

Tao

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"Daily, as he sat by the window, he approached nearer to that center of cosmic life where outward activity counts for less than the shadow of nothing. Daily he felt the tide rise in his secret self, trying to blend with the essence of eternity."



T was now the custom of Li Ping-Yeng, the wealthy retired banker, to sit near the open window and look up at the sky, which seemed always to be packed with dirty clouds, or down into Pell Street, toward the corner, where it streams into the Bowery in frothy, brutal, yellow-and-white streaks. Occasionally, huddled snug and warm in a fold of his loose sleeve, a diminutive, flat-faced Pekinese spaniel, with convex, nostalgic eyes and a sniffling button of a nose, would give a weak and rather ineffectual bark. Then, startled, yet smiling, Li Ping-Yeng would rise and go down-stairs to the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace in search of food.

To do this, he had to cross his apartment.

Fretted with shifting lights, it lay in dim, scented splendor. Underfoot stretched a thick-napped dragon rug of tawny orange and taupe, picked out with rose-red and brown. Age-darkened tulip-wood furniture faded into the corners, where the shadows drooped and coiled. The door of the outer hall was hidden by a great, ebony-framed screen of pale lotus silk embroidered with conventionalized figures, black and purple and maroon, that represented the "Hei-song-che-choo," the "Genii of the Ink," household gods of the literati; while here and there, on table and taboret and *étagère*, were

priceless pieces of Chinese porcelain, blue-and-white Ming and Kang-he beakers in aubergine and oxen-blood, crackled *clair-de-lune* of the dynasty of Sung, peachblow celadon, Corean Fong dogs and Fong-hoang emblems in ash-gray and apple-green.

This was the room, these were the treasures, which years ago he had prepared with loving, meticulous care for the coming of his bride.

She had come, stepping mincingly on tiny bound feet, "skimming," had said an impromptu Pell Street poet who had cut his rice gin with too much heady whompee juice, "over the tops of golden lilies, like Yao Niang, the iron-capped Manchu prince's famous concubine."

But almost immediately—the tragedy had not loomed very large in the morning news, starting with a crude head-line of "Woman Killed in Street by Car on Wrong Side," and winding up with "The Chauffeur, Edward H. Connor, of No. 1267 East 157th Street, was held at the West 68th Street Station on a charge of homicide"—her body had passed into the eternal twilight, her soul had leaped the dragon gate to join the souls of her ancestors.

And to-day Li Ping-Yeng, in the lees of life, was indifferent to the splendors of Ming and Sung, of brodered silks and carved tulip-wood. To-day there was only the searching for his personal *tao*, his inner consciousness removed from the lying shackles of love and

hate, the drab fastenings of form and substance and reality.

Daily, as he sat by the window, he approached nearer to that center of cosmic life where outward activity counts for less than the shadow of nothing. Daily he felt the tide rise in his secret self, trying to blend with the essence of eternity. Daily, beyond the dirty clouds of lower Manhattan, beyond the Pell Street reek of sewer-gas and opium and yellow man and white, he caught a little more firmly at the fringe of final fulfilment.

Food? Yes. There was still the lying reality called body which needed food and drink and occasionally a crimson-tasseled pipe filled with a sizzling, amber cube of first-chop opium. Also, there was the little Pekinese spaniel that had once belonged to his bride,—“*Su Chang*,” “Reverential and Sedate,” was its ludicrous name,—and it cared nothing for *tao* and cosmic eternity, but a great deal for sugar and chicken bones and bread steeped in lukewarm milk.

“*Woo-ooff!*” said “Reverential and Sedate.”

And so, startled, yet smiling, Li Ping-Yeng went down-stairs to the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace, exchanged courtly greetings with the obese proprietor, Mr. Nag Hong Fah, and ordered a heaped bowl for the spaniel, and for himself a platter of rice, a pinch of soey cheese, a slice of preserved ginger stem, and a pot of tea.

Twenty minutes later he was back in his chair near the window, scrutinizing sky and street.

Unseeing, meaningless scrutiny; for it was only the conscious, thus worthless, part of his brain which perceived, and reacted to, the details of what he saw: the lemon tints of the street lamps leaping meanly out of the trailing, sooty dusk and centering on a vivid oblong of scarlet and gold where Yung Long, the wholesale grocer, flung his sign-board to the winds and proclaimed thereon in archaic Mandarin script that “Trade revolves like a Wheel”; an automobile-load of tourists gloating self-righteously over the bland, shuffling Mongol’s base infinitudes; a whisky-soaked non-

descript moving along with hound-like stoop and flopping, ragged clothes, his face turned blindly to the stars and a childlike smile curling his lips; or, perhaps, hugging the blotchy shadows of a postern, the tiny figure of Wuh Wang, the wife of Li Hsu, the hatchet-man, courting a particularly shocking fate by talking, face close against face, to a youth, with a checked suit and no forehead to speak of, whose native habitat was around the corner, on the Bowery.

Also voices brushed up, splintered through the open window, the stammering gurgling staccato of felt-slippered Cantonese, suggestive of a primitive utterance going back to the days before speech had evolved; the metallic snap and crackle of Sicilians and Calabrians talking dramatically about the price of garlic and olive-oil; the jovial brogue of Bill Devoy, detective of Second Branch, tolling a licenseless peddler to “beat it”; the unbearable, guttural, belching whine of Russian Hebrews, the Pell Street symphony, with the blazing roar of the elevated thumping a dissonant counterpoint in the distance.

Li Ping-Yeng saw, he heard, but only with the conscious, the worthless part of his brain; while the real part, the subconscious, was occupied with the realization of himself which he must master in order to reach the excellent and august wisdom of *tao*—the search of his inner soul, beyond the good and the evil, which, belike, he had muddled by his too great love for his wife.

This *tao* was still too dim for him to see face to face. It was still beyond the touch and feel of definite thought. Its very possibility faded elusively when he tried to bring it to a focus. Yet he knew well what had been the basis of it. He had learned it by the bitterest test of which the human heart is capable—the negative test; the test of suffering and unfulfilled desire; the test of acrid memory. “Memory,” he would say to himself, over and over again, patiently, defiantly, almost beligerently, when the thought of his wife’s narrow, pleasurable hands rose flush with the tide of his regrets and, by the same token, caused his *tao* once

more to dim and fade—"memory, which is of the dirt-clouted body, and not of the soul."

Yet in the matter of acrid memory and unfulfilled desire Miss Edith Rutter, the social-settlement investigator who specialized in the gliding vagaries of the Mongol mind as exemplified in Pell Street, had brought back at the time an entirely different tale, an entirely different interpretation of Chinese philosophy, too.

But be it remembered that philosophy is somewhat affected by surroundings, and that Miss Rutter had been on a visit to an aunt of hers in Albany, balancing a Jasper ware tea-cup and cake-plate on a scrawny, black-taffeta-covered knee, and, about her, tired, threadbare furnishings that harped back to the days of rep curtains, horsehair *chaise-longues*, wax fruit, shell ornaments, banjo clocks, pictures of unlikely children playing with improbable dogs, cases of polished cornelian, levant-bound sets of Ouida, and unflinching, uncompromising Protestant Christianity.

"My dear," she had said to Aunt Eliza Jane, "the more I see of these Chinamen, the less I understand them. This man I told you about, Mr. Li Ping-Yeng—oh, a most charming, cultured gentleman, I assure you, with such grand manners!—I saw him a few minutes after they brought home the poor crushed little body of his young bride, his two days' bride, and, my dear,—would you believe it possible?—there was n't a tear in his eyes, his hands did n't even tremble. And when I spoke to him, tactful, gentle, consoling words, what do you imagine he replied?"

"I've no idea."

"He smiled! Yes, indeed, *smiled!* And he said something—I forget the exact words—about his having, perhaps, loved too much, his having perhaps been untrue to his inner self. I can't understand their philosophy. It is—oh—so inhuman!" She had puzzled. "How *can* anybody love *too* much? What *can* he have meant by his 'inner self'?"

"Pah! heathens!" Aunt Eliza Jane had commented resolutely. "Have another cup of tea?"

Thus the judgment of the whites; and it was further crystallized in detective Bill Devoy's rather more brutal: "Say, them Chinks has got about as much feelings as a snake has hips. No noives—no noives at all, see?" and Mr. Brian Neill, the Bowery saloon-keeper's succinct: "Sure, Mike. I hates all them yellor swine. They gives me the bloody creeps."

Still, it is a moot point who is right, the Oriental, to whom love is less a sweeping passion than the result of a delicate, personal balancing on the scales of fate, or the Occidental, to whom love is a hectic, unthinking ecstasy, though, given his racial inhibitions, often canopied in the gilt buckram of stiffly emotional sex-romanticism.

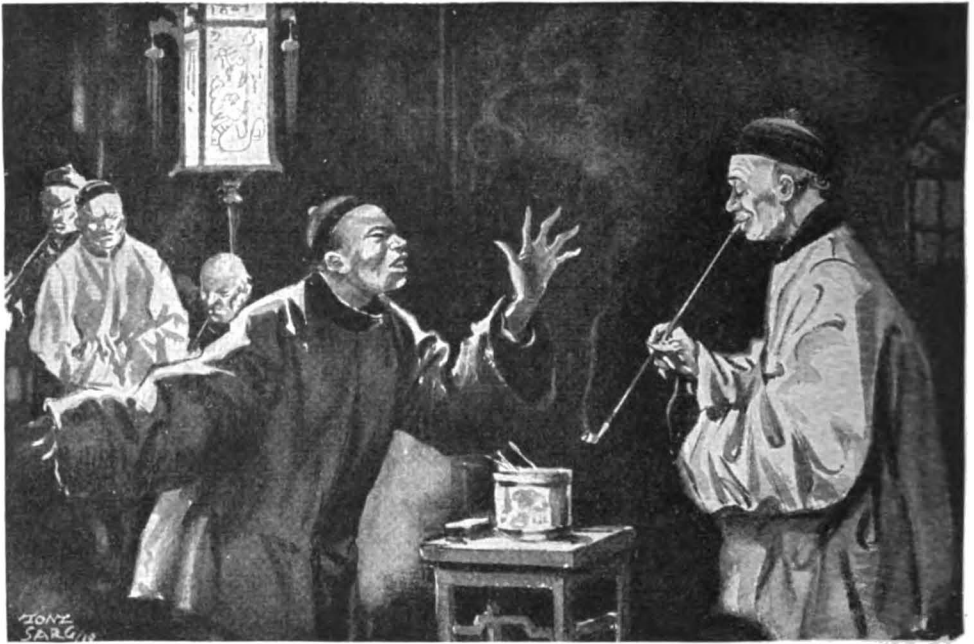
At all events, even the humblest, earthiest coolie between Pell and Mott had understood when, the day after his wife's death, Li Ping-Yeng had turned to the assembled company in the back room of the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace, which was for yellow men only and bore the euphonic appellation, "The Honorable Pavilion of Tranquil Longevity," and had said:

"The ancients are right. One must preserve a proper balance in all emotions. The man who, being selfish, loves too much, is even as the one who cooks the dregs of wretched rice over a sandalwood fire in a pot of lapis lazuli, or as one who uses a golden plow in preparation for cultivating weeds, or as one who cuts down a precious camphor-grove to fence in a field of coarse millet. Such a man is the enemy of his own *tao*. It is most proper that such a man should be punished."

After a pause he had added:

"I am such a man, brothers. I have been punished. I tied my soul and my heart to a woman's jeweled ear-rings. The ear-rings broke. The woman died. Died my heart and my soul. And now, where shall I find them again? Where shall I go to seek for my *tao*?"

THERE had come a thick pall of silence, with only the angry sizzling of opium cubes as lean, yellow hands held them above the openings of the tiny lamps; a sucking of boiling-hot tea sipped by compressed lips; somewhere, outside,



"The other's features, yellow as old parchment, indifferent, dull, almost sleepy, had curled in a queer slow smile"

on the street, a cloudy, gurgling trickle of obscene abuse, presently fading into the memory of sounds.

The men sighed heavily. Coolies they were, the sweepings of the Canton gutters and river-banks, cooks, waiters, grocers, petty traders; yet men of an ancient race, behind whom stretched forty centuries of civilization and culture and philosophy, in solemn, graven rows. Thus they were patient, slightly hard, not easily embarrassed, sublimely unselfconscious, tolerant, permitting each man to look after his own fate, be it good or evil. Anti-social, an American would have called them, and he would have been wrong.

Li Ping-Yeng had bared his naked, quivering soul to their gaze. He was their friend; they respected him. He was a rich man, an educated man. Yet Li Ping-Yeng's life was his own to make or to mar. Sympathy? Yes; but not the arrogant indelicacy of help offered, of advice proffered.

Thus they had thought, all except Yu Ch'ang, the priest of the joss-temple.

For many years, since he made his frugal living by catering to the spiritual

weal of Pell Street, it had been the latter's custom, when he foregathered with his countrymen, to gain face for himself and his sacerdotal caste by talking with nagging, pontifical unction about things religious and sectarian. But, being a hedge-priest, self-appointed, who had received only scanty training in the wisdom of the "three precious ones," the Buddha past, the Buddha present, and the Buddha future, he had found it hard to uphold his end when tackled by Li Ping-Yeng, the banker, the literatus, anent the contents of such abstruse books of theological learning as the "Park of Narratives," "Ku-liang's Commentaries," or the "Diamond Sutra."

Now, with the other baring his bleeding soul, he had seen a chance of settling the score, of causing him to lose a great deal of face.

"Little brother," he had purred, "I am a man of religion, a humble seeker after truth, whose knowledge is not to be compared with yours; yet have I thought much. I have thought left and thought right. Often in the past have we differed, you and I, on minor matters of philosophy and ceremonial. May I,



"Sitting by the window, his subconscious mind centered on his *tao*"

merit so as to reach his *tao*, beyond the good and the evil?

Of course, first of all, mainly, by tearing from his body and heart even the last root of the liana of desire, of love, of regret for his wife; by again and again denying, impugning, destroying the thought of her, though, again and again, it would rise to the nostrils of his remembrance, with a stalely sweet scent like the ghost of dead lotus-blossoms.

She was on the shadow side of the forever. Her soul, he would repeat to himself, incessantly, defiantly, belligerently, had leaped the dragon gate. Broken were the fetters that had held him a captive to the tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of her jeweled ear-rings. A mere picture she was, painted on the screen of eternity, impersonal, immensely aloof, passed from the unrealities of the

earth life to the realities of the further cosmos. He must banish the thought of her, must forget her.

And he did forget her, again and again, with the effort, the pain of forgetting choking his heart.

Sitting by the window, his subconscious mind centered on his *tao*, his salvation, the blessed destruction of his individual entity, "Reverential and Sedate" huddled in a fold of his loose sleeve, scrutinizing street and sky with unseeing eyes, he would forget her through the long, greasy days, while the reek of Pell Street rose up to the tortured clouds with a mingled aroma of sweat and blood and opium and suffering, while the strident clamor of Pell Street blended with the distant clamor of the Broadway mart.

He would forget her through the long, dim evenings, while the sun died

in a sickly haze of coppery brown, and the moon came up, stabbed on the outer horns of the world, dispassionately calm, sneeringly indifferent to the hearts of man, and the hiving stars swarmed and swirled past the horizon.

He would sit there, silent, motionless, and forget her while the stars died one by one, and the wind came driving the dusk to the east, and the sky flushed with the green of young morning, like a curved slab of thick, opaque jade, and again came the morning and the sun and the reek and the maze and the soot and the clamors of Pell Street.

Forgetting, always forgetting; forgetting his love, forgetting the tiny bound feet of the Plum Blossom, the Lotus Bud, the Crimson Butterfly. Her little, little feet! Ahee! He had made his heart a carpet for her little, little feet.

Forgetting, reaching up to his *tao* with groping soul; and then again the

thought of his dead wife, again his *tao* slipping back; again the travail of forgetting, to be forever repeated.

AND so one day he died; and it was Wuh Wang, the little, onyx-eyed, flighty wife of Li Hsü, the hatchet-man, who, perhaps, speaking to Tzu Mo, the daughter of Yu Ch'ang, the priest, grasped a fragment of the truth.

"Say, kid," she slurred in the Pell Street jargon, "that there Li Ping-Yeng wot 's kicked the bucket th' other day, well, you know wot them Chinks said—how he was always trying to get next to that—now—*tao* of his by trying to forget his wife. Well, mebbe he was all wrong. Mebbe his *tao* was n't forgetting at all. Mebbe it was just his love for her, his always thinking of her, his *not* forgetting her—that was his real *tao*."

"Mebbe," replied Tzu Mo. "I should worry!"

