

# Weird Tales

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## Contents for November, 1926

- Cover Design ..... E. M. Stevenson  
*Illustrating a scene from "The Peacock's Shadow"*
- The Peacock's Shadow ..... E. Hoffmann Price 580  
*A tale of devil-worship and the Adytum of Darkness—a mystery story of graphic action and exotic imagery*
- The Star Shell (Part 1) ..... George C. Wallis & B. Wallis 597  
*A four-part weird-scientific serial about a thrilling voyage to the planet Jupiter*
- November ..... A. Leslie 618  
*Verse*
- The Parasitic Hand ..... R. Anthony 619  
*A terrific life-and-death struggle between a living man and a hand that groped among his vitals*

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The City of Spiders**.....**H. Warner Munn** 625  
*A complete novelette of shuddery horror and eery fascination that will remain long in your memory*
- The Creature of Man**.....**Oscar Cook** 647  
*A Chinese tale about a cruel mandarin and the terrible deception that was practised by his majordomo*
- The Ode to Pegasus** .....**Maria Moravsky** 659  
*A dream-tale of the winged horse, and the yearnings of a boy to fly in the sky*
- The Fiend of the Marsh**.. **R. E. Lewis & Martha M. Cockrill** 663  
*The haunted marsh-woods finally gave up the dread secret that had terrorized the community*
- The Tenth Commandment** .....**Victor Rousseau** 677  
*The third in a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky, "The Surgeon of Souls"*
- The Assault Upon Miracle Castle**.....**J. M. Hiatt** 684  
*Into one of the "holes in space," into another dimension, stepped a horde of Moorish warriors*
- For Clytie** .....**Binny Koras** 689  
*Verse*
- Across Space (Conclusion)**.....**Edmond Hamilton** 690  
*A three-part weird-scientific serial—strange beings under Easter Island pull the planet Mars from its orbit*
- The Dog-Eared God**.....**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 699  
*There were strange kings in the old forgotten days in Egypt, and they would not brook irreverent modern prying*
- The Caves of Kooli-Kan**.....**Robert S. Carr** 704  
*Verse*
- Weird Story Reprint**  
**No. 17. Ligeia** .....**Edgar Allan Poe** 705  
*This is the story that Poe himself considered his supreme prose masterpiece*
- The Eyrie** ..... 715  
*A chat with the readers*

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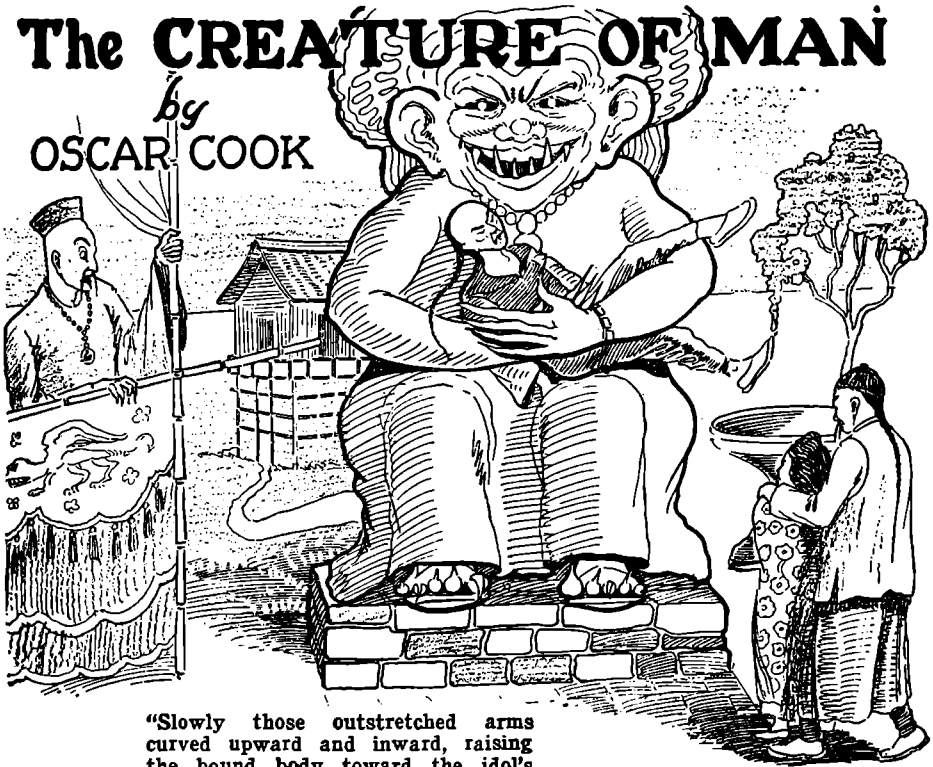
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# The CREATURE OF MAN

by  
OSCAR COOK



"Slowly those outstretched arms curved upward and inward, raising the bound body toward the idol's breast."

**T**HROUGHOUT the great palace of Tey Bee Yong, governor of a vast province in the interior of China, the atmosphere was heavy with tense expectancy, pregnant with a sense of troubled fear.

Within the palace itself, under the eyes of a stern, expressionless, toothless majordomo, the indoor servants quailed, answering by some subtle instinct his unspoken commands, moving about with that silent stealth, the combination of their nature and their fear.

In the outer courtyards the most menial of the servants—little better than slaves and less cared for and tended than pigs and fowls—scarcely dared to breathe and only dared to express their dull, untutored thoughts in whispers.

From every window of the palace,

which stood upon one of twin hills, myriad fantastic lamps gave forth their lights, winking like colored stars upon the houses that huddled in the plain beneath. From the crest of the sister hill on which was built the great Temple of Parenthood, a solitary, mighty light gleamed heavenward. It came from the huge lantern that burned day and night before the great carved ivory and golden altar, dedicated to the brooding spirit who ruled the destinies of child-birth.

The accomplished days were numbered. Hours, perhaps only minutes, now stood between the supreme moment, when the hopes of a people and the burning desires of Tey Bee Yong would be realized to the uttermost, or despair and cruel anger once again stalked the land. For the wife

of Tey Bee Yong was in the pangs of childbirth.

Tey Bee Yong, the omnipotent, governor of the mightiest and largest province in China, potentate over the lives and destinies of ten million people, possessor of a hundred wives and twice as many concubines, was still without a son.

This night——?

From the palace to the temple a steady stream of servants flowed, laden with offerings from the deep and those strange lands across the sea that basked in perpetual sunshine and torrential rains. Sharks' fins and birds' nests, cuttlefish and sea-slugs; the scented woods from vast and almost untrodden jungles, gave off their aromatic perfumes from a thousand joss-sticks that burned before and upon the ivory and golden altar. Sucking-pig and fowl and sweets, decked with fantastic frills and colored paints, were laid in great profusion before the weird effigy of the spirit-god, upon whose extended arms was placed the image of a naked man-child, carved from a solid block of age-old amber.

The temple courts were filled with priests whose shaven heads, bowed in almost ceaseless supplication, glistened like ivory balls in the glare of the great lantern. Naked were they all save for their baggy trousers; against the dull ivory of their skin their long, black, oiled pigtails gleamed like dark weals of wo—the stripes of a burdened people, symbols of an age-long superstition.

In the squalid houses on the plain, smoke from the open fires all but obscured the fitful light of flickering torch and candle. Round the fires huddled the almost soulless inmates, hungrily filling their half-starved bellies with a meager fare of sweet potatoes—for of rice there was none, since for the fifth year in succession the crop had failed. Even to them far removed, yet under the shadow

of the palace, the air of tense expectancy and troubled fear had spread. One topic and one only passed their thin pinched lips. They spoke in the cracked, weak voice begotten of poverty and endless utter dejection.

Before the cheap painted wooden *pikongs* in each house the joss-sticks burned, adding their quota to the smoky, stuffy atmosphere; carved sweet potatoes, representing pigs and fowls, and dyed vermilion, blue and green, rested upon trays before the pictured image of the god.

“Oh, that a man-child would be born this night!” Such was the burden of the people's prayers. For with his birth the curse of famine would depart and plenty once again spread over the land. This was the superstition, the edict of the priests of the great temple on the hill. The blight of famine would continue and spread, year upon year—unless an heir was granted to the land to carry on the rule of Tey Bee Yong, the heaven-born lord, beloved of Confucius.

“Oh, that a man-child would be born this night!” As a whispering wind, as the swell of waters, as the distant tramp of feet, as a living, breathing, moving spirit the cry, though almost silent and nearly inarticulate, seemed to permeate the air—the cry of despair that yet expressed hope.

**I**N A room hung with gold and black silken draperies, upon a multitude of cushions reclined Tey Bee Yong, outwardly impassive and calm. By his side was his opium pipe, which he raised to his lips, as frequently he filled its blackened bowl with tapering, nervous fingers, the long nails of which glistened in the lamplight like the talons of a bird of prey. His almond eyes were narrowed to the merest slits, his forehead was creased into thin, graven lines. Over his lower lip the two front teeth, large, yellow, and discolored, fell like two slabs of

ancient ivory. His thin lips were bloodless, his ears abnormally large.

Thus he waited—waited like the very meanest of his people for the coming of the child that meant so much. But his anxiety was only for his pride, not for the hungry populace.

Outside, the sound of feet coming along a corridor reached his ears. Just for a moment his impassiveness gave way and he raised himself upon his cushions. Then as the steps passed by he sank back, his fingers hungrily groping for his pipe. He raised it to his mouth, unfilled, then put it down and struck upon a gong that stood by his side.

The door opened in due course and the majordomo stood bowing before him.

“Chow Lim,” the words were soulless, expressionless, “bring me a bowl of bird’s nest soup and——” Tey Bee Yong hesitated. In the silence Chow Lim waited. “And——” Again Tey Bee Yong paused. Though the world rocked, though his wife might die—still he could not, would not, show the tension that was his. Immemorial custom barred the way.

Still Chow Lim waited, his body bent in deep obeisance, his hands crossed over his breast.

A lantern by an open window, lit by twenty candles, flickered, guttered and went out. A streak of darkness stretched across the room and in its passage rested on Tey Bee Yong’s face.

“And——”

A moaning cry of pain came stealing through the window from the courtyard below, followed by an infant wail.

With blazing eyes and outstretched finger pointing to the window, Tey Bee Yong spoke.

“Go! And cast her in the well of eels who thus has dared to break my rest, and throw her spawn into the

river that its blighted spirit may not dwell in nearness to my house. Go!”

Chow Lim bowed lower and departed.

Through a maze of passages he walked with rapid, silent footsteps, that yet seemed weighted with the low fatalism of the East.

From out a small door in the palace he emerged, and guided by unusual sounds, crossed the courtyard and entered one of several squalid huts.

Inside was confusion and distress. Upon dirty matting on the floor a woman lay, with closed eyes and faintly moving breast. She was so thin and worn it seemed impossible that she could have given the breath of life to another than herself. In the arms of a woman near by, a newborn babe, a man-child, was nestling. Over the smoking fire its father stirred some black, insipid gruel made from yams and sweet potatoes. Two dogs, in a corner, were fighting over the peelings.

Just for an instant Chow Lim stood still as the squalor of the scene struck even his unimpassioned senses. Just for a second he wondered whether the woman was not dead—so faint her breathing, so still she lay. Just for an instant——

The child’s wail rose above the snarling of the dogs. Chow Lim moved forward. Slowly, inevitably he drew near. Only three paces separated him from her who held the child. The mother opened her eyes in supplication—some instinct warned her of approaching harm—her lips moved, but speech was beyond her power. Over the fire the father crouched lower; his stirring ceased. With a moan he rolled to the ground; his body could endure no more, the blackness of a swoon and hunger enveloped him.

Close to the woman Chow Lim approached, his arms extended, his eyes and mien eloquent of command.

Over the tiny body his fingers crept. Then——

From the palace arose a long, despairing wail that stole out of the building, through the courtyard, down to the huddled houses on the plain. The great light streaming heavenward from the temple changed from its golden to a blood-red hue. The priests, on their knees before the altar, chanted a dirge of misery and wo.

Chow Lim stood still, hesitating. Then above the wail from the palace, louder than the temple dirge came the cry of many voices, a cry of fear. "The child is born, the child is born! But alas! it is no man-child, we must starve another year!"

In his room Tey Bee Yong waited for the confirmation of the cry which crept through the walls and reached his ears. Broken in two his opium pipe lay on the ground at his feet. Clenched were his hands till the knuckles shone like polished bone in the flickering light. Into his lower lip his ivory, slablike teeth were biting till blood fell drip by drip.

Not many rooms away, his wife lay dying, unheeded and alone, bereft of her serving women and midwives, who with the callousness of their race and smitten with the prevailing dread had left her in her very hour of need. At her cold breast a tiny form was vainly pressing. Into the frail weak arms it wriggled and there lay still, silent save for its puny whimper. Faint as an autumn ray of sunshine a smile flickered over the mother's face; then light as a spring shower, her tears fell. Slowly her lips moved as she whispered with her dying breath:

"Dear little daughter, thou art not wanted,  
In this great China, this land of much wo,  
It were far better that Death now should claim  
thee,  
Than thou shouldst live the world's griefs to  
know.

"Dear little daughter, accursed for thy woman-  
hood,  
Born to be sold, or exchanged, or just bartered,  
A slave and a drudge till the end of thy days,  
Creature of man and his——"

The whisper ceased. The joss-sticks smoldered, then died out. The lamps flickered with uncertain light.

IN THE hut in the courtyard Chow Lim's fingers fastened on the tiny body, and as they did so he formed a great resolve. Gently he took possession of the child. Then with a ghost of a smile at the weeping mother he passed out. Back through the maze of passages he traveled up to the room where the dead woman lay. Silently, almost secretly, he entered. With the ensuing draft from the opening door the lamps went out. Darkness and a child's whimper.

Quickly he crossed to Tey Bee Yong's wife, and in her arms placed the man-child. Quickly he seized the baby daughter, and placed his hand over its mouth, then in the darkness re-crossed the floor. His footsteps hurried out in the passage with an unaccustomed haste. Once again he reached the courtyard, entered the hut and put down his burden. He spoke no word, but with a gesture, unmistakable in its authority, commanded complete silence. Then he departed.

Slowly he retraced his steps, wondering as he walked what strange freak of fancy, what curious twist of psychology, had been the cause of his unprecedented action.

Just for a moment fear seized him, fear at his temerity in pitting his strength against the god, fear at his audacity in so attempting to deceive Tey Bee Yong. As he reached the door where the dead woman lay, he trembled from head to foot and a cold sweat broke out over him. He had dared the gods, defied their decree! He was deliberately about to lie to Tey Bee Yong, the omnipotent! Irresolute he stood, hesitating to enter.

Why had he done this thing? Why? To his unspoken thoughts no answer came, but before his eyes appeared the picture of his own erst-

while wife, whose golden lilies\* were far-famed, whose curved vermilion lips his own had so often kissed, whose head of shiny well-oiled hair had lain upon his breast, whose cheeks so lightly brushed with scented pearl-dust had nestled near his own, lying dead and dishonored, killed by the passion and cruelty of his master, Tey Bee Yong.

The beating of a gong broke in upon his troubled thoughts. The imperious sound awakened in him the necessity for action; gave him the courage to play his part. Quickly he entered the room, picked up the child, then, calm and collected, impassive as of old, hastened to obey the summons.

"My lord," the words were laden with respect.

From the contemplation of his opium pipe Tey Bee Yong looked up to find Chow Lim bowing before him, and in his arms a child.

"Cast that most accursed spawn, that female toad into the river. And she who gave it birth, accursed and hated by the gods, drive forth from out my gates with ignominy. Burn on her forehead the brand of shame, for she sold herself for food and raiment, lived for a year in wealth and comfort, then failed to give her lord a man-child. Go!"

"My lord." Deeply Chow Lim made his obeisance, then stood erect. Thus for a brief moment he faced Tey Bee Yong, then the child's whimper broke the silence.

"Son of an evil mother!" cried Tey Bee Yong as he raised himself from his cushions. "Dost dare to pause upon my command? Go, ere my wrath burst bounds. Go!"

"My lord, most honorable master," began Chow Lim, and his voice, though humble, held some quality of compulsion. "Thy servant for many years craves thy pardon for his disobedience, yet is he emboldened thus to dare thy wrath, for those whose

voices reached thine ears a little while ago, did lie. They spoke of what they knew not but only of their fears. See, lord, what I thy humble slave and majordomo bring to thee. For this, and this alone, dare I delay in execution of thine honor's will."

As he paused for breath, Chow Lim stretched out his arms, showing the child to Tey Bee Yong.

"Oh, heaven-born master, gracious lord, behold the great god of the mighty temple has answered thy prayer. See, into thy arms I place the longed-for man-child."

A slow silence crept over the room as Tey Bee Yong with the child in his arms rocked slowly on his feet. A whimper broke the silence. It startled Tey Bee Yong. Into the arms of Chow Lim he thrust the child, then with a sudden thought asked:

"And she who bore this child, this son of mine, this infant of the god most blessed, what of her? Give to her all attention, double the number of her serving women, for I will raise her to my side and take her to my own most intimate habitation. Hasten, Chow Lim, and do my bidding; prepare her for my visit, for I would speak with her. Go! And for thyself there shall also be rewards."

Chow Lim bowed low.

"My lord, though the god has given thee a son, in the giving hath he claimed the mother, for Moi Kam Moi, thine honor's latest and best-beloved wife, is dead. Yet shall the child live and so delight thine eyes. Thus shall he perpetuate the heaven-born's fame and so give plenty to this stricken land."

He bowed again and silently departed. For fully a minute Tey Bee Yong stood still, motionless as an ivory image. Then he struck the gong. Chow Lim himself answered the call.

"Bring me another pipe," Tey Bee Yong's voice was calm and expressionless, "for this of evil workman-

\* bound-up feet.

ship is broken in two. And send Kiu San Kiu to me. My eyes would feast upon her sinuous form, my mouth taste her vermilion lips, my arms feel her soft body in their sweet embrace. Go!"

Far into the night Chow Lim was busy making arrangements for the care and tending and upbringing of the changeling child.

Over the land the news was spreading. In the months that followed, from East to West and North to South the fields were heavy and golden with the thick ears of ripening grain.

## 2

SEVENTEEN years had passed since the birth of Tey Bee Yong's child—years of plenty for the populace. Never a breath of suspicion blew upon Chow Lim; not for an instant did Tey Bee Yong suspect; never a word was spoken by the inmates of the hovel.

Only in the palace and its precincts there grew up two children, who by some freak or fantasy of the god were in the end most strangely drawn together.

Yong Bee Tey—for so was the man-child named—was good to look upon. Tall and straight of limb, with open eyes and smiling countenance, he held his father's pride and such affection as was his. In all things was he indulgent save one—his future marriage. On this one point his father was the stern, unbending autocrat. For there was one, the pale-faced limping daughter of a far-off governor, whose province adjoined that of Tey Bee Yong, with whom he intended his son should wed; that with the union his ambition for aggrandizement might be fed and he redeem his pledge. For, as was the custom of the land, the children in infancy had been affianced by their parents' bond.

Across the sky dark clouds were

seudding. Faster they came and thicker they grew, till in the west they banked one upon the other, then spread across the star-flecked sky. Out of the east a wind came roaring, then ceased with a startling suddenness. The clouds pressed lower and then broke, dragging the earth with torrential rain. Peal upon peal of mighty thunder; flash upon flash the lightning played.

But Tey Bee Yong's son, returning home from the hunt, heeded not the storm, for just before reaching the outer walls of the palace he would pass a tiny, disused gardener's hut. There he would find his heart's desire, his pearl beyond all price, his Ming Po Ming, whose peach-bloom cheeks were innocent of pearl-dust, whose lips pouted a natural redness richer than vermilion paint, whose sleek-black hair, untouched with oil, outvied that of other maidens, whose golden lilies were beyond compare.

As he approached he sang for the very lightness of his heart, while his pulse beat quicker at the thought of holding her soft form in his embrace. Just as he turned a bend in the path a vivid sheet of lightning lit up earth and sky. In its glare he beheld the hut and Ming Po Ming framed in its doorway.

For a moment his heart stood still and his blood seemed turned to water as he saw her flinch before the sudden glare. Then with a run and a bound he reached the hut, and she was in his arms.

"Ming Po, Ming Po, sweet flower of my heart," he murmured, "thou must not stand so at the door, when such a storm is raging; what should I do, sweet blossom, if the lightning struck thee down?"

For answer she nestled closer in his arms, then shyly whispered: "Ah! but I could not wait to feast my eyes upon my best beloved. If he be in the storm, shall not Ming Po then watch for his return? What is



a little rain, a little thunder and a little glare compared to her great love?"

"Ming Po, beloved!" And once again his lips met hers and all the world was lost to them. Thus did they stand, oblivious of the storm without, murmuring such words as only lovers know.

But in a world of stern reality such moments, though they hold an age, must pass, nor is their power supreme enough to triumph over fear and dread, those deep-born instincts of the serf and poor. And so—

There came a clap of thunder, louder than the rest, that startled Ming Po and by its seeming unexpectedness awoke her quiescent fears. Slowly she disentangled herself from Yong Bee's embrace; then with a pensive gesture smoothed out the wrinkles of her coat and trousers, the while he watched, wondering yet conscious of some forceful intrusion.

Over the room a silence crept as the storm with unearthly suddenness ceased. Through cracks in the walls and holes in the roof a chill wind found its way. Ming Po shuddered—was it from cold or fear?—and slowly her tears fell.

"Ming Po!" The words were wrung from Yong Bee. "Ming Po!" and he moved toward her, but with upraised hand she motioned him away.

Wondering, he obeyed the gesture and waited.

"Beloved, king of my heart, I am afraid. You are the governor's son; I—I am only the daughter of his meanest servant."

"Yet the jewel of my life," Yong Bee could not restrain the words, nor the fervent love and longing in their tone.

Through her tears Ming Po smiled a silent answer and then continued: "I am afraid and sore distressed. Only today I heard Chow Lim relate how that thy father had decreed that

thy marriage must take place before the waning of two moons. If so, it so—"

Tears choked her voice. Her sorrow broke down Yong Bee's good intents and once again he found his arms around her, and hot passionate words of love fell from his lips.

"Flower of my heart, most priceless jewel in all the world, thou must not weep so. Dry thy poor tears; nor ever think that I can cease to love thee, nor that my father's will can force me to a marriage with that limping, pale-faced daughter from the North."

"But of Chow Lim I am afraid."

"Chow Lim! My best beloved fearful of a servant? Nay, nay, whence comes thy fear?"

"I do not know—I can not say, and yet—he seems to fill me with a fear. It is as if he served a purpose of his own; as if behind his face of masklike blankness there lay a knowledge all his own. Always I feel his eyes upon me. He seems to see what others do not notice. His thin lips droop with a cruel twisted smile whenever he meets me. Only today he stopped me as I came to meet thee; pinched my arm and tweaked my chin, then with a dart his fingers reached my neck. He felt the amber necklace thou didst give me, pulled it from my neck and then—was gone."

The last two words, faint as a whisper, just reached Yong Bee. Just for a moment Ming Po's glance, in which fear and love were struggling for the mastery, met his gaze, then over her shining almond eyes the heavy lids fell and unconscious she lay in his arms.

Slowly the fear that was hers stole into his brain; slowly he realized the danger that confronted them. Their secret was out! Chow Lim held them in the hollow of his hand; his power was second only to his father's. Some even said he ruled the land, for since the day of Yong Bee's birth,

his honor and power had steadily grown in silent, subtle ways, till he alone held the ear of Tey Bee Yong who, sodden with opium and degenerate with excessive lusts, leant more and more upon his strength.

Into the pale face of Ming Po, Yong Bee looked lovingly. No paint nor pearl-dust marred her beauty. Light as thistledown she lay in his arms; the scarlet of her 'golden lilies' the only touch of color in her clothes. And as he looked he marvelled at her features. There was no beauty in the land like hers. Whence came such perfectness? How was such loveliness born of menial parentage? Surely the god of childbirth moved in strange and subtle ways.

"Chow Lim!" In her swoon Ming Po was muttering, murmuring the words of her great fear.

What was the knowledge that he held locked in the fastness of his mind? What was the purpose that he served—the purpose all his own? Yong Bee wondered, for he did not know the story of Chow Lim's wife.

Then once again the thunder rolled and the vivid lightning forked the sky. Once again the rain poured down in unaccustomed fury. The frail shelter of the disused hut proved but little protection from the storm. Yet they must wait, for between them and the palace stretched a river, now running in spate, the roar of whose waters almost equaled that of the thunder.

Gradually Ming Po recovered from her swoon, and though cold and still fearful, yet found some warmth and comfort in Yong Bee's arms.

**I**N THE great palace on the hill Chow Lim was waiting. The hour of his destiny was approaching; his mind seemed akin to the fury of the storm. Each night during seventeen years his prayer as he lit the *pikongs* had been the same. Each night ere troubled sleep had touched his eyes

his vision had never changed—the vision of his wife cold in death and dishonor and shame. And now—

The beating of a gong broke in upon his reverie. Silently, impassively, as of old he obeyed the summons and stood bowing low before Tey Bee Yong.

"Chow Lim." Tey Bee's voice had lost its strength and vigor. In the large room it sounded cracked and husky. Between words its owner's breath wheezed in gusty puffs. One ivory slablike tooth was missing from the now loosely hanging lower lip. The almond eyes were almost lost in heavy rolls of fat that encased the deep caverns of their sunken sockets. The creases on his forehead were graven deeper than of old. Only the long fingernails glistened in the lamplight as of yore.

"Chow Lim."

"My lord," Chow Lim was almost servile in his complete obeisance.

"Where is my son?"

"Thy honor's son?"

"Yea, my son. Fully two hours have I, Tey Bee Yong, the blessed of Confucius, governor omnipotent, been waiting thus, and yet he does not come. I whose commands have never yet been broken, whose slightest wish is weighted with the fear of death, I, lord of the lives of all my subjects, I have waited! Only my love has kept my wrath from bursting. Tell me, Chow Lim, where is my son? Tell me, I say, or shall thy home be blasted?"

Through the great room the cracked voice echoed, for it held an intensity of emotion, of love and anger and wounded pride, that would not be denied. Just for a moment before that fateful figure of omnipotence Chow Lim wavered in his resolve; just for a moment his courage failed. Then once again the vision came before his eyes, and slowly he spoke each word with steadfast calm.

"My lord, the offspring of my honored master, is—how should I know, my lord? I do not spy upon the movements of thy honor's honored child. It is not meet that I—and yet——"

"Spawn of a filthy mother, whose shameful wife I cast from out this land, beware! If thou knowest aught, then speak; if not then close thy mouth, else will I send thee back whence thou camest."

Tey Bee's wrath had burst its bounds. In his unbridled rage he thus taunted Chow Lim with those sad happenings of the bygone years. Careless of all and cruel in the belief of his omnipotence he thus set fuel to the fire of Chow Lim's yet wavering thoughts. Yet not an eyelid quivered, not a muscle twitched to betray the storm of hate within his heart as Chow Lim, in answer, bowed low his head, extending outward both his palms in token of servitude and submission.

"Oh, heaven-born princee, beloved of Confucius, thy servant hears. Thy words, thy slightest wish, as ever, are his commands. Hear me, oh lord, for I would speak the truth. Yet if my words should anger thee, I crave thee withhold thy wrath from me, thy humble slave; remember, oh honored master, the years of my untiring service."

Chow Lim ceased and silence filled the room. It was as if these two, the governor and the servant, fought a duel; and in the end the servant won, for with a heavy sigh Tey Bee sank back among the cushions from which he had risen and with a weary gesture of his hand signified consent.

"My lord," Chow Lim began, "how better can thy servant break the news to thee than by a question? Whom does the dove seek among the branches of the trees when spring is in the air? The mighty dragon, symbol of thine honored race, prowling in unpeopled lands when the new

buds are blossoming upon the trees, whom does he seek, oh master? The snake, shed of his year-old skin and conscious of his——"

"Enough!" The cry was wrung from Tey Bee Yong, who with blazing eyes and quivering lips sat upright among his cushions. "Enough! Thou meanest——?"

"That youth will serve its instinct and find a mate of its own choosing. My lord, 'tis ever so. Thou mayest command; thy will may be enforced; yet in the heart of youth there lies a depth unplumbed. And so I fear——"

Skillfully now in turn, Chow Lim added fuel to the fire of his master's wrath and with consummate cleverness played on his curiosity.

He paused and then repeated, "And so I fear that thine honor's child may prove indeed his likeness to his sire and so possess a will immovable. Love is the life of youth. 'Tis meat and drink to those that are ahungered and athirst. It knows no stooping, counts not its condescension; heeds but the lips and eyes, nor thinks of birth or rank, and I am afraid——"

"Of what? What dost thou fear? What wouldst convey with thy insinuations?"

Once again Chow Lim extended his arms with the palms of his hands uppermost ere he continued.

"That the insidious disease called love, which saps the strength of those who do contract it, which enters their blood and breeds a curious madness that warps their views and so corrupts their wills that they acquire a stubbornness beyond all reason, so that they do forget the tenets of their land and faith and the true teaching of the great Confucius that youth should reverence age and bow before its will, may seize thy honor's offspring in its grasp and so bring desolation on this land."

"Thou liest." The words were a very snarl, a blend of pain and wrath. "Thou liest. No child of mine, while I yet live, shall mate save under my commands, nor wed the one save whom I choose. And I have chosen. In the North is one affianced from birth. Love! I do not know its meaning. Figure and form that do delight the eyes, a body that can bear a son—such do I ask and such will I command. Such can I find among the great ones of the land. There is no will in all the land save mine." Tey Bee, exhausted by the vehemence of his spirit, fell back among his cushions, glaring at Chow Lim with blazing eyes.

"And yet——" Reluctance and grief and fear were in the pause, but Tey Bee knew not that they were simulated.

The storm had passed. Through the window gleamed the moon. In the hut by the river it lighted on Ming Po's face. It gave to Chow Lim the inspiration of his life.

"My lord, behold the moon. Under its silvery light, beneath the magic of its spell, the love disease grows strongest, for lovers best care to meet when the great orb is highest in the sky. 'Tis then the madness grips them and lips meet lips. 'Tis then that duty, honor, filial piety are shed and only naked, longing souls remain. Near to the river whose roaring waters can now be heard, yet which will soon subside, there stands a hut, disused and old. There, of a night, thy servant, lord, hath seen two lovers meet. Each month when the moon was full they met. Thy slave paid them no heed—thy pigs and fowls find mates—until——"

Chow Lim paused once again to watch the tortured face of Tey Bee Yong. In very truth the hour was come. Then he continued with relentless calm.

"Until this night thy servant recognized a voice that drove the blood

from out his veins—the voice of thine honor's child."

From nerveless fingers Tey Bee's opium pipe fell to the ground to break in two—just as his pipe had broken of yore. The great head nodded from side to side. The loosened, ivory, slablike tooth worked up and down the overhanging lower lip. The long-nailed fingers clawed his silken coat.

Slowly, with infinite effort, he opened his lips, but no sound came forth. Yet once again he tried. Faintly the whisper reached Chow Lim: "Water."

The latter crossed the room, filled a bowl, which he brought to his master. Deeply Tey Bee drank, then closed his eyes and waited. The years of excess had taken their toll; opium and lust now claimed their sway. Gone was omnipotence, might and power; only the husk of a man remained, to see life's dream fading.

"My lord," Chow Lim was speaking and his voice held now a note of pleading. "Yet trust thy servant, who serves but thee. All is not lost if I do act tonight, for I have found an antidote to this disease of love. Hark! even now the waters of the river are abating. Give me but leave to cross the river, reach the hut and take possession of those love-sick two. For the sake of thy great name and fame, oh honored master, for the love and gratitude I bear thy house, grant me this leave. Give me permission and unfettered power and I will cure the ill, restore thy child to thee and wreak such vengeance on that besotted offspring of a foul and leprous birth as shall establish for all time the fame of thy omnipotence."

Chow Lim ceased and for a minute, which seemed laden with ages, Tey Bee remained motionless, heedless of his words. Then with shaking forefinger, pointing to the door he whispered:

"As thou hast promised, so achieve. Let me be told the hour of vengeance that I may whet my jaded senses. Go."

OVER the east, dawn threw her first faint vaporous streamers. In the hut by the river, whose waters now ran calmly, Ming Po stirred restlessly in Yong Bee's arms, for sleep had overtaken them in the night. Her eyes opened and gazed upon his face. Her lips just pressed against his forehead. Over his hair her fingers strayed. For those few moments forgotten was her fear; she was content to be there in his arms and rest. Her lips, pouting and cool, were nearing his, when—a creaking noise just reached her ear. Quickly she turned, yet more quickly still a hand was placed upon her mouth and roughly she was pulled away. A thud, and Yong Bee was stretched unconscious on the floor. Over her head a darkness fell and once again she swooned.

## 3

A FLAMING ball of brass, the sun rode high in a cloudless sky. Before the great ivory and golden altar the joss-sticks burnt in great profusion and the great lamp, though dimmed by the midday sun, gave forth its mighty light.

The extended arms of the huge effigy of the spirit-god were empty, for the image of the naked man-child carved of age-old amber had been removed, since the day of Yong Bee Tey's birth.

The temple was deserted of its priests, for the hour was that of the midday meal. Over the sacred edifice a brooding spirit spread.

From the palace on the sister hill came the beating of a gong in twelve measured beats. Then silence. Then—through the outer courts came the unsteady, shuffling footsteps of men

who bore a heavy burden. Closer and closer they came, entered the central court, then stopped before the altar.

Over the knees of the spirit-god one climbed, then stood up. His fingers found the navel, which he pressed. A hidden door in the great abdomen opened, giving to view a cavern in which two mighty springs reposed in the bowels of the god.

Chow Lim—for he it was who, though holding not the priestly rank, yet dared to so approach the god—signed to the waiting men beneath to pass him up their burden. Into the bowels of relentless fate he thrust a living body; then closed the door, descended from the graven knees and with his four companions departed.

OVER the land a dusk was creeping. It seemed to meet and mingle with a darkling haze that rose from the water-logged rice-fields, to fill the sea and sky with weird fantastic shapes and wreaths that went eddying and circling heavenward till the bright light of the newly risen moon was dulled to opaqueness.

By twos and threes the inmates of the huddled houses on the plain wended their way toward the great temple, for the edict had gone forth that they should gather to witness the punishment of one who had presumed to foul and besmirch the fame and dignity of the great house of Tey Bee Yong, governor omnipotent of China's largest province.

From the palace to the temple a steady stream of servants flowed. In their hearts was fear, in their minds a morbid curiosity.

Down the hill, across the narrow valley, up the temple path a golden litter bore the great Tey Bee Yong. Carefully the bearers bore it, gently they placed it in an almost hallowed spot close to the ivory and golden altar.

To the right and left the priests and temple servants stood with bowed shaven heads and shining pigtails.

The air was heavy with smoke from the myriad joss-sticks. The fierce light from the great lantern rose ever heavenward.

From behind the altar came the sound of chanting—a doleful wail of plaintive note. Its volume increased as all in the temple took up the refrain. Then suddenly it ceased.

In the ensuing silence the high priest came before the altar. On either side four golden steps were placed. Those on the left he slowly climbed, then stepped upon the knees of the mighty idol.

Through the great concourse a shudder ran, and as a single sob their gasp of terror went echoing along the roof. For now they knew beyond mistake the dreadful scene that they must witness.

Silence! Silence heavy and heart-rending.

From afar there came faintly, then slowly louder, the sound of shuffling footsteps. Up the full length of the great court, right through the packed and trembling onlookers Chow Lim led a figure muffled from head to foot, whose groping, stumbling footsteps would in any other circumstances have been ridiculous. Up to the base of the ivory and golden altar he led that muffled, silent figure and then stopped.

From the knees of the god the high priest spoke.

“O people and servants of the most high Tey Bee Yong, our lord, our master who rules us by the will of heaven, a crime has been committed against his name and house and thus against the very Deity of our God himself, the ever blessed Confucius. One of low birth and menial parentage, by arts and magic, by subtle use of lips and limb and honeyed words and drooping eyes has dared to scheme alliance with the sacred, god-

descended house of Tey Bee Yong. For such a crime against our lord and master, for such impiety against the god, for the mere thought of so polluting the pure fount of birth, death is the only penalty.”

He paused and once again a shudder ran through the congregation. Then the priests took up the cry, “Death to the foul polluter; death in the bowels and arms of the god!” The cry grew louder as from the throats of those present it soared upward. “Death to the foul polluter; death in the bowels and arms of the god!”

Then as the high priest raised his hand the cry subsided and all was still.

The raised hand slowly descended, passed down the figure of the god, found and rested on the navel, pressed it—and up from the cavern the bound figure of a man was flung, bleeding and torn, to fall and rest upon the outstretched arms.

From the veiled figure by Chow Lim, there burst a piercing shriek: “Yong Bee, my beloved!” From the golden litter came a heavy groan: “My son, my son!” as stupefied and numb with horror Tey Bee looked on. From the vast congregation rose a cry of fear. Only the high priest and Chow Lim remained immovable.

Slowly those outstretched arms curved upward and inward, raising the bound body toward the idol’s breast; tighter the grip on the poor bound flesh. From the doomed wretch a cry was wrung: “Ming Po, my beloved!” Then with a shudder he hung limp and still.

Upward and inward those arms pressed—till the head fell limp on the shoulders, pressed till the legs dangled twisted in death.

Over the watching people a silence had fallen. Only the faint creaking machinery in the bowels of the god just faintly smote the air. Then—peal upon peal of maniac laughter as

the madness of Chow Lim broke bounds and the pent-up grievance of those years burst forth.

"Fool, fool!" he cried and pointed to the litter where the frozen image, Tey Bee Yong, sat dumb. "Thy day is done, thy name as dung upon the fields. Thou hast no son. That tortured wretch before thine eyes is not of thee, but of thy servant's stock, spawn of a swineherd's wife, whom I did change for thine own flesh and blood, the daughter of Moi Kam Moi. See, her full lips have met his lips of evil birth; her frail form lain in his foul embrace."

With a single rend he tore the draperies from Ming Po's body and with a bound bore her to the litter. "Thou hast called my wife a wanton,

named me of filthy birth; behold thy daughter and her shame, who spent a night in the disused hut in the arms of a swineherd's son. Thy day is done, thy name a byword to the people; fouled of thy stock, no longer shall thy sway be owned. Cursed of the god, this night thy end is near; yet ere thou diest, witness how thy wanton offspring dies, too."

Into his arms he gathered the almost fainting Ming Po to swing her round his head—then stopped as his gaze became fixed on Tey Bee's face. Slowly the frenzy left him. Into the litter he pushed his head.

Over the great stillness his whisper spread. "Dead! He's dead! Tey Bee Yong, the governor, the omnipotent, is dead."

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