

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 6

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 405 Holiday Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. T. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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THE FAN

By FRANK OWEN

Author of "The Wind That Tramps the World," "The Lantern-Maker." etc.

LI HSEIN sat before the door of her house, a shapeless huddled figure without form or outline. Once she had been famed for her beauty throughout the length of Canton. The poet who wrote *Songs to the Peonies* must have been thinking of just such a girl when he wrote, "She was of a loveliness to overthrow kingdoms." But now her youth had faded like an old sunset, and even the blush of evening had departed, leaving her wrinkled, scarred and old, her skin yellow and coarse as goose-flesh. The years, like great black ships, had floated silently out to sea and Li Hsein was left alone, a forgotten, broken old stout woman whose loveliness had once been almost legendary.

Her family too had all died, some of grief, some of age, some of subtle illnesses, but they were gone. They had passed through the great door which marks the beginning or the end according to one's point of view. Li Hsein alone remained, Li Hsein and the gorgeous yellow, carmine-splashed fan. Now as she sat by the doorway and the night blackness was drawn by the gods of the mountains like a great blanket up from the plains, the alley in which she dwelt almost vanished into the night mystery which is Canton. Only one shaft of light from within the house still cleft the blackness as though struggling for life. It was a flickering yellow glow and it fell upon the fan shimmering off in a maze of fan-

tastic colors of blended orange shades, yellow and vivid red. It was as though the fan resented the light and flung it back into the alleys. And Li Hsein, a shapeless mass, sat and crooned, forever waving the fan, crooned in a cracked harsh voice, broken melodies, unintelligible gibberish which might have been curses or prayers.

The shifting cycles of time are rather odd to contemplate. A few years and one is flung from one cycle of existence into another. The change is almost as great as the transition from one planet to another. In China the position of woman is on a very low plane, not much better than that of cattle or dogs. She is never allowed to walk beside her husband on the street, seldom is permitted to eat at the same table with him, and if she displeases him he is quite within his rights to beat her into insensibility. But none of these customs applied to Li Hsein. She looked down upon men. She openly sneered at them and they did not resent it. In all of China she was the one free woman.

When she smiled, men could not resist her. Tales are told of how Liu Wong, who was a great merchant, satisfactorily married and a blessing to his mother, left his ancestral home because Li Hsein smiled at him. He neglected his business, his large tea plantations and his banking offices. Failure crashed down to smite him, and when his wealth was gone, gone

also was the smile from the lips of Li Hsein. One morning his body was found half buried in the yellow mud by the river bank. There was no sign of violence upon it, but his lips had been torn from his face.

This was only one of a series of tragedies in which Li Hsein figured. A shipping agent named Chang wooed her. Later he, too, was found in the river mud, lifeless, with his lips missing. On the occasion of this second death people began to talk. No one spoke boldly, but there were vague whisperings. Li Hsein was a witch woman, daughter of a serpent who drank only human blood. Yet there were many who refused to give credence to such fantastic mutterings. Chief among these was Lin Sing, the scholar. Lin was a great philosopher who spent much of his time on the hilltops lost in profound meditation. He was a worshiper of beauty. That which was beautiful, he believed, was divine. When he saw Li Hsein for the first time his heart beat fast with love. She was a divinity, something to be worshiped, more fragrant than a flower, lovelier than a frost-tipped sunset or dawn rising above a yellow sea.

For a summer their love was something to tell about in legend. It put at rest all the vague mutterings about Li Hsein. Greater love there could not be. He adored her.

One day she returned to her home shrieking and crying frantically. Lin Sing, the scholar, was dead and all that life affords had been snatched from her. She wept and moaned and beat upon her breast. She implored the serpent that slept under Canton to devour her. Tragedy stalked that night throughout Canton. Neighbors wept and mourned with her. She and Lin Sing had been rambling through the mountains far from Canton when they were attacked by a mountain lion. Lin Sing

had fought the beast with his bare hands and had succeeded in keeping it back until she escaped, but he paid with his life. The wailing of the women who knew her continued until the body of the scholar was found. It had not been scratched. There was no sign of a struggle. But he had been dead for some time and his lips were missing.

After that people commenced to shun the beautiful Li Hsein. They turned from her on the street. They muttered magic words as they passed her door. And she kept on smiling, although she avoided everyone. During those days it was noticed that she had begun carrying the fan, the orange-red fan of fantastic design. She drew it across her face when she met people in the filthy winding alleys of Canton.

THE years rolled on. Other lovers came to her home, but they were strangers and no one questioned their coming nor their going. Whether they, too, died, who can say?

Li Hsein never married, and in time her beauty faded, her face became lined and coarse, her lips thickened. All her fine features seemed to slip from their moorings. Her nose grew flatter and the nostrils farther apart. The sheen died out of her hair. Her body grew stouter and stouter until she was but a bloated, shapeless mass. Every night she sat before her doorway with the fan. The years had not been kind to her. Each had extracted a charm from her, until she had no more to give.

One night John Stepling, an American explorer, chanced upon her. She was sitting crooning before her door. Stepling had heard the legends about her, and when she smiled at him, he paused.

"Won't you come in," she said softly, "that I may sing songs to you

such as you have never heard before?"

He accepted her invitation, and with a good deal of groaning and sighing she rose ponderously to her feet, a huge woman waving a monstrous fan. Li Hsein led the way through a dim-lit hallway, into a wide, spacious room beyond, a room of soft blue lights and fragrant colors, hung with rich tapestries. At one end of the room a vessel of incense burned and a slim gray thread of smoke curled up toward a blue-green lantern above. The light was subdued. It was kind to Li Hsein for it seemed to bring back much of youth to her coarse cheeks. It reformed her nose and thinned out her lips. She disappeared through a curtained doorway.

For a few minutes Stepling was left alone in the room wherein the incense burned. At last she returned, and her return marked her transformation. She was attired in a soft clinging orange-red gown and she was carrying the queer fan. She came to the center of the room and commenced to sing. She sang of love and enchantment; of green glades where tiny rivers flowed beneath the willows; of youth and laughter and young love. She sang of flowers, of gorgeous peonies pursued by the sun, and as she sang, other voices joined hers, soft plaintive voices singing in a subdued tone.

The lights had grown somewhat dim. They seemed concentrated solely upon her. The far corners were in shadows, but where she stood and gently swayed was a blaze of light. As she sang she seemed to grow young. It was as though with her orange fan she were waving the years away from her. She even looked slim. Her eyes were shining like black jewels, her lips were thin and wondrously red and her teeth were like carved ivory glistening in the night. Her

cheeks were flushed and her voice had softened and grown as sweet as a summer breeze caressing garden flowers. And always the voices joined in the singing.

Stepling gazed at her amazed. All the glamor and noises of the alley outside were forgotten. The awful stench which is the heritage of Canton was drowned in the incense burning in the bowl. He was hypnotized by the glory of Li Hsein even as all her other lovers had succumbed to her enchantments. In reality she was an old woman, but when she sang of love she became young, for love has no age. And Stepling could feel himself drawn toward her even against his will. It was as though he were turned to stone, powerless to move. The appeal of Li Hsein was a drug more subtle than opium or hash-eesh. He struggled to free himself from the invisible bonds that held him to her. He shifted his gaze from Li Hsein to the fan, and as he gazed at it steadily, the vivid red patches took form. They were moving. They were lips and they were singing. They were joining in the songs of Li Hsein. It was an awful moment. All those mouths out of which the fan was made were moving horribly. Soft sounds came from them to blend with the voice of Li Hsein.

Stepling gasped. He sprang to his feet. He had broken the bonds. He was free, he could move again. Li Hsein paused. She ceased to sing. The light died from her eyes, the pungent color ebbed from her cheeks, her nose widened, her lips thickened and her body lost its allure. She made an effort to arrest his flight, but he pushed her away so violently that she slipped and fell. Once only he turned and glanced back. Her prostrate body lay beneath the green-blue lantern. The huge fan had fallen over her face, and it trembled and moved as though all the red lips that composed it were seeking hers.