

Oriental STORIES

Published quarterly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter September 2, 1916, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Indiana, under Act of March 3, 1915. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscriptions, \$1.00 a year in the United States, \$1.45 a year in Canada, \$1.50 in other countries. English office: Charles Lavell, 12, St. James's Inn, Fleet St., E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publisher's Chicago office at 448 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Cobra Teeth

By M. SMALL

*A strange story of double-dealing, blackmail and murder
in Shanghai*

ONLY the slimy, sluggish cobra in the window of the native medicine shop enjoyed the Shanghai midsummer heat. Ah Sam, the proprietor, lay in his long wicker chair drowsily fanning his porky body, naked to the waist. He idly watched a buzzing fly on the dirty window. Had he known the danger that was approaching he would have shortened his midday rest. No customers would be abroad in such weather and anyhow Ah Sam's income did not depend upon casual buyers attracted to this lonely alley by the ugly hooded cobra in the sunlit window. His livelihood came from a dark business carried on with unscrupulous, fox-eyed, seafaring men of all races and of all colors. Not too much business, not too many accomplices; for imprisonment, ruinous fines, and sometimes even death was meted out to caught opium smugglers. Only the vindictive eyes of the old serpent had witnessed the huge sums that often changed hands in that dingy, cobwebby shop, and serpents, like dead men, tell no tales. Since all men venturing within had not been so wise as the crafty cobra, not a few had been dead men before they could get out of the dark, evil-smelling alleys of the Hongkew district of Shanghai.

Since Chinese medicine shops often displayed reptiles, scorpions, centipedes, gruesome arrangements of bones and preserved viscera in their windows to draw trade, so Ah Sam's cobra gave his place of business the desired tone of respectability and proclaimed to the authorities the legitimacy of his business.

Ah Sam aroused himself with a start as

a ricksha pulled up at the door. With fear in his heart he recognized the huge newcomer who kicked the ricksha coolie and lurched into the shop. He well knew his visitor's unsavory reputation—unsavory even in the underworld of Shanghai. He was the Eurasian known to the dens of the port cities as Jake. He was never in one city long enough to be caught but he never left any city without full pockets. Jake had inherited his size and his daring from his Portuguese sailor father and his slant, cunning eyes from his mother, who in her day had been a notorious singsong girl on the waterfront.

Before Jake spoke Ah Sam knew that the Eurasian had ferreted out some facts about him that would spell his ruin if he could not act quickly and thoroughly. He was aware of the powerful ring behind Jake which operated among Chinese merchants throughout Oriental ports. He remembered two of his friends they had ruined.

Ah Sam instantly became the smiling, suave Chinese merchant anxious to show and sell his wares. He pulled out a drawer containing bottles, jars, and packages of pungent herbs and queer animal concoctions:

"Master wantchee buy pills, wantchee look-see——?"

Jake did not allow him to finish but he pushed him roughly back and handed him a card on which three Chinese characters were written. These three characters were more feared by prosperous Chinese than the loss of their souls. They meant ruin or death and often both. Ah Sam's

expression did not change as he innocently replied:

"Ah Sam no savvy. What Master wantchee buy?"

Jake fixed his cruel, bloodshot eyes upon the Chinese until the merchant shrank back against the wall.

"You dirty yellow rat! You know what I came here for!" Jake looked around the tiny room with the one door and the one window occupied by the cobra. In the center of the room stood a rickety counter. On the counter were some tiny scales and a greasy abacus for reckoning accounts. A dusty cabinet held the extraordinary stock in trade. A string of dried herbs was festooned over the window; an infant's skull and a cat's skeleton glared at each other on the cabinet; over the counter hung a long, thick string of small animal vertebrae and reptile jawbones retaining an occasional fang. In spite of its weird equipment, it was a humble shop, but Jake knew far too much to be deceived by outward appearances.

The Eurasian was a man of little speech and he spoke only three words, but each of these rang out in the still, expectant air of the shop like three pistol shots: "*Ling Mei Chi!*" Then he laughed an unholy laugh and shook a fist in Ah Sam's face.

There was something so blood-curdling about Jake's mirth that the cobra in the window was disturbed. It swished a restless tail and flopped about in the narrow confines of its cage. Its glinting, menacing eyes became even more glowing and vindictive. At the words "*Ling Mei Chi!*" Ah Sam trembled and leaned against the wall. However, his mind was working fast and furiously. He had known Ling Mei Chi well. Ling had been a fabulously wealthy silk merchant of Hongkong. Gradually and mysteriously he had lost his entire fortune and then he had been found cruelly and horribly slain across the bay at Kowloon.

JAKE watched the effect of his last three words on Ah Sam and was pleased. Then he leaned heavily on the wobbly counter and spoke two more in Chinese: "Five Thousand!"

Ah Sam thought of his accounts in the Bank of India and in the Bank of China. They were in strange contrast to this humble place of business. His pass-books were not kept here; they were in a modern safe in an office building near the Garden Bridge. A thick joint of bamboo—the Chinese cash register from the time of Yao and Shun—held a few stray coins, the week's income from the shop. While the shop receipts did not suggest affluence, the mansion on Tibet Road just back of the Race Course was pointed out to envious Chinese from the provinces as the residence of the great Cantonese broker, Wong Heung Kong. Here lived his old wife who had borne him only daughters—ugly creatures like their mother—and his young secondary wife. She was the mother of his idolized Pao Pei that he had waited so long for. Ah Sam thought of his four-year-old son, affectionately nicknamed "Little Circus." He must act wisely and quickly if he were to save himself and Little Circus from ruin. He picked up the bamboo money-container and shook it:

"All Ah Sam hab got. Master make mistake. Maybe he wantchee other man."

Jake leaned more heavily on the counter as he reached for his hip-pocket. Ah Sam stepped back and the counter swayed. The halfbreed regained his balance. This time he did not speak but he reached over and drew a cold, damp finger slowly across Ah Sam's throat.

The Chinese knew his danger and he paled beneath his yellow skin. He would not be the first man put out by Jake's gang after parting with huge sums of hush money. Loss of business, loss of home, loss of reputation, separation from

Little Circus. Men had even faced the firing squad or knelt before the beheading-sword for such crimes as his. He had more than once seen the ghastly results on the execution ground. He tried again as he stalled for time:

"Poor medicine shop Ah Sam no hab got five thousand dollar." He again shook the bamboo joint. Ah Sam well knew that Jake's blackmailing funds never came from primitive bamboo money-containers. They came rather from the marts where men talk in tens of thousands and not in brass cash.

Jake wasted not one word in reply, but he towered threateningly over the merchant. Ah Sam glanced at the string of bones and fangs now directly over Jake's head. With no further loss of time he reluctantly opened a pouch on his girdle. He pulled out a roll of bills and began to count slowly and sadly in Chinese. Jake's wary eyes were upon his every move.

"Ten—twenty—forty—fifty—seventy—five—eighty—five—ninety—five—ninety-six." He kept the money well out of reach of Jake's greedy hand.

"Ninety-six dollar hab got this side, Master."

The old cobra, disturbed from his siesta, thrashed about in his window. A cobra's siesta can not be interrupted with impunity. Jake cast an uneasy glance in its direction and leaned further over the rickety counter. The room was far too small for a blackmailer, an opium smuggler and a serpent. The Eurasian was anxious to get his money and be out of that slimy, creepy atmosphere. The string of reptile fangs touched his forehead and he shrank from their clamminess. Ah Sam was quick to see his tormenter's uneasiness.

"Maskee, old snake teeth all same fashion one piece stone. No can hurt," Ah Sam glibly lied as he stepped further back with the roll of bank notes.

Jake's greed for the money in sight made him soon lose interest in snakes and their accessories. He demanded the money vehemently and profanely. The Chinese rapidly estimated distances. Then he pretended to hand over the cash but snatched it back as the halfbreed made a grab for it. The counter toppled and Jake would have fallen with it had it not been for the string of animal bones above his head. The cord was strong and Jake righted himself. In one hand he held the ninety-six dollars and in the other were two drops of blood from two tiny punctures. The latter he wiped unconcernedly on his trousers, the former he anxiously counted to be sure there were no discountable notes in the roll.

The shopkeeper spoke with the solicitude of a host and the fine courtesy of the East:

"Velly velly solly, Master. Counter hab got old age."

Ah Sam no longer shrank against the wall. He was expansive. He was maganimous. He was jubilant. He had saved his sizable bank account, his flourishing business, his good reputation and his sleek skin.

Jake did not look up from his examination of the bank notes. It would be an easy matter now to keep on bleeding his victim. The small sum of ninety-six dollars had only whetted Jake's appetite for more. This time he spoke three words and returned to his counting:

"Five Thousand! Quick!"

Ah Sam was all affability. "Can-do, can-do, Master." He cheerfully acquiesced as he put on his cotton jacket.

The Eurasian was too busy with his money to hear Ah Sam slip out of the door and snap the latch from the outside.

The merchant was very happy as he trudged along the blistering Shanghai streets. Cobra fangs he well knew re-

tained their venom indefinitely. He knew, too, that the poison was quick to act, for he had tried out one of these fangs on a stray cur last week. He had laughed long over its sufferings and contortions. He was certain Jake would attempt no escape through the live cobra's window, and the door and the lock were strong. Shanghai was in the middle of the "great heat," so he knew the alley would be deserted until late afternoon. The little matter of the latch could be fixed up easily before the police arrived.

Ah Sam was a kind, gentle man, so he gave the beggar at the back door of his office building a silver coin.

WHEN the pompous Wong Heung Kong later emerged from the front door of the same office building a shining limousine and liveried chauffeur were waiting to whisk him back to his mansion on Tibet Road, where he was due for a romp with Little Circus.

The next morning few residents of Shanghai were interested in the small paragraph at the end of the police reports:

An inquest will be held tomorrow before His Majesty's Coroner over the body of Jake Gonzales, residence unknown. The body was found by the police early this morning in the shop of one Ah Sam in an alley of the Hongkew district. It appears that the deceased in attempting to rob the shop was bitten by the cobra in the window. Near the victim was found a roll of \$96.00 in foreign bank notes. There was every indication that the cobra had not only saved the poor shopkeeper a lifetime's savings but had also brought a notorious criminal to justice.

