



Weird Tales

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REGISTERED IN GREAT BRITAIN

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



Pale Pink Porcelain*

By FRANK OWEN

TSANG KEE FOO was an artist in porcelain. His house in Kingtehchen, the porcelain capital of China, was filled with exquisite specimens of porcelain art that no museum could surpass. The family of Tsang Kee Foo had all been potters dating back for almost a thousand years. Somewhere a book is written on the lineage of this renowned artist, though trace of it has been lost. Perhaps some day it will be located and much data about this ancient family will be given to the world.

Tsang Kee Foo was tall and slim and round-shouldered from constantly stooping over his wheel. His face, colorless and bleached, looked as though it had been dried by the furnaces that baked his delicate porcelains. He was superbly well-educated, a profound linguist and efficient in all the supreme literatures of the world. One of his ambitions was to translate the musings of Long Chik, the poet, into pottery. For each quatrain a vase, an urn or a traced-bowl. He believed in the possibility of his desire, since all arts are interchangeable. It was

his knowledge of quaint tales and folklore that gave Tsang Kee Foo his charming personality. What mattered that he was cold and ruthless, that he could pass starving children on the streets without so much as a glance, or that he permitted his own sister to die of want simply because once in her youth she had criticized his handiwork?

The face of Tsang Kee Foo was a mask, and few there were who knew the mind behind it. He was successful, rich, an artist. It was enough.

Now as he sat at the door of his house he felt great contentment. He was snatching a moment's rest for his family from the ceaseless toil that had gone on for almost a thousand years. Listlessly he watched the coolies trotting past laden down with porcelain-ware which they were taking to the furnaces to be baked. Not many factories in Kingtehchen could boast furnaces, for most of the pottery was made in the homes of the people. Almost every house was a factory, and even tiny children were skilled in the ceramic art. But Tsang Kee Foo was rich. He had his own furnaces for baking. Life was very good.

* From "The Wind that Tramps the World and Other Stories." Copyright 1929 by the Lantern Press, Inc.

In this he eclipsed Lu Chau, his greatest rival. Lu Chau was equally as skilful, but he did not own his own furnace. Tsang Kee Foo hated Lu Chau, though he always greeted him with a smile and welcomed him to his home. In cordiality he treated him as a brother. Yet deep within him was buried a burning hatred, a hatred that burned as surely as the pine-wood in his furnaces. For one thing, Lu Chau was handsome. He was possessed of a beauty that made all women his slaves. They looked up into his black almond eyes, into his face which was like a full moon, and listened to the flattery that dripped ever from his lips; and at once they were lost in a surging sea of desire. Lu Chau's attraction for women was as famous as his fine porcelains. In ordinary circumstances Tsang Kee Foo would not have cared for the talk which Lu Chau caused, were it not that Lu Chau was infatuated with the lovely Mei-Mei, a China girl as gorgeous as any bit of porcelain.

That poet of old must have been thinking of Mei-Mei when he wrote:

*Her voice makes perfume when she speaks,
Her breath is music faint and low.*

The lovely Mei-Mei was a product of porcelain, even as were Tsang Kee Foo and Lu Chau. The very foundation of her family, of her house, was built on porcelain. But she paid no attention whatever to the modeling of cups and vases. Her concern was solely with the painting of them. Most of her vases were decorated with Yunnan blue and yellow, though other colors also were used upon occasion. Mei-Mei ground all her own colors from rock crystals, arsenic, copper, lead and pewter. No colorist was ever more adept than she. Her creations were justly famous. It was said that she infused her personality into her creations. Each bit of pottery reflected her mood.

When she was melancholy, so was the jar. When love, desire or laughter enveloped her it found reflection in her work. Whether all the quaint tales that were recounted about her were true or not, they served to emphasize her popularity. If all the great artists of China were put down, the name of Mei-Mei would have to be among them.

With all her colors she was satisfied, with the sole exception of pink. The pale pink color which she desired was hard to locate. There were many types of red, but not the elusive pink for which she had sought in vain for years.

LU CHAU wooed her with vast enthusiasm. He was always smiling.

"For ever I will stand guard over you," he declared, "like an old ginkgo tree if you will but pause to listen to my voice. Marry me and I will fashion wondrous pottery for you to paint."

Tsang Kee Foo was equally as vehement in his wooing. He quoted to her all the love songs of the poets. He brought flowers to her of rare elegance.

"When we are wed," he declared, "life thereafter will be but one superb poem of loveliness. Greater than Kutani-ware is the porcelain of Mei-Mei and greater than the love of any other is my love for you. It is like an endless lyric poem, or a brook that flows on for ever through the ages. When the sun ceases to rise yellow over China, then only will my devotion fade."

Mei-Mei smiled. She sang softly to herself as she worked at her art. She was decorating a vase with ivory-white and mirror-black. Close beside her was one of great beauty in celadon.

"Who first brings to me the secret of the pale pink color that I crave," she murmured, "to him will I surrender and to none other. Marriage at best is a subjection of womanhood and I can only

submit to it if my reward does justify it. Love is a poem, but poems can be repeated to many people. My love is a color, pale pink like the blush of the morning, pink like the cheek of a happy woman, pink like the sky when day is dying. Your reward will be great if you win me; mine must be great by proportion."

TSANG KEE FOO returned to his house. He locked himself in his workroom for days seeking the secret of that wondrous color. His enthusiasm was great, but no greater than that of Lu Chau even though Lu Chau was not so adept at concentration. While pining for the wondrous Mei-Mei he was not blind to the charms of other women. He studied profoundly, but his amours were in like proportion.

Frequently Lu Chau stopped at the home of Tsang Kee Foo. He was extremely polite, but the essence of politeness he affected did not dull the edge of his cynicism. He angered Tsang Kee Foo to an acute degree by assuming that in the end he himself would win the prize. All women were as flowers that bent to every breeze, and the love of Lu Chau was as subtle as wind in the willows.

He walked about the rooms of Tsang Kee Foo, fingering his porcelains, eulogizing their perfection and beauty. Occasionally he drew attention to a slight defect in one. At other times he was loud in his praise. But the porcelains he praised were always the ones Tsang Kee Foo had not wrought, while those in which he detected defects were always the works of his friend.

This goaded Tsang Kee Foo to great fury, but there was nothing in his bland expression that reflected his inward turbulence. He knew that he was a far better artist than Lu Chau, except in one thing—the frailties of women.

"Women," reflected Lu Chau, "are much like porcelain: a single flaw and they are worthless."

He was perfectly complacent. He was handsome and he knew it. China girls loved to gaze upon his moon-like face. His kisses were valued. In love, he was supreme. The ceramic art was only secondary. Every other art was subordinate to love. Some day he would marry Mei-Mei. The future was pleasant to contemplate. Not for a moment did he question his ultimate success. Lu Chau did not fail in love.

It enervated his spirits to talk to Tsang Kee Foo. He was a rival to be derided, not to be feared. What woman could fail to choose Lu Chau, given the choice between them?

He handled the cups, the bowls and the vases carefully. Tsang Kee Foo was an artist, a ceramic-artist, not a love-artist. He was eloquent, his words were honeyed but his face was like a bleached dried lime.

Meanwhile Tsang Kee Foo sat and gazed up toward the lantern above his head. He made no rejoinder to Lu Chau's witticisms except an occasional grunt. He reclined seemingly at ease upon a divan. But there was no rest in his mind. He could be patient. Ultimately his time would come.

THE baking-furnaces of Tsang Kee Foo were in a separate house at the foot of his garden. There all the splendid potteries that had brought renown to him were baked. It was one of the few private furnaces in Kingtehchen. Even Lu Chau with all his swagger had no furnace. He was forced to send his wares through the crowded streets with all the other throngs of potters. Lu Chau was handsome, successful with women, but he had no bake-ovens. He was simply one of the com-

mon herd. Tsang Kee Foo smiled. There was more provocation for mirth in the thought than in any of the witticisms of Lu Chau.

"Now we are rivals," mused Tsang Kee Foo. "Perhaps one of us will attain to the hand of Mei-Mei. And because I wish to put no obstacle in your way I offer to you the privilege of using my bake-ovens for your experiments. Let us be rivals but not enemies. If it comes to pass that you discover the pale pink color before I do, then will I bow my head and pray to the spirits and the dragons to bestow happiness upon you and to guard your footsteps well."

Lu Chau was surprized. He arched his eyebrows. "You speak in a manner befitting a great artist," he commented, "and I will accept your kind offer. It would indeed be a crime to refuse a suggestion coming from a heart so overflowing with bounty. Let me then be less than the least coolie in your household. If I offend by being in your shop too often, have me cast from your door."

Tsang Kee Foo smiled. He blinked his eyes as though the light were strong, the light, perhaps, of his own benevolence.

"And now," he said, "I will take you to the rear of my garden to inspect my furnaces. They are not perfect, but they are adequate. Such as they are, I offer them to you."

Together they strolled out into the garden.

The air struck their faces delightfully cool. The sun was a yellow maze. It poured down in golden splendor on the lilacs and peonies, on the pink oleanders and lotuses that sweetened the air. About the walks were stately trees, Chinese ash and scented pine. The air was as fragrant as the spice-laden air of Cambodia. Beneath the trees several stone benches beckoned one to loiter. It made incon-

gruous the fact that at the foot of the garden were the furnaces of intense heat in which pottery was baked. The pine fires were never out. They continued onward as surely as the moon. In this same spot the family of Tsang Kee Foo had flourished for a thousand years, had clung tenaciously to life through famine and flood, through pestilence and death. There was something admirable about it, something superb.

Tsang Kee Foo opened the door of his shop and bade Lu Chau enter. He was very polite, very formal. No race can match the Chinese in courtesy, no Chinaman could eclipse Tsang Kee Foo, poet and potter and lover of Mei-Mei.

At one end of the shop was the great door that led to the bake-ovens. Lu Chau walked close to it. His interest was sincere. Cupidity lighted up his eyes. He was to receive the use of these ovens free.

Tsang Kee Foo opened the great door. The blast that came from the oven was like that of a swirling volcano.

"I have a dozen vases baking within at the present time," he said, "but there is room for very many more. Stand closer so that you can appreciate its capacity."

Lu Chau stepped forward that he might peer with greater intensity. As he did so Tsang Kee Foo caught him about the waist and pushed him into the oven. The shriek which Lu Chau emitted was drowned as the great iron door swung shut.

WITHOUT haste or trepidation Tsang Kee Foo returned to his garden. The air was fragrant with lotuses. He plucked a carnation from a bush and touched it to his nostrils. Never, he thought, had the wisteria blossoms appeared to greater advantage. He seated himself upon a bench near a willow tree. His soul was filled with poetry. Quat-

rains like jewels were chasing themselves through his consciousness. He thought of the lovely Mei-Mei. When they were wed it would be an excellent triumph for the art of ceramics. What wondrous vases they would be able to create together! He listlessly picked up a ripe pomegranate that had fallen to the ground. Love was as delicious as the seeds of that luscious fruit, sweeter than honey and almonds, or sandalwood and myrrh.

Now Lu Chau would bother him no more. No longer would he be forced to bear the bite of his sarcasms, of his boastings, nor to listen to the quaint tales he told of amorous Chinese maidens who could not resist his allure. The future had taken on a rosy hue, somewhat akin to that pale pink color of Chinese porcelain for which Mei-Mei yearned.

Until the moon rose that night he remained in his garden, until the soft flush of sunset had blended into the purpling folds of night. The scent of lotuses sweetened, the breeze intensified, the stars bloomed out like wondrous lanterns hanging in the sky. The world was suffused in a riot of beauty. Tsang Kee Foo rose to his feet. He sang wildly in his ecstasy. He crooned love songs to the moon.

Even unto dawn he remained in his garden. For his eyes there was no sleep. He wished simply to breathe in that perfume of joy for ever. He refreshed his face by crushing it into a large wild rose on which the cool night dew was heavy.

When the hour of noon approached he

went to the studio of Mei-Mei. He bowed low as he entered, arrayed in the costliest of his satin costumes.

"Surely," he cried, "I must be permanently protected from hardship and danger by a Spirit Screen. Beloved am I of the gods, for in all this universe I am the one appointed to gain the love of Mei-Mei."

As he spoke he drew from his cloak a vase, exquisite in workmanship and of a soft pale pink color that surpassed in splendor the glory of dawn or the cheek of a lovely woman. Mei-Mei uttered a little cry as she seized the vase and fell upon her knees to study its elusive color more easily. Her eyes were of dazzling brightness and her heart beat with supreme excitement. It was that immortal hour for which she had waited years.

Tsang Kee Foo stood beside her, as majestic as a ginkgo tree. He did not tell her that Lu Chau existed no longer, that his blood had colored the vase. He could not explain how the miracle had come to pass, nor did he try to. It was sufficient that the vase was pink. He had offered Lu Chau the use of his ovens. Lu Chau had rewarded him for his generosity.

At last Mei-Mei rose to her feet. "It is the color," she whispered. "Nowhere else have I beheld it except in the necklace of peculiar workmanship which Lu Chau always wore about his neck. When he returns, I will marry you, even as my word was given. But I can not do so until Lu Chau admits that I have kept faith. Lu Chau is a cultured gentleman. I know that he will accept defeat gracefully."

