

Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1952

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Published bi-monthly by WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 28, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

D. McLWRAITE, Editor

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Vol. 44, No. 7

The Japanese Tea Set



by Francis J. O'Neil

EBERLE

Chicoro was dead . . . dead. Yet her hand had come out of the fog and brushed across his cheek.

IT WAS at that moment that he became sickeningly aware of his approaching madness. With a wrench of almost physical pain, he felt the last faint vestiges

of his sanity tearing loose and fleeing in abject terror into the shifting shadows gathered at the back of his mind.

At that moment, Lieutenant Joshua Fal-

ter, United States Marines, felt the hand brush gently along his cheek, filling the whole of his quivering body with a strange and unearthly coldness.

A few minutes ago he'd been walking with swift intensity along the gray sidewalk of the *Ryokan Shimabashi*, completely unaware of the myriad piping cries of the Japanese vendors holding forth pewter and brass trinkets for his inspection. With a sort of desperate intensity he was recalling the address in his overcoat pocket. *Doctor Ato Taimai, 999 Ryokan Shimabashi, Tokyo*, the damp scrap of paper had told him.

It was all that was left, that address—the last thin sliver of salvation thrust between himself and an inexorable dissolution into madness and, finally, death.

Ever since leaving the air force base at Haneda that morning, Joshua had been questing frantically through the maze of misty streets that splayed out in mud-spattered confusion from the macadam spine of the *Ginza*. Finally, long after nightfall, he'd found *Ryokan Shimabashi*, and then the house 999, sitting back from the sidewalk, its thin walls and small windows showing in the saffron splash of a streetlamp.

Looking up at the delicately etched numerals above the stained, monkey-pod door, Joshua had felt that spasm of hysterical elation, and he had said aloud, "Now, Chicoro, you vicious, sloe-eyed imp, we'll see if I live or die!"

Walking up to the door, he'd knocked loudly and stepped back to wait. Then it happened.

In that little pool of lemon light, with the fog drifting in gauze tendrils around him, a hand reached out of nowhere and drew a soft, smooth caress across his cheek.

Joshua felt a snap behind the frontal bone of his forehead, felt a kind of draining, warm wetness, as though a fat grape had burst amid the convolutions of his brain. Gripping himself hard he spun about.

Then he knew the madness was coming upon him swiftly, for Chicoro, his sweet-faced girl-ran, had died six months ago, a suicide in Osaka miles to the south. Yet the hand that just touched him was Chicoro's.

It was Chicoro's—of that there could be no mistake. There could be no mistaking the incredible softness of flesh, the long slender fingers, the singular scent of some musky Oriental perfume. Countless times, sitting at the tiny bar in the officer's club at Itami, Chicoro's hand had made that same caress. Looking up at him, the elfin face naive as a flower petal, Chicoro had said, "Ah, Josh, I love you, love you," and the words had been a whisper, almost a sigh of pain. Six months ago. . . .

THERE was a soft sound behind Joshua. He whirled around. The monkey-pod door had opened and, in the dim light issuing from within, stood an elderly Japanese wearing a black Occidental business suit.

"*Hai?*" he asked softly. "May I do something for you?" His voice was a thin thread of sound. Controlling an impulse to look back over his shoulder, Joshua said, "You are Doctor Taimai?"

The old man nodded, his placid eyes, canted slightly in the fragile, brown face resting gently on Joshua. Surprisingly, he said, "A wise man once wrote that it is only fear itself of which we must be afraid, Lieutenant. Try to relax."

Doctor Taimai stepped back into the ante-way and made a gesture with his hand toward another door. Joshua entered and walked quickly across a deep-piled Oriental rug into a small room. He dropped into the lap of a leather chair beside a teakwood desk, and took his head in his hands as a sob shuddered up from deep inside him.

Closing the door, Doctor Taimai crossed to his chair and sat down in the cone of a single lamp that flooded the desk top. He watched Joshua weeping for a moment, then said, "You are gravely ill, my son. Even to the uninitiated that would be obvious."

"I had to come to you," Joshua said suddenly, leaning over to grasp the desk. "If you cannot help me I'm finished. I'll be doomed as surely as the Stateside wise-acres thought we were at Chosin Reservoir."

Joshua's palsied hand skittered across his

forehead as he mopped at the sweat. "In fact, it was at Hungnam, after the withdrawal from Chosin, that I heard of you. We'd run a herd of Chinese prisoners down with us, and among them was this Major Tao, a tank commander. He'd been to UCLA; majored in psychology; knew about Freud, Adler, Jung.

"I got to talking to him, as a man sometimes will, and I told him a little of my trouble. Oddly enough, he was fascinated. He insisted I come see you. He said that you were without question the best psychiatrist in the East."

Joshua's reddened eyes stared across at Doctor Taimai. He hesitated, then said, "He also claimed that despite your knowledge of modern psychiatry, you have not completely abandoned a belief in the occult, or, at least, in things beyond the reach of academic pigeon-holing. In other words, Doctor, you haven't that damned, deadly smugness toward the outre and unexplainable that earmarks the medical world. If that's right, chances are you won't laugh at me."

Doctor Taimai's eyes flicked up at Joshua. "Laughter is too expensive," he said, for me to indulge myself." Reaching into a drawer he took out a block of paper. "It is evident that you have experienced a severe fright, Lieutenant. Could you tell me of it now?"

"It's Chicoro," Joshua said and, though he fought it, a cold spasm ran through him.

"It's Chicoro," Doctor Taimai repeated. "Japanese girl?"

"Yes."

"So," Doctor Taimai said softly. "And this girl gave you such terror?"

"She's dead," Joshua said, his hands gripping hard at the desk. "She's dead, and she just touched me outside your door. Her hand came out of the fog, brushed across my cheek."

DOCTOR TAIMAI ran slender, sere fingers through his thinning hair, his lips pursed in thought.

Joshua took the look for one of disbelief. He said, "Yes, Doctor Taimai, I

know. Such a statement relegates me to the ranks of the loony. No normal man wallows in conniption fits of this type.

Jumping up, Joshua paced the room. "You'd think I could laugh something as stupid and foolish as this right out of my mind. I'm a fairly rational man. I've seen it all from ouija boards to Haitian fetishes.

"But this thing is not to be shrugged off. There's the whole crux of this stinking business, the things that scare me: I can't stop thinking about what she said! I come awake at night and find my whole body sopping with sweat, my arms and legs trembling uncontrollably. I can't fight her any more; she's whipping me, pulling me down. Soon, very soon. . . ."

"Just a minute, Lieutenant," Doctor Taimai's soft voice cut in. "You are letting emotion become master. Let us be calm. Of what words do you speak? Where is the beginning of this thing?"

Joshua returned to his chair. He made a determined effort to control the chill spasms that chattered through him. "I met Chicoro at a dance in Osaka. She was unbelievably beautiful. Raven hair, clear skin, scarlet lips. She had a trick of tucking up her mouth in a way that got to you. I fell for her, hard."

Joshua rubbed his knees. "I had two months training before going into Korea, and I spent every spare minute with her. I was convinced I loved her."

Getting up, Joshua began to pace again. "And then, a week before I was to leave, something completely illogical happened. One of those things that make you shake your head. I ran into a nurse at the club, a tiny blonde kid from Indianapolis. I . . . I fell in love with her. Don't ask me why. Don't tell me about vacillation, about an unstable, immature mind. I was completely, irrevocably in love with Linda, and within the week we married."

"And Chicoro?" Doctor Taimai said.

"Yes, Chicoro." Joshua's smile was a leer of fear and pain. "After Linda came, I forgot all about Chicoro. It had been an infatuation—a blazing, peculiarly deep infatuation, I'll admit, but that was all. Un-

fortunately, it was more than that to Chicoro. Much more. She had fallen in love with me and had discarded all her old ties. I need not tell you about the social and moral dictum of the Orient. It is a strange thing to us Caucasians, but deadly serious to Easterners. Chicoro's intent to marry a white man had alienated her with her family, her friends. She'd become practically a pariah in Osaka."

Joshua paused in his pacing. "To sum up: I went to Chicoro when I finally realized how crudely I'd handled something very precious to her. When she learned of my abrupt marriage her senses seemed to leave her. If you have ever seen love and devotion change into bitter hatred, you will know what a frightening experience it is.

"Chicoro simply blew up. At first, she threatened to kill me. Later, she did away with herself, but before the suicide, just before I went to Pusan, she came to me once more. In a regular fury of passion she said that she would haunt me, that scalding searing hatred was far stronger than love, strong enough to fling aside the veil separating life from death. She would come back and stay right beside me, whisper thoughts down into my mind, little thoughts, drop by drop, that would wear away my patience, irritate me into self destruction as the only means of escaping her weird torture."

Joshua's voice rose, touching the edge of hysteria. "I thought at first it was the ranting of a demented woman, Doctor; just cheap prattle to goad me. But I was wrong. She's succeeding. Despite the gunfire on Korea, I could hear her tiny padding footsteps. In foxholes, on ridges, she was right there talking to me. I could hear her!"

"Wait. Wait." Doctor Taimai rose quickly from the chair, his eyes pinned on Joshua. "Easy, my son, please." He pulled a bell cord against the back wall. "We will have tea, Lieutenant. Tea is soothing." He turned as the door opened. A man, extremely old, but moving with the consummate grace of a dancer, came across the room.

"Naiko," the doctor said. "May we have tea. You'll use the Naratocki."

The old man frowned, then turned and left.

The doctor returned to his chair and smiled at Joshua. "Did you suspect, Lieutenant, that Naiko is blind? Completely. Yet he stumbles against nothing. Over the past thirty years he has developed a sort of animal sensitivity, a keen perception that is almost inhuman. Do you see how even the most terrifying tragedy can be turned into a triumph of courage?"

"Why, Naiko is so well-adjusted, he even worries about such prosaic things as my Naratocki tea set. It is old china, long in my family, and the years have depleted it terribly. So few pieces left."

Doctor Taimai picked up the block of paper. "But, to return to you, Lieutenant, I believe you are suffering from a complex, a particularly severe and violent complex that is developing a realistic phobia in your mind. A complex is simply a group of ideas and feeling which have been wholly or partly repressed in the unconscious because of painful emotional associations. Just as a person, once burnt, fears fire, just as we unconsciously withdraw ourselves from painful stimuli of any kind, so does the mind attempt to withdraw its field of perception, or by deliberately opening avenues of escape, such as fantasies or daydreams.

"It is evident," Doctor Taimai went on, "that you are an intelligent, well-educated lad of good background. You are, too, sensitive, impressionable. Because of these, and because of an innate sense of decency, you have been unconsciously trying to repress your feeling of guilt concerning Chicoro. This attempt is rich soil in which grew a phobia. Your guilt has become a nebulous wraith shaped in the form of Chicoro. It is not Chicoro, but your own conscience that is haunting you, Lieutenant."

The door opened and Naiko came in. He placed a tray containing sandwiches and the gleaming, yellow pieces of a tea set on the desk. Doctor Taimai looked at the tray, then up at Naiko. He hesitated, then said, "Aragato. That will be all, Naiko."

Later, the tea finished and the block of paper scrawled with notes, Doctor Taimai

took Joshua to the door. "If you will try to remember that this is something mental, Lieutenant, a fearful little quirk of your subconscious, I think that Chicoro will become less and less of a menace. Come back to see me on Sunday. I want time to look over these notes."

He opened the door and the fog swirled close. "Do not forget, my son, that this trouble is just a phobia, a figment of your imagination cruelly trying to be master."

Returning to his office, Doctor Taimai pulled the bell cord. Naiko entered quietly.

"And, why was it, Naiko," the doctor asked, "that you did not use my Naratocki? It is true the young man would not understand the gesture, but I wanted to show my appreciation for his presenting such an interesting case."

Naiko's smile was a silent apology. "I regret causing you displeasure, Doctor-san, but there were only three of the Naratocki tea cups left and, unhappily, I dropped and broke one of these. I was reluctant to affront the lieutenant or his young girl-san by bringing in only two of the Naratocki, and having to use an ordinary, uncomplimentary cup for the third. I hope you understand, sir."

"Girl-san?" queried Doctor Taimai. "How did you know of the young man's girl-san? You don't see, and she was so quiet!"

"When one is blind, Doctor-san," replied the servitor, "other senses sharpen. So I hear what others fail to hear. The young man's girl-san sat much closer to him than we Japanese regard as proper, and was

quite shameless in her profession of love. She kept saying, "I love you and will never let you go! I love you and will never let you go!" A Japanese girl should have pride. If the tea set had not broken I should still not have used the Naratocki, with all due respectful apologies, Doctor-san. This is understood?"

"It is understood, Naiko. Had I heard the young lady myself I should not have bidden you bring the Naratocki!"

OUTSIDE, Lieutenant Joshua Falter almost staggered, almost ran, from the doctor's office. Twice since leaving he had felt the hand of his late beloved, caressing his cheeks. Now something had been added that he could not understand, that made madness nearer, virtually upon him—a sound utterly *Japanese*. He heard it around every corner, from every open door; the tinkling small crash of breaking chinaware; as if exactly the same tea cup were being dropped countless times right behind him; as if the sound pursued him.

It did, with his knowledge of the Orient, indeed pursue him. A broken tea-cup had a certain meaning: it was the symbol of a cast-off bride, of an unmarried girl no longer a maiden, of a suicide; it meant Chicoro.

The hands touched his cheeks, there were two of them now, and they slid slowly, caressingly, down to his throat, started to tighten. His neck, his face, swelled with fright and the heavy darkness closed in around him as the sound of the breaking chinaware multiplied, weaved together into a crashing crescendo.