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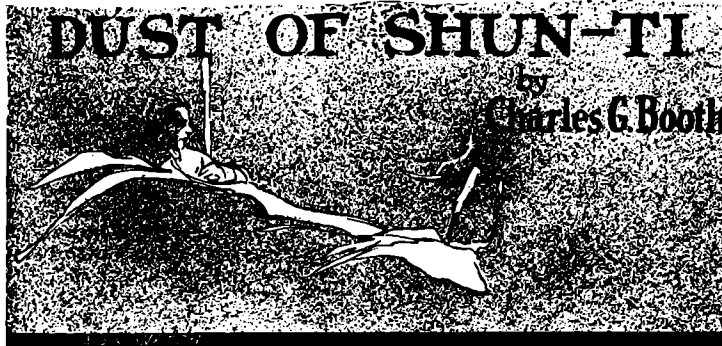
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DUST OF SHUN-TI

by
Charles G. Booth



WILDE sat up in his bed and peered into the velvet blackness around him. Chills crawled up and down his spine; his skin tingled as if the tense pressing atmosphere of the room was electrically charged.

The scream was not repeated, and for several minutes he sat rigid, held so by his demoralizing uncertainty of its source, whether it had come from his own lips or from the room next door.

He was in a small, weather-scarred hotel on the precipitous shore of one of the purple inlets that fret the iron-bound British Columbia coast from Vancouver to Alaska, where he had come to report on a copper property for the Continental Company. His report—an unfavorable one—was ready; he intended to leave the next day.

Quite suddenly, and for no explainable reason, Wilde knew instinctively that he had *not* uttered the cry, and that it *had* come from the room next door. A flow of warmth poured through him; his sun-browned face, with its suggestiveness of high adventure eagerly sought and recklessly encountered, glowed again beneath its tan. He leaped out of bed and lit the lamp. Listening intently, with

his head inclined toward the north wall, he heard a faint pattering in the next room, as if someone was moving softly and quickly upon the floor.

Wilde went into the corridor. A lamp set in a bracket at the end of the passage shed a fitful light upon the gaunt, shabby interior. There was no sound whatever, now. But the horrible cry still rang in his ears. It had been short and clear; then it had terminated abruptly. Wilde knew instinctively that the one who had uttered it would never utter another.

The door of the room next to his was shut; no light showed beneath it, and for several moments Wilde stood before it indecisively. Believing as he did that someone had been killed in the room, he yet hesitated to try the door. One has that feeling about breaking into another man's room at dead of night.

His indecision vanished, however, when a light shone suddenly from beneath the door, then flashed out again. He turned the handle. The door was locked as he had expected. He stepped back and flung his great body at it, shoulder first. The lock snapped and the door shivered, but held its place. A second and a third time he had to fling himself upon it before the

door, and the chair which had been placed against it, crashed into the room. As the door splintered he had glimpsed a man in the room—a lithe, compact man with his face toward the window. Then the light, which streamed from an electric torch, flashed out. When he got into the room he had to feel about on the bureau for matches before he could get a light.

The murderer had gone—through an open window, beneath which a small shed was built against the side of the hotel; on to this he had evidently dropped from the window-sill.

On the bed lay the man he had killed—a Chinaman. About his throat deepened a crimson smear. The crumpled bedding, red-blotted here and there as with the splashings of an unruly pen, suggested the terrific struggle that must have terminated only with that dreadful scream.

WILDE went to the window again and peered into the blackness, but a hundred murderers could have hidden within a dozen yards of him. The mountains, their presences felt rather than seen, seemed nearer; more than ever did they suggest black brooding personalities pondering the impertinence of this intrusion into their solitude.

On the floor was a traveling bag, and a satchel of the sort used for carrying legal documents. Both had been slashed with a knife as if the murderer suspected the existence of some secret compartment. Clothing, and papers covered with Chinese characters, were strewn around the room.

Wilde scrutinized the Chinaman intently, his big hands clasping and unclasping, a vast indignation boiling within him. The man's face must have been placid and smooth and expressionless before the dreadful realization of his danger had come upon him. But now it was contorted in the sharp

agony of death. The narrow, dark eyes, forced wide open, stared upward appealingly. The man's hair was spare and gray, and Wilde estimated his age at sixty. His broad flat face was dignified, even in death. That he was no common coolie Wilde could see at a glance.

The man's head had sagged to one side and Wilde raised it and pillowed it. As he did so the man's pajama coat opened, the two top buttons having come out of their loops, and Wilde noticed that the breast of his undervest bulged slightly as if some object lay beneath it. Unbuttoning it gently, he found a pocket sewn on to the inner side of the vest, fastened with a tiny button, and filled with papers which he took out. It was fortunate that he did so, for they were blood-soaked and would soon have been indecipherable.

Wilde spread them on the dressing table so they could dry out. All of them but one were covered with Chinese characters and were as unintelligible as those scattered on the floor. This one he took up with an exclamation of surprise. It was a rough map of the inlet. But when he discovered a small cross upon it, his surprise deepened into amazement. The cross was marked squarely on the center of the waterfront of the copper property Wilde had come north to inspect!

At that moment he heard the patter of feet on the stairs, and thrusting the paper into the pocket of his pajama coat, he strode into the corridor, marveling at the variety of emotions one may experience in the space of three minutes; for no more than that space of time had elapsed since the Chinaman had screamed in his death agony.

Nolan, the proprietor of the hotel, a lanky, thin man in a very short gray flannel nightgown and dilapidated

slippers, topped the staircase and hurried toward him.

"What's wrong?" he grunted. "Seems like I heard something."

"Probably you did!" said Wilde, dryly. And he led the man into the Chinaman's room.

Nolan's jaw fell. "Murder!" he gasped. Then his face brightened. "Oh," he exclaimed, in relief. "It's only one of those Chinks!"

"Chink or white man," Wilde rapped out, "he's been killed in your house!"

"Sure, that's right," Nolan agreed, scratching his head and looking at the shattered door. "That was a good door, too," he said regretfully.

"Look here!" Wilde roared impatiently. "When did this man come in? What's his name?"

Nolan pondered. "Yes," he said. "He came on last night's boat. His name? Let me see, now." Nolan scratched his head again. "There was two of 'em came last night. This one, and another that came later on. Now this one'll be Sun Yet. The other one signed himself something like that, too."

"Who else is here?" Wilde demanded.

"Well, there's me and the missis and the Chineese cook. We does it all ourselves."

"But guests, man?" Wilde shouted. "Who's staying here?"

"Sure, I was a-comin' to that," Nolan rambled on. "There's you, this here Chink, and the other Chink that come after; and there's Bill Kelly, the miner, what lives here. He was dead drunk on red-eye last night. Then there's Frenchy Gaul; he came in yesterday for gas for his boat, and stayed. I guess that's about all. Nothin' less'n an earthquake would wake Bill, and Frenchy's deaf. We don't have many this time of the year," he went on apologetically.

"This other Chinaman," Wilde demanded. "What about him?"

"What has happened?" inquired a serene voice from behind them.

Wilde swung round sharply. In the doorway stood a Chinaman clad in silk pajamas, who regarded them mildly. His smooth bland face was as expressionless as a billiard ball, his eyes blinked a little, his attitude was that of a benevolent saint.

"One of your countrymen has been murdered," Wilde told him, and described what he knew.

The Chinaman came slowly into the room and Wilde stood back so that he might approach the bedside. For all his bland expressionlessness there was a certain quality about him that commanded respect. He was of medium height and had that admirable balance of body and limb that comes of physical perfection.

For nearly a full minute he looked at the figure on the bed, not a muscle of his face stirring. Then the man turned to Wilde.

"He is my brother," he said simply.

His undemonstrative grief affected Wilde deeply, infinitely more than the wildest protestations would have done.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. Wilde got the impression that he was standing in the presence of a tragedy with other, profounder aspects not yet revealed to him.

"If you will leave us?" the Chinaman suggested gently.

"But the murderer," Wilde protested. "We've got to do something—inform the police!"

"The police? Yes," the Chinaman agreed courteously. "No doubt you can telephone. But I'm afraid nothing can be done," he added sadly. His rather precise enunciation held no trace of accent.

Wilde nodded understandingly and followed the hotelkeeper downstairs. There was nothing he could do. A search in that wilderness at dead of night was unthinkable.

"You'd better 'phone Vancouver at once," Wilde told Nolan.

"Seems to take it badly," the man whispered mournfully, going to the instrument.

A minute passed during which there came no response from the exchange. Wilde examined the wires emanating from the instrument.

"Look!" he shouted. "They've been cut." And he held up the severed ends.

"So they have!" exclaimed the man. "Whoever done it must have come through here."

Wilde nodded. This seemed probable, for the door of this house of occasional patrons was never locked, and the office was left to itself during the night.

"I'll get Frenchy to run down to Round Bay in the morning," the man went on. "They've got a 'phone there."

SINCE there was nothing more that he could do, Wilde returned to his room, where he could hear the strange Chinaman moving quietly on the other side of the partition. Once he was on the point of joining him, but thought better of it, for the Chinaman had propped the smashed door into place as if he wished to be alone with his dead.

Remembering the map, Wilde spread it upon his bed and studied it closely; not without a sense of guilt, however, for he felt that he should have given it to the Chinaman. While he supposed that the murder had been committed for the map, Wilde felt sure that it had only a personal significance and in no way indicated un-

suspected mineral wealth in the property he had come to investigate. Nevertheless, he decided that he would reinspect that part of the property indicated on the map by the cross. This much the interests of his company demanded. After that he would give the map to the Chinaman, or to the police when they arrived. The police, he rather thought.

It struck him as curious that the Chinaman had advanced no theory of the motive that had inspired the crime. No doubt he would, Wilde concluded, when the authorities arrived. This thought aroused in his mind a series of pertinent questions, none of which he could answer. Who were these Chinamen? What were they doing here? Why had they arrived at different times? Indeed, it occurred to Wilde that there were many questions he should have asked instead of falling so completely under the spell of this Oriental personality, questions which he determined to ask in the morning.

But when morning came the Chinaman was not to be seen, nor could the hotelkeeper enlighten Wilde as to his whereabouts.

"Oh, he's around somewhere," Nolan said.

"Did you see about telephoning Vancouver?" Wilde demanded.

"Sure. Frenchy's gone," the man went on.

A trail ran along the shore in the direction of the place indicated on the map, and Wilde set out on it at once. It was rough walking and he made slow progress. When he had gone about half-way he got the impression that he was being followed. He slowed down and presently turned around quickly once or twice in the hope of catching off guard whoever was behind him. But his strategy was unsuccessful, though once he thought he saw a man dodge back into the shad-

ow of a cedar. Nevertheless, the impression that somewhere behind him, in that confusion of brush and rock and sand, was someone bent on discovering his destination, became certainty.

He drew up sharply and reviewed the tragic circumstances of the previous night. It was known that he was the first to discover the dead man and that he had been alone with him for about two minutes; and as he was convinced now that the murderer had intended to get the map, it seemed reasonable to suppose the murderer had concluded that either he or the Chinaman had it.

It occurred to Wilde that this mystery was deeper than he had at first supposed and that since he had become involved in it, possibly to a greater extent than he suspected, he had better retain the advantage possession of the map gave him. So, instead of continuing along the trail, he struck off up the mountain and made a superficial reinspection of that part of the copper property which lay at some distance from the place indicated on the map.

When he had done this, Wilde returned to the hotel, confident that his shadower, whoever he was, had gained nothing for his pains.

TOWARD evening Wilde was in his room when there came a knock at the door. It was the Chinaman, the brother of the dead Sun Yet. In response to Wilde's invitation he advanced into the room. Advanced is the only word that describes the dignity of the man's approach to the chair Wilde indicated he should take. The sweep of his personality was immense; it gripped Wilde as it had done that morning.

The Chinaman was unobtrusively dressed, with the nicest possible sense of effect. No subtle, mystery-loving

Oriental this, Wilde judged, but a man of culture, of refinement, who combined in his complex nature the decorous charm and ancient wisdom of his race, and the fresh virility of the western peoples.

"I feel that I owe you an explanation, Mr. Wilde," he began gravely. His words were soft and gentle, and Wilde thought of the uncounted centuries of which this man was the perfected product. His voice was low and even, a little musical, and unsuggestive of his nationality. A sublime example of the art of two civilizations, Wilde thought, as perfect in his ensemble as the painting of a master.

Wilde inclined his head in agreement; but so completely had he fallen under the spell of the man's personality that he would probably have agreed had the other said exactly the opposite.

"My brother's name," the Chinaman went on, "was Sun Yet; mine is Sun Wong. If it would not bore you too much I should like to tell you something of the duty that brought us to British Columbia."

He stopped, and Wilde murmured something quite inadequate to express his desire that he should continue.

"Mr. Wilde," the Chinaman resumed, fixing the other with his narrow dark eyes, which seemed a little less narrow, a little less slant than Chinese eyes usually are, "I think you have in your possession a map of this inlet which you found in my brother's room."

So astounded was Wilde at this unexpected turn that his hand went involuntarily half-way to the pocket in which he had placed the map, before he recovered himself.

"Ah, I see you have it," the Chinaman went on with the merest of smiles. "But I shall not ask you for it until you have heard my story."

Wilde felt that the decent and the courteous thing to do was to give him the map at once, and be done with it. But he remembered his decision and kept the map in his pocket, though not without an accusing sense of shame in doing so. Had the Chinaman demanded it he would have felt justified in keeping it; as it was, he felt as if he was robbing an heir of his rightful inheritance.

"What I have to say, Mr. Wilde," Sun went on, "is inseparably entangled with the varied history of my country and goes back to the days of Jenghis Khan. I can well imagine that it will sound unbelievable to one unaccustomed to the thoughts and habits and customs of the Orient, so I must ask you to set aside for a minute or two, if you can, your western conceptions of the fitness of things and listen with the ears of the East."

In the small silence that ensued, Wilde had no difficulty in adopting this frame of mind. His imagination responded easily to the influence of Sun's soothing voice, to the bland wisdom emanating from him like an aura.

"Seven hundred years ago," Sun continued, "Jenghis Khan came out of Mongolia and conquered the eastern world. Ruthless and cruel as he was, according to our modern standards, boasting as he did that his armies so utterly destroyed ninety cities that his horsemen could ride over their ruins, he nevertheless brought a rebirth of vigor and enterprize to the Chinese nation that reached a culmination of glory in the reign of Kublai Khan, the founder of the Yuen dynasty, of whom the poet Coleridge wrote immortally."

Sun's mellow tones ceased again, but their soothing music played in Wilde's ears. The pages of history turned back before his eyes; he rode the Mongol plains with the hosts of the great Khan.

"The last of the Yuen dynasty, Shun-ti," Sun went on, "who reigned scarcely less gloriously than Kublai Khan, in the Fourteenth Century was compelled to flee before Chu Yuen-chang, a Buddhist priest and the son of a laborer. He died, and with his death the great Yuen dynasty passed away. The Mongols were expelled from China. And until 1912 his body lay in its tomb."

Sun Wong's voice rose to a higher, stronger key, as if its swift ascent of the centuries had had on it the renaissance effect the hordes of Jenghis Khan had had on China.

"Then came the republic," he rumbled on, "and the troubles that still beset my country. It was thought at that time by those who called themselves the children of the great Shun-ti that his tomb stood in danger of desecration at the hands of certain of the republicans. No crime is more revolting to the Chinese than this. It involves family and state and religion; it is the quintessence of human infamy. So, until order, respect, and virtue returned to China, it was thought that another country should harbor the remains of Shun-ti; and my brother (for we rejoice in our descent from the Mongol chiefs) was chosen to bring them to British Columbia, where they might rest until they could be taken back.

"But peace is a gem beyond price," the voice swept on, "and once it is lost, not easily found. Chaos prevailed in China, and the dust of Shun-ti remained far from the land of his birth. But recently a desire for peace has come upon my country. The dust of Shun-ti is to be returned to its tomb; and at a favorable moment, which is thought to be near at hand, the Yuen dynasty will be re-established in the person of one of royal descent, when the fighting tradition of Jenghis Khan and the glory

of Kublai Khan and Shun-ti will return to China."

Sun Wong regarded Wilde silently and gravely, his personality enhanced by the mantle of large affairs his unassuming words had cast about him. But only by a distinct effort of will could Wilde bring himself to break the peculiar silence of the room, peopled, as it seemed, by the ghosts of all the Khans.

"And the dust of Shun-ti?" Wilde asked breathlessly.

"The place is indicated on the map in your possession," Sun said. "Only my brother knew exactly where the casket is hidden."

"But who killed your brother?" Wilde demanded.

Sun Wong smiled faintly. "There are men who for no good purpose desire to learn the hiding place of the casket," he said. "It was for this reason that my brother and I did not come together. We were to meet here this morning, casually, as if the meeting had not been pre-arranged. But he was murdered in the night and I had to announce my relationship so that I could get his papers."

"How did you know I had the map?" Wilde asked, the thought having suddenly occurred to him.

"I merely considered the possibility of your having it, because you were the first to go into the room after the murder was committed," Sun explained. "And to dispose of this possibility I did what would have been an unpardonable thing were it not for the urgency of the undertaking I am on. I followed you this morning. Apparently you suspected this. Nevertheless, I was convinced, much to my surprize, that you had the map and that my brother's assailant had not got it, for which I am inexpressibly thankful. Now that you have heard my story, Mr. Wilde," he finished, "will you give me the map?"

If ever a man had truth and sincerity in his face, Sun Wong had at

that moment; yet Wilde hesitated to grant his reasonable request. He did not doubt the truth of what this man had told him, for his manners, his breeding, his personality, convinced Wilde that he was dealing with a statesman, a leader of men, one passionately devoted to his country and who might yet cut an international figure in world politics.

But he recalled again his determination to keep the plan until the police came. It was the crux of the situation—murder had been done for it—and he felt justified in turning it over only to the authorities. He was the first to find the dead man; should the case take an unpleasant turn, it was his alibi.

As gently and as apologetically as he could, meeting Sun Wong's grave face with difficulty, Wilde explained his reasons for retaining the map.

"It's only another day," he said. "The authorities will be here tomorrow, and if I keep it, unpleasantness may be saved for both of us." When Wilde had said this he waited the denunciation he expected, but it did not come.

"I understand your position," the other assured him. "My anxiety led me to forget it. You will forgive me, I am sure?"

He had Wilde's forgiveness all right, and the map, too, pretty nearly. The man's charm of manner was almost irresistible; had Wilde not been moderately strong-willed, he would have surrendered then and there.

AS SUN WONG passed through the door, after shaking Wilde's hand as if he was indebted to him, some quality that had come in with the man seemed to go out with him, leaving in the room only a faint mellowness, a richness, a savor of an accumulation of wisdom, which lingered like the elusive scent of a delicate perfume, then disappeared.

The thought that he had not treated this courtly gentleman as considerately as he deserved, haunted Wilde's mind throughout the evening. He felt that his excuses were paltry, and poor return for the other's frankness. Had he seen Sun Wong again that evening he would probably have given him the map.

When it was dark he went down to the pebbly beach that extended for a hundred yards or so in front of the hotel, and marched back and forth in the black solitude that enveloped the inlet. Presently, he sat on a cool rock that rose a dozen feet or so above the glassy surface of the water, and reviewed in his mind Sun Wong's astounding narrative. The romance of it held him and he surrendered himself to its mood. In his imagination the mountain-bound inlet became a vast arena in which the ghosts of the Mongol hordes wheeled and charged with silent shouts of triumph, and until the atmosphere seemed to vibrate with the impact of multitudinous ghostly hoofs and the clatter and rattle of uncounted ghostly weapons of war.

Soon afterward Wilde went to his room and to bed. For hours he tossed in the cool darkness, his thoughts continually turning upon Sun Wong, and what he had told him, until, deciding suddenly that he would give Sun the map in the morning, he fell asleep.

WILDE woke abruptly from a dream in which the roar and clatter and agony of war were a background for marching hordes, charging hordes, of disciplined barbarians that passed unendingly over a prostrate land. The room was silent. Nothing moved. Yet he had the impression that he was not alone, though it took him a minute to be sure that whatever was in the room lived and breathed and was no creature of his dreams.

His body stiffened and grew cold; he held his breath until he could hold it no longer. His eyes, prodding the darkness, found nothing more tangible than a shadow, a scarcely imaginable shade denser than the others, at the foot of his bed; but suddenly he felt that the shadow was a man whose eyes hung upon his slightest movement.

A new moon had risen and a thin slice of white light lay upon the window-sill. There came a scarcely perceptible movement of the dark shadow at the foot of the bed. A glimmer of cold light twinkled in the darkness, and with a shiver of horror Wilde knew that the moonlight had touched the blade of a knife.

The shadow moved again and the twinkle brightened. Wilde distinguished the hand that gripped the knife, and behind it the vague outline of a man's form moving toward him with a menacing slowness that froze his blood and numbed his tongue. His muscles refused to respond to the frantic urging of his nerves; he lay inert, waiting the inevitable.

Then an unforeseen incident occurred. Wilde had left his boots at the side of the bed and the man tripped over them. He recovered himself instantly, but this break in the slow continuity of his approach released Wilde's stiffened limbs, and as the man lunged at him, he thrust the bedclothes above his head and against the sweep of the weapon. The hiss of the slitting fabric sang in his ears.

Wilde dropped the bedclothes, and as the knife swept back, caught the man's wrist and held it so that the blade, curved and ugly and Oriental, gleamed wickedly against his neck. He was still on his back and at a tremendous disadvantage, but he improved his position by turning on to his side, at the same time bending the

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Dust of Shun-Ti

(Continued from page 470)

man's wrist—it had the toughness of a steel bar—downward and backward until, with a sharp exclamation, he dropped the weapon.

Wilde released the man's wrist and jerked himself up. But he had not done with him yet. The man flung himself at Wilde, and as the latter went down on his back again, the other's fingers gripped his throat. They were like talons; long and narrow and sharp-nailed.

But Wilde had got a throat grip, too, and they threshed around on the bed, arms and legs and bedclothes whirling in confusion. Wilde was far the heavier and the stronger, however, and presently, with an immense effort, he flung his assailant back. The man came at him again, but they were on even terms now. Wilde dragged him to the side of the bed and they rolled on to the floor. The man's forehead struck the boards with a sickening thud. . . .

Wilde got up and lit the lamp.

The man was face down. Wilde turned him over; an involuntary exclamation broke from his lips and he nearly dropped the lamp in amazement. Gone from the man's features were the charm and dignity and benevolence he had seen in them that evening, yet undoubtedly they were those of his Chinese gentleman, Sun Wong, now set in an expression of uncompromising hatred.

Wilde tied the man up with a bed sheet and sat down to await the coming of dawn.

THE police came in the morning. With them was a dour, gray-faced Scotsman named MacGregor, who described himself to Wilde as an agent of the federal government. He listened to Wilde's account of the affair with phlegmatic countenance, in-

terjecting only an occasional comment.

"So you believed that yarn, did ye?" he demanded, and a twinkle of mirth crept into his deep gray eyes.

"Yarn!" exclaimed Wilde. His big body stiffened. "It was a yarn, then!" he demanded. "There's no casket? No—no dust of Shun-ti?" he went on, forcing a grin to his crest-fallen face.

"There'll probably be a casket, I'm thinking," said MacGregor. "And there'll be dust in it, too. Dust of death! But I'm afraid you are not up in Chinese history, young man. Shun-ti was a weakling, anything but illustrious—and no Chinese, whatever his politics, would invite a descendant of the hated Mongols to the Chinese throne. Ten years ago, Ah Foo (to give your Mongol chief his real name) was a leading character actor on the Chinese stage. He left it for a more profitable business. This man he has killed, Sun Yet, was an agent of the British government. According to his papers, while working in his Chinese fashion, he intercepted the description of the location of the casket, and came north to examine it. Ah Foo discovered Sun Yet's intention and followed him, determined to recover the map one way or another before Sun Yet could come upon the casket. Evidently, the stuff was run in by another branch of the gang. Ah Foo merely had to arrange its distribution, I expect. Probably the map was the only record of its hiding place this side of the Pacific. If this is so, Ah Foo simply *had* to get it."

"Hiding place! Casket!" gasped Wilde, in bewilderment. "What were they hiding?"

"Cocaine," said MacGregor pleasantly. "When we bust open that casket (if it is a casket) I'm thinking we'll find a hundred thousand dollars or so, of the stuff. We'd better be getting over there."

MacGregor was right.