

WEIRD TALES



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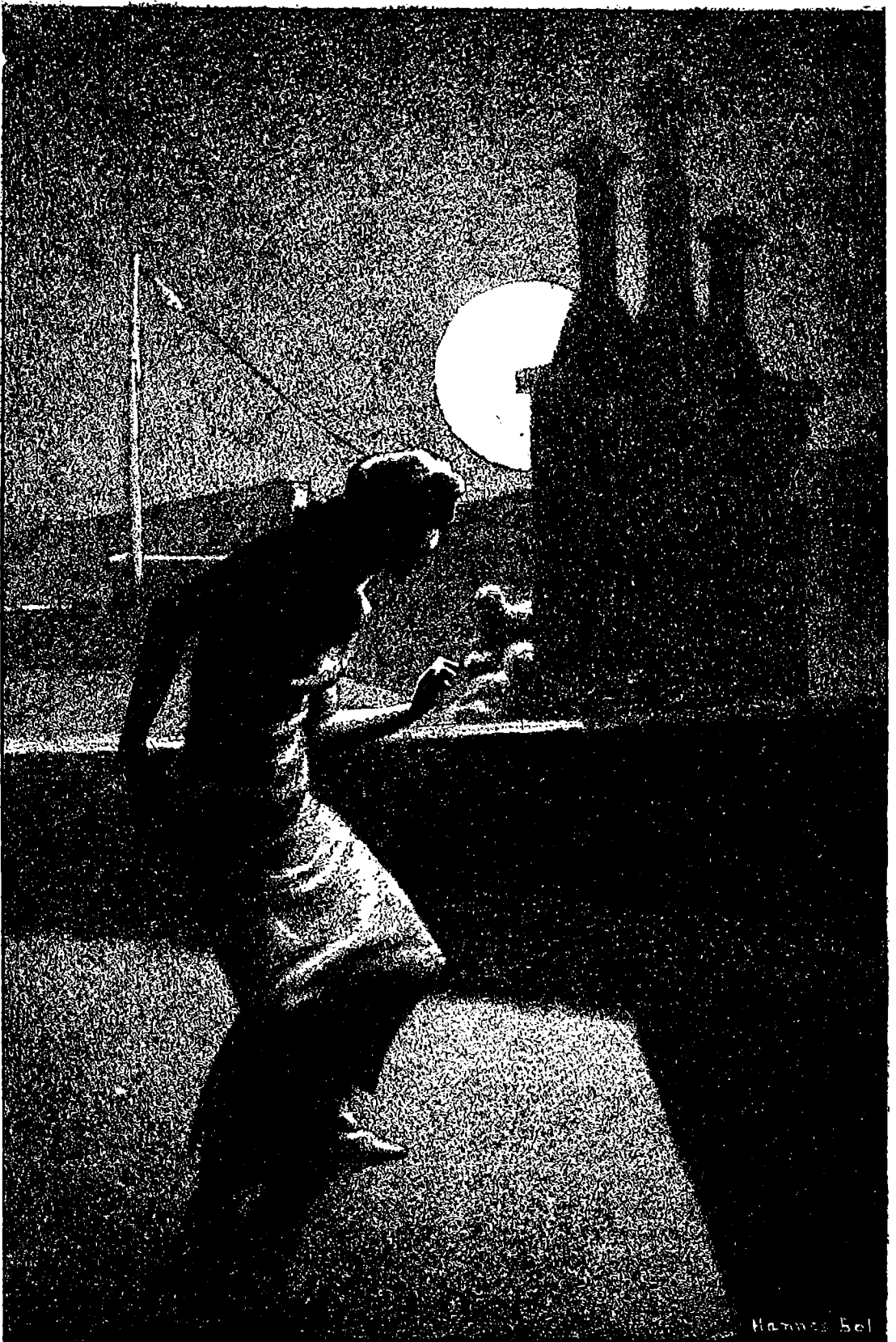
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Hannes Bol

"They were after her, too, because they imagined she was his mistress."

On Pell Street

By FRANK OWEN

Chinatown keeps to the old lanes—by the author of "The Purple Sea" and "The Wind That Tramps the World"

SAM WONG was in a particularly morose state that night because his beloved canary, Li Po, named after the most illustrious of Chinese poets, had died that morning. One last sweet song, then death. Li Po had trilled an anthem to the sun. He had died from excess emotion, from excess of beauty. Anyway that is how Sam Wong diagnosed his passing. His grief was extreme.

The fondness of Chinese for birds is traditional. In China it is no uncommon sight to see a rich man walking along the street, carrying a canary in a cage, taking the little songster out for a walk to enjoy the sunset. Sam Wong had always regretted that the custom of Manhattan precluded his walking about the streets with Li Po. To be sure there was nothing to prevent him doing so. But it would direct attention to him and he did not at that particular stage of his nefarious career care to be the target for the eyes of men. Better to be a shadow, for a shadow is indestructible, with nothing to dread or fear.

Now as he walked along the Bowery he beheld a thin wisp of a girl standing before a window. Her face was like old ivory, colorless. Her hair was burnished copper, and in her large dark eyes were all the sorrows of the world. Sam Wong sighed.

He was an ardent worshipper of all beautiful things. He noticed that her hands were clenched so tightly, the nails of the fingers were white. Softly he glided over to her side.

"May I be forgiven for addressing you?" he whispered. "I do so at the risk of arousing your wrath. But I am only Sam Wong, a Chinese, with much money and yet poor, for tonight I am lonely. Accept my friendship until the moon rises. When one is sad, the moon, too, weeps. In its sympathy it is dependable. I wonder if you are hungry."

"Very hungry," she admitted. "All my life I've been hungry for something beyond my fingertips."

"Perhaps it is hunger of the heart."

While they talked, Sam Wong had led the way across the street and around the corner to an Oriental restaurant, the dim lights of which were soothing to the nerves.

"What do you wish?" he asked.

"Anything will do," she said listlessly.

"You are right," he agreed, "all effort is as useless as summer dust."

She sighed. "It is so quiet and peaceful."

"Don't talk," said he. "Rest. Forget that I am with you. Here is the tea. In Chinese restaurants they do not wait for one to order the liquor that does not intoxicate."

He filled a small cup, and placed it before her. Then he spoke in subdued tones to the waiter, ordering chicken-mushroom soup, chow mein, roast young pork and a variety of almonds and condiment delicacies.

Then once more he turned to the girl. "Your name?"

"Just Barby."

"Barby," he repeated slowly. "It is a pretty name."

Barby breathed deeply of the sweet aroma of the tea, fragrance of jasmine blossoms.

Sam Wong sipped his tea and looked at her through half-closed eyes. Had she been a written picture, he could not have been more absorbed in her. A strangely beautiful girl with a face of ivory pallor. No painted lady. No common girl of the streets.

He longed to know her history but he asked no question. He was infinitely patient and he waited.

Not till the soup had been placed before them did Barby speak again. Then after she had tasted it, she said, "Gee, but this is good. I don't know how long it is since I've tasted food. Funny that the body goes on living after the soul is dead."

Sam Wong looked up quickly. She had disturbed his tranquillity. The bitterness in her tone was astounding.

"Not true," he said bluntly. "Your soul is not dead. I see it shining from your eyes, fine and white and beautiful. The past doesn't matter. It is a sun gone down. But of the present, I wish to speak. The hours that have not happened belong to you. Tell me where will you sleep to-night?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me, infinitely."

"Why?"

"I am a lover of jewels and jade. I am swayed by perfect sonnets. Although I was born in San Francisco and have never been in China, the Yellow River flows through my blood. I have fallen under the spell of your eyes, the spell of their dark brooding mystery. There is far too little beauty in this world for any of it to be destroyed. And you are beautiful."

She closed her eyes and struggled to choke back a sob. Last night she had belonged to Bat Matson; the night before an

unknown man had beaten her in a Third Avenue hall bedroom.

"I am homeless," she murmured.

"I will take you back with me to my house," he said. "My rooms are near by, on Pell Street. The flat is large and fairly comfortable, large enough so I need not get in your way. There no one will disturb you, for I discourage visitors. In Chinatown I am a man of mystery. It is right therefore that I should shelter a girl of mystery. Be assured that I am actuated by honorable motives. Sam Wong is but a humble merchant, a merchant who deals in beauty, a merchant of dreams. How then can I stand idly by while beauty is destroyed?"

"All right," she said wearily. "I will trust you, and why not? I have trusted everybody else, and I have nowhere to go."

THE meal was finished in silence. Thanks to the gentle care of Sam Wong she ate heartily. Her young body yearned for food. And now she could scarcely keep her eyes open.

Sam Wong paid the check. He led the way from the restaurant. As they turned into Chinatown, he held her arm lightly. Through the narrow twisting adventurous streets they walked, streets about which more fabulous tales have been written than any other section of New York, perhaps of all the world. Few of them are true. The most interesting and sinister have never been written. Colorful stores displaying a vast variety of gewgaws, nicknacks, ivories, jades and raw fish. Joss houses. The Chinese theatre. A Catholic priest walking slowly along apparently lost in thought. No one bothering them, no one paying the least attention to their doings, and yet Barby felt as though countless eyes were following them, watching their every move. Strange smells, strange sounds, laughter, weird music. A child

crying. Chinatown, a vast rug wafted on the winds from the Orient to be cast down in the heart of the city. One of the most congested spots in all New York and one of the cleanest. No littered dirty streets, no piles of filth, not much dust. Immaculate cleanliness as though great brooms in the hands of genii had swept it clean.

Sam Wong led the way up two flights of winding stairs in a building on Pell Street. There was no light in the halls and he lighted a cigarette to show her the way.

"Be not afraid," said he. "The halls are in darkness because I believe that he who must walk through narrow places should be protected by shadows."

"I am not afraid," said Barby.

And now he unlocked a door and pressed an electric button. The next moment a glare of light shattered the blackness and Barby followed him into a room of such sheer beauty it might have belonged to a Mandarin when the Manchus were at their peak of glory. Here was wealth inestimable. Rich carpets and tapestries, priceless porcelains, teakwood tables and finely carved cabinets in one of which reposed a hundred species of jewels, some rough, uncut, some that glowed eerily in the lantern light. Here were comfortable chairs, embroidered screens, written pictures, carved statues in jade, nephrite, agate and carnelian.

"The apartment has sundry rooms," said Sam Wong. "Consider yourself mistress of it. I sleep in a small room in the front. I suggest that you make your personal apartment in the rooms at the back."

Barby slipped into a chair. She knew that Sam Wong was trustworthy. He had no designs upon her person. To meet such a man was somewhat of a novelty.

Impulsively she turned to him. "I cannot understand," she said, "why you should be interested in my welfare."

"Have I not told you? It is my belief

that no beautiful thing should be allowed to perish. One of earth's extreme tragedies is that flowers ever must fade. So much time is devoted to an effort to banish crime from the world, when to purge the world of sin it would only be necessary to banish ugliness. When I beheld you I was entranced. Even the stars must tremble to behold you. If flowers can know jealousy, they must be stirred when you pass. Then, too, for years I have had a canary. His name was Li Po. He was a sweet singer. He sang pæans to the dawn. He died as he had lived, worshipping beauty. And I was very lonesome when Li Po was gone. Something precious had been snatched from my life. In extreme melancholia I walked along the Bowery. Then my eyes beheld you. Beauty had been snatched from my life in the vanished songs of Li Po. Now beauty had come back again with the approach of an ivory girl. I am your slave for as long as you choose to share my dwelling. When you are gone my life will be eternally devastated. I make no effort to hold you. You are free, though I hope for a while at least you will remain to make up to me for the loss of my little comrade. You are perhaps unacquainted with grief; if so you cannot appreciate my anguish."

She placed her hand upon his arm. "I had a baby," she said. "A few weeks ago my boy died and nobody cared. Had you who worship beauty been near my room that night on Third Avenue he might be still alive. After all, perhaps it is better. How could he succeed with everything against him? I know how you must grieve over Li Po."

THE days flowed along like poetry, never distinct, never quite real. Stuff of dreams, dust of moonrise, breath of roses. Nothing beautiful is ever real.

Barby was being wooed back to health by silence, complete tranquillity. No music

is as majestic as silence, absolute silence. Each morning Sam Wong slipped from the house before she had awakened. He never came near her room. He never touched her body. Not even a kiss did he seek. But he wooed her in a thousand subtle ways. And when her face began to take on some semblance of color he was glad.

Barby never left the apartment even when Sam Wong was away. She was afraid of the streets, the filthy noisy streets and the evil faces of men. Sam Wong brought her beautiful garments fit for a Manchu princess. She always wore them in the rooms, saving her single dress for such time as it would be necessary for her to return to the streets.

During those days she slept much, without trepidation, without fear. She never locked the door of her room. She had faith in Sam Wong. He was a genial philosopher. He never tried to force his favors upon her. One may bow down in worship before a goddess, but one should not presume beyond obeisance. Perhaps Sam Wong was foolish in his attitude. Certainly he was not a moralist, for his stock in trade destroyed the souls of men.

They never went out to dinner. All meals were sent in from near-by restaurants. Every conceivable luxury graced their table.

Barby was glad Sam Wong never urged her to appear upon the streets with him, although she was surprised that he did not. How was she to know that a hundred men constantly waited an opportunity to kill him? The police, too, were constantly on his trail. His increasing influence was resented in high places. The streets were not conducive to health. It was not his wish to parade his ivory girl in the face of danger. Better to keep her hidden away from baleful eyes.

At times he read Chinese love poems to her that thrilled her immeasurably. He

chanted the verses in a softly modulated voice. It was a new strange country to Barby. She closed her eyes and listened. She scarcely breathed, so intent she was. It was restful. It soothed her nerves. Sometimes for hours they sat thus as Sam Wong read to her from his countless volumes of Far Eastern lore.

One night he entered the apartment breathlessly as though he had run a long distance. His usual calm mien was ruffled. His hands worked nervously.

"Quick, follow me!" he cried hoarsely. "There is not a moment to lose." He opened a secret door in a wall panel, disclosing a black passageway. Into this he crept and dragged Barby after him. The panel swung shut again, leaving them in impenetrable blackness.

"Be not afraid, Ivory Girl," he murmured, "but enemies are pursuing me and if we fell into their hands the consequences might be dreadful. I was a fool to subject you to disaster. But you will be quite safe if you follow my instructions."

While he had been speaking they had been creeping up a winding stair. Presently they emerged on the roof-tops. It was strange to be slinking along like shadows under the pale moon's glare. The sounds of the street drifted to their ears, laughter, harsh noises, the wail of a motor siren, the bark of a dog.

SAM WONG sped from roof to roof. Nimbly Barby ran along beside him. At last they darted into a doorway.

"Go down these stairs," he said, "and you will be free. Get away from Chinatown as soon as you can. I haven't a moment to loiter. Perhaps some day we will meet again and I can recite more lyrics to you."

The next moment he was gone. It was almost as though he had vanished into the air. It was an eerie night, weird and creepy. The moon caused the chimneys

to stand out in grotesque silhouette. A train on the Third Avenue "el" went grinding by. And now she imagined she could make out the forms of figures creeping along the rooftops. They were after Sam Wong. They were after her, too, because they imagined she was his mistress. In terror she turned and sped down the stairs.

The halls were dimly lighted. They too seemed to be seething with wraiths and shadows. Once a malevolent face loomed up before her and two gnarled bony hands clutched at her like talons. But she evaded them and continued down the stairs. She breathed a sigh of relief as she reached the street. But even now she dreaded to look behind her. Hurriedly crossing the street she turned neither to right nor left and so it was that she did not notice the large beer truck that was bearing down upon her. As she went down, the truckman clamped on the brakes and a woman screamed. But Barby felt no pain, she even smiled, for

miraculously Sam Wong was bending over her.

"Come, Ivory Girl," he said gently. "We will go back to my rooms where we can find quietude."

"But is there no danger?" she asked.

"Not now," said he, and her wonderment grew.

So hand in hand they walked back to Sam Wong's apartment on Pell Street. But now the stairs did not seem dark as they mounted. There was a pale blue glow as though a lantern had been lighted.

As Sam Wong pushed open the door of the apartment, Li Po greeted them with a song so beautiful it seemed as though the city had paused and stood on tiptoe to listen.

Barby placed her hand on Sam Wong's arm. "But I thought Li Po was dead," she whispered.

Sam Wong smiled reassuringly. "Not dead," he said softly, "living. Now we are all—living."