

An American war flier, shot down somewhere over the innermost regions of ancient China, provides the opening for one of Frank Owen's enthralling fantasies. A combination of legend and adventure, of romance and mystery, inscribed in Oriental colors as only this writer's master hand knows how.

A Study in Amber

by Frank Owen



THE THING PLUNGED downward like a dark star falling to earth. A moment before it had been Richard Trent, a Yank flying for China. Then in the space of the trembling of a leaf, machine-gun bullets had shattered the night's still blackness. His gasoline caught fire and the "Tomahawk" was enveloped in flames. In a split second he had jumped clear of the plane, striking his head sharply as he did so. He was unconscious before he could pull the rip-cord of his parachute. And so he dropped through space, unaware that his body was hurtling toward the dust of a parched earth. His plane had been flying at eighteen thousand feet.

The air was biting cold and it served as a stimulant to revive him. He opened his eyes. Down, down, down he plunged. It was difficult for him to pull his thoughts together. His brain was in chaos. Memory eluded him. His hand went mechanically to the rip-cord and the parachute opened up like a white cloud above him. Against the sky it had a luminous quality, the reflection of starlight. There was no moon.

A strong wind was blowing, stalling his descent. Often he drifted many miles though he was in no condition to calculate direction. Nevertheless he was aware that he was drifting but he was not alarmed. He had been flying at approximately three hundred miles per hour, when his plane

was attacked. Before leaping into space he had cut down the speed. His head ached viciously, and blood was trickling down his face from a gash in his forehead. The wound gave him no pain. Otherwise he was uninjured. Only that sharp headache annoyed him. It nauseated him but the cold air felt good against his forehead. Occasionally, the descent of the parachute would be arrested by a sudden vicious upswing of a wind channel, as though Quan Yu, the God of War, were striking out with his fists, flaying the very air itself even as the entire earth was being churned by his huge iron heels. Once the parachute collapsed and billowed around his head, for he was falling upward, but as it enshrouded him like folds of white cloud, he abruptly plunged downward again at a terrifying speed. Once more the parachute mushroomed and his descent was gentle and reasonably calm. But now he noticed a strange phenomenon. Silently one by one, stars were disappearing into a terrifying void of blackness. There was little dampness in the air despite its coldness so no storm was approaching. Yet the stars continued to be blotted out as though they were white flowers and the gentle, smiling God of Longevity was walking about the blue meadows of the sky and gathering them as he walked.

Soon all color and brilliance was gone from the night, and only bleak, desolate blackness remained. Man drinks light with the atmosphere, so it was that Richard Trent's mouth felt parched, dry. Fear drove the moisture from his throat, until he could not have needed drink more if he had been in a Gobi sandstorm. But one single star visible in the dark would have slaked his thirst.

Meanwhile the descent had become more rapid. The cold grew less penetrating but the peril seemed to increase. For months Richard Trent had been a Flying Tiger. His exploits were world news. He had faced death in its cruelest forms without flinching. He had laughed in face of danger, yet now he was afraid when there was nothing to fear; afraid of blackness when he had crept about Chinese villages feeling his way along, not even a candle visible, and had never given it a thought. Now, without reason, horror, biting, incredible was eating into the very marrow of his bones.

How long he could have stood the suspense of an unknown terror, as though he were falling into a deep pit and the earth was closing in, is problematical, had his descent not abruptly ceased. He struck with a jolt and the parachute dragged him along a few feet. Even in the blackness,

he found no difficulty disentangling himself. Thereafter he lay prone, endeavoring to draw his scattered wits together, and as he lay there gradually the panic abated. Even the air was calm, devoid of evil spirits. Fool, that he was! Flying Tiger! Bah! No Flying Tiger could have nerves like that. Yet the unknown has ever been fearsome since the first man trod gingerly upon a strange new world. Nearby he could hear the sound of a river splashing and gurgling along, a swift current that had little of the eerie about it. He was lying so close to it that occasionally a few drops splashed upon his face. For a moment he had the intense desire to rise and leap into it, to end this farce of terror, but for some unknown reason he refrained. However, he could not move far because of the danger of falling into the subterranean river or a rock crevice. With a start, he uttered a cry that echoed and danced over the rocks as it sped into distance. What if he had fallen into an extinct volcano? He would not be discovered in a thousand years. Then reason reasserted itself. Wherever this spot may be, it was not within an extinct volcano for the air was delightfully fresh and cool. Besides, a volcano is never extinct, it merely accidentally gets corked up by the force of its own spew.

He rolled over and lay on his back to wait for daylight or whatever might come. And now above him he could see the stars through a narrow ribbon of light, and they cleansed his mind of the last vestige of fear. Whatever it was, he'd face it. He was curious too. Adventure always has a pleasing expression. Since the air was so clear he was in no danger of suffocation. The water of the river was probably fresh, so he was in no danger of thirst. Before hunger could overtake him, he'd be able perhaps to climb back into the world of men once more. Without doubt, he had fallen into a mighty crevice in the rocks, though why the air was so sweet to breathe was an enigma. Why was it not fetid and vile if the walls were narrow, and filled slightly with the sweepings of the wind? He felt about him. The rock was as smooth as a marble road that was kept in good repair. There was no vestige of sand, neither were there dead leaves. Evidently nearby there must be an entrance to this cavern with the skylight window. He had the feeling that people were in the vicinity. He was not alone. His courage returned to him, gone were the stupid fears that had momentarily gripped him. He stretched out and yawned. He longed for a cigarette, and even though he had a pack with him, he made no attempt to light one. Better to wait till daylight before doing so. It was never wise to attract attention. Even though he felt that he was

not in hostile territory, his natural caution exerted itself. A cigarette attracts enemy fire. Why make a target of oneself? The sweetest morsel of life is that which a man tastes when he is in danger.

Somehow, he had no regrets. This was adventure. Perhaps he had run across, or rather fallen into a natural air raid shelter that nature had kindly equipped for just such an emergency as China was facing. Why it even had clear, fresh, running water.

He smiled ruefully. What a pity if it should prove to have no exit. Still the thought brought him no dismay. He could see the stars above. If there was no other means of egress, he'd journey to the stars.

The solitude was friendly. Perhaps the belief that all was well was only an illusion, but illusion has a sweet-tongued voice. It lulled him to sleep without his knowing. And in his sleep, he dreamed that a voice kept whispering to him over and over again, "This is the hour of mist-feeding."

He awakened much refreshed. Curiously he gazed about him. Perhaps this, too, was a dream, for he was lying in a comfortable bed in a luxuriously silken-draped yellow room in which a single lantern burned with a cheerful, subdued glow. It was a room in which one might give himself over to the enjoyment of solitude. On the air floated a faint suggestion of sandalwood and musk. He gazed down at the coverlet, rich yellow silk embroidered with the dragon emblem. In the days when China was an Empire such a covering was reserved only for the Emperor. He smiled ruefully. Perhaps it was fitting, for in this shadowy hour of mist-feeding, somehow he had become a Lord of Dust, an Emperor of Dreams. Some echo of doubt, brought him up shortly. He was undoubtedly in delirium, feasting on beauty as his life ebbed away. But this was ridiculous, too, for he had not been injured in any way. He grasped at logic, but it failed him. This was the stuff that dreams are made of, there was no place for reality in this enchanting room. Nevertheless, he refused to be disturbed. If this was the fringe of death it was indeed a beautiful adventure. But that was all rot, for he was hungry. Does the spirit detached from the body yearn for food? If such a state exists, would it not be beyond hunger, beyond thirst, beyond desire? Those were mighty comforting questions to have about in this strange hour, for of one thing he was sure, his hunger was real though all else be but wraiths and visions.

With a start, he became aware that in a shadowy corner, an old man

sat as though waiting—for what he dared not guess. And as he peered intently at the ancient figure every detail of his face became clear to him—like old parchment, as lined and wrinkled as a dried fig. But his eyes were as sharp as sword's points. The most surprising thing of all was that the ancient one did not look Chinese. Perhaps he was a native of those forgotten lands where men and women live and die magnificently and mysterious strangers knock at moonlit doors.

And then, accidentally, the eyes of Richard Trent met those of the stranger, and remained as though bound by a spell—an instant only—then the ancient one turned his eyes away and the spell was broken.

Trent's interest had been fired to fever pitch. In that glance there had been no hostility, only the reflection of a strong personality. Bah! It was only a hypnotic trick. Trent's eyes were already large with wonder, ready to be swayed by anything. Another time he must be on guard, exert his own influence. He must live up to the reputation of the Flying Tigers.

When the stranger spoke his voice was soft and gentle. He spoke English with little trace of accent.

"My name is Mu Lin, I bid you welcome to my humble home."

"I am Richard Trent, an American volunteer, flying for China. I don't know how I came here, nor why I am here, but I am gratified anyway. However, if this is a humble home my eyes would not be able to stand the brilliance of a palace."

"A house is humble when its occupants understand and appreciate the value of humility. He is rich who is well satisfied. I think of Su Wu, the Shepherd. In the market, Su Wu sold bean curd. He sold it for nineteen years and saved three dollars. He married a young wife and passed the New Year happily. He was a very rich man. . . . But come, arise, you must be hungry. You will need much food to make you strong for the dangers that lie ahead."

"Dangers, I know of no dangers."

"That is regrettable, for death stares you in the face."

"Fine, that proves at least that I'm not dead, or dying or tossing about in delirium."

"No, I can assure you you are in perfect health. I found you lying by the Black Dragon River, so I brought you to my house."

"So there is an exit from this cave."

"Several and death is one of them. I will show you the way. However,

for your guidance, be it known that my house is within the cavern. How you came unto my people I have no way of knowing."

"The explanation is simple. I came down by parachute when my plane was destroyed, and, since your house is near the Black Dragon River, it wouldn't be exaggerating to say I fell through your skylight."

"Your words are not without a substance of humor but the incident is regrettable nonetheless."

"I prefer to call it fortunate and I am grateful."

"Is a condemned man grateful for the rope that hangs him?"

"What's that to do with me?"

"Perhaps much."

"What fantastic stuff is this? Are you threatening me? I don't scare easily. My squadron of flyers were and still are known as Flying Tigers."

"And you have done great work for China. For that we shall honor you."

"Thanks."

"Unfortunately, soon thereafter you must die."

"I assure you I intend to keep on living. I've wiggled out of worse spots than this. But what have I done? What law have I broken?"

"You've invaded our solitude. For ages we have been people of legend. Come, let us go into my library for a moment and I will read you a short passage from one of the endless stream of books on China written by your people. Odd how you Americans can write so much about us when you know so little. I spend many a droll half-hour reading over these merrie tales. So many of your people are patronizing about the Chinese. We only taught you the Golden Rule, gave you the first printed book, the first paper, the first ink, the first silk, the first tea—"

"But alas," broke in Trent ruefully, "what good are all these great gifts if I cannot live to enjoy them."

"I am amazed that you are so opposed to dying, when you can die for a great principle—in order that our solitude will not be violated."

"Sounds a bit selfish if you ask me."

"Not at all. There was once an Indian philosopher who spoke for all men when he said, 'Ah, brother, you will never know the blessing of doing nothing and thinking nothing; and yet, next to sleep, that is most delicious. Thus we were before our birth, thus we shall be after death!'"

As he spoke, Mu Lin drew aside a curtain and they entered a library,

large in extent but very homelike. Beside comfortable chairs scattered about the room were convenient tables piled with books while yellow lanterns burned above in the best position to give proper light. Mu Lin went to a bookshelf and took down the volume he wanted.

"This book," he said, "was published about a hundred years ago but it will serve its purpose. It gives only a few lines about us, but enough. Let me read to you, 'In the mountainous districts of China there are magic streams and wonderful caves, which are the scenes of mythical and legendary tales without number; many of these have great interest for the student of folklore. In one of these curious caves there are many chambers and exquisite formations of colored rock produced by the action of water in past ages. The people tell of a strange race having white faces and red hair, who came down the rapids in ancient times and took possession of these caves and pillaged all the neighborhood land. From whence they came and to what race they belonged was never known, but when they were satisfied with their booty they vanished into the land of mystery.'"

Mu Lin finished reading, closed the book, placed it back on the shelf. "That will give you some idea what I mean. Others have told the story in somewhat different fashion but all agree we are only a myth. Are we at fault if we desire to remain apart from the world in a Utopian Elysium of our own choosing. Among my people hatred, greed, and modern civilization cluttered up with motor cars, yachts and such worries are unknown. But we love nature in all her exquisite forms and caprices. Our women are beautiful. Life is calm. There is no envy. Such an ideal state has been menaced by your accidental plunging down into our midst. You must die gently and without pain. We'll grant you a perfumed death if you prefer."

"The death I prefer is from old age."

"That isn't quick enough."

"I'm in no hurry."

"We are not so patient. You must cease to exist within a fortnight. Why are you so stubborn? Why a man should protest about dying when it is the supreme adventure in life is an enigma. But enough of this playing around with words. Let us not waste time while the lentils burn. A small repast is ready for us. You will join me at rice."

"At anything as long as it is food. Don't forget I'm a guest. No poison."

"Did I not say you would be honored ere you were destroyed?"

"Yes, you did say something about that, but save your medals. I might escape."

"I doubt it. The Black Dragon River flows only under the earth. It never emerges."

"No matter. I can't swim."

"That is well."

They walked through a series of rooms, each more gorgeous than the last, filled with fragile porcelains, carved jades, fine brocades, lanterns shaped like unto the loveliest flowers, splendid bronzes, lacquers and lapis lazuli. Trent longed to linger, but Mu Lin urged him forward.

There were no doors to any of the rooms, only embroidered silk and tapestry curtains. And always there was a fragrance in the air, ever changing—wistaria and musk, jasmine and nutmeg.

In one room a table had been set for them.

"Be seated," said Mu Lin, "and may you enjoy abundant health."

"I hope you do nothing to disturb my digestion."

"In this hour of rice, you are in no danger."

Trent seated himself at the table. Before joining him, Mu Lin put on a gorgeous coat, embroidered medallions of yellow and red on a field of darkest blue. Along the skirt of the coat was a conventional wave design. There was no border or collar. The brilliant yellow sleeves were colorfully embroidered—flowers, birds, deer and the heavenly Dog of Foh. The blue cap had a pearl button.

"I never drink tea," explained Mu Lin, "unless attired in ritual robes." He seated himself at the table. "Tea is liquid jade, the medicine that has saved Chinese civilization. Where are the Greeks, the Romans, the early Egyptians? They were not tea-drinkers. And they have perished. All those who would prepare tea should heed the Ch'a-ching (Tea Classic): 'The bubbles should reach the size of lobster's eyes but on no account should they be permitted to grow to resemble those of large fish. To do so would be to boil the water until it lost its original freshness of life.'"

A servant entered and placed a tea service before each of them. The fragile cups were transparent green in order that the light, shining through them, might reveal the delicate coloring of the tea.

Trent said nothing as Mu Lin poured the liquid into the cups.

"Let us drink," he said and his voice seemed far away.

Trent sipped the golden beverage. It coursed through his veins like rarest wine but with a far better taste. It was a soul-satisfying moment.

Somehow he felt that he could trust Mu Lin anywhere despite the doleful sentence he had pronounced. Tea makes all men brothers. As Mu Lin filled the cups once more, the world narrowed down. They two alone remained. Could this be "The hour of mist-feeding" of which the voice in his sleep had spoken?

Not till long afterward did he realize that neither of them ate anything. Nevertheless, hunger left him. He longed for excitement, a new thrill, the bright face of danger, as though drunk with the wine of living.

As they returned to the library Mu Lin said, "The fact you are a Flying Tiger complicates things."

"Set me free and I'll bother you no more."

Mu Lin ignored the interruption as he continued, "For amber is made of the souls of tigers. When a brave tiger dies, his spirit enters the earth and becomes transmuted into that which is known as hu-p'o or tiger's soul."

"Mere folklore," said Trent. "It is common knowledge that when amber was being formed, none of the present races of mankind existed. Forests of the Tertiary Period were submerged and the resin became petrified. I mean the resin produced by certain kinds of coniferous trees, now extinct, which were embedded in blue clay. In the Ice Age, changes in the earth's surface released much amber from its former bed. Today it is found in various quarters of the earth, but practically none in China proper despite the fact that since long before the Han Dynasty it has been prized because it is symbolic of courage."

"Courage, yes," agreed Mu Lin, "because it has tiger qualities. As to the rest of your remarks, I fail to agree with them. Alas, you have been reading books again. And reading without knowledge is a dangerous thing. Books have a quality of being wrong. It is believed by your countrymen that Gutenberg printed the first book from movable type. A nice fallacy but given almost universal credence. It is almost as ridiculous as the belief that the Americans invented air-conditioning, when these caves were air-conditioned before I was born, while Ming Huang, the illustrious Emperor who died in 762 A.D., had one of his summer palaces air-conditioned. Again you claim that Columbus discovered America. As a matter of fact he rediscovered it, for certain Chinese Buddhist Priests landed on your West Coast in the vicinity of Lower California and called it Fusang, 'The Country of Women,' probably because the Indians wore their hair

long and the Chinese did not at that particular time. My people have never worn long hair, that is, we Red-Haired People. Nevertheless, it is well that you have devoted some small time to the study of amber, for it is with amber that you are to be fittingly honored for your exploits as a Flying Tiger. Thereafter, you must be put to death but in no spirit of anger."

"I'll be just as dead as though you hated me," said Trent curtly. "I spurn your gifts. First you give me a bit of amber, a trinket of little importance, then you kill me and take it back again."

"No," said Mu Lin slowly; he seemed somewhat offended. "I shall give you no tangible gift. What I will bestow upon you is something of far greater value, something that you will remember always, in this world and in all the worlds that are to come."

"I'm still unimpressed and unappreciative."

"All things change, so will your opinion." Mu Lin walked across the room, Trent could not help thinking, "With what grace he walks, despite his years. But then it is an attribute of the Chinese. The smile of a Chinese girl is infinitely charming. Speaking to the eye, the Chinese language is the richest in the world."

How far his thoughts might have flown is problematical had Mu Lin not spoken again. "If there be no use in our words, of what use are they?"

He took a small object from a wall cabinet. Then he returned and stood by the chair in which Trent was sitting and held up the small yellow object for his gaze. "Here is a fragment of amber," he mused and now his voice sounded far away as though his thoughts had retreated to the inner recesses of his heart. "Amber may easily be tested as to its genuineness by a simple device. Only that which is rubbed and thereafter attracts mustard seeds is true. The belief that amber goes back to what your countrymen call the Age of Bronze is fantastic in the opinion of Chinese scholars who have meditated over this problem for centuries and they have long since set down that the 'resin of fir trees sinks into the earth and becomes amber after a thousand years.' I have proven this to be correct in an astounding manner. But behold, this amber is transparent and if you hold it close to the light you will see that it encloses the body of a fly."

Trent examined the trinket with keen interest. "I have heard of oddities like this many times," he said, "and when I was in college, how long ago that seems, I studied the poems of Robert Herrick, one in particular I have never forgotten:

'I saw a fly within a bead
Of amber cleanly buried.
The urn was little, but the room
More rich than Cleopatra's tomb.'

"A poem that fits the occasion," observed Mu Lin. "But see, this little fly is perfectly preserved. Its legs and wings are undamaged. Why did it not struggle to get away when first it became entangled in the liquid resin long ages ago? Perhaps it knew that it was to be immortal and was satisfied. Scientists by years of study have discovered one hundred and sixty-three different types of insects incased in amber, many unknown to us. But in no case are there signs of struggle or panic. All are perfect specimens. Perhaps they submitted serenely because they knew that this was not death but suspended animation. If one had the fantastic impulse one could release specimens of all these different insects upon mankind. Perhaps some are poisonous. A single sting might bring death. Of these things no man may tell, for no living man knows. It would be interesting to trifle with such an experiment but I am concerned with a higher ambition. After all one plague more or less in this Axis infested world would scarcely matter. I'd do it at once if I thought that the insects would only feed on Japanese. However, I doubt if they'd touch such poisonous meat. But of idle speculation enough. What lies before us is on a loftier plane. It would be fitting if it could take place along the Milky Way or upon the Blue Highroads of the Sky. Alas, that we must be content for this great adventure to take place near Black Dragon River."

"Are you then planning for me a perfumed death, or am I to have my throat cut with a golden sword?" asked Trent dryly. "I'd be far more enthusiastic about this thing if I knew what lay in the inner recesses of your mind."

"I assure you that at this moment you are in no immediate danger," said Mu Lin gently. "Right now you are being feted for the marvelous deeds you have performed for China. Let me assure you that the exploits of the Flying Tigers are scrupulously set forth in our gazette, a newspaper that is not published daily or weekly but whenever there is news worth recording that is of uncommon interest. You Tigers have been responsible for many editions. For even though we have red hair and our faces are white, we deem it a privilege to walk side by side with the brave Chinese whose brothers we are."

"From your eulogies I gather that I will not be stabbed in the back."

"Your mind may be at rest on that score. I would be a party to nothing so ungenerous."

"Good. Having faced death a hundred times, I'd hate to turn my back on it at the end."

"You make my position very difficult."

"Then let me live and we will both be cheered."

"If I did I'd be a traitor to my people. Our sanctuary must be preserved."

"By murder?"

"The need for it is upon us."

"Thereafter it will no longer be a sanctuary, for whenever you hear the roar of the tiger that drives the wind, this evil deed will be driven into your mind."

Mu Lin sighed. "The hour of grandeur is upon us. Let us put aside such distressing thoughts. The vision that you will witness will purify the eyes of your heart."

As Mu Lin spoke, he drew aside a curtain and Trent followed him into a room of subdued lights. The carpet was as soft as grass in the green spring. Though there was sufficient illumination it was difficult to see with any degree of clarity. Nevertheless it was not gloomy. A great beauty was in the air, hard to define. If it were perfume it was elusive and unlike any he had ever encountered. He walked gently as though the rug on which he trod was a carpet of dreams that might vanish at any moment.

Far down the room a yellow disc was glowing like the round moon of autumn. Was it a disc of jade? Yellow jade is one of the rarest of gems. Not till he was quite close did he realize that it was amber, amber as clear as polished crystal.

Mu Lin clutched his arm so tightly his fingers felt like steel claws. Nevertheless Trent made no objection to the pain. It was odd that a man so old should have such strength in his fingers.

"See, I keep her in a Golden Room," Mu Lin whispered. "A red embroidered cloth is spread before the shrine of her beauty. Above, the curtains are of silk as green as jade. Her fragrant mouth is small. Tell me did your eyes ever behold a girl more beautiful?"

"What girl is this of which you speak?" said Trent, "I see no girl."

"Within the amber, gaze and you will see. My dear one, for a thousand years, has waited to be released."

Trent took a step forward. He gazed at the amber, glowing with a soft golden light, and as he gazed he saw that the amber was transparent. Within was the body of a slender girl. She seemed to be sleeping. Her beauty was breath-taking, peach bloom cheeks, eyebrows like willow leaves. A knot of hair lay low upon her neck. She wore a gown of green silk, though it may have been blue with yellow amber tints upon it. In her hair was a flower, a small red rose bursting into bloom. It was hard to believe that rose had bloomed a thousand years ago. He was now willing to believe that all amber did not go back to the Stone Age for this slender girl must have lived in comparatively recent times as years are reckoned in the great age of the universe.

"Do you wonder that night after night I kept for her the half of my quilt?"

Was it only his imagination, Trent wondered or did her eyelids move as though she were sighing in sleep. Never in his life did he realize the importance of the flickering of an eyelid until that moment. He held his breath, afraid to breathe, lest he disturb the magic of this immortal moment.

This was the woman that the magic hours of all the world had given unto him. And she belonged to Mu Lin, Mu Lin the ancient one whose face was as wrinkled as a dried fig. Why it was sacrilege to even think of such a union. In that moment he forgot that his life was in danger, forgot that he was a Flying Tiger, forgot his intense yearning to get away from those caverns; for a new desire, terrible in its intensity had blotted everything from his thoughts but his craving for this glorious woman. What matter that she was the oldest woman in the world? Her face glowed with youth eternal. Music was mingled with her form.

"She is as lovely as a nutmeg bursting into bloom," murmured Mu Lin. "Below her amber palace I have built a mound of dried fir and pine chips. A touch of flame would start a fire that would burn away the amber, restore heat to her numb body until her heart began beating once more. I await that day when she will come to me like a goddess of the morn with stardust in her eyes. I will kneel as she comes to me, and in the warmth of her young arms I will become young once more."

"Are you setting nets to catch the moon?" asked Trent bitterly.

"That is why I hesitate," sighed Mu Lin. "I speak of spring and yet the autumn gale blows wildly through the grass. Her body has the cloquence of jade. I gaze upon her face with the eyes of my heart, and I pray

to the God of Longevity that he will help me in this supreme hour. She stands there waiting and I hesitate. The flower of yesteryear will bloom again, but not the flower of man's youth. So sang the poet, but need I believe him? Is a verse true because it is set down in grass characters? For thirty years I have waited for my face to grow young, my remaining hope is in the fire that warms my dear one, perhaps it will bring its blessing unto me. Still I hesitate. The words of Wang Wei chant in my ears even though no man sings:

"Out of the dusk comes the autumn
The fragrance of spring sighs and expires."

"Yes," said Trent slowly, "you are old but I envy you. To own the golden room that encloses a girl so beautiful makes you the richest of men. Are you not afraid I will snatch your great treasure from you?"

"No, for you will be dead ere that opportunity comes."

"But you said I would be honored!"

"You have been honored."

"What use a feast of beauty without the time to digest it?"

"You must die within the week. When the week fades you must die."

"But during that week I may remain in your house?"

"Yes, as an honored guest."

"I am humbled before your words. Seven days will be enough. If then death steps in, I'll meet it smiling. If it should pass me by, for even you have no power over death itself, I shall be gratified."

"Death will halt, I promise you that. In the meantime, I shall muse over an old precept, 'Never lightly esteem a friend or an enemy.'"

Hours later Trent was alone in the sleeping room that had been assigned to him. He paid no attention to the embroidered rugs and draperies. The flowers were so lifelike they seemed to give forth perfume. In one corner of the room there was a silken bamboo thicket that seemed to sway in the breeze like slender girls dancing. Above them was a verse embroidered in exquisite characters: "The bamboos are admirable when fresh with rain. In the hills we love the time of sunset." Trent had always enjoyed this mixing of art with written characters that is so typically Chinese. He had several landscapes in his apartment in New York, dating back to middle Ching upon which there were numerous verses, one written by the original painter, others by poets who had enjoyed viewing

the picture and had set down their thoughts as one might scribble marginal notes on the pages of a beloved book. There were also a couple of seals that attested to its authenticity. One had the simplest of lines, "Oh, these Mountains, Oh, these Great Mountains—" as though the artist, overcome by their grandeur had been unable to go on. But now Trent gazed at the inscriptions of the tapestries with unseeing eyes. In the bamboo grove he imagined he could see the amber girl dancing to the rhythm of the swaying bamboos. His eyes were glazed with the wonder of her, nor did he see her with his eyes alone. He saw her with his heart and his flesh. His whole body longed for her, his mouth was dry with the dryness of a thirst nothing could quench. He cast off his clothes and put on the Chinese lounging garments that were spread on a chair beside the bed. They were cooler than his own clothes but still that amber fire burned within him, the fire of love without reason and without regard. He must have the girl, hold her for one immortal moment in his arms though he die for it the next moment. Death would mean nothing to him then, for he would be like unto a man who had drunk the stars and walked through the highroads of the sky. There was madness in his thoughts, divine madness.

He threw himself upon the bed and tried to rest. Sleep dug at his eyes but it would not enter. The silken coverlets were warm to his touch as though a fire had been kindled underneath the kong as is customary in China during four-coat weather. But it was mid-summer, though he was not sure of the season. Time in China is very elastic and one never cares about the day of the week or the weeks of the months. The earth turns without man's effort. Why toil? The heat intensified, the fever of longing which he could not endure. He did not even know the name of the girl enclosed in the amber, yet her image had come to live in his heart. His body was in torment, and then out of the whispering night a daring plan took root in his thoughts. He was a man of action. The war had made him so. He rose from the bed, put on his felt-soled slippers, and slipped through the curtains of his room. He was thankful that there was no door to creak an alarm.

It was not difficult for him to find the way. The lanterns in the various rooms were still lighted, since within the caverns daylight never penetrated. His padded slippers made no sound, nor did he meet anyone. Within the mountain all were sleeping or enjoying inactivity. It took but a moment for him to reach the amber shrine of his beloved. A gentle

smile seemed to hover about the corners of her lips, as though she sensed his purpose and somehow knew that her hour of deliverance was at hand. The beating of his heart was like sledge-hammer blows. He was surprised that it made no echo. His forehead was moist, his hands shook as he struck a match. He would like to have delayed for an instant, to catch his breath, but this was no time for waiting. Unless he acted quickly the opportunity might be gone forever.

He did not know that Mu Lin was standing but a few yards in back of him, a picture of profound inertia. He made no outcry; his face was expressionless, as tranquil as that of Lao Tzu Riding on an Ox in the painting by the Sung artist, Ch'ao Pu-chih. Nevertheless his eyes were as keen as sharp swords.

With shaking hand Trent applied the lighted match to the chips of fir and pine. They flared up joyously. Had they not been aged and dried for many years by Mu Lin for the moment that would be for him the culmination of his dreams, perhaps bringing him youth once more? But always Mu Lin had hesitated. Suppose his experiment failed, suppose his golden girl was devoured by the flames that consumed the amber. Suppose youth should always remain beyond his fingertips even though success crowned his efforts. And so his hands had remained leaden. He lacked the strength of will to apply the spark. The amber burned quickly with a bright yellow flame. It gave off an agreeable perfume, like unto the scent of pine as it was consumed. The amber melted away into ashes. Now and then they both could catch a glimpse of the golden girl. Her cheeks seemed flushed, her eyes about to open. She remained smiling as if her ordeal was without pain. So quickly did the amber burn away, her flesh was not even scorched. A slight flush had come into her cheeks as though the blood was once more flowing after a thousand years of suspended animation. Trent took a step closer and now for the first time he noticed in her hair a golden hairpin delicately inlaid with kingfisher feathers. Her gentle breast seemed to rise and fall slightly as though the breath of life had indeed been restored to her. Or was it only the fruits of his own imagination? He brushed aside his momentary doubt. Is it not a fact that it is only the imagined that is ever real? Or is it true that nothing exists except the moment one is living, and in this moment this one woman encompassed all. Perhaps he too was only made of the stuff that dreams are made of. Was he not in the caverns inhabited by the legend-

ary Red-Haired People? Was he not a guest of Mu Lin who certainly existed on the borderland of reality?

For long he stood gazing enraptured at the golden girl, while the ashes at her feet grew lifeless as the last spark flickered out. Then abruptly he reached up and drew her down to him, her body all warm and yielding. Reverently he held her close and kissed her lips. Was it only imagination or was there a response?

With a harsh cry Mu Lin, aroused from his lethargy, flung himself at his tormentor, his hands like talons yearning to tear his prey to shreds. Spellbound he had watched the experiment, the experiment which he lacked the courage to complete because it might bring destruction to his dear one. But now the woman of a thousand years had been released. Trent, the madman, had dared to take her into his arms. He had violated every code of hospitality. To invade a man's home and steal his beloved was the most heinous of crimes. That he had released the girl from the amber prison in which for so many ages she had been enclosed, Mu Lin saw fit to overlook. Trent had attempted to captivate her. Therefore, he must die, not only because he had inadvertently invaded the sanctuary of the Red-Haired People but also for his preposterous impudence. Truly no man was ever more deserving of death. And so Mu Lin clawed at Trent's throat, his face convulsed with hatred, but Trent was a trained athlete and easily eluded him. To have delivered a crushing blow to Mu Lin's chin would have been an easy matter. But Trent had no wish to injure his aged host even though Mu Lin was intent on killing him. As a Flying Tiger, Trent had seen death in a hundred cruel forms and so close had he lived to it, he was without fear. Besides there was no slightest tinge of enmity in his heart for Mu Lin. All that he cared about was this new wonder that had come to him with a woman's kiss. And now for the first time he noticed that her eyes were open, black brilliant eyes that contained all the mystery of the ages. Mu Lin, too, had beheld and in that moment all anger was drained from him. One could not be angry in the presence of this fair woman. Strangely enough she seemed startled, frightened, like a forest creature before the avalanche of man's wrath. Then, without warning, she turned and fled with both Trent and Mu Lin in pursuit. Trent, by far the younger, was fleetest of foot. Even so, Mu Lin exhibited enormous stamina as he followed them. But the girl easily outdistanced both of them. Through the rooms she sped, nor did any servant block her way, and on to the level paths of the cavern. Once

away from the house, her pace quickened. She sped along with Trent close in pursuit, until she reached the edge of the Black Dragon River. On the brink, she hesitated for a moment only looking back at her pursuers, but now she was smiling and her teeth were as white as camomile flowers. Then she plunged into the water; nor did Trent hesitate to dive in after her. The river was deep but he came to the surface quickly. Was it only imagination or could he hear the ripple of laughter? He could see the flash of her white body just ahead of him. With bold strokes he drove forward, urged along by the fast-flowing river. And now the lights were growing dimmer, the lights of lanterns that were lighted along the road near the house, but he could see that he was gaining on her, as though she had lessened her speed for him to come abreast. As he did so she snuggled against him, and from that moment they swam together in perfect unison. It was like swimming through the waters of the Milky Way, that milky river that flows through the cold night sky. They were on a journey to the sun, to meet the sun at dawn with all its crimson purple splendor.

In his ecstasy he did not notice that the rock roof was closing in above them. In a few moments it was so close to the water, they were forced to swim submerged. Not once did he worry over the fact that they were swimming in an underground river, a black cold river that might wind like the coils of a serpent into the depths of the earth. Only when he was in need of air did the horror of his predicament enter into his consciousness. Even then he shrugged it aside. If this was to be a journey into death, it would be rapture to die with his dear one in his arms. And so he ceased to swim. His arms fell limply, consciousness left him. In this last glad moment, he was beyond life, beyond despair and pain.

When Trent awakened the night had ended. Morning swept in golden splendor from the mountains of the sky. A lark graceful of wing dropped down from heaven, sprinkling its song in the air. He gazed dully about him. So it had all been a dream, beautiful hallucinations while he lay unconscious after striking his head when he landed by parachute.

He sighed, how sad that such loveliness should have less texture than dust of moonrise. He sat up and gazed about him. A few feet from him a river flowed tranquilly but nowhere in sight was there the slightest vestige of a parachute. Someone must have made off with it. But the Chinese are by nature honest.

"Those damn Japs," he muttered.

However, he was dripping wet and even his enemies could not be blamed for that. Perhaps he had fallen into the river. He could not remember crawling to safety. He must have been in a half-stupor before he passed out. That would account for the missing parachute. It had merely drifted down river.

So the dream ended.

He rose to his feet. An old man driving an ox-cart was approaching along the river road.

Trent called to him. The old man seemed pleased to stop and talk as is the custom of people who dwell in lonely places.

"I am a Flying Tiger," explained Trent in Chinese.

"May heaven protect you, Noble Tiger," said the old man.

"Came down by parachute. Haven't the slightest idea where I am," Trent explained.

"We are not far from a town, seven li. Yonder is the Black Dragon River. It rises in the Daourian Mountains and has a course of two thousand miles to the sea. Come, get into my humble cart and save your felt soles from wear."

"The Black Dragon River!" Trent repeated in an awed tone.

"Yes, is there ought that is strange about that?"

But Trent did not hear the question. He had stooped reverently and picked up a glistening object from the sand. It was a golden hairpin delicately inlaid with kingfisher feathers.

A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour, or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all. The painter of this work asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organized than any thing seen by his mortal eye.

—WILLIAM BLAKE