

Weird Tales

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Contents for April, 1926

- Cover Design** **E. M. Stevenson**
"She struck with her dagger, and her assailant hurled her to the floor, searing, searing at her."
- Wolfshead** **Robert E. Howard** 437
An Evil Something Wrought Frightful Death
- The Outsider** **H. P. Lovecraft** 449
An Oustré Masterpiece—One of the Strangest Stories Ever Written
- The Contra-Talisman** **George Ballard Bowers** 454
Tale of Filipino Superstition—and an Anting-Anting
- The Hooded Death** **Joel Martin Nichols, Jr.** 457
Two Milk-white Cobras Guarded the Jewels of the Temple
- Out of the Mists of Time** **William Benton Frazier** 465
A Terrible Doom Rolled out from the Fogs of Antiquity

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- Knights of the Red Owl**.....**Elwin J. Owens** 474
A Portly Businessman Undergoes a Wild Night of Terror
- The Derelict Mine (Part 1)**.....**Frank A. Mochnamt** 481
Three-part Mystery Serial, Which Rises to a Ghastly Climax
- Teeth**.....**Galen C. Collin** 492
Old Ling Foo Plans a Terrible Revenge on his Daughter's Lover
- The Vengeance of India**.....**Seabury Quinn** 497
Graveyard Tale of Hypnotism, and Corpses That Rise in the Night
- The Phantom Drug**.....**A. W. Kapfer** 508
Document Found in the Burned Ruins of an Insane Asylum
- The House in the Willows**.....**Sewell Peaslee Wright** 513
A Rational Ghost-Story
- Duval's Weird Experiment**.....**F. Williams Series** 517
Eery Tale of a Scientist's Attempt to Pierce the Veil
- Weird Story Reprints**
No. 10. The Mummy's Foot.....**Theophile Gautier** 527
Hermionthis, Princess of Egypt, Returns for her Lost Foot
- The Tiger**.....**William Blake** 534
Verse
- Things That Are God's**.....**C. Franklin Miller** 536
The Wolf-man Comes to his Senses Through a Terrible Crime
- The Yellow Specter**.....**Stewart Van der Veer** 541
Old Spanish Prison—a Terrified Bride—the Ghost of a Chinaman
- The Glacier Lode**.....**Strickland Gillilan** 549
Soapy Sam Was Balmy, so his Friends Thought
- On the Dead Man's Chest (Conclusion)**.....**Eli Colter** 553
Four-part Occult Serial
- The Eyrie**..... 556
A Chat With the Readers

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*Terrible Was the Vengeance Prepared by
Ling Foo for the Lover of Ti Ling*

TEETH

By GALEN C. COLIN

PAUL VERMAIN awoke slowly. His blue eyes blinked. He stretched his long form painfully. His strength was hardly enough to lift his blond head from the floor on which he lay. As full consciousness came to him, he gazed about. Above, beneath, on all sides, nothing but closely fitted masonry. A tightly barred window of tiny dimensions admitted the dim light. This was a new experience, which the young American could not fathom.

His last memory was of the wonderful Chinese twilight, as he lingered at the wall of old Ling Foo's garden, awaiting Ling Foo's goldenly beautiful daughter, Ti Ling. He recalled, now, a faint sweet odor coming to his

nostrils. He had felt a strange drowsiness stealing upon him, and wondered if the scent could be from the white poppies across the wall. He had rested his head on the wall for a minute—then this awakening.

As his strength returned, he arose. A careful search revealed that nothing had been taken from him while he slept. His clothing was not even mussed or awry. Robbery evidently was not the motive. His cell was entirely devoid of furniture; it contained not even a bench or box, but by standing on tiptoe he could just reach the grated window with his eyes. The grounds outside were strangely familiar, in a sort of warped and backward way. Then it dawned

upon him. He was staring at Ling Foo's garden, but from the side of the stately palace instead of the garden wall.

Why should he, Paul Vermain, representative of the Standard Oil Company in Hia Waku, be a prisoner in the old Chinese professor's home? True, Ling Foo was of the older generation and looked with great disfavor upon all foreign devils, but his hatred had never been active. True, the young American had held hands with Ti Ling, the daughter of Ling Foo, many times over the garden wall in the hazy dusk—but according to American standards there was nothing more than a little pleasurable indiscretion in this. Rack his brain as he would, Vermain could not untangle the mystery. Still drowsy, he lay down again, determined to puzzle his head no more, but to let the solution work itself out as it would.

He dozed.

Then a sound as of a bolt withdrawn awakened him. Still reclining, he opened his eyes. Directly above his face a stone moved; then it swung upward, revealing an opening not more than a foot square. A wrinkled and benevolent yellow face filled the aperture for a moment, and twinkling black eyes surveyed him. Then the face was withdrawn, and a small silver bucket on the end of a chain was lowered beside him. Raising himself on one elbow he lifted it. The contents looked like water. He tasted it. It was water, clear and cool. Becoming conscious of a great thirst, he drained a mighty draft.

The bucket fell from his grasp, its contents drenching his clothing. He tried to lift his hand to raise the bucket again. Every hint of power was gone. He could not even move his head. It was only by great effort that he summoned strength to close his eyelids. When they were closed it was a gigantic task to open them again. Yet the feeling of drowsiness

swiftly fled. While every muscle was paralyzed, his mind seemed stimulated to as great a degree. He could feel the discomfort of the uneven rock floor, but could not alleviate it by a single movement. Some strange and powerful drug had him firmly in its grip.

A door in the wall beside him swung silently open, and four half-clothed coolies entered. Without a word they lifted the American and carried him up a short flight of steps into a spacious room, topped by a skylight of orange glass. In the center of the room they deposited their burden on a teakwood table, hollowed to fit the body of a man most comfortably.

By great effort, Vermain forced his eyes to survey the room. Tiled walls and tiled floor were laid in queer mosaic patterns. Everywhere the same motif was repeated—a great dragon with widespread jaws, but toothless as an old hag. He had seen the design many times before, and cudged his brain to remember. Then it came to him. This was the insignia that graced the lintel of every Chinese dentist who had successfully fulfilled his apprenticeship on the graduated wooden pegs. It was more the sign of great strength of wrist and finger than of knowledge—but the practise of dentistry was a profession for the sons of mandarins alone in old China.

Then Vermain's eyes roved again. On the walls were panel after panel, all studded with wooden pegs of varying sizes and lengths. Nothing else but bare floor was visible. The truth rushed upon him. Here was where Ling Foo taught his pupils the quaint art of pulling teeth from unwilling jaws by main strength and artful twist. This table upon which he was lying was, beyond doubt, the scene of the final examination of the apprentices—actual practise on actual teeth.

The young American could not summon strength enough to shudder.

At his head, and consequently out of sight, he heard a door open. A babble of Chinese came to his ears. Although Vermain was fairly proficient in the ancient language, he could distinguish but few of the words, for each voice seemed to be trying to outdo the others. Then they were stilled by a voice, deep and resonant, which he recognized as coming from Ling Foo.

The old professor approached the table and stood at Vermain's feet. For several minutes the Chinaman gazed silently at the recumbent figure. The perpetual smile, the wrinkled but kindly old face, the close-fitting black skull cap and the folded hands gave old Ling Foo a peculiarly benevolent expression which his words could not dispel.

"Ling Foo welcomes the most honorable American to this most miserable hovel," began the old Chinaman in his singsong salutation. "The Gods have been good to Ling Foo, the unworthy. They have ordained the white man's visit when Ling Foo's need was the greatest. The hour of the tests of the unworthy pupils was at hand. There was no fitting subject. Then the American comes with his strong, white teeth. Truly the Gods are good."

Words and words—but no explanation. It was now that fear entered Vermain's mind for the first time. He tried to speak, but even his tongue was paralyzed. He wanted to explain that there was some mistake; that he was Vermain, representative of the Standard Oil Company; that he had never harmed Ling Foo; that he was the warm friend—in fact, the accepted lover of Ling Foo's daughter. He wanted to tell Ling Foo that he would feel greatly honored to make Ti Ling his wife in the good old American way. It was no use, the words would not come.

Slowly the old man turned to the waiting pupils, and as he beckoned, he called out a name.

"Fang Tu, come hither. To you, most honorable son of Wu Fang, shall be the honor of the first test."

With wrinkled thumb and finger Ling Foo opened the unresisting jaws of the subject.

"Look," he said to the waiting pupil, "the teeth are tight-set and strong. It will be a test worthy of all the skill Ling Foo has taught you. See, the one next the first molar. The roots are straight—but long and fast-grown to the flesh. The tooth is small, and your grip must be powerful. Ah—it started, but your fingers slipped. Try again—a twist to the right and a twist to the left—now a straight pull. See the red, clean blood! That was worthy of your master."

The white man's body twitched in agony, but he was powerless to move. Only the pressure of finger and thumb was needed to keep his jaws apart, so potent was the drug that bound his muscles. The blood from the wounded mouth almost strangled him, until the old professor and his pupil rolled the unresisting form over and let the red fluid drip on the tiled floor.

Then another pupil was called—and still another—until six teeth had left their moorings in agony. Clean extractions, worthy of China's best, brought exclamations of pride and pleasure to the happy pupils from the old teacher. Bungling work that crushed flesh and bone was followed by clucks of impatience at inferior skill. With each operation Vermain's agony became worse, until it was unbearable. Then he fainted.

WHEN the young American awoke it was dawn of another day. The effect of the drug had worn off and his strength had returned. The jaw with the toothless holes was inflamed and swollen. It ached ter-

ribly. His throat was parched, and his whole body was crying for water. Yet he determined that not another drop would pass his lips in this hell-hole. Frantically he shook the bars; they were so strong that the strength of six men would not have budged them. The door was close-fitting and barred from the outside. He could not move it. In despair he paced the floor of the tiny cell.

It was midday when the trap-door was opened and the bucket was lowered. With a thick-voiced curse that was half groan, Vermain snatched it up and dashed it against the wall. Silently the trap closed, and he was again alone with his thirst and pain. Near evening the torturers again offered him water, and again he refused it.

The night was one of almost madness. Thirst and pain filled the hours, and gradually thirst took the ascendancy. The thickly swollen lips uttered growling curses.

Came morning, and with it another offer of water. Vermain clutched the bucket and drew back his arm to dash it at the wall. He stayed his hand. He gazed at the cool, crystal-clear liquid. With a groan, he drained the vessel. He sank to the floor inert.

Once more the coolies came and carried him to the torture chamber. This time but four teeth were dragged from the protesting jawbone when merciful unconsciousness came. Vermain awoke again, and found water beside him. This time he drank. Thirst was supreme over pain.

Six days elapsed before the last tooth was pulled, by the master himself. Vermain was almost mad with the agony of body and mind. He had long given up hope of rescue or escape. Death seemed certain, for the Chinese would not dare liberate their prisoner to tell his story. A delirious fever developed, and he raved through three mad days. He lived over again the agony of the torture table—yet at

intervals the cool, small hand of Ti Ling seemed to ease his aching brow. It was during these intervals that the countenance of Ling Foo would darken with hate as he peered through the trap-door at the stricken foreigner; for it enraged him to hear a white devil making tender love to his daughter, even in delirium.

Then one morning the fever left the American and he sank to the floor, weak and exhausted. This time the bucket contained nothing but water, cool and sparkling. His abundant vitality soon responded to food and drink, and he became almost himself again.

LING FOO'S decision was made. The four frightened coolies entered and overpowered their weakened prisoner. Then they bound his wrists behind his back. Again Vermain was taken to the chamber of tortures, but this time there were no waiting pupils.

Directly to the table in the center moved the prisoner and his guards. A glance at the bed of horrors brought a shudder of remembrance to his frame, for on the table, pegged in one long row in a testing frame, were all the teeth that had once been so much a part of him—and that had been so painfully removed. Vermain closed his eyes against the sight for a long minute.

He opened them again at a soft touch on his arm. Beside him was Ti Ling, lovely as the lotus blossom. Vermain's heart leapt at the sight of her. The love that he thought so strong before now overwhelmed him. Gone were his misgivings. She was Mongolian—he was white. Very well, what would be the difference? He was soon to die, but living or dead, Ti Ling was his.

Timidly she looked at her lover with pitying eyes. Then she started as their eyes met. In his was no hint of fright or pain—they were

brimming over with love. A blush suffused her golden skin and her gaze fell. A tremor of joy shook her slender frame. Then both raised their eyes to the figure across the table.

Ling Foo was seated in his great carved chair—his feet on the golden footstool. Gorgeous mandarin robes covered his spare body, and the tasseled cap decorated the shaven head. Across his knees rested the long, curved sacrificial sword.

His voice, now harsh with hatred, startled the lovers.

"O, miserable Ti Ling," he snarled, "see to what depths of agony the foreign devil has gone, that he should presume to covet the daughter of Ling Foo, the mandarin! His pain and anguish have been so great that the Gods have only permitted him to live through it that he might suffer the last stroke at the hands of Ling Foo. I have made him hideous in your sight so that through the ages that will be your memory of him. I have seen love for him in your eyes, and for that madness you shall also die. With the sacrificial sword of my ancestors will the vengeance be taken. Look at this unsightly creature, Ti Ling, and hate him as I do."

"O, my father," said Ti Ling, in a low clear voice, "though you cut off his ears, dig out his eyes, pull out his hair, sever each hand and foot, yet would I love this American. Gladly do I go to death with him."

Ling Foo's face turned the color of pale old ivory. His hands shook with rage. Several times he tried to speak and could not. He grasped the great sword in both hands and raised to his feet for the fatal stroke. The weapon flashed a baleful reflection as it was lifted above the old Chinaman's head. It began to descend, and Ti Ling bowed her head to receive its force on her slender neck.

The sword clattered to the floor, and Ling Foo flung his arms wildly forward to catch himself as the golden footstool overturned beneath his stamping feet. The flying hands found the table's edge too late as the shaven head came down with a crash upon the long row of firm white teeth. The old professor's body went limp as it rolled from the table, taking with it, firmly imbedded in the left temple, a long, sharp incisor.

THE Standard Oil Company's representative in Hia Waku is an upstanding young American, blue of eye and blond of hair. His pearly white teeth are the delight of his goldenly beautiful Chinese wife, Ti Ling. You would say that Paul Vermain's teeth are his own; and truly they are—all but one that is buried with the dust of Ling Foo. The teeth he gathered from the teakwood table in the palace of Ling Foo made a trip across the Pacific to the best dentist in the States—and the plates are marvels of dental art.

