

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*The Strange Tale of a Yellow Man
and His Beloved Reptile*

Six Feet of Willow-Green

By Carroll F. Michener

IT WAS for no love of the Chinese that Allister risked his life in the shark-plagued waters off Samoa.

The motive was largely a rigid sense of fair play, which had led him into more than one hazard. Also, he hated the second mate, who was so ridiculously afraid of Ssu Yin's serpent.

Therefore the Chinese need have nourished no great feeling of obligation. Scales for weighing honor and indebtedness, however, are not the same in the East as in the West, where motives are perhaps more closely scanned; and it would have been difficult to persuade Ssu Yin that he did not owe more than life to Allister. He felt that he owed *two* lives; that of his own leather-yellowed body and that of the woman whose soul, so he believed, now sojourned on its vast pilgrimage along the Nirvana-road of incarnations, within his snake's scaly longitude.

To the Chinese, an obligation clearly understood is a collectible asset. Death or the devil—or dishonor that is worse than either—claims him who escapes payment of a just debt. Therefore it need not be surprising that the magnitude of his fancied obligation to Allister discomfited Ssu

Yin, and left him more than melancholy for the remainder of the voyage.

On the other hand, his devotion to the serpent, a poisonous six feet of willow-green relieved by the satin-white ribbon of its belly, was greater than before, and the venom of his regard for the second mate, who had dared toss the reptile's basket overboard, was disquieting to observe.

The thing had happened in a flash that gave Allister no more than a moment for reflection before the action that had bound him with inseverable fetters to the destinies of Ssu Yin. The second mate, who was Irish, with a soul fed upon belief in banshees and leprechauns and the traditions of St. Patrick, had chafed bitterly at the captain's indifference toward the Chinaman's obnoxious galley-pet.

His irritation had grown steadily since the third day out from Panama, when the reptile's presence on board had been discovered. The captain was one of those rare humans in whom a snake breeds no particular revulsion; he merely winked at Ssu Yin's vagary, stipulating, as an afterthought, that the serpent should be tied by the neck and at all times safely confined to its bamboo cage.

The mate's displeasure grew into agitation, and then into a saturnine fear. Ssu Yin's notion that the serpent was animated by the spirit of his dead wife, a creature of frail morals whose fate it had been to be slain in an act of infidelity, reduced the mate to paroxysms of superstitious rage. A suggestion of insanity blazed from his eyes, and he vented his irritation upon the crew in a variety of diabolical mistreatment. Stealthily he plotted the serpent's destruction.

He had long to wait, for Ssu Yin was rarely beyond sight of his somnolent pet. But one day, growing reckless from the excess of his somewhat alcoholic fear, the mate seized the bamboo cage, well beyond reach of its occupant's fangs, lifted it brusquely through the window of the cook's galley—from under the very eyes of Ssu Yin—and gave it a triumphant heave overboard.

With a yell that seemed to supply added impulse to his flying heels and to stiffen his queue into a rigid horizontal, Ssu Yin darted from the galley and flung himself after his ophidian treasure.

Allister turned automatically toward a life boat, but the mate thrust him back. A fanatical cruelty colored the leer in the man's face as he watched Ssu Yin bobbing helplessly some yards from the bamboo cage, quite evidently unable to swim.

"Aren't you going to launch that lifeboat?" Allister bawled at him.

The mate spat over the rail, with a sullen negation.

"The hell you won't," snarled Allister, poising swiftly to plunge after the Chinaman. "Let's see if you'll do it for a white man, then."

THE mate lowered the boat, not so much because Allister was white as because he was a brother of the captain.

There was a calm sea, and no difficulty in the rescue. The crew fished

up the three of them, Allister supporting the exhausted Ssu Yin, who in turn held aloft, out of the wash of the sea, his most unhappy dry-land reptile.

The mate shut himself up in his cabin and drank Jamaica rum with such proficiency that it became necessary to lodge him in the brig. He wallowed there for the remainder of the voyage into Penang, where Ssu Yin, with the serpent clasped to his meager bosom, scuttled ashore and vanished from the mate's bleary ken.

Allister, for whom the world was in its opening chapters, lost himself in bizarre and dizzy pages of Oriental life. At the end of three years he was "on the beach," tossed up with other human jetsam from the slime of the Orient's undertow.

He had brawled with sailors from many seas in the dives of Hongkong, tasted the wickedness of native inland cities, and squandered himself in a thousand negligible pursuits between Bangkok and Peking. He was the eternal parable of West meeting East, a conjunction perpetually fatal to the insecure soul. For it is only the strong who can sip safely at the pleasant vices of a mellow civilization.

On a day squally with the pestilent dust of an obscure Chinese outpost, Allister sat gazing at a wooden door in a wall. He was oblivious to outward discomfort, although his clothes were remnants through which the wind drove chill misery. He felt only one need, and his mind had room for but one thought, and that was the gratification of an unholy lust. It was three days since opium had caressed his shrieking nerves.

Beggars, exhibiting their unspeakable sores, the ghastly souvenirs of real or simulated disease, jostled him in their crawling search for charity; it was the plaza of a temple where he had taken up his watch.

Curses, and the muttered insults that are flung to foreigners, came to

him from the crowd, but he appeared not to hear; his senses were subject only to one diversion, and that was the wall before him, with its wooden door, and the peephole that for an hour of eternities had remained blind. If he could not gain the attention of Ssu Yin, he would be doomed to another night of drugless terror.

To knock on the door would be useless; he had tried that. Only a certain alarm would gain admittance, and no amount of cunning had been capable of revealing this to him. To shout was equally futile, for Ssu Yin had become almost wholly deaf, the result of his barber's unskillful wax-scraping—an accident with an equally unfortunate sequel, the barber having been bitten to death shortly afterward by Ssu Yin's serpent.

It was necessary, Allister well knew, to wait for the soya-brown eye that glistened intently through the peephole at a certain hour of the day—the eye of Ssu Yin, focused expectantly upon some indeterminate object within the temple grounds.

The impatient accents of a woman, half-concealed behind the discolored marble flank of a stone lion with the head of a dog, roused Allister. He had been long enough in the Orient to absorb an understanding of many dialects.

"The serpent-eared grandfather of a skillet is late," complained the voice, and there was an answering murmur from another woman at her side.

Allister stole a glance at them, and saw that they, like himself, were interested in the wooden door. One was young, and probably, though not definitely, a courtesan; she may have been merely an adventurous and discontented second-wife. Her companion was an older woman, evidently a servant.

His eyes returned to the hole in the door, but his ears continued to listen for the words of the women. The servant was speaking:

"How long, Tai-tai, must my Crimson Lotus submit to the vile attentions of this opium hawker? Surely it should not be difficult——"

"It is more difficult than thou thinkest, mother of no sons."

"Will he not take my Peach Blossom—my Lotus—into his stinking hovel? Will he look upon your beauty in no place other than the teahouse?"

"He fears the serpent."

"The serpent?"

"Have I not told thee, daughter of an addled egg? He cherishes a creeping creature that he swears was once his wife in a former life. He fears the fangs of her jealousy."

"A serpent may be crushed by the heel——"

"That shall be thy task, then. Nay, find the way, and it shall be my heel, and mine the silver *sycee* that lies under the bricks of his *kong*."

"Find the way?"

"The secret of the knocks that gain admittance, O Half Moon of Wisdom—buy it from one of the slaves of the pipe that come here each day."

Allister heard no more, for there was of a sudden a deeper shadow, a more animate void, within the aperture of the door. He shook himself together, and arose, for he was conscious of the eye of Ssu Yin.

After a moment the door opened, and the opium seller stood forth. He was imperceptibly startled when Allister touched his sleeve, for his attention had been directed to the vanishing glint of embroidery that beckoned him toward the tea pavilion of a Thousand and Three Beatitudes.

There was no greeting from either, and there was no need of word or gesture. Allister's drug-lust uttered its own argument, and Ssu Yin bowed with the air both of acquiescence and of acknowledged obligation. He shouted backward into the passage behind the open door, and shuffling feet responded.

The door closed behind Allister's starved figure, and Ssu Yin, con-

scious of the street-crowd admiration that followed the unwonted gayety of his attire, crossed a miasmatic lotus pool and entered the teahouse.

ALLISTER was able to think more clearly when the stupor wore away, though mind and body were torn by a devastating revulsion. He lifted himself abruptly from the filthy bunk in which he lay, and the feeble, awkward movement upset a stand upon which was his chandoo pipe, still nauseous with burnt opium. The effort left him suddenly faint, and with alarm he shuddered back into the bunk, closing fiery-lidded eyes.

"Can't be far from the end," he murmured to himself. "If I could only get away—if I could only get back to the States!"

This was the usual burst of remorse; it was like all the rest, a feeble protest against ill-directed destiny. He knew that, of his own effort, he never would get back to the States, away from the insidious East. He had tried that; he had worked until the money was in his hands, only to dive more steeply for a time toward the poppy fields of oblivion.

The consul-general had shipped him out on a transport, but he had gone only as far as Manila. The call of the drug had been too insistent. If the vessel only had been going straight East, without a stop to the California coast, he might have made it.

He *would* make it! He would get the money once more—earn it, perhaps, but somehow he would get it, and go Home.

After a second effort, he succeeded in struggling to his feet, then in staggering out of the room into a larger one where there was the light of a horn lantern, and the comforting aroms of tea.

Ssu Yin sat gurgling contemplatively at his water-pipe, his eyes fixed upon two brilliant points of light in

the half-shadows over the *kang*. He did not stir at Allister's approach, though he muttered an acknowledgment of the other's presence. Slowly Allister's bleared sight, following the direction of Ssu Yin's comprehended the significance of those cold-blue darts of phosphorescence. They were set in a rigid, cylindrical, limblike standard, projecting motionless from a pyramid of symmetrical coils. Often as he had beheld the serpent of Ssu Yin, on the poppy excursions that brought him so frequently to the sea cook's illicit den, he had never conquered a subtle fear, a rage for crushing, stamping out, obliterating. He had tried to explain this as an expression of man's traditional enmity toward the creeping creatures of the earth. Curiously, to witness the same fear in another was his sole antidote. In the presence of one who was more afraid than himself he could laugh down his own feeling, as had happened in the case of the second mate.

He sat down beside the brazier and helped himself to a gulp of tea. Ssu Yin, removing his eyes from their fixed stare, with a gesture that suggested the snapping of an invisible thread binding them to the eyes of the serpent, regarded Allister with an attentive but unfathomable look. Though his countenance expressed nothing, he was, Allister observed, in an unwonted mood. It was as if there had been a misunderstanding between himself and his reptilian familiar.

"Was there sweetness in the Elder Brother's honorable pipe of August Beginnings?" inquired Ssu Yin, bringing forth the foreign ear-trumpet that looked incongruous against its oriental setting.

A grimace of pain was Allister's only answer.

"And was the sleep of this poor worm's wise and illustrious benefactor filled with the jessmine-incense of celestial happiness?"

"May your flesh be jellied and your bones splintered," was Allister's discourteous shot into the trumpet. "May your ancestors——"

"Harmless is the bluster of the paper tiger," interrupted Ssu Yin, with a playful malice. He went on in a more kindly vein: "A gem cannot be polished without friction, or a man perfected without adversity. The friction has been thine, Elder Brother, even as it is written; also the adversity; but a wise man also has said that the gods cannot help him who loses opportunities."

"Oh, drop the classics, Ssu Yin, and tell me what you're driving at!"

"The Elder Brother must set his feet unto new paths, or he will learn to walk soon in the Eternal Shades."

"I'm through, Ssu Yin. No more chandoo for me. Tomorrow——"

"The man who overestimates himself is like a rat falling into a scale and weighing himself."

Allister was stung by the contempt of his host's words, but he feared to retort. His sense of need came more fully upon him. His head swam, leadenly, and his tongue was thick.

"The pipe, Ssu Yin—only once more. And tomorrow——"

"Spawn of frog begets but frog; the wise man does not give his cloak to the stealer of his coat; and to cure a habit by indulging it is to push a stone with an egg."

"No, Ssu Yin, I mean it this time——"

"Dragging the lake for the moon in the water, adding fuel to put out a fire," ran the relentless river of Ssu Yin's scornful proverbs.

Nevertheless, Ssu Yin arose and led the way to the sleeping-room. He set forth within Allister's reach a bamboo pipe with black tassels and a mouthpiece of jade, lighted the lamp, and from a receptacle within his capacious sleeve jealously produced three miniature cylinders of amber-hued opium.

Cynically, Ssu Yin observed the trembling hands of the white man as he held one of the precious morsels over the flame, watched it sizzle, dissolve, evaporate. He waited until the operation thrice had been performed, each puff sending Allister nearer to the paradise of drugs, and stood gazing at the young man's emaciated features long after the squalid room had been translated, for Allister, into a pearly grotto through which he stepped forth on the winged feet of inexhaustible youth into a world of unimaginable color, transcendent beauty and unspeakable delight.

"A just debt—a just debt is mine," muttered Ssu Yin, solemnly, "and it is thus that I have paid. For this have I merited no less than the reproach of the gods."

WHEN Allister returned again from the lotus fields of Elysium, his eyes were more fevered, his yellowed skin closer drawn over cadaverous cheeks, and his weakness even greater than before.

This was the tomorrow of which he had spoken to Ssu Yin.

But what had any Oriental tomorrow to do with him? Here there were promises only of more lethal hours that did not relieve so much as they accented the deepening miseries leading toward an indubitable end.

Tomorrow——

He sprang up suddenly, the effort startling his heart into wild uncertainties. The recurrence of a feeling of resentment, long nourished, supported him.

"Ssu Yin, the superstitious dog—rich—preaching to me in nasty proverbs and feeding me this spawn of hell when he might be sending me home!"

The thought took possession of him, made him stealthy and steel-nerved. He would take the money—Ssu Yin owed it to him, the heathen ingrate; this time he would have a share in

that board of *sycee* beneath the bricks of the *kang*.

He crept into the other room, fearing to find Ssu Yin there, a delay to his plot. But Ssu Yin was not in the room; the house seemed empty even of servants. The seller of opium probably was at his daily tryst, Allister thought, in the teahouse of the Beatitudes.

For the moment Allister had forgotten the serpent, and it was only in the act of turning his darting steps toward the *kang* that he remembered. In that instant a ray of sunlight revealed the still creature, eternally somnolent, as immobile as the stones against which its gelid coils were ranged.

The old fear seized him, and with it the rage to kill; but his weakness returned, and he was incapable of that. He remained as motionless as the snake, thinking of its reputed iniquities. The opium den of Ssu Yin was not without a reputation for crime. It had had its murders, strange deaths that baffled the native doctors of both "inside" and "outside" anatomy.

The serpent, he knew, was master of man in a duel of eyes, and Allister felt relief at a sound of interruption. Someone had entered the house. The shock loosened his limbs, and he crept back to his foul bunk, waiting for the philosophical gibes of Ssu Yin, sick with revulsion at thought of his intended theft.

His ears told him in a moment, however, that the wary step and the listening caution of the one who had entered, were not Ssu Yin's. Presently there were hurried movements, unwonted sounds, a breathless intensity that took audible form, in the outer room. Stealthily, Allister moved nearer to see.

The figure of a woman was beneath the ray of sunlight now, cutting off its warning of the coiled spectre of dissolution. She stooped over the *kang*, lifting the bricks, laying them

aside with a careless impatience. A cavity grew, and from it presently, with a sigh of gratification, she plucked a silver ingot—followed it with others, until a mound of them, too heavy for her own strength, lay at her feet.

Allister watched her in amazement. Was she unaware of the snake? Or was she, like Ssu Yin, its master, immune to ophidian fear?

She stood up, turned toward Allister, as if at some psychic warning of his presence, and he recognized her as the woman of the temple yard—the Crimson Lotus, Ssu Yin's teahouse siren.

Doubtless her apprehensions heightened her error, but in the half-light it must have been easy to mistake Allister's immobile figure for the darkly vengeful one of Ssu Yin.

She cried out, took an involuntary step backward, tripped upon a *sycee* ingot, and a bared arm, thrust outward to break her fall, met the serpent's fangs.

IN THE nine-toned sing-song of a Cantonese who is at peace with himself, Ssu Yin entered his hovel incanting a bar of that old song of Cathay, "The Millet's in Flower."

He paused at the door of his inner room, in the middle of a note, and allowed the details of the tableau to etch themselves upon his brain.

Across the *kang* lay his woman—his Crimson Lotus—inert, lifeless. Upon her still breast, its viridescence blending strangely with the soft tints of her silk tunic, was piled the deadly pyramid of the coiled serpent—flat, arrowy head drawn back awaiting the impulse to strike, glistening red tongue stirring with forked vibrations, and phosphorescent eyes blazing with a sinister fury.

Within reach of its fangs was crouched Allister, one hand touching, with a suggestion of pity, the face of the woman, the other, clasping a sil-

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ver ingot, poised cataleptically in the midst of an intended blow. His was the arrested animation of carved marble, the impotent fascination of a bird obeying the hypnosis of the serpent's eye.

Slow rage filled Ssu Yin—a calm cruelty. Here lay his broken Lotus Bud; a thief, an accomplice, a wanton, or a viperous traitor to his heart's homage—what did it matter? And here was his "Elder Brother," his benefactor, the white man—dog, despoiler—who would have robbed him of all.

Well, a simple solution—the fangs of his serpent, slaving for their prey. . . .

But the poise of a hundred philosophical generations began to quiet his thick pulses—the restraints of a race that has schooled itself to play the game of life by meticulous rule. A debt was his—he must pay it.

Ssu Yin realized, suddenly, that an abrupt movement, the slightest translation of Allister's rigid pose into activity, would bring to him the darting caress of oblivion.

Cautiously, Ssu Yin approached, uttering a curious sound that always, until now, had brought an answering acquiescence into the eyes of the serpent. He came closer, at last laying his parchment-skinned hand upon the vibrant coil, seeking a grip that would keep him safe from a scratch of fangs.

But something was amiss with Ssu Yin's mastery over the snake. He recognized this in a thrill of terror at the moment when he knew it was forever too late. He would have explained, had there been time for such inquiry, that it was jealousy in the soul of the transmigrated woman who had been his wife—jealousy of the Crimson Lotus. This it was, he would have said, that animated the serpent's yellow needles of death.

The poison gripped him, but a

sense of unfinished justice gave him strength while he battered the cringing reptile into an amorphous, hideous mass.

With Allister dazed, half understanding, he still had the business of words. A courteous smile crackled the parchment of his face as he took from his sleeve an envelope and held it out to Allister.

"Three lives for two," he murmured, "and the debt is more than paid. May the August Elder Brother's voyage into the friendly bosom of the West be as pleasant as the repose of Buddha."

Allister's wondering fingers disclosed within the envelope a steamer ticket to Seattle. He put out a protesting hand, began self-accusing phrases, but the seller of opium was beyond argument. Ssu Yin was on his knees murmuring before the shelf of the gods:

"Unabashed, Great Ancestors—in to the Vale of Longevity Ssu Yin walks without shame."