down the beach, he leaped forward with a gay shout into a group of people.

Miss Richards sat stiffly on the bench. Slowly, carefully, her fingers flattened out the crumpled card. She held it then with one hand while the other dipped into the big purse, then went to her mouth. Her nose wrinkled with distaste as she licked the mucilage on the stamp.

Search

By GILEAN DOUGLAS

There is a cause for all of this
Which, if I go among the stars, I may discover;
If I go above the fog which wraps us all about
And touch my head against the sky.
But what if there is no sky, but only more and more
To wrackingly find out?