

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1949

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D. McLWRAITH, Editor

Out of the Wrack I Rise

BY H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

*The illusion is what works for a conjurer—
things seeming other than what they are!*

“**C**HU CHIN'S in,” said the Assistant Stage Manager to the Manager of the Blackton Empire.

“Oh yes. How's he seem?”

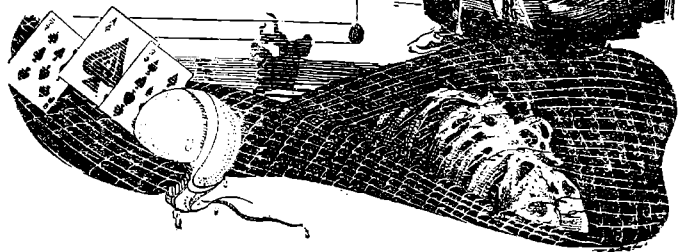
“Much the same, sour as ever, well, even sourer.”

“A superb conjurer,” said the manager, “but between ourselves a very nasty bit of work.”

“You *could* be right!” laughed the assistant stage manager.

“Watch his turn tonight,” said the manager. “A pal of mine told me he was slipping.”

“I was going to—for another reason. D'you remember what this is?”



Heading by Vincent Napoli

OUT OF THE WRACK I RISE

"How do you mean?"

"Anniversary of his wife's death."

"Good Lord! How time skips. He has married again, hasn't he?"

"Yes," said the assistant stage manager, "that assistant of his."

"There was a certain amount of—well—talk, when his wife was drowned, wasn't there?"

"Yes; may have been unfair. It always looks a shade odd when you take your wife out night-bathing and she doesn't come back."

"Her body was never recovered, was it?" asked the manager.

"Well, no, but oddly enough a trawler landed a skeleton, believed to be a woman's, this morning. It had been caught in their nets. It's in the mortuary round the corner now. There'll be an inquest in a day or two, but I understand it's quite unidentifiable."

"He treated her pretty rough, didn't he?"

"She certainly looked as if he did. And then of course getting married again within a couple of months to a girl half your age and such a bold, designing minx into the bargain! As a matter of fact I didn't think she looked too happy just now."

"I can understand that! Is there feeling against him in the town, do you think? Will they give him the bird?"

"I don't think so. Anyway I'll watch carefully and report to you."

"Okay."

Chu Chin's real name was Jerry Pullin. He had adopted this stage name because he had the Mongol fold to his eyes and a vaguely Oriental cast of countenance. With a mandarin's skull-cap, a black bootlace moustache, and enveloped in a voluminous priest-robe, he looked the part well enough. He was very tall and always paced the stage in majestic Mr. Wu attitudes. He used no patter at all, never opening his mouth from start to finish of his turn. He "distracted attention" by two means. He fixed his queer eyes on the audience, and the female members of it were often slightly hypnotized by this piercing stare. To lull male alertness he relied on his assistant, a big bold-eyed strapping wench. He dressed her in the briefest and tightest of shorts, a low-necked almost

transparent blouse, and a Coolie hat. He made her move frequently behind him, as though arranging the things on his work-tables, and the men gave her plenty of eye. She also did any talking that was necessary. Jerry was around fifty and cordially detested in the profession, being sly, grasping and utterly unsociable, but he was recognized as a master of his craft, his manual dexterity being unrivalled and his over-all technique superb. He topped the bill everywhere.

THE assistant stage manager took his stand in the prompt wing as the curtain rose and Chu Chin and the girl came on the stage. His reception was damp and unenthusiastic, but there were no boos or other manifestations of hostility. The assistant stage manager was himself a competent amateur conjurer, and always watched Chu Chin when he got the chance, to sharpen his skill; just as a golfer or billiards player studies a "Pro," to absorb something of his balance, touch and rhythm, the essence of his mastery. And on this occasion he was particularly concerned to decide whether the manager's suggestion about Chu Chin's decline was true or not. His was, as ever, the last turn of the evening.

He had two work-tables, one on each side of the stage, some chairs for volunteers from the audience, and at the back was a high contraption, a three-sided screen with an orange silk curtain making the fourth side. And always behind him moved the big girl, smiling and showing off her points.

His first trick was about the oldest on the list, just pulling things out of a top-hat, but he made it fresh and amusing. He would place in the hat, say, a miniature baby's feeding bottle and extract a small bottle of whiskey, replace that and produce an imitation red rose. The assistant stage manager knew how it was done, but he never ceased to marvel at the slick virtuosity of Chu Chin's execution. He usually ended by flashing out the flags of all the more-respectable nations, but on this occasion he drew out a woman's black bathing-cap.

The assistant stage manager frowned and shrugged his shoulders. What an incredible and monstrous error of taste! But was it that? Jerry stared at it for a second and then

flung it down like a hot coal. Then he glared out at the audience as though demanding, "Which of you has done this?" And somehow at that moment the assistant stage manager knew beyond all doubt that Jerry had drowned his wife. From the audience came a short-lived, puzzled murmur. The girl ran forward, picked up the cap and put it on a work-table. The assistant stage manager watched her do this. The brazen smile had left her face, and when she was standing still again, he saw she was trembling violently.

It then became her business to appeal to the audience for four volunteers to come to the stage and cooperate in the next trick. Her voice as she did so, the assistant manager noted, was not quite under control. After some hesitation four persons responded; a girl, two young men, and a tall woman dressed in unrelieved black and heavily veiled. She looked, thought the assistant stage manager, extremely out of place.

Chu Chin took up a pack of cards and the assistant said, "Each of you, please, take three cards and memorize them."

The woman in black took three cards and at once held them up for Chu Chin to see. The assistant stage manager could see them, too. They were the eight of spades, the ace and the nine of spades, in that order. Now, the assistant stage manager, like all conjurers, did a little light-hearted fortune-telling for the amusement of his friends; so he knew that was the most sinister combination of all, spelling a sudden death and very soon. Then the woman in black let them fall from her hand and left the stage, and, apparently, the theatre also. In his subsequent investigations the assistant stage manager had reason to doubt whether she had been in the house at all until the girl called for volunteers. The doorman denied having seen her come in and, still more oddly, ever seeing her go out. Her appearance and disappearance remained a complete mystery, which was never solved.

Jerry took this contretemps fairly well and went on with his trick, but the assistant stage manager could see the audience was getting restive. They vaguely sensed something was going wrong; and there was much shuffling and some murmuring.

The assistant stage manager himself was perplexed in the extreme. Was there a conspiracy on? Had certain persons determined to wreck the turn? If so, it had been most subtly organized, for how had they been able to tamper with Chu Chin's props? He knew the discomforting sense that there was something afoot of which he could not grasp the significance, as though there was being enacted some play within a play, as it were.

CHU CHIN finished the card stunt, a very clever and difficult one, satisfactorily, and there was some applause from the audience, which had quieted down. The assistant stage manager, who understood audiences like the back of his hand, and could register their reactions with delicate certainty, realized it was still on edge and embarrassed; about twenty persons even left the house. But if all went well from now on, it would settle down. Any further irritant, or upset, however, might send it right out of control. He'd seen that happen once and it was a daunting memory.

Chu Chin's next offering was his famous Poster Illusion, which he kept a tight secret; the assistant stage manager had no notion how it was done. The conjurer took a large sheet of paper, about the size of a newspaper bill, on which was inscribed in the boldest scarlet lettering the legend, "Today's date is—." Then, in full view of the audience he screwed up the paper into a tight ball, then unscrewed it again, smoothed it out, and what *should* have appeared was "August 21st, 1947," the current date. Instead the "7" was a "6," so that it read "August 21st, 1946," the date of his wife's death.

At once there came a loud murmur, a loud and *angry* murmur from the audience, and the applause was still-born.

"Who is doing these things," thought the assistant stage manager, "and how is he doing them?" And now for the first time he felt fear. Chu Chin had unrolled the paper without glancing at it, but now he hurriedly inspected it. Once more his face was convulsed with rage, and he screwed it up again and hurled it into a wing.

Realizing his act was on the verge of

disaster, he omitted some further business and hurried on preparations for his final illusion. For this he employed the screen-contraption. First of all the girl called for a volunteer, and after some delay an elderly man came up. She asked him to pick out any spot near the middle of the stage on which he would like the contraption to be placed, first assuring himself there was no trap-door, by scrutiny and stamping. He did so, and the contraption was erected over the indicated spot. As the elderly man turned to leave the stage he slipped and fell heavily, and was in obvious pain as Chu Chin assisted him to his feet. "Why don't you keep the stage dry!" he angrily exclaimed. "Look at that damp patch!" Refusing to be mollified, he hobbled from the theatre.

THE audience began whistling and shouting, and a number began hurrying out. The assistant stage manager later asked one of them why he had done so and he replied, "It was simply that I had a feeling something horrible was about to happen, something I had no wish to witness." There was consequently much stir and some confusion as Chu Chin went on with his trick, and the girl in a vibrating falsetto asked for silence. The illusion consisted, the assistant stage manager knew, in the girl entering the tent. Then Chu Chin would lower the silk curtain, raise it again and reveal the tent empty. He would then enter the tent himself and lower the curtain, and a little later they would both come onto the stage from different sides. It was a brilliant mirror invention entirely undetectable by the audience.

Now came the moment for the girl to enter the tent, but this, it appeared, she refused to do. The audience became very quiet and watchful. The assistant stage manager was utterly baffled and more than

ever conscious of strangeness, unreality, and growing apprehension. After a moment Chu Chin, his face a mask of fury, thrust the girl hard through the curtain. Just at that moment the assistant stage manager saw something white—could it be a fleshless arm?—slung up above the screen and down again. There came a high thin scream of agony and terror and the tent was violently shaken.

The assistant stage manager turned and shouted an order for the curtain to be lowered; instead every light in the house went out. Now the audience started shouting and screaming and surging towards the exits. For a moment the assistant stage manager felt inexorably compelled to watch the stage. He heard the tent crash over, and then he could just discern in that dimmest of glows, three—he could swear it was three—figures struggling violently near where it had stood. Still in wild motion they staggered down towards the footlights, and then the iron safety curtain roared down like the blade of a huge guillotine, and all the lights came on again. Another shriek of terror came from the crowds milling around the jammed doors.

"Play something!" yelled the assistant stage manager to the dazed conductor of the orchestra. He could see runnels of red seeping through below the curtain, and dashed round onto the stage. The bodies of Jerry and the girl were lying in their blood. The heavy safety curtain had crushed their skulls and then hurled them aside. After stage hands had carried them to the dressing-rooms and the ambulances were summoned, the assistant stage manager returned to the stage. In the middle of it lay the eight, ace, and nine of spades, in that order. By the side of one of the work-tables lay the black bathing-cap. He picked it up—it was damp to the touch.

