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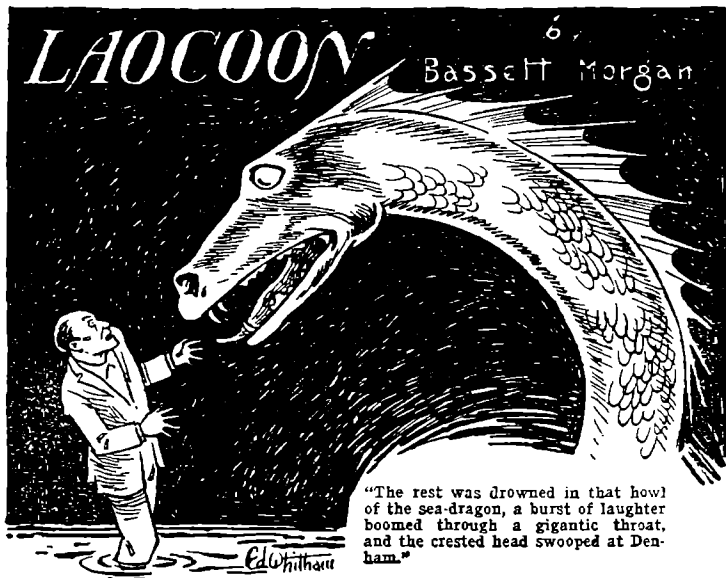
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LAOCOON

Bassett Morgan



"The rest was drowned in that howl of the sea-dragon, a burst of laughter boomed through a gigantic throat, and the crested head swooped at Denham."

AS THE little trading schooner drew nearer the shadowy fringes of the island, the talk on deck fell to silence. The tropic beauty of Papua was strangely repellent. Willoughby, who had impulsively answered the offer of Professor Denham to spend a year or so helping the scientist in his investigation in deep sea lore off these shores at a salary of three thousand dollars a year, rather regretted his acceptance. He felt as if mysterious tentacles of miasmatic jungle swamps breathed poison in the perfume-laden off-shore wind. It was like the breath of a black panther. He took Professor Denham's letter from his pocket and read it again.

Five years before, Willoughby had been a student under Professor Denham in the University of California, and had gained a name for himself as

a football star. He had regretted the circumstances which prompted Professor Denham to resign the chair of science under the storm of ridicule and protest resulting when a newspaper featured the scientist's assertion that sea-serpents really existed. The article was illustrated by a cartoon of Professor Denham and Chueng Ching, a Chinese student who was his especial protégé and devoted to Denham, in the coils of a serpent labeled "Public Opinion," depicting the agony of the Laocoon. There was the account of class experiments in transplanting the brain of one rat to the head of another, and of the practical joke perpetrated by a student assistant in substituting the brain of a female rat for that of a male, which led to riotous speculation on the campus as to the outcome of the experiment.

Willoughby had been sorry for Professor Denham. It was, however, the three thousand dollars salary that decided him to accept Denham's offer and take the next steamer from San Francisco east, re-embarking on a trading schooner for Papua, and Denham was to send a boat to take him to his own habitation.

The letter, which he re-read within sight of landing, had emphasized the necessity of "a strong fearless man, without nerves." Willoughby interpreted the phrase with a new meaning, now that he recognized the repellent fascination of Papua.

He had no sooner stepped ashore than a Chinese in oil-stained dungarees approached him and spoke:

"You allee samee Mista Will'bee, you come 'long my boat."

He had scant time to bid farewell to his acquaintances of the trading vessel when he was led to a launch lying on water so clear that she seemed to be floating on air. Her propeller churned foam and she caulked a little as they rounded the point; then for hours the launch raced along the coast, where jungles brooded and river mouths showed no banks, but only trees rooted in swamp. Fighting a loneliness he could not analyze, Willoughby watched sea gardens beneath and tried to reason away a lowering depression. The Chinese ignored his tentative approaches to conversation by unbroken and stoical silence.

In the late afternoon, with her engines slowed to half-speed, the launch entered a lagoon, where echoes of her pulsations disturbed boobies on the wreck of an old ship pronged on coral spurs. The lagoon water held gaudy little fish scattering like sparks between skeleton-white roots of drowned trees. Sea life had made the wreck its prey. White decay crept up her sides and she was rooted to abysmal depths by weed. A small wharf sagged under forest creepers with

tendrils trailing in the sea. The planks creaked alarmingly as Willoughby trod them following the boatman, and met the shrill hum of insects. The heat was like a furnace blast. He was aware of a throb like *tic-douloureux* pulsing incessantly, as if on distant hills the heat had a voice.

What had once been a path leading from the wharf was now overgrown. The Chinese, lathered with sweat, slashed with a knife at trailing vines. Orchids quivered like flames. The incessant hum of insects rose in loud crescendo, but as they progressed the trail became less confused with looped lianas. Sunlight filtered through branches overhead. And ever nearer came that slow beat of sound, touching nerve centers as insistently as the insect humming irritated the ear-drums.

Then the jungle was ended and Willoughby saw a bamboo palisade enclosing ground that had once been cleared and under cultivation; yet the jungle, beaten back, had swarmed again, choking the garden, creeping over the palisade and the crushed coral walk which led to a substantial dwelling with nipa-thatched roof and a vine-covered pergola leading to shore rocks which rose abruptly at one side. It was then that Willoughby understood that diapason of sound, the shock of outer seas breaking in subterranean caverns.

THE Chinese who had guided him did not enter the gate, but darted beside the palisade. Willoughby heard no sign of human presence save the "shir-rr" of his boot-soles on the coral. Then a Chinese wearing the white ducks of a house-boy appeared in a doorway cut through luxurious bougainvillea vines purple with bloom. He stood staring at Willoughby, with his hands twisting together. For a moment Willoughby felt again that sense of helplessness

bred by the jungle, the fear of encroaching death.

"Tell your boss-man that Willoughby is here," he said.

He followed the Chinese into the house. The large living room was shaded and cool. Chinese matting covered the floor. Sea-grass chairs offered ease. There were wall cases filled with labeled specimens of sea denizens, a table holding a typewriter and note-book and some loose pages of script. The house was clean and orderly, yet he still felt as if the jungle lay too close for safety.

"Boss-man, he come bimeby," ventured the Chinese plaintively.

"Where's Chueng Ching?" Willoughby knew the Chinese student had accompanied Denham to his retreat and, it was rumored, provided funds for the scientist.

"Him gone long time. I not know much." The reply brought a grimace from the house-boy, as of apprehension.

"You got one piecee ship, I go out 'longside," he added plaintively, then darted back at the sound of steps, as Professor Denham entered.

Willoughby was shocked at the change in him. Denham's skin seemed stretched over his bones, his eyes shone like those of a madman, the hand extended to Willoughby felt cold and lifeless as that of a corpse in spite of tropic heat.

"Glad you arrived, Willoughby," he said. "You've come too late to see Chueng Ching today, but he'll be here tomorrow. We'll eat, then you can rest. You'll excuse me if I write a few notes right away. I've just come from Chueng Ching and I must get them down at once."

Willoughby was a little surprized, but he followed the house-boy to a room with a bed screened by netting, took off his shoes, collar and coat and dropped on the cotton covering and dozed. He was awakened by the clink of dishes. In the living room a table

was set for two, but Denham did not appear.

The house-boy hovered near, serving Willoughby eagerly, and when the coffee was brought voiced again his wistful plea, "You got one piecee ship, I go out 'longside."

He seemed to hang on Willoughby's answer. Plainly the Chinese was in the grip of fear, and the white man remembered again the encroaching jungle and the derelict rooted to sea gardens. He wished Denham would return, and went on the porch to look for his host. He did not mind the lack of courtesy, but the silence and oppression were affecting his nerves. Tropic night had fallen, the mosquitoes were vicious. Beyond the murmur of sea caverns he heard nothing, and returned to the house, to look at the specimens in wall cases, then to reach the typewriter stand where he glanced at a sheet still in the carrier. Without consciousness of reading something not intended for him, Willoughby glanced at the typing in view:

"There is now no doubt but the physical coarseness of the beast has absorbed the fine mentality of Chueng Ching. I fed him double the usual amount of chicken yesterday, and he was in a fine rage for more. His roarings are bestial. The pool was lashed to foam by his fury. And I am assured that his rage was directed toward me, his friend and companion. It is scarcely a year since he was sorrowful at the thought that I should die before he died and leave him alone. Now he is all brute and I am punished. He no longer heeds my voice...."

As if the writer had been interrupted at his task, the sentence was left unfinished. Willoughby read with mingled rage and horror. Evidently Chueng Ching had gone insane and he had been hired to care for a madman. He resented it. Yet he was virtually a prisoner on the

island unless he could find the boatman who brought him. He stood a moment, wondering what to do. The little house-boy lingered near him constantly without giving the impression of watching, but shook his head when Willoughby demanded to see Denham.

"No can do," he said plaintively.

Willoughby went through the curtained doorway into a room evidently belonging to Chueng Ching, to judge by the embroidered tapestries moving in the draft. Chests of carved teak stood between wall cases. A table held metal tubes, with sealed ends and addressed to the Royal College at Peking. Willoughby heard the squawking of hens and ran outside into the pergola of vines. A lantern stood beside a bamboo coop and Professor Denham was wringing the neck of a hen and tossing it on the ground while he reached for others. He looked at Willoughby, and it seemed to him that Denham's eyes held mingled fear and madness.

Then he heard the sound of water threshed as if by storm, although there was no wind and not a leaf of the vines stirred.

"Chueng Ching," said Denham. "Hungry again. Such gluttony. I wish you'd arrived earlier, but it's difficult to see him at night. Go into the house. Willoughby, and read those notes you'll find. I'll return presently and tell you all about him."

Denham gathered the slaughtered hens and darted down the vine-covered passageway of the pergola. There was the sound of an iron door banged shut, the repeated noise of water threshed violently, and Willoughby returned to the house, where he took up the typed script, arranged the pages according to numbers and glanced over them. Fear, horror, fascination held him. He forgot where he was. He was unaware of the house-boy standing mute near his

chair, seeking companionship in a fear that was sapping his life. Willoughby sat on the edge of his chair, hair slowly rising, scalp prickly, his palms moist with cold sweat.

"I HAVE now the evidence that ocean depths are a desert of ice-cold water, with no living organism; soundless, still, dark nothingness. A ship sinking to those depths would cease to be, ground into molecules on the ocean bed. The silence must be fearful. But greatest satisfaction of all, is the proving of my theory that sea-serpents, as they are popularly called, do exist, and that their armor of scales and longevity has preserved some of them to this day. The cavern pool is an ideal spot for such a sea denizen to lurk. Chueng Ching told me that he had heard rumors of this haunted cavern, when we were both in California, and he is as delighted as I, that we have found the thing, and my years of research are rewarded. . .

"It is three months since I added to this diary. Chueng Ching is despondent. The white spot which he tells me has been spreading for a year is only too plainly evidence of leprosy. Chueng Ching is accursed, doomed to a lingering death, a tragedy for both of us. He feels it keenly because we have found what we sought, and for him there will not be time to pursue the study of the sea-serpent. We spoke, last night, of the restrictions of man's limited span of life, the pity that we are not given enough years, even centuries, for research. One envies the sea-serpent, which is undoubtedly older than whales, older than the sequoias of California, much older than the Christian era. To judge by his length and the size of his armor plates, our dragon is centuries old. I said to Chueng Ching that I wished I could inhabit his body, and not only live indefinitely but also explore the

ocean depths, learn his manner of living and perhaps find his relatives. Chueng Ching seemed startled rather than amused . . .

"Two months later. This morning Chueng Ching asked a terrific thing of me. He pleaded the growing decay of his flesh. His fingers are already numb. He believes that I could give him the magnificent body and strength of our sea-serpent, a thought suggested no doubt by those experimental tamperings of mine in college surgery, substituting the brains of one rodent for those of another. But I could not do such a thing. Chueng Ching is a man, a brother to me, a fine mentality, a higher organism."

Willoughby ripped open his shirt, longing for a cooling breath on his skin. The shadow of the house-boy fell across his feet; the brown hands were twisting mutely. The page he had just read fell to the floor, and he seized the next.

"Chueng Ching has worked out an arrangement by which he is confident we can manage the operation. The steel net will confine the sea-serpent, a collar of steel will hold his head while I shoot ether from a spray gun. The bench, the instruments, the cauterants, are ready. Only, I am afraid. If it were not that Chueng Ching's fingers and toes are already sloughing away, I could not do this thing. He pleads all day, and moans all night. Tomorrow I shall be alone save for the house-boy Wi Wo and the boatman who is hired to call here at regular intervals."

There was the rustling of the page which Willoughby crushed in tense fingers as he took it up, and the sound of his heavy breathing.

"Chueng Ching awakened with a great fear, although he assures me that he went under the anesthetic not only reconciled but even rejoicing in a resurrection of which he felt surer than I did. He felt no pain, only fear and the sense of a great weight

dragging him down. No doubt the serpent body is not yet under control of nerve telegraphy of the mind. I attribute his fear to the same cause. Time will cure both troubles. Today, I made out the first of his attempts to communicate with me. There is no doubt he speaks, but I scarce understand his words, roared in that tremendous voice. I spent hours with him, and had Wi Wo fetch my meals. I asked questions to which he could reply by a nod or shake of his great crested head. What a pity those fools who ridiculed my assertions that sea-dragons do exist, can not see this triumph!

"The vitality of Chueng Ching's body is prodigious. He revived quickly from the ether. The leprous shell of my poor friend is in the ocean depths, sewn in canvas, weighted with iron. The sea will sing a requiem. But Chueng Ching is now invulnerable and magnificent. Nothing could harm that marvelously constructed coat of mail unless it is some device of man, the destroyer."

Willoughby lifted his head and brushed his hand across his eyes. He was entering into horror that chilled his flesh, a nightmare he could not and would not believe. He abominated the crime of Denham, yet was fascinated.

"He will not take meat, yet we fed the sea-serpent he now inhabits, at regular intervals, on raw flesh. But since the change Chueng Ching will not touch it. No doubt the higher mentality of an esthete has subjugated the beast body. Today I prepared another roll of notes for the Royal College of Peking, a rare collection of data which will receive consideration from Chinese savants that I could not wrest from my own people. Chueng Ching and I have proved the existence of sea-dragons and the ability of science through martyrdom to penetrate to the mysteries beneath the waters."

WILLOUGHBY mopped his face. Who held a tray toward him and he took a bottle it held and poured himself a peg of brandy, then seized the next page.

"Chueng Ching is timid of the dark. His fear throttles our investigations. And much that he would impart is lost through my faulty understanding of his articulation. The curse of Babel rings down the ages. He breaks into Cantonese in his endeavor to enlighten me. The finer details would be invaluable but I hoped too greatly. I can not understand his fear, and his rather pathetic regret at the loneliness he will find when I am dead. But one thing comforts me, he is taking food and prefers rather undercooked chicken and pork. I must keep a stock on hand, as his appetite is prodigious. . .

"Six months since I last wrote these notes. Chueng Ching has furnished me with priceless specimens and data of the ocean depths, the notes of which I seal daily in metal tubes to be sent to Peking. But I notice a change in him. While at first he was afraid of the depths, he now goes fearlessly and remains for a longer period each time. The silence down there must be fearful, but he seems to like exploring, and has even identified geographic indentations of continent shores, and recognizes the chill of polar seas. . .

"Three months from my last entry. Another period of change has come over Chueng Ching. The little fish spewed from his jaws are spoiled by carelessness. Things are not going so well. There is a change of temperament and his articulation is thick. For a time he spoke clearly although in a voice like a church organ. Now he roars in sullen rage when I refuse to feed him before I obtain an account of his wanderings. I believe it was a mistake to feed him flesh. Better to have left him to find sea-food only. I wonder if the brute

body is in ascendance, or if meeting other monsters of his own kind has upset him. He would know no means of communication with them, and no methods of defense, but what a spectacle it would be to view a battle of sea-dragons! I wish it had been my lot to change from a human to this saurian. I am past middle age and the passions which plague a younger man. Chueng Ching, who in his human shape was vowed to celibacy and had devoted his life to science, is seeking a mate. He was never more lucid than when he roared to me that he had found a 'sweetie', the college slang of old days for a sweetheart, and demanded more food for strength; he would need to fight off other males of his kind. With great sorrow, I must admit the end is in sight. He is indifferent to our researches and I gained nothing today but the account of this female sea-dragon, which seems coy and exhibits greater speed and endurance than Chueng Ching, as they tear through the depths, circling islands, lashing a riot of phosphorescence in the night. Oh, to see them! To find another and change from this body hampering me to a saurian like Chueng Ching!"

Cold sweat broke out on Willoughby's forehead as he took the last sheet from the typewriter, and re-read the bit which had fascinated him a little while before.

He understood perfectly what Denham had written, of the change over this *thing*. The brute body had conquered the mind of Chueng Ching. The ferocity of the sea-dragon was in ascendance. He had turned on Denham, no longer obeying the voice of the scientist. The remainder of the page held no less of horror, a prophetic intimation of Denham's fear.

"Chueng Ching is a fiend. He struck at me today with open jaws. I have sealed the complete notes to date, and addressed the results of my researches to the Royal College at

Pekin, where they will act on the instructions to use the balance of Chueng Ching's wealth to pursue this investigation in case anything should happen to me. But Willoughby has arrived, and I am confident that the skill he displayed in the science class can be enhanced by practise so that he can perform the operation I desire. Chueng Ching laughed when I told him my plan, but promised to entice another male of his kind to the pool where Willoughby and I shall trap him by means of the iron-barred gateway dropped behind this sea-dragon we used as a body for the brain of Chueng Ching. I have not talked to Willoughby about it, but I noticed he seemed as well set up and fit as in college days. His reward shall be a share of Chueng Ching's wealth, and the fame of . . ."

Willoughby crushed the sheet in his hand, every nerve in his body on edge, his breathing scounding loud in the silence. The chair crashed over as he rose and stared past Wi Wo at the curtained doorway. The embroidered dragons seemed to move with malignant life. And a more terrible dragon inhabited this place, the Madness which had caught Denham and made of him a priest of more dreadful rites than voodoo of the jungles.

Willoughby realized now for what he had been summoned by the scientist. He must escape or be caught in a trap from which there was no escape. He would find Denham, and tell him that he was going; Denham was at that moment near the pool. Willoughby remembered the chickens he had been killing, and his words: "Chueng Ching, hungry again. Such gluttony!" He remembered the sound as of water threshed by storm. Denham feared the thing, yet he had gone to it again. He might be in danger of his life. Common decency demanded that Willoughby try to save the man. As for remaining under the conditions to be imposed, his

body shivered as if with nausea at the thought.

Under the vine-covered pergola, he was startled by the sight of Wi Wo in his white ducks. The hand of the Chinese fell on his arm, the man's teeth chattered like castanets. And above that chattering and Willoughby's breathing, came the sound of water crashing on rocks, threshed under flails of no wind that ever was.

WILLOUGHBY stalked down the pergola, gripping his courage in his hand, assuring himself the typing was the fantasy of a madman, and that the worst he would find would be Denham in the violence of insanity brought on by loneliness and the eery mystery of the island. The heelless slippers of Wi Wo shuffled reluctantly as they came near an iron door, with light from beyond shining through the space between heavy bars. Willoughby saw the lantern on the stone floor. Steps led down. There was the crash of waves subsiding gradually, and a low moaning audible.

Willoughby opened the iron door, snatched up the lantern and began to descend the steps. A cool wind swept upward, a smell of sea-wrack and cavern chill. He saw the oily luminance of water where the sea filled a natural cove. It was stirred as by violent upheaval from beneath. The rock ledge below glistened with minute sea life. He saw something resembling a huge horsecollar slung to iron rings in the cavern roof, and a steel net dependent from ropes, the apparatus of that operation performed on the sea-dragon. Along one side was a litter of things scarcely discernible by the faint lantern light.

With his scalp prickling, Willoughby held the lantern at arm's length, to learn what manner of gigantic bird it was that ran to and fro on the ledge, uttering squawks of fear which the cavern echoed. He saw a heap of

dead chickens on the ledge, then a movement of Wi Wo caught his eye. The Chinese was retreating up the steps, backward, his eyes staring at the pool, his hands groping along the rock wall. Willoughby looked again at the pool, straining his vision to see what had thrallled Wi Wo and turned his yellow skin green with terror.

It came like gushing light in the depths, stirring the black water, a radiance of glittering unrest, undulating flitter and shadow, faintly phosphorescent; then coils broke a moving swirl in the gloom.

Willoughby turned to run up the steps. The breath of Wi Wo hissed between his teeth. There was the silken slur of water washing the rock, and in another moment Willoughby was crowding the Chinese on the steps, for the water parted and a crested head was upreared, water dripping from fanged jaws, red tongue quivering, large glassy eyes regarding the two men on the steps with malevolent glaring. Coils of a serpent body upreared. Willoughby saw the great scales like iridescent metal plates. There was that threshing hiss of water, tremendous in the cavern walls. Willoughby's heart was pounding in his throat and wrist. Fear paralyzed him.

Then he screamed. From that great throat came a roar that swelled and boomed, and in that sound Willoughby heard unmistakably the name of "Denham" howled in wrath.

His own scream seemed to be echoed by the flapping white thing on the ledge. For the first time he realized that he had lost the chance for what he came to do: to save Denham. That was Denham—that mad disheveled thing clad in white ducks

which was bent nearly double, waving its coat-tail over its head. It stood erect, laughing horribly.

"Chueng Ching," it called, "did you bring your sea-dragon? See, Willoughby is here, Willoughby who will make me invulnerable so we can rove the deeps together . . ."

The rest was drowned in that howl of the sea-dragon, a burst of laughter boomed through a gigantic throat, and the crested head swooped at Denham. The sea leaped, a wave shot by those armored coils crashed up the steps and over Willoughby. The lantern fell from his numbed fingers, the sea was in his mouth.

Then he felt the hands of Wi Wo clutching him. They were crouched in a heap on the steps. The pool was dark and the seas fell quiet. Willoughby felt his way a few steps lower and saw the outer archway of the cove. Dawn had bloomed, early tropic dawn shone silver. The ledge was empty. Denham had disappeared.

Willoughby turned and pushing the terrified Chinese before him went up the steps, clanging and bolting the iron door.

He strode through the house, looked at the sealed tube of notes addressed ready to send, and at the typed account of Denham's crime. Then he went to the porch.

A voice at his shoulder startled him: "You got one piecee ship, I go out 'long you." The plaintive wail was chattered through quivering lips.

"Come on," snapped Willoughby and ran down the path.

Along the palisade sauntered the Chinese boatman. Willoughby took money from his pocket and offered it.

"Take us back to the port," he commanded. "Quick!"

