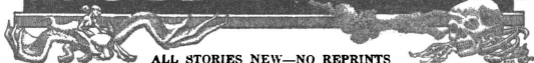


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1942

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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1942 by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.



PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 36, No. 7

W. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

*You'll meet in this tale the man whose soul
is a raging battleground for the never-ending con-
flict between East and West. . . . And you'll read
of a beautiful dancer and a monstrous revenge!
For here is a drama charged with subtle terror
in its sure approach of inevitable doom!*

Never the

"Oh, East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet."

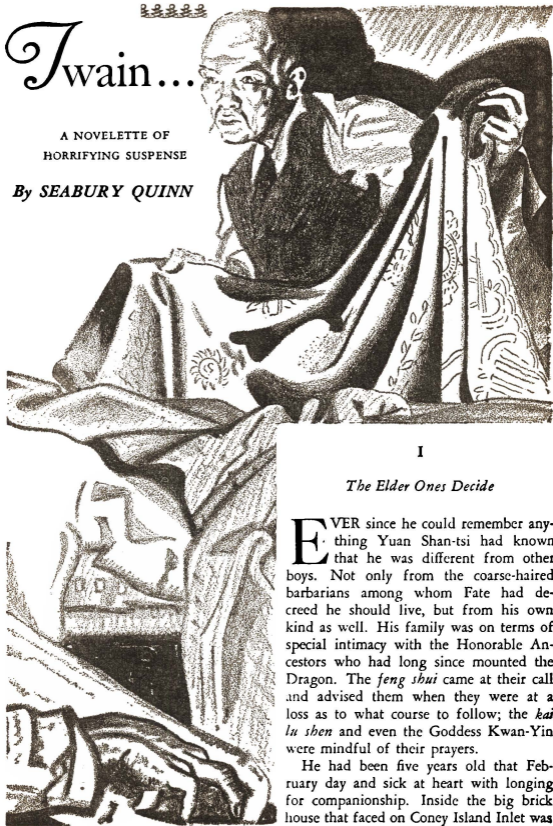
—KIPLING.



Twain...

A NOVELETTE OF
HORRIFYING SUSPENSE

By SEABURY QUINN



I

The Elder Ones Decide

EVER since he could remember anything Yuan Shan-tsi had known that he was different from other boys. Not only from the coarse-haired barbarians among whom Fate had decreed he should live, but from his own kind as well. His family was on terms of special intimacy with the Honorable Ancestors who had long since mounted the Dragon. The *feng shui* came at their call and advised them when they were at a loss as to what course to follow; the *kai lu shen* and even the Goddess Kwan-Yin were mindful of their prayers.

He had been five years old that February day and sick at heart with longing for companionship. Inside the big brick house that faced on Coney Island Inlet was

warmth and coziness, and the cheer that comes with firelight and drawn curtains. And there was beauty, too. Beauty exhaled from things of priceless jade and brass, of silver, gold and celadon. A bellowed atmosphere of heirlooms, ancestors and history mingled with the redolence of exotic scents and the fragrance of tall, potted white narcissi. His small heart almost burst with the longing to be out in the street where the sweated, legged, mitted children played and tumbled in the fresh, soft snow, but when he put aside the curtains of silk rep and smiled ingratiatingly at the small savages they mocked at him and hurled snowballs and insults at the little ruddy face that looked so longingly at them.

That night he besought his father, "O Honorable Sire, be pleased to hear my plea. Send me, I beg you, to the schools of the barbarians, that I may mingle with them, know their ways and come to have them for my friends!"

"*Abee*," his father chuckled. "*Aboo*, small piece of scented jade, wouldst thou become as one of them?"

"I am a *Chi-jen*, a scion of the Manchu Banner-Men, and a descendant of the Three-toed Dragon's line," the little boy responded simply.

"Well said, son of the house of Yuan, and such shalt thou be ever, but concerning thy request to mingle with the coarse-haired ones I think thou art over young to start thy journey into the great world. Nevertheless, it is for *Them*, not me, to say regarding such decisions."

He led the way to the alcove where, veiled in drapes of ancient tribute-silk, the jade ancestral tablets hung, and after they had lighted incense sticks and made the seven-fold, profound kowtows before the altar, Yuan Ch'in-hsiu prayed, "O Venerable Ones, most August Forbears of our race and clan, make clear to us, the worms who creep upon the dust before

thy altar, the course that we should follow, we beseech thee."

Small Yuan Shan-tsi remained kneeling with his forehead pressed against the rug of Peking-blue, for he was very fearful of the Elder Ones. Yet nothing happened. The purple-white incense curled in slow spirals toward the lacquered ceiling, from outside came the jingle of sleighbells as a one-horse cutter jogged down Exeter Street, but inside all was silent as the inside of a tomb.

Then, suddenly, it came. He could not be sure if the roaring came from far away and grew and swelled in volume as it rushed toward him, or if he heard it with his inward ear and felt its heightened intensity as he sucked his frightened breath in and held it till it seemed his veins must surely burst. But there it was—the rumble of the pounding of a hundred thousand unshod hooves, the roll of Tartar kettle-drums, the thunder of the Golden Horde's resistless charge—and out of the dim, swirling incense smoke he seemed to see an endless phalanx of mailed riders sweep, slim men on little wiry ponies, high-shouldered, clad in armor of black-lacquered leather with bright gold inlays gleaming in it, iron helmets on their heads and braided, fierce mustaches sweeping backward in the wind created by their mad onrush.

The charging horsemen passed, and after them the smoke revealed a wide, tree-shaded garden with a statue set up in its midst. Or was it a statue? It was as motionless as a thing formed of porcelain, but there was something vibrant and alive in its pale-cheeked face. Calm, aloof, oblivious the image seemed; the lovely, slanting eyes were wrapt and brooding, the lips that slashed across the ivory-yellow of the face were like a taint of spilled fresh blood; the thin arch of the jet-black brows might have been laid on with a bamboo brush.

Her hands were very long and narrow, and the brightly lacquered pointed nails were like slim, scarlet daggers on her finger-tips. For a moment—or an age, he could not tell which—she contemplated them with eyes as darkly lustrous as moss-agates, and then the faintest shadow of a smile seemed flickering on the carmine lips, and the slim head beneath its wreath of glowing blue-black hair gave a brief nod.

The Kwan-Yin, Lady of the Moon and Goddess of Divine Compassion, had deigned to give an answer to their prayer.

So little Yuan Shan-tsi went to the New York Public Schools, and became as much a good American as Isadore Abramowitz whose father came from Cracow, or Gregor Pophosepholos, whose family taproots reached back to the hills of Thessaly, or Henry Brewster Cabot, whose forebears came over in the Mayflower.

II

Yuan Ch'in-hsiu and Yuan Shan-tsi

NOW he was thirty-five, and all but a faint, wiped-over remembrance of that day had faded from his memory. He was not quite an atheist, but if you'd asked him what he believed in he would have had a hard time answering.

The edict that permitted queues to be cut off was passed before he reached high school, and with his hair close-shingled, dressed in the height of Western fashion, he passed readily for a dark-complexioned Occidental, though sometimes people took him for an Indian.

He was outstanding in his studies, and when the cheering section chanted, "We want a touchdown—we want a touchdown!" it was more often than not he who, with the pigskin clutched against his lean brown side, raced to victory with a speed and trickiness of running that out-

distanced interference as easily as it avoided tackles.

He was more than merely surface-Westernized. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal—the government of the people, by the people, for the people"—those lessons struck responsive echoes in his heart. Sun Yat-Sen was right. Chin should be a republic. The old Empire was falling. Let it fall, the sooner the better.

Of course, he did not tell his father these thoughts. The "Venerable One's" heart would have broken at hearing that his son, a scion of the ancient Banner-Men, saw virtue in the democratic heresy. But in the secret meeting places of the revolutionary party he was among the most enthusiastic speakers, and—when they had finally overcome the age-old hatred and suspicion of the Cantonese for the Manchu—the leaders took him to their hearts and gave him work to do.

He was going regularly with his father to China, learning to know true from imitation in the realm of Eastern art, and on every trip he bore dispatches to the leaders of the Kuomintang—the National Republican Assembly. Who would suspect the young Manchus Yuan Shan-tsi, son of the illustrious Yuan Ch'in-hsiu who might have been a coral-button Mandarin had he remained in his homeland, of harboring republican sentiments, much less of carrying seditious messages?

Finally the fight was won. The pygmy Emperor Pu-Yi abdicated and General Yuan Shik-kai, a man of his own clan, was inaugurated President of China in the dragon-yellow courts of the Forbidden City.

It was after two o'clock when he returned from the celebration at the Garden of Ten Thousand Fragrant Felicities Chinese restaurant in Pell Street. A light was burning in his father's room, and as he tiptoed past the door a sudden impulse

made him pause and rap upon the panels softly.

"Come in, my son," the slurring Manchu syllables bade, and he stepped across the threshold, his head still slightly fuddled from the *ng ka pi* he had drunk, then halted as abruptly as if he'd run into a solid wall. Except in China, and then only on high ceremonial occasions, he had never seen his father in court costume. Now, in the rays of the small lamp whose wick floated in a cup of perfumed oil, Yuan Ch'in-hsiu sat in full Mandarin's regalia. His robe was black with a medalion of rich color worked upon the breast, tightly-fitting trousers of white satin came down to his ankles, on his feet were white silk socks and velvet shoes with three-inch-thick felt soles. He was wearing his official cap of office, a black silk fez-like hat with a coral button in a gold mounting on top, and a peacock feather slanting down behind it. Shan-tsi's Western training sloughed off at the sight. "Thou art up late, most Honorable Sir," he intoned formally.

The old man took the cover from a bowl of tea that stood beside him on the teak-wood *kang* and sipped it delicately. "O man-child of the house of Yuan," he replied at length, "this is an unauspicious day for our clan."

The silence lengthened, and finally Shan-tsi, knowing what was expected of him, replied softly, "It is even as thy jade-speech says, O Honorable One."

"Aye," his father repeated, seemingly as if he spoke to himself, "an unauspicious day. I am a man without a country, son of Yuan, for the coarse-haired barbarians have laws that set the yellow man beneath the black in human worth. I was born in that empire thy forbears took by right of conquest; never can I be a citizen of this land, though I have dwelt here many years and added much to its treasure. Neither can I claim our fathers' land, for the Cloud-

Throne of the Son of Heaven is cast down and the execrable rabble of the South have set a state of their own up in its stead. There is no place on earth for me, my son—"

"Nay, ancient Long-beard, say not so," Shan-tsi replied when he was sure his father had done speaking. "This land is thine for a refuge—"

"For a refuge, yes," his father raised a delicately-veined hand, "but not for an inheritance. With thee, my son, the case is different. Thou wert born here, thou art a native-born American. Let thy duty be to this, the country of thy birth; cast out all thought of China from thy mind and take the ways of this land to thy heart."

"It shall be even as thou sayest, Thrice-honorable—"

"And when the time has come for me to mount the Dragon, see to it I am buried in the West. I would not have my bones laid in the earth polluted by the putrid spawn of Canton."

Shan-tsi bowed again but replied nothing, for he was literally stricken speechless. Not have his body taken back to China to lie in the ancestral soil when the geomancer had selected an auspicious time for burial? Not have his coffin of Mongolian cedar borne to the grave by grunting white-smocked coolies while kinsmen in the formal red of mourning scattered paper spirit-cash by the way and shaven-headed priests banged gongs and chanted prayers and hired mourners wailed and keened while at the head of the procession bumped and swayed the empty sedan chair in which the *kai lu shen*—the spirit that makes the way clear—might ride in majesty? An ex-Confederate's request for burial in a G.A.R. graveyard would have been less astonishing.

But he was a son of the house of Yuan and his father had spoken. "The harmony of thy voice is exquisite, Venerable Sire," he declared with another bow.

Once more he inclined his body three times from the hips, receiving in exchange a nod from his father. "Poor old Dad," he murmured as he went down the hall to his room, dropping naturally into the English words in which he did most of his thinking. "The Emperor's abdication and our kinsman's elevation to the Presidency must have been a nasty uppercut for him."

As his son's footsteps faded in the distance Yuan Ch'in-hsiu took a writing book and brush and ink pot from the *kang* beside him, and a small white pasteboard box of small white pills. Such pills could not be bought at any Western pharmacy, the law forbade their sale, but in the shops of Chinese druggists—

The little writing book had leaves of thinnest gold, like that sign painters use for lettering on glass. Ch'in-hsiu tore out a page of goldleaf, marked the *hong* for "Justice and Eternal Life" on it with the bamboo brush and wrapped it loosely round one of the small white pills. He put the gold-wrapped pellet in his mouth, took up the teacup and washed it down with a long draught, then pinched the lamp's flame out and leaned back in his carved blackwood chair. "*Ch'eung sang*—long life to thee, O Son of Yuan," he murmured as he closed his eyes and waited for the coming of the *feng shui*, the spirits who lead through the Dragon Gate the souls of those that die.

III

Flower of the Moonlight

THE third vice president of the All States Trust Company was more than merely cordial on the inter-office telephone. He was positively enthusiastic. "Tell Mr. Yuan to come in at once!" Young men with more than half a million dollars to their credit were always welcome in his office, and when the young man was a

Chinese who probably didn't know one security from another his call was doubly appreciated. The All States had had some difficulty in marketing the latest issue of Aldyne & Hicks seven percent preferred stock. It seemed a kindly heaven had sent this young Celestial for the special purpose of—

Mr. Alcock was not altogether pleased at what he saw when the clerk showed young Mr. Yuan in. A young man slightly but compactly built, with high cheek-bones, a hawk-beak nose and close-clipped, haughty mustache above a wide, firm mouth, who spoke with a pronounced Harvard accent and wore a well-cut suit of Harris tweed—you couldn't talk pidgin English to a man like that. Probably you couldn't sell him Aldyne & Hicks seven percent preferred stock, either.

Five minutes' conversation confirmed his worst forebodings. Mr. Yuan was not interested in investment securities. He wanted to know why the All States refused to lend him forty thousand dollars when he offered Waterford & Allentown debentures as collateral, especially since Mr. Alcock had recommended those same bonds as gilt-edged investments to his late father.

"But you don't understand, my boy," protested Mr. Alcock. "Those bonds were perfectly good when I advised your father to buy them, but with the European war drawing money to munitions manufacturing, and away from railroad securities, the whole picture has changed. If you'll just be guided by me—"

Young Mr. Yuan smiled at him, and for a moment Mr. Alcock's life-long habit of outward self-control was shattered. There was something dreadful in the prune-black eyes that looked straight into his beneath the jutting brows, a flash of awful anger, like the flash of unsheathed steel, but the cultured Cambridge accents were harmless, almost gentle. "I under-

stand perfectly, sir. My father bought those bonds, and paid a hundred thousand dollars for them, on your advice. Now, two years later, your bank refuses them as collateral for a loan of less than half their face value. Will you be kind enough to let me have a blank check?"

"A check?" repeated Mr. Alcock, slightly flustered. "Why, certainly I'll let you—"

"And have your bookkeeper report my exact balance, if you please. I want to withdraw all of it—"

"Good heavens!" Mr. Alcock who taught Sunday School and was averse to all profanity, completely forgot himself. "You can't do that! Why, it would mean—"

Welcome diversion came in the form of a vision that appeared unannounced at the office door. A vision in black velvet and white fox, with an orchid trembling on one shoulder and a faint perfume exhaling from the furs that glistened with a powdering of snow. Her fairness outlined by the burnished walnut of the office wainscoting, a quince-colored flush in her cheeks and her eyes jewel-like, she smiled at them as if she were an angel busy with celestial thoughts. "Oh?" she apologized as she caught sight of Mr. Alcock's visitor, "I didn't know—" From under lowered lashes she regarded the young man with such a look of sustained indifference that there was no mistaking her interest.

Mr. Alcock coughed a soft perfunctory cough. "This is Mr. Yuan, my dear," he said suavely. "Mr. Yuan, my—ah—niece, Ramalha."

"Rimalha?" echoed Shan-tsi questioningly as he bowed to the girl.

"Quite so. My niece is on the stage. She prefers to be known by her professional name, without the usual complimentary title of Miss."

His small gray eyes shot from the young man to the girl, then back again. There

was interest in their faces. H'm'm. His well-oiled mind was working smoothly. "I promised I would take her out to luncheon," he added with a slightly deprecating smile, "but we were getting on so pleasantly I quite forgot the engagement. Won't you join us?"

"Please do," the girl added as she caught the flicker of a look from Mr. Alcock. "We'd love to have you."

"And don't bother about that loan, my boy," Alcock whispered as Shan-tsi helped him into his mink-collared coat. "Come round tomorrow morning and we'll lend you fifty—or sixty—thousand on those bonds."

SHAN-TSI could not remember what they had to eat. His thoughts had been with Ramalha. She was like no other woman he had ever seen, tall, willowy, superbly graceful in her every movement. The glowing halo of her bronze-gold hair was her chief beauty, but her skin was like old China silk, her little teeth like blanched almonds, her lips as ripely red as broken pomegranates, her hands as frail and delicate as white narcissus blossom. Her throatline was an arching curve of loveliness. She had, however, the eyes of an Eastern slave, languishing and passionate, and the slightly sneering but undoubtedly attractive mouth of a Parisian cocotte.

He drove her uptown after luncheon and at her request took her to the little, elegant bazaar in Park Avenue where he kept the cream of his art treasures for discriminating buyers with thick pocketbooks. He showed her objects worthy of a royal museum—a small graceful vase whose enameled surface held forever imprisoned the form of a Ming favorite, a libation-cup of milk-white jade, Mandarins' staffs of office carved from camphor-wood or ebony and topped with golden apples set with lapis-lazuli or garnet, oddly-shaped bits of celadon and tiny images of cultured pearl, no larger

than a dried pea, yet worth a hundred times their weight in gold.

She was spellbound by the beauty of the display, but, Western-womanlike, she put a price tag on it. "Why, these things must be worth a fortune!"

"They are the treasures of the oldest families in the oldest civilization in the world," he answered simply. "If the ancient Manchu houses had not been impoverished by the rise of the Republic there would not be money enough in New York to buy the smallest of them. When you came in the office today I was trying to negotiate a loan from your uncle to buy a collection of Sung bronzes that my Peking agent tells me may be had for forty thousand dollars. The Sung dynasty was the Golden Age of Chinese art, you know."

"Why, no, I didn't know it," she confessed, then, casually: "Did Uncle Grigsby let you have the loan?"

"Yes."

She gave him a long, soft look. The gently-glowing eyes held an invitation, almost a promise, but behind them her small, active brain was busy. A man who could borrow forty thousand dollars—and from Grigsby Alcock—

She had a small apartment in East Fifty-second Street, a jewel-box of a place where everything was white except the jet-black composition floor. The walls were ivory, the ceiling dead chalk-white, the furniture upholstered in cream kidskin. The long-haired rugs on the black floor were like pale water-lilies floating on a black pool. Through the partly-opened door he sometimes glimpsed her bedroom with its softly shaded lamps of cut rock-crystal and the full-length mirror framed in carved ivory.

Here they would sit before the open fire and smoke and drink the fragrant jasmine tea which he supplied her, or sometimes she would play for him and sing the latest Broadway hits in a rich, throaty pizzicato contralto. Presently the Ming vase with the

lovely little slant-eyed Chinese lady smiling from its polished surface and the milk jade libation cup came to rest upon the mantel-shelf above the brass fire-dogs, and on the wall there was a silken scroll that blended all the colors of the Orient in the witchery of a painting by the master of all Chinese painters, Chao Kuang-fu.

"You shouldn't!" she protested when he brought the treasures to her. "Why, they're worth a fortune—"

"*Hayah!*" he laughed softly. "They had no worth at all till you admired them, little Flower of the Moonlight, and after that they had no value save as tribute to your jadelike loveliness!"

"Oh, you *do* say pretty things, Shan-tsi," she complimented. And after a while, when they had grown to know each other better, she persuaded him to buy a hundred thousand dollars' worth of Aldyne and Hicks seven percent preferred stock through the All States Trust Company.

SPRING came. You could hear roller skates clattering on the sidewalks and boys shouting gleefully over marbles. Crocuses peeped through the grass and barrel-organs sounded serenades along the curbs. A soft wind played about the budding trees and in the park the earth smelt sweet and warm. "You've never come to see me dance," she pouted as they sat beside the open window while a light breeze ruffled the organdie curtains. "Everybody says I'm good, even the critics, and—"

"I couldn't bear to, little Flower of the Moonlight," he defended. "To see your loveliness on display before an audience would—well, I'd be jealous of every other man in the theatre."

"But you will come—please?" she teased prettily. "Tomorrow night?"

"I fear I can't. You see, I'm due to start for camp tomorrow morning. My number was called in the draft last month, and—"

"Oh, Shan-tsi!" her voice was like a

wail. "They can't do this to you—to us! Why, you're not even an American. How can they make you fight for their country—"

"You're wrong!" he broke in sharply. "I am a Manchu, a descendant of the iron-capped Banner-Men who overthrew the Mings and set their leader T'ai Tzu on the Dragon Throne, but I was born here. This *is* my country. If it needs me—"

"Oh, piffle!" she derided. "Spare the Liberty Loan oration, Shan. I'm as patriotic as the next one, but this old war's spoiled everything. Grigsby—Uncle Grigsby, I mean—says they've almost killed the sale of good securities with their Liberty Loan drives, and all for nothing too, for the Germans have already won, and will be in Paris by September. Besides, it's taking all the nice young men to camp—"

She saw the anger gathering in his eyes and laid soft fingers on his lips. "Don't mind me, Shan. I'm all unstrung tonight, I guess." Then, brightening suddenly, "But you're leaving tomorrow and you've just *got* to see me dance before you go. Wait here while I slip on my costume."

Five minutes later he heard the soft click of the bedroom light-switch, then the soft rattle of the lock as she unlatched the door between them. The crêpe portieres at the doorway drew back, and she stood revealed like a lovely picture in a frame, a jewel that glowed against the velvet background of the bedroom's darkness.

He had not thought that change of costume could so change a personality. In Fifth Avenue or on Broadway she was American as turkey for Thanksgiving or buckwheat cakes and country sausages for Sunday morning breakfast; the figure rippling toward him with the grace of softly-flowing water was a daughter of the Gods, a temple *deva-dasi*, the mystery and allure of the Unchanging East incarnate. Her bodice was of saffron silk and sheer as net. Cut with short shoulder-sleeves and

rounded neck, it terminated just below her bosom and was set with little imitation emeralds and small opals that kindled into witch-fires in the lamplight's glow. From breast to waist her slim, firm form was bare. A small-blue cincture had been tightly bound about her like a cummerbund, and from it hung a many-pleated skirt of cinnabar-red gauze. Across her smoothly-parted hair was draped a *sari* of pale lizard-green with silver edging, falling down across one shoulder and caught coquettishly within the curve of a bent elbow. Silver bracelets hung with little hawk-bells bound her wrists; bands of heavy sand-molded silver with a fringe of silver tassels that flowed rippling to the floor and almost hid her little blue-veined feet were ringed about each ankle. Between her brows there blazed the bright vermilion of a caste-mark.

She paused a moment before him, humming lightly a verse from *The Temple Bells*:

The temple bells are ringing,
The new green corn is springing,
The marriage month is drawing very near—

Her feet were close together, touching at their inner sides, her knees were straight, her arms were stretched full-length above her head, wrists interlaced, the right hand facing left, the left turned toward the right, and each pressed to the other, palm to palm and finger against finger. Then she retreated from him with a swiftly shuffling step that set her ankle-bells to chiming, swaying like a palm tree in the breeze as she moved. She took the folds of her full skirt between her thumbs and forefingers, daintily, as she might take a pinch of perfumed snuff, and spread the gleaming, many-pleated tissue out fanwise as she advanced again with a slow, gliding step. Her head bent sidewise, now toward this sleek shoulder, now toward that, then slowly, as if exhausted, it sank back. Her large eyes

almost closed, like those of one who falls into a swoon of unsupportable delight, her red lips parted, fell apart in a slow, tantalizing, enigmatic smile that increased the mystery of her face.

Then she dropped forward in a deep salaam, head bent submissively, both hands held to her forehead with thumbs and forefingers together.

Her gray-green eyes came up to his dark ones, inviting, pleading.

His breath stopped with a jerk, as if a throttling hand had closed around his throat. "Ramalha!" he choked brokenly.

She flung herself into his outstretched arms and kissed him savagely, and as his arms closed fiercely round her, "Oh, Shan, I don't know whether you're a lamb or tiger!" she panted. "You seem so strong, so dangerous, but—"

"You'll marry me?" he begged. "Say that you'll marry me—"

"Of course," she settled herself in his embrace, then raised her lips to his again. "I've been engaged to you since we first met in the bank."

"Engaged to me? You—"

"Surely, you sweet, silly thing. I decided that I wanted you the moment I first saw you!" She pouted prettily at him. "And you've been long enough making up your mind about wanting me!"

"But I must be in camp tomorrow—"

"Yes, and all night long the New Haven will be running trains to Connecticut. To Connecticut, don't you understand, you old silly? The place where you can get a marriage license any hour of the day or night, and a justice of the peace to go with it."

IV

A Bill of Divorcement

FIRST-SERGEANT YUAN leaned back in his wheel-chair and looked out to sea in lazy contentment. In the cool and

airy silence of a summer day before the sun became too hot he watched the other convalescents on the broad lawn, the sea gulls circling with sharp, hungry cries above the curling wavelets and the primly white-starched nurses busy with their patients.

He'd been at Biarritz almost two months now, and except that there was no mail from home he had nothing to ask for.

Van Vliet had gone to England, they told him, and would leave for home in a short while. There was more than an even chance he would regain his sight entirely. Good old Dutch! His eyes warmed at the thought of his buddy. There was a man!

From their first day in the dépôt brigade at Upton they'd taken to each other like affinitive chemicals, the descendant of the founders of Nieuw Amsterdam and the scion of the Manchu Banner-Men. They'd drilled together, worked together, slept in the same tier of pipe-bunks on the transport—even "gotten theirs" together.

A fragment from the same shrapnel that smashed Yuan's right leg had struck Van in the head and blinded him, so Van's sound legs and Yuan's sharp eyes had worked together to bring them back to their lines. "Gosh, Chink," Van chuckled as they stumbled to the dressing station, Yuan riding pig-a-back on his broad shoulders, "I'm all awash with blood. Don't know how much of it is yours and how much mine, but I'm certainly one hell of a mess."

"Our blood has mingled," Yuan Shantsi whispered as they laid him on the table and the orderly put the ether-cone to his face. "We have made the blood compact, thou and I, Walter Van Vliet. We are blood brethren. Your ancestors shall receive honor on the festal days of Yuan's house, you are adopted as a member of the clan that gave China T'ai Tzu, first Emperor of the Manchu line—"

He remembered their parting. "Good-

bye, Chink. Don't take any wooden nickels, and be sure to look me up when you get home. I'll be seeing you—I hope."

"Like to see the papers, Sergeant?" asked the little British volunteer worker. "They're just in from New York." She dropped a *Chronicle* and *Times* in his lap, flashed him a heavenly smile and hurried toward a group of convalescent Tommies with copies of the *Sketch* and *Bystander*.

He shook a paper out. "Let's see what's happening in the Big Town," he murmured. "Fay Bainter in *The Kiss Burglar* at the Eltinge, Hitchy Koo at the Globe, Eyes of Youth at Maxine Elliotts'—what's this?" The headlines struck him like a knotted fist:

BANKER'S WIFE NAMES DANCER

*Ramalha, Exotic Oriental Dancer, Named
Co-respondent by Mrs. Grigsby Alcock*

Courtney Forsythe, known on the stage as Ramalha, was yesterday named co-respondent by Mrs. Margaret Alcock in her suit for absolute divorce from her husband Grigsby Alcock, third vice-president of the All States Trust Company. According to Mrs. Alcock's complaint, filed by Dillingsworth, Foote & Smoot, the dancer and her husband have been intimate for several years, and he was in the habit of introducing her to acquaintances as his niece.

An ugly sidelight is cast on the otherwise unremarkable story of a middle-aged man's infatuation with a young and pretty woman by the further allegation that the banker used the dancer as a lure and that she was in the habit of becoming friendly with certain wealthy clients of the bank and using her "persuasive arts" to induce them to buy highly speculative securities through the investment department of the trust company, of which Alcock was in charge.

President Humphries Barnstable of the trust company declared last night, "I am quite

sure that Mr. Alcock, who has been a trusted executive of our institution many years, would not stoop to such chicanery, but we have asked another officer to take over his desk and duties pending an investigation of these charges which will, I am sure, be proved entirely groundless."

Miss Forsythe could not be reached at her 52nd St. apartment last night, as she is out of town.

HE LET the paper slide through his fingers to the close-cropped lawn. A sharper pain than that of his wound seemed drilling at his heart. Small incidents—little unconsidered trifles that had bothered him at the time but been quickly forgotten—were suddenly explained with terrible clarity: Her trick of referring to Alcock by his given name, then hastily correcting herself with, "I mean Uncle Grigsby," the gentle, teasing pressure she had put on him to buy that Aldyne & Hicks stock—

"Letter for you, Sergeant," the orderly's announcement broke through his bitter thoughts. "Looks like it's followed you all over the A.E.F."

The envelope was so filled with endorsements that the original typed address was scarcely legible, but in the upper left-hand corner he read the return card of a firm of Reno lawyers. "Who the devil do I know in Nevada?" he muttered as he slit the letter open.

Inside was a complaint and summons in a suit for absolute divorce. Courtney Forsythe Yuan vs. Yuan Shan-tsi. The plaintiff charged unbearable and inhuman cruelty, desertion and fraud in the procurement of the marriage inasmuch as the defendant had represented himself to be of Caucasian blood when as a matter of fact he was of the Mongolian race—Alimony—

The change that came over his face was not so much a difference of expression as

a slow hardening, like a freezing that began beneath the surface and extended slowly to the skin. It seemed his countenance had sharper lines, the eyes beneath the drooping, hooded lids and haughty brows seemed to retreat till they were like those of an old man. The lips seemed actually to lose their fullness, not merely to be pressed against the teeth. There was new sharpness to the chin, a pinched, almost frost-bitten shrinking of the cheeks each side the hawk-beak nose.

V

Reunion

"WELL, I'll be top man of a totem pole if it ain't old Ching Ching Chinaman himself!" The blow accompanying the words almost paralyzed his shoulder, and Shan-tsi looked up from his file of sole Marguery into a pair of blue eyes smiling through the thick pebbles of rimless spectacles.

"Chink, you darn old fugitive from a Chinese laundry, why haven't you been to see me?" asked Van Vliet. "You know, you promised last thing—"

"Of course, I did," agreed Shan-tsi with a grin, "but I just got back from Peking last week, and things have been so out of hand at the bazaar I had to—"

"What the blazin' hell were you in Peking for? Ain't the good old U.S.A. good enough for you—"

"More than merely good enough, I assure you. But it took me longer to get well than they'd figured, and I was officially on the sick list when the Armistice was signed, so I took my discharge in France and went to Peking to pick up some Ming porcelains and other precious objects that I need—"

"Skip the sordid details of the laundry business, Chink. I want you to come meet my fiancée. Got your hat?"

"My hat? It's out in the check room, but—"

"Oh, it's all right, then. I just wanted to make sure you ain't wearin' it, 'cause Ramalha'd knock it clear off—"

"Ramalha?" Shan-tsi's voice did not break, but it came out of his throat without any tone.

"You said it, feller. Funny name for a girl, ain't it? But beautiful, don't you think?"

"Quite."

"And she's as beautiful as her name. There she is!" He paused beside a table and bowed, smiling. "Darling, I want you to met my old Army buddy. He's the feller who guided me home to the dressin' station when I was blinder than a flock o' bats."

She was more lovely, even, than he had remembered her. His glance took in the grace of her slim throat, the lovely contours of her arms and shoulders, the glory of her bronze-gold hair against the candlelight. She was wearing a black velvet evening dress so simple and so perfectly moulded to her body that it proclaimed its cost as clearly as if the price tag were still on it. A diamond and ruby bracelet glittered on her left wrist, around her neck was looped a string of perfectly matched pearls, and the sea-gems were almost an exact match to the pale-glowing skin on which they rested.

She glanced up at Van Vliet's words, and for a moment the hand winding in the pearls stopped still. Then, coolly, "How do you do, Shan-tsi?" she asked.

"You—you know each other?" gasped her fiancée delightedly.

The gray-green eyes beneath their fringe of curling lashes flickered momentarily with dispassionate irony. It was as if they asked, "Well, Shan-tsi, what will you say? It's your next move."

He bowed with all the formal courtesy he might have shown if he had been pre-

sented to a duchess, and nothing in his face moved. "I have had the happiness of meeting the lady," he acknowledged, and into his voice crept a shade of the sing-song a Cantonese might have used. "It has been my privilege to admire her dancing. I cannot say I ever really knew her."

"We'll change all that toot sweet!" Van Vliet promised. "You're goin' to know her, Chinky, and love her, too. We're goin' to be three musketeers, we are. One for all an' all for one, an' all that sort o' thing. Sit down and crack a bottle of champagne with us, old-timer. Nothin' less will meet requirements o' *this* occasion. They'll have to serve it in a teapot, though. Some o' Andy Volstead's cellar-sniffers may be snoopin' round the joint."

"Thanks, no, Dutch," Shan-tsi refused. "I'm really all in from my long voyage, and"—he forced a grin to his lips, though his eyes remained unchanged—"there was a party down in Chinatown last night, and—well, I fear I leaned a little too hard on the bottle."

"Ha, boozin' again, were you, you benighted follower of false gods? I'll bet a dollar to a plugged nickel you were hittin' the pipe!"

The warmth of Van Vliet's friendly laughter was with him as he came from the restaurant, but as he paused upon the steps to fasten his topcoat he felt a sudden wave of sickness, not at his stomach, but in his heart. Van Vliet was his old army buddy, his more than friend, his blood brother. This heartless cocotte, this *ch'ing shik*—this vampire-woman—must not be allowed to serve Van as she had served him.

VI

The Counsel of the Moon Lady

HIS hurrying thoughts kept pace with the sharp rhythm of his feet as he marched down the avenue. He had to

save Van Vliet, he had to regain the face he—and through him all his clan and family—had lost when Grigsby Alcock and this woman had conspired to fleece him. But how?

This was America and she was an American. Had she been Chinese he would not have hesitated. A fee paid to an "honorable hatchet-man," minute directions given, and she would disappear completely as a bubble blown into the ocean. But the guild of hatchet-men had limitations. It was doubtful if they would accept assignment to remove a white woman; certainly, if they did, they could not expect the protection of the silence with which Chinatown was wont to baffle the police after a tong killing. No. It was too risky, even if it had been possible, he decided.

Thoughts far away, he paused a moment to inspect a display of Oriental merchandise in a shop window. For the most part it was trash, it contained nothing to which he would have given shelf-room in his collection, but the figurine of Kwan-Yin that occupied one corner of the window caught his eye. It was executed in cheap porcelain, designed to sell for a dollar or two, but even its cheap workmanship could not disguise its lovely lines, the calmly curving brows, the gently smiling mouth . . . "By Lord Gotama's sacred eyelids!" he exclaimed and laughed half-cynically, half-shamefacedly. "Why not?"

The memory of that day so long ago when he and his father knelt at the family shrine and asked advice of the Elder Ones came to him like the echo of a half-remembered tune. It had been all nonsense, of course. Children are imaginative little devils, and he had been conditioned by the legends he had heard to expect signs and portents from the *feng shui*.

Still, there could be no harm in trying. He might draw inspiration from a session with the family shades. Lord knew it had

been long enough since he had paid them dutiful devotion.

Half an hour later he had lighted the prescribed joss-sticks, made the prescribed seven-fold kowtow, struck the brazen cymbal to attract the notice of the Honorable Elder Ones.

Nothing happened. He had been a fool to think it could. That childish nonsense—

Suddenly, without prelude, it came. The thunderous drumming of the unshod Mongol ponies' feet, the booming battle-cry of Tartar kettle-drums, the wild charge of the iron-capped riders from High Tartary. . . .

And after that the quiet garden of Kwan-Yin, and the faintly smiling Goddess seated in the midst of peaceful quietude with tall narcissi nodding gently round the pedestal of her throne.

She smiled at him. Her teeth were very white and very small and even. The lids of her eyes had the faintest tinge of violet-green, like the luster of old silk. Her lips were red as cinnabar.

"O Lady of the Moon, O Bodhissatava Kwan-Yin," he began, but stopped short, for the Goddess moved one ruby-nailed, frail ivory hand and motioned toward the short-shorn grass before her throne.

Across the greensward trailed a length of multi-colored, lambent silk as if it were endowed with a life of its own. He recognized it. He had picked it up in India on his trip home from the Orient, not buying it so much in hope of resale at a profit as because its beauty fascinated him. What was it doing in the garden of the Moon Lady?

He watched with fascinated eyes. Slowly, like a snake made sluggish by engorgement, it crept by degrees so gradual that its motion was almost unnoticeable, and in its wake the green, lush grass grew white and fungus-like, devoid of life as something seared by fire, and then turned brown and brittle, showing little patches

of bare earth between its withered blades.

Decay, extinction, death were everywhere the length of trailing silk had swept. The lovely garden was a place of desolation, black and sterile as the plains of Sodom when Jehovah's fire fell on them.

And then the vision faded in the wreaths of whirling incense smoke, and he was kneeling on the Peking-blue soft rug before the tablets of his ancestors. But in his ears still sounded echoes of the Mongols' charge.

"Be pleased to take my humble thanks, O Lady of the Moon," he murmured as he rose from his knees, for his quick, subtle Oriental brain had solved the allegory. He thought—he knew!—he understood the meaning of the vision.

VII

The Silver-Skinned One

"ELDER brother," he asked Mr. Fung, his number one clerk and confidential agent, "do you know the stopping place of Ning Pao?"

"The stricken one?" asked Mr. Fung as he bent in a bobbing bow before his employer. His usually bland, butter-yellow face was marked by a look of almost ludicrous concern, and the pudgy, comfortable little hands laced across his sleekly rounded stomach fluttered a little.

"Even he, my venerable one."

"But, of course, nobility. Does not your plum-blossom jadeship contribute to his well-being? Have I not gone to his abode with presents of—"

"Quite so. And you will go again tonight, most venerable cousin. You will take this to him and request he wear it next his jasmine-scented skin without removing it until I send for it again."

"That?" Mr. Fung's question was like the squeak of an astonished mouse. His

little eyes were fixed in fascination on the length of gleaming silk that trailed across the other's arm.

It was an Indian shawl, a *sari* worthy of a *mabarani*. Pale rose it was in some lights, and a delicate, pale apple-green in others, and shot through it were flashes of bright orange and the purple of blood-mulberries, and the iridescent blue-green of dragon flies. Around its edge there ran a fringe of pure-gold wire strung at the tip with seed pearls and small uncut diamonds. It had cost three thousand dollars in Bombay, as Mr. Fung well knew, and the duty on it was almost as much more, yet the Benevolent Presence ordered him to take it to Ning Pao and bid him wear it next his skin. "Thou art a thousand years old, and thy wisdom is as that of the Five Classics, O Flower of Jade," said Mr. Fung and went to do his master's bidding.

WHERE Pell and Doyers Streets meet Mr. Fung paused by the blank wall of the Hip Sing Tong House, plastered with red and white posters on which were daubed in Chinese characters the current gossip of Chinatown. "A thousand years, wise elder brother," Wah Ken the beggar accosted him. "This alley of entirely unimpressive hovels is indeed enlightened by thy jadelike radiance."

"And yet another century, O father of a hundred scented charms," Mr. Fung replied conventionally as he felt for a coin. Then, in a lowered voice, "How goes it with Ning Pao, the silver-skinned one? Does he yet abide at the felicitous mansion of Wah Ching in Mott Street?"

"Ning Pao?" the beggar echoed, and his slanted eyelids lowered over rheumy eyes as he held both hands straight down before him, balled his fists and moved his stiffened arms across each other with a scissors motion—the universal Chinese gesture to ward off the evil eye and other

dire calamities. "*Abee, aboo, bob!* He has transferred the brilliance of his countenance to the home of Hin Ching, effulgence. The health inspectors of the barbarians were hard upon his trail, like hounds that track the wounded tiger—"

"A thousand years, and yet another year, most venerable," Mr. Fung dropped a half-dollar into Wah Ken's palm and turned toward Chatham Square.

Everyone in Chinatown knew of Ning Pao the leper, and every yellow mother's son and daughter of them was in league against the Health Department of the City of New York to keep him from incarceration in a pest-house or deportation to his native Canton. Chinatown cared for its own. Its indigents received alms from its prosperous tradesmen, those who transgressed its code were summarily dealt with by its "honorable hatchet-men." Its sick were dosed with nostrums from Chinese pharmacies. When a resident died his bones were sent back to his native soil for burial, for that was meet and altogether proper, but to have one of its denizens imprisoned in a white man's lazaret-house or sent ingloriously back to China under guard—that would entail a loss of face. So Ning Pao, though the course of his disease had almost stripped the ulcerated flesh from his bones, was tended and cared for, shuttled from one refuge to another, and guarded from the minions of the city health department.

"Prosperity attend thee, O highly-favored one," Mr. Fung clasped hands across his stomach and bowed formally to the wretched creature on the filthy iron cot beneath the skylight of Hin Ching's attic. "This person is delighted at the brilliance of thy jadelike countenance and brings thee almond-scented messages of felicitation." He slurred the formal Chinese compliments in a firm voice, but his little flat nose twitched and trembled like a nervous rabbit's, and there was a comically lop-

sided expression on his round face. He wanted more than anything to turn and run, but he had a duty to perform.

"This ill-conditioned outcast from an obscure city feels the sun-warmth of thy presence, august one," replied the leper in a rasping whisper. The mucuous membrane of his mouth and throat had thickened with the advance of his leprosy till breathing was a labor and speech almost beyond him, but the amenities had to be observed.

Mr. Fung's round eyes traveled to the spot of rain-stain on the ceiling and remained there. He could not bear to look at Ning Pao. Where the filthy cotton bandage had slipped aside the leper's face stared like a skull, the flesh brayed clean from the bone. One hand was gone entirely and the other lacked two fingers. Where the skin showed it was white as ashes, and rough as the bark of an oak tree.

"I bring thee tidings of good cheer, most highly-esteemed one," continued Mr. Fung, intent on finishing his business as soon as possible. "Thus says my master Yuan Shan-tsi, the Manchu prince whom I delight to serve: 'Bear this exquisite garment to my elder cousin Ning Pao and bid him wear it next his jasmine-petal skin till I require it of him again.'" From its paper wrapping Mr. Fung drew out the scintillating silk *sari* and tossed it on the reeking mattress beside Ning Pao.

"I—wear a wondrous thing like that?" the leper looked bewildered from his remaining eye. "Did the jadelike Yuan Shan-tsi leave his wits behind him when he came back from the wars? Why does he wish me to wear it?"

Mr. Fung's fat shoulders rose in a shrug that announced his complete dissociation from the transaction. "Does the ball ask of the player why he strikes it, or the buffalo require reasons for the course the driver sets? I know only the Prince Yuan

Shan-tsi requires this of thee, and in requittal for thy service bids this person give thee this, which makes a truth of falsehood and turns evil into good." From his pocket he drew five gold pieces and stacked them in a little column on the floor. "Five times twenty of the white man's dollars are there, little brother. More than a hundred taels of Haikwan silver."

Ning Pao's one eye shone with quickening avarice. "The shadow moves as the sun directs," he rasped as he slipped the dirt-encrusted blouse from his shoulders and wound the glowing *sari* around them. "*Abee*, is it not truly written, 'He who heeds the commands of authority shall never want for rice?'"

VIII

The Wedding Gift

AFTER four years' absence the little apartment was unchanged. Everything was just as he'd remembered it, the white-upholstered furniture, the white rugs on the black floor, the Ming vase on the mantelpiece and the jade libation-cup beside it—all through the war, all through the months at the recuperation station, all through the trip to India and China and the long voyage home he'd thought of it. The picture of it was so firmly printed on his retina that he had only to close his eyes to see its every detail. And with it was another memory, the vision of her as she danced for him the night before he went to camp, the pressure of her mouth on his, the sweetness of her perfumed body in his arms, then their hurried journey to Connecticut and their marriage by the justice of the peace—

"And so you're going to marry Harold Van Vliet?" he asked, when she had greeted him a little apprehensively. "He's one of the best, Ramalha, but he's been hurt. Dreadfully hurt, it's no joke to be

almost blind at twenty-five. He deserves well of life—and you."

His voice was casual and friendly, not at all reproachful, but she chose to read reproach in it.

"I suppose you think that I'm incapable of loving anybody, after the shabby way I treated you?" Her eyelids flickered and her lips and chin quivered like a little child about to cry. "I know I gave you a raw deal, Shan-tsi, but Grigsby put me up to it. He made me—"

"Your Uncle Grigsby"—he spoke with elaborate unconcern—"has passed the Dragon Gate, as they say in China?"

"The Dragon Gate?"

"Precisely. Joined his honorable ancestors. Passed on as the Western euphemism has it."

"Yes, he's dead, and I'm glad of it! If it hadn't been for him I'd never have treated you so shamefully. I always liked you, Shan, but I never loved you as a woman ought to love the man she marries—"

"I understand," he broke in gently. "You were forced to play a sort of Trilby to his Svengali. Poor little—" His voice trailed off to vague silence. *Don't overdo it, you fool!* he told himself. *She's no sim-pleton.* But:

"Yes, that's exactly it!" she snatched his bait like a hungry trout. "He made me do those despicable things, Shan, but now he's gone and I'm my own woman. Don't you think I have the right to some happiness, Shan? All those years that I was Grigsby Alcock's slave I had to do as he directed. I dared not give my love to any man, or even my friendship—" Her voice was gentle, pleading, and the big tears filled her eyes as she looked at him, begging his forgiveness and agreement.

"Of course. Happiness is like gold, to be taken where we find it, and taken quickly, before somebody steals it from us. And—" he bent a smile of positively Con-

fucian benignity on her—"just to show there are no hard feelings, I've brought you a small wedding gift."

"A gift?" Her eyes were dancing with anticipation. "Oh, Shan, how lovely!"

But when he opened the Korean-work casket of sandalwood inlaid with bronze and tortoiseshell and drew his offering from it she was speechless.

SHE knew values and appreciated beauty, especially in feminine adornment, and this superb work of the weaver's art held both. It was worthy of a *maharani*, a shawl of pale rose silk which seemed to turn to delicate applegreen in some lights, shot through with flashes of bright orange and the purple of blood-mulberries, with here and there the iridescent blue-green of the dragon fly. Around its edge there ran a fringe of pure-gold wire strung at the tip with seed pearls and small uncut diamonds.

"Why, Shan," she found speech with an effort, "it's the loveliest thing I've ever seen! And it's for me?"

"Especially for you," he agreed with a soft laugh.

"Then you must help me put it on!" she ordered with a show of mock imperiousness as she held the length of gleaming, jewel-fringed silk out to him and posed before the mirror.

He crossed the clinging scarf above her narrow hips, drew a corner under her left arm and folded it across her bosom, then with a deft tug drew it behind her, leaving one arm free, one bound by the silken sheath, and draped the jewel-set end across her head like a hood.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as he completed the arrangement. "It scratched me, Shan—you pulled it too tight. I'm scratched beneath the arm and on the back."

"How clumsy of me!" he apologized. "I'd dreadfully sorry, Flower of the Moonlight—"

"Oh, never mind. It's nothing, really.

A little powder on the scratches and I'll be good as new." She smiled at her reflection in the glass, then, rising on her toes to do a pirouette, "Would you like a drink before you go?"

"Before—" he raised slim eyebrows interrogatively.

"Yes. I feel like a pig, rushing you off this way when you've hardly come, but I'm still a working girl, you know, and have to be at the theatre before eight o'clock."

He took the cocktail she proffered, raised it toward her and smiled at her across the glass.

"To you, O Flower of the Moonlight. May you have the happiness that you deserve, and may Death give you timely notice of His coming."

"Why, Shan!" she reproved. "Is that a nice thing to say to a girl just when she's going to be married?"

"I'm sorry. I'd hoped you'd like it. I seem to remember that the Christian prayer book has a petition against sudden death in it."

"That's true," she agreed somberly. Then the dimples showed each side her mouth. "But I'd rather have you say *ch'eung sang* to me."

"*Ch'eung sang*—long life to you!" he answered dutifully as they drained their glasses.

IX

Diagnosis

DR. NORDEMAN looked grave. When Dr. Early had referred the case to him with the notes of his findings he had been inclined to laugh. There hadn't been a well authenticated case of *lepra vera* in a white person in New York for more than twenty years. Still—

The beautiful young woman on the table showed some symptoms he did not like. On each cheek was a smooth, ash-white

spot which—now her make-up was removed—showed like an inlay of dead flesh against the healthy tissue. There was another livid area on her back some six inches below the hairline, and the ulna nerve of her left arm showed marked enlargement at the elbow.

He took a camel's hair brush and poised it over her left cheek. "Close the eyes," he ordered, and tell me when you feel this tickle." He drew the brush across her chin.

"I feel it, Doctor."

"H'm. And now?" He traced the soft brush down her brow.

"Yes."

"H'm." The doctor took a small syringe and pressed it gently in the white spot on her left cheek. "Feel anything?"

"No, sir."

"U'm-h'm." He laid the first syringe aside and drew a little blood into a second from her right cheek, then used a third to suck a tiny sample from the white patch on her cheek. "You're sure I didn't hurt you?" he asked, scribbling labels for the syringes.

"No, Doctor. I felt no pain at all."

"Very well. That will be all today. I'd like to have you call tomorrow evening, though."

Two hours later he looked up as his assistant knocked. "Well, Grandison?"

"I can't believe it, Doctor, but—"

"Your beliefs or disbeliefs are unimportant, Grandison. Tell me what did you find?"

"I made slides and stained the specimens with cobol fuchin and methylene gentian violet, and—"

"Never mind describing the process, Grandison. I taught it to you, remember. What did you find?"

"*Leprae bacilli*—in abundance—sir. It's incredible, but we've a case of *lepra vera*—true leprosy—on our hands, Doctor! What are you going to do?"

X

Unclean!

"UNCLEAN! Unclean!" Over and over the drums of her mind beat the word into her brain. Lepers no longer had to wear a special dress and clang a bell in warning as they walked, but as they were in Bible-times so they were today—"Unclean!"

The doctor had been very gentle, almost cheerful, with her. He'd talked of the strides science made, told her of the curative effects of chaulmooga and hydrocarpus oil. But he hadn't fooled her! She'd heard about the lepers of Port Said and Canton, dreadful maimed things holding out their beggar's bowls for alms and stretching out the stumps of handless arms and footless legs to excite sympathy. *Unclean!*

She let herself in with her latchkey and paused upon the threshold, breathing with hard, laboring sobs. In every corner of the room she seemed to see hunched and deformed things crouching, poised and panting, waiting for the time to pounce.

She sank her teeth into her lower lip to still its trembling and staggered toward the bedroom. Unclean! The dreadful word seemed echoing with a thundrous clamor from floor and walls and ceiling. The terror that had gripped her throat was in her stomach now. There was a frantic, stifled feeling in her breast beside her heart. "No—no!" she moaned as she dragged her pert, small hat off and dropped it to the floor. "Not that—anything but that!" Her bronze hair flamed like molten metal as its coils unloosened and fell cataracting down each side her face, reaching almost to her knees.

The thought struck her in midstep and she turned unsteadily and tottered toward the bathroom. Why wait for it? Why wait until her beauty had become a thing

of foul and monstrous frightfulness? Why drag the years of awful waiting out in a pesthouse—

"Caution," read the notice on the sleeping tablets bottle. "*This medicine is to be taken only on a physician's prescription, and then only exactly in accordance with directions. An overdose may lead to—*"

She wrenched the cap off of the phial, counting out the little pellets in her palm. She'd never taken more than one before—"Three, four, five—a dozen!"

The water cooled her parched throat gratefully as she washed the little white pills down. She felt calmer, almost peaceful, now. She'd lie down on the bed a while—

The room seemed strangely shadowed as she walked toward the bed. Her feet—her little dancing feet that had never made an awkward movement—felt strangely heavy, as if she waded waist-deep in water, and there was a humming sound in her ears. She stumbled, caught her balance with an effort and went on a step or two, tripped again and slipped gently to her knees. Then like a little girl tired out with play she dropped full-length to the floor, pillowing her cheek on her arm. The glowing, bronze-gold hair swirled round her face in a warm, sensuous cloud—

XI

Bon Voyage

THE final gong-stroke faded to an echo on the still air, and like the whisper of a breeze through crisp leaves there came the subdued rustle that betokens turning heads and craning necks—that almost involuntary gesture that even well-bred people make at such times.

A momentary halt at the church door while six frock-coated young men raised their burden shoulder-high, then: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want—"

the clergyman's well modulated, slightly unctuous voice sounded as he marched up the aisle before the flower-laden casket. "He leadeth me beside the still waters—"

The afternoon sun slanted through a stained-glass panel, glinting mellowly upon the dull mahogany of the pews. Here and there it picked out spots of color, a flower, a woman's hat, a man's necktie. Through a memorial window came a single beam of amber-tinted light that struck back tiny echoes from the silver mountings of the casket. A quartette sang "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere" and the minister spoke feelingly of the young life blighted before it had a chance to grow from bud to blossom.

A tenor rendered "Crossing the Bar," the pallbearers arose to their appointed task, and once again the solemn parade passed between the close-packed pews. A momentary lull came in the outside traffic as the suave mortician appeared on the church steps, then a motor purred up to the curb, the hearse moved forward, and the procession was on its way to Fresh Pond Crematorium.

The sidewalk buzzed with scraps of conversation: "Poor Ramalha! What could have *made* her do it? And she was to be married to that rich young Harold Van Vliet——"

AMONG the close-shaved, over-tailored men and over-coiffed women with too many diamonds and too much heady perfume he seemed incongruous as a falcon in a flock of brightly feathered songbirds.

In his dark-gray, formally cut suit and black Homburg, with a white carnation in his lapel and a blackthorn stick hung in the bend of his left elbow, he was a figure to arrest attention. More than one curious glance was cast at him as he stood at the curb and looked along the street where already the last car of the funeral procession glimmered intermittently in the swirling cross-currents of traffic.

"*Bon voyage, Ramalha,*" he murmured as the funeral cortege gathered speed and disappeared. Then, with the ghost of an ironic smile, "*Ch'eung sang*—longevity to you."

He readjusted his hat, squared his shoulders and set off toward the Avenue, his stick tucked jauntily beneath his arm. This was his victory. He had taken full-measured payment for betrayed trust; he had regained the face that he and all his clan and family lost when Grigsby Alcock and the woman victimized him; he had prevented her from breaking Van Vliet's heart and faith as she had broken his.

But the taste of triumph was as ashes in his mouth. The world seemed dead and empty as the craters of a burned-out moon. His footsteps echoed hollowly against his ears, like a drum beaten in a deserted theatre. For almost five years he had loved this woman—and hated her. But had his hate been stronger than his love? He could not say. He did not know. He knew only that she would be with him forever, that the memory of her was a candle-flame no wind of marching years could ever dim.
