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CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1934

Number 4

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "Satan's Garden"</i>		
Satan's Garden	E. Hoffmann Price	402
<i>The story of a terrific adventure, two beautiful girls, occult evil and sudden death</i>		
Black Thirst	C. L. Moore	424
<i>An astounding story of ultimate horror, by the author of "Shambleau"</i>		
Corsairs of the Cosmos	Edmond Hamilton	449
<i>A stupendous story of interstellar space—an amazing weird-scientific tale</i>		
Shadows in the Moonlight	Robert E. Howard	466
<i>A thrilling weird tale of colossal iron statues that stood in a ghostly row</i>		
The Death of Malygris	Clark Ashton Smith	488
<i>A tale of weird sorcery—even in death the mighty wizard proved himself greater than his peers</i>		
Behind the Screen	Dale Clark	496
<i>The tale of a doomed man who experienced a terrible awakening in a curious shop in Chinatown</i>		
The Cane	Carl Jacobi	502
<i>A mad obsession caused the respectable Mr. Grenning suddenly to become a murderous fiend</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
Bells of Oceana	Arthur J. Burks	511
<i>An eerie, shuddery story from WEIRD TALES of seven years ago</i>		
In Mayan Splendor	Frank Belknap Long, Jr.	519
<i>Verse</i>		
The Eyrie		520
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Behind the Screen

By DALE CLARK

The doomed man experienced a terrible awakening in that curious shop in Chinatown

SIGHT of the police officer at the corner roused Catlin from his delirious frenzy like a spray of cold water. He stopped short; he gasped, almost expelling the cigarette from his mouth. The lifting red haze of anger and dismay left him sober and shivering,

and a little stunned. He stared stupidly up the dingy Chinatown street into which the first rays of the morning were stealing. He had run many blocks, perhaps miles, to reach the heart of this dismal and unsavory quarter. But why? He could not say. Somnambulistic fumes

clouded his mind; he could remember only plunging on madly and blindly without having noticed either his direction or the breaking of day overhead. It was as if some invisible power had guided his flight. Aroused now, Catlin found his situation inexpressibly terrifying. And after a glance at the slit trouser leg, where the recently shaved flesh showed a bald and chalky white, he shrank into the doorway under the sign of Lung Wei.

To Catlin's surprize, the latch yielded under his fumbling hand. Inside, he stood stock-still, puffing hard at the cigarette and staring warily about the shop. A melancholy light leaking through the small, dust-coated window quickly melted and died in the pervading murky gloom. But a faint and nebulous glow spread from an Oriental screen stretched across the rear of the long, narrow, low room. The screen was of some translucent and gauzy stuff; it had the color of silver, and shimmered with a rosy iridescence as minute ripples stirred the gossamer surface.

Behind the screen, a single candle burned with a wan and discouraged flame; its dim glimmer fell in crepuscular half-tones upon a robed figure slumbering in a cane chair. That, too, was behind the gauzy curtain.

Catlin wet his lips nervously. An uneasy sensation overpowered him: it was that he had been here before. But that, of course, could not be. His mind was playing tricks again. . . . Then he smiled harshly.

It was the odor he had recognized. There was in the shop a smell of dead incense, dry and musty and blended with the peculiar trail of opium. The musky taste in the air resembled that which he had often detected in his wife's room—she was a narcotic addict.

It was only the odor; it could be nothing more.

On tiptoe, without making a sound, he advanced into the shadows and inspected the squat show-cases and counters ranged along the low walls. He saw tiny figurines of wood and jade, vases and jars of porcelain, cabinets, sandals, and embroidered cloths. But there was nothing he could convert into money without much difficulty.

He glided toward the screen. (He had become marvelously adept in muffling his footfalls, these past few hours.)

Nevertheless, the figure in the chair behind the screen stirred, and looked around, and arose. He was Chinese, and very old. He came close to the diaphanous gauze, smiling a strange and enigmatic smile.

"Ah, here you are!" he said. "At last!"

This Lung Wei wore a black skull-cap, and had gathered about his thin shoulders a stiff, richly brocaded crimson robe. Above the robe, his thin, wrinkled, clean-shaven face had in its expression the delicacy of ancient and yellowed lace. It was, in fact, an expression too delicate, too indefinable, for analysis; it was bland, inscrutable, and mystic as well.

Staring, Catlin forgot that he had been about to hurl himself through the screen. It struck him that there was something dimly familiar in that countenance; he might have glimpsed Lung Wei in a crowd once, or it might have been only in a dream.

"Yes," he faltered, confused.

"I knew you'd come," the Oriental said. He spoke without any accent, with the merest sibilant slurring of syllables. "You see, I have waited so patiently!"

Catlin reflected. Concealed as he stood in the shadows—and seen through the screen, too—he decided that the Chinaman had mistaken him for someone else.

"Well, here I am!" he parried gruffly. It could be no harm, this little game.

Lung Wei arched his eyebrows. "You are not afraid, young sir?" he asked softly.

Catlin puffed his cigarette. "No," he said with a laugh. "Not at all. Of course not."

"That is well." The Oriental removed his hands from the sleeves of the robe, extending them in a curious gesture of—was it appeal? Or perhaps invitation. The outspread fingers looked quite as tenuous and pale as the gossamer screen itself. "You must believe this," he said, "that I want only to help you."

Catlin did not say anything, but his heart began to beat with a furious, groping hope. Decidedly, this became interesting!

LUNG WEI regarded him steadily through the shimmering curtain. "That is why I waited so long. I thought that I might be of some service to you." The delicate, unknowable smile played upon his worn and yellowed face. "Do you find that hard to understand? You—you are so very young! That was what impressed me at the first—your so-blind youth. I wonder what you thought of me. Perhaps that I was so very old, eh? Or perhaps you did not think at all?"

The musing voice dripped away into placid silence. Catlin leaned watchfully against a show-case, filling his lungs with the cigarette smoke and letting it drift from his nostrils. He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"You do not understand, do you?" the Oriental murmured.

Catlin watched the candle brighten, watched a ripple of ruby cross the screen.

"No," he said at last.

"But that is natural." Lung Wei bobbed his head sagely. "It is confusing. One is not exactly prepared. And then,

you left in such haste. You have had no time to think."

Cold perspiration cropped forth on Catlin's face at these soft, sibilant words. Some divining sixth sense warned him of an inexplicable peril.

"No!" he exclaimed roughly. "I—that is, you—both of us—why, it's all a mistake! I'm not the man, whoever he is, you were waiting for; I came in to"—he hesitated—"to the wrong shop!"

But with his enigmatic and relentless smile, the old Chinaman said: "In that case, you had better go back. If you think I can help you when you have returned to the prison——"

With a strangled cry, Catlin started toward the screen. He raised his clenched fist.

"So you know!" he panted.

Then, and at the moment he was about to dash aside the shimmering veil, a dazzling light burst within his disordered mind; he stopped short, and the fist dropped numbly to his side.

"But then," he faltered, "if you knew—what you said about helping me——?"

He peered at the face of Lung Wei, serene and bland behind the gauze.

"It's a trick!" he said hoarsely. "A Chinese trick!"

Lung Wei laughed musically. It was not a laugh of amusement or of scorn; there was perhaps a note of pity in it.

"You do not understand, young sir," the liquid voice said.

"No," Catlin muttered.

He felt strangely dizzy. That was the sheen of the candlelight flickering on the glistening gossamer; that, and the smell of the dead incense crawling into his lungs and into his very blood.

He began to walk to and fro in front of the curtain. Presently he said slowly, "There is one solution. This man I killed—you knew him, is that it? He might

have been your enemy. Let us say, he belonged to a rival Tong. That is why you offer me your help?"

He stared interrogatively at the veil. But the face of the Chinaman remained impassive, like a sheet of parchment wrinkled into indecipherable lines.

Catlin made an apologetic gesture, an opening and falling of his hands. "I do not expect you to commit yourself," he said hurriedly. "It does not matter. The thing is, I must get away. I need money. Clothes." He looked despairingly at the slit trouser leg. "I can't go far, like this."

"It is not that," Lung Wei said. "You will have to tell me exactly what happened. Otherwise—I am sorry. There would be nothing I could do."

Catlin took a long pull at the cigarette.

"I know what you mean," he muttered. "You are afraid. You needn't be. They can't trace me here. No one has seen me since I escaped. No one at all."

"We are talking at cross-purposes," Lung Wei said. "If you will tell me exactly how it was—then, it may be, I can help."

"I am at your mercy," Catlin muttered. "I will try to remember. It is not very clear—there are things I can recall perfectly, and other parts of it that are quite gone."

Lung Wei made again that gesture of appeal—of sympathy, it might have been—with his hands outspread, the fingers like pale smoke, the palms dark shadows. "It is for your good, young sir."

Catlin shivered. "The worst was when the priest put the oil, the peculiar oil, over my eyes. And on my fingers. That happened, you understand, in the cell. It was because I could not stand any more! I rolled the cigarette. And when I licked it, at the same time I dropped onto my tongue the wad of cigarette papers."

He looked through the screen into the Oriental's face.

"The pellet tasted bitter. In your country, you know about that. You may have saturated paper, or a cloth with a drug? That is the way Blossom—my wife—smuggled this stuff to me."

He stood silent, thinking, watching the smoke drift upward from his lips into the dry, dead-scented air.

"I did not intend to kill that man," he said at last. "I am a respectable man, a chemist. And I could not earn money enough for her—for Blossom—to buy that stuff. That was how she met Trent, Billy Trent, met him in one of those dens where they smoke it. They put their heads together and told me how I could get it for them. It was Trent's gun I used. They waited outside in his automobile and I went in; they sent me in because the dealer would not know me. But I did not intend to kill him."

HE RESUMED his pacing in front of the screen.

"The police were continually after me, continually asking me who had been in the car. They even promised to commute the sentence to life imprisonment if I'd tell where I got the gun. That was why Blossom brought me the cigarette papers—so at the last I wouldn't lose my nerve and confess. Being doped, you see, I could go to the chair without any fear. I swallowed the wad, the whole pellet, all that she had brought me.

"I could feel it burning in my stomach. I wasn't used to that sort of thing, and for a while I was afraid it wouldn't take hold soon enough. The warden had come in. I tried to put him off, asking for a match to light the cigarette. He didn't have one. Perhaps he saw through me. I had been sitting on the edge of the bunk; I got up and went over to the

wash-stand to the candles, those candles the priest was burning.

"I remember he said something horrified. Then it happened. As I straightened up from the candles, with the first puff I became all at once sick. The dose must have been a big one. I staggered. I could feel and hear the bones in my head grinding and crunching upon themselves. When I opened my eyes, I was lying on the floor. I sat up and looked around. The priest was kneeling there in front of his candles, praying. His robe made it look like he was kneeling in a pool of black water, the robe spilled around his knees. The warden was gone."

Catlin flung back his head and laughed, filling the shop with the reverberations of his laughter.

"I suppose he had run to get the prison doctor, making sure I shouldn't cheat the chair, after all!"

He lowered his voice.

"You won't believe it," he said, "but he had left the cell door open. I crept there, on my hands and knees, so as not to disturb the priest. And the corridor was empty. I closed my eyes and opened them again to make sure.

"So I went out. I walked down the corridor, and down the stair, and so into the prison yard. You understand, all this was in the dark, before sunrise. I waited there beside the death-house wall. After a while they opened the gate to let in a car—newspaper men coming to cover the execution—and I ran out through the open gate. No one saw me."

He looked fixedly at the man behind the screen of gauze.

"It was as simple as that," he said insistently. "It was as easy as coming in here, coming into your shop."

"Of course," said Lung Wei. "Proceed."

"I went straight home," Catlin mut-

tered. "I thought that the three of us—Blossom, and Trent, and I—could think of some safe place for me. I remember fancying how, afterward, we'd all laugh about the way that drug fooled the warden. I was quite happy about it."

The Chinaman gave him a curious glance. "Did you walk?" he asked.

Catlin became confused. "I don't know," he stammered. "I can't remember—the drug, you see—I suppose I took a street-car. It is quite a long way. I suppose that is what I did. I am perfectly sure no one noticed me, however it was."

The Oriental said, "But it is important, young sir. Can't you think?"

"I got there, anyway," Catlin told him. "I rang the bell—rang it again and again. And Blossom didn't answer. I waited there on the porch, smoking, and trying to think what to do next. And then a car—Trent's car—stopped out in front, and those two came up onto the porch together."

His voice trembled.

"They were in evening clothes. They had been to some club or other. On the night I was to die, you see, it had been that way with them. They had been dancing and drinking. I smelled the liquor on them when I went up and spoke to her."

The eyes of the Oriental burned with a strange eagerness. "So, young sir——?"

"She did not even hear me!" Catlin declared. He avoided the gaze of Lung Wei, and continued wearily:

"They had eyes and ears only for each other. Without noticing me, they fell into each other's arms."

He began to laugh shakily. "Perhaps I should have killed them both! On the contrary, I was glad to escape. I was like an animal crawling away to lick its hurt in silence. Besides, would they have helped me? They would only have notified the police!" Then he added, almost

calmly, "But, as they did not see me, there is no danger from that source."

"THAT is true," said Lung Wei. He appeared to reflect; his pointed yellow chin rested upon the gathered collar of the brocade robe, and his eyes were lowered.

"Your cigarette," he said at last.

"What did you say?" Catlin asked.

He stared at the screen, which had grown suddenly brighter, with a myriad of little colored glints flashing upon its shining surface. The candle in the background burned no better than before. . . . The gossamer seemed to quiver and glow with a luminous life of its own.

He looked down at the cigarette. The steady white wisp rose in a spiral from its end, from the little molten tip; and he had been smoking it for so long, for hours perhaps.

"Did I roll another?" he asked in bewilderment. "I don't remember that."

"If you will observe its odor," said the liquid Oriental voice of Lung Wei. "That is not a drug, young sir. I, who am used to such things, recognize the presence of a poison——"

"Poison!" cried Catlin in a dry sob. "Then she—then that is why—but *that* would mean——"

The words stumbled and blurred into a groan as Catlin reeled back from the thought. He stared blankly into that shimmering veil of gauze. And now it blazed up in pitiless molten brilliance; it extended to titanic proportions; it became a scroll of fire. His confused eyes beheld incandescent suns wheeling in its argent depths. He cowered in a funnel of searing light. His flesh seemed to shrivel in that glare, his breath clotted in his throat, and a fierce whining, crackling sound thrashed and gibbered about his ears. The suns rushed past him, the curtain en-

folded him and drew him into a weird spaceland where the myriad lights receded to pin-points. This sudden darkness was more terrible than the intolerable light had been. With a cry of despair he plunged ahead, striking madly with both fists.

Then he realized that he was fighting the little gauze screen. The gossamer was cool, like a stream of water passing over his hands. It tore with a strange tinkling sound, a patter of distant bells.

It lay in a cloud of crumpled silver at his feet. The little jeweled particles in the fabric winked in the candle-light.

Catlin raised his eyes to the face of Lung Wei.

A chill seized him; the next moment, a fever came stinging through his veins. Without the screen to veil it, the face was——

"I remember you, now," he said. "You are the man I killed."

The Oriental smiled his enigmatic, mystic smile.

"That is so," replied the imperturbable yellow man. "You understand, then. Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Catlin faltered.

"To go," said Lung Wei.

Catlin nodded. Lung Wei blew out the candle, and walked out of the shop, and the younger man followed.

There was a long moment in which Lung Wei locked the door of his establishment, and in which Catlin stood gazing into the street. The sun was well up, now, and a thin trickle of traffic stirred upon the pavement. A milk-wagon clattered over the street-car rails. A fruit peddler went by, his legs scissoring between the shafts of his cart. Away off in the city a factory whistle blew.

Catlin touched the brocaded sleeve of Lung Wei.

"Which way?" he asked.