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**WEIRD TALES**

408 Holliday Building

Indianapolis, Ind.

*A Poetic Fantasy, About Old Yin Wen  
and His Forty-Year Love for Taki*

# The LANTERN-MAKER

By FRANK OWEN

*Author of "Black Hill," "The Wind That Tramps the World," etc.*

THE gray, gloomy shop of Yin Wen, the lantern-maker, lay up one of the narrow filthy alleys of Canton as though it were a bit of refuse swept from one of the main highways by some monstrous boom. It was a mere shell of a shop, completely open in the front, and so many cracks did it have between its paperlike board walls it was practically open in the sides as well.

As shops are reckoned, it was of little account, until one gazed on the countless lanterns stacked about on every side and hanging from the dust-festooned rafters overhead. Here were lanterns of splendor, lanterns for every country and every clime, for pauper and for prince; lanterns of magic, of wonder and of awe. Yet more interesting than any of the gaudy lanterns was Yin Wen himself, creator of vast beauty even though he was as ugly as a toad. Ugliness in a broader sense is merely a comparative term. Even a toad becomes attractive when compared to a slimy octopus or watersnake, or some soft-creeping, death-cold night terror that haunts our dreams.

Yin Wen looked old enough to have been the first historian of all China. He suggested a mummy suddenly endowed with life. He was very short, his feet were very large and his toes turned out. He walked in a toadlike manner, almost by leaps, and his eyes bulged watery and staring from their sockets. The skin on his face was like shriveled brown parchment. His eye-

brows were gone; gone also was his hair, leaving his bronzed pate polished like glass, a shininess unrelieved except by a great purple-red mole in the direct center.

When his face was in repose he looked like one of the idol monstrosities which dot China as thickly as beggars. Always as Yin Wen worked, he kept muttering to himself bits of verse from ancient China legends and forgotten songs.

One morning as I loitered near his shop, I heard him crooning a song written more than two hundred years ago by the immortal Yuan Mei.

In spring for sheer delight  
I set the lanterns swinging through the  
trees,  
Bright as the myriad argosies of night,  
That ride the clouded billows of the sky.  
Red dragons leap and plunge in gold and  
silver seas,  
And O my garden gleaming cold and white.  
Thou hast outshone the far faint moon on  
high.

There was enchantment in the verses and I could not help but comment on it.

"One would imagine," said I, "to hear you sing, that there was witchery in lanterns."

At my words, he dropped his tools. He came toward me, his face convulsed with emotion. "And is there not?" he demanded tensely. "You wise men of the West gloat in your imagined knowledge, but some of the greatest facts of earth are still closed books to you. A lantern is as impor-

tant as the path down which we walk. What good is the path without the light of a lantern to show us the way? Have you time for me to tell you a story? It matters little in any case. You must stay. Nothing could be of vaster importance. Listen then to my story."

He drew me into his shop and motioned me to be seated upon a rude bench at a table, a table piled high with lanterns, and he took up a position on the farther side.

"LANTERNS," he began, "are like opium. They can be a force of good, or conveyers of frightful evil. One should indeed be careful in selecting a lantern. For a lantern lights one's path, and sometimes the path is of the lantern's choosing."

He drew his hand across his eyes as though striving to bring the pictures of memory out in sharper detail.

"You must know," he continued presently, "that for thousands of years the family of Wen have been lantern-makers. It is a great art that has been transmitted from father to son for ages. The making of lanterns is not merely artizan work. Great lanterns are not turned out as though they were stamped from a machine in a mill. There is much of mystery and romance in their manufacture. Some I will tell you, but more is a closed book, a locked book of which only those who are of the family of Yin have the key. The original lantern-makers were men of great prominence. Through the dark channels and streams of old China they sent their bright and cheerful lanterns, like great fireflies darting about in a garden. It was as though additional moons had been given to China by the illustrious family of Yin.

"With all the great spirits of the earth and sky and also within the waters of the sea my family was in great favor. Even the dragons and

serpents which lie beneath the great grim mountains of West China never even thought of harming us. We were people greater than other people. We were creators of light and beauty; and as a token of respect and appreciation it has been for centuries the custom of the Great Spirits which guide the universe to pour forth blessings on the family of Yin.

"I was no exception. To me they gave a girl more marvelous than any maiden born before in all of China. She was my very own, more precious even than my lanterns, and lanterns are more precious than pearls. Her name was Taki. She was born one night when the moon was at the full. It looked that night as though it were a lantern and she gazed at it and made faint sounds as though in adoration. It was a prophecy. Sixteen years later she chanced to pass my shop and paused. She uttered a little cry of joy as she gazed at the lanterns, just as at birth she had gurgled joyfully at the moon. That pause was the turning point in both our lives. It marked the beginning of an epic of happiness such as all the flowery poets of the East would be powerless to tell of. Love, they say, is unknown in China. But what they say does not agree with facts, for love took root in my heart and flamed more brightly than any of my lanterns, and I was fortunate in kindling an answering flame in hers.

"Then followed a period of my life fraught with dreams and romance and soft-tinted lights. It was an existence to dream of, not to tell. This girl of peerless beauty was my very own. If you have the slightest imagination you can conjure up what that meant to me. We planned our marriage with as much enthusiasm as though we were not chained down by all the rusted traditions of old China. But fortunately a thing that is rusty is easily broken. It was not necessary for me to secure the consent of her

father to our wedding, for all of her people were dead. She talked about them vaguely. She never told me anything of her past except the incident of her crying for the moon. Nor did she tell me whence she had come. She chose to enshroud her past in secrecy, and I was content. It was sufficient that she was actually with me in the present.

**T**HEN came the eve of 'The Feast of Lanterns'. The Chinese calendar, as you must know, is regulated by the moon, and the start of the New Year is a period of great rejoicing. It is then that the Spirits are in a most amiable mood, and the Chinese celebrate by the world-renowned festivities which are known as 'The Feast of Lanterns'. At that period China ceases to be a land of mystery and groping shadows. It becomes a veritable fairyland of riotous colors and thousands upon thousands of lanterns. So many lanterns there are, there is no place for shadows and they flee moaning and groaning out to the desert places. China then is more fantastic than ever and the very air, always foul, is filled with poetry and soft-blowing incense. No wonder the poets of China have gone into ecstasies over those riotous, gorgeous feasts, riotous, you understand, only in the clashing and blending of colors.

"At this particular 'Feast of Lanterns' I was very happy, for Taki was with me. Together, hand in hand (an unheard-of mode of walking in Canton, we ambled about the bazars eating rice cakes, sipping tea and munching the sweetmeats which were held out temptingly on every side. That night Canton was a city of purple dreams, of love, of glory and enchantment. I longed to place my hands upon the moon, arrest it in its course and hold it so it need never pass again. It was the zenith of my happiness. What more could be added to it? And Taki too was glad.

"But there is something sad about crossing the zenith of anything, for then whatever it be must begin to wane. So was it with my happiness that night, for there chanced to be abroad in Canton a rich merchant named Ching Ling. He carried a gorgeous golden lantern which stood out in prominence among all the pageantry of light and color. Taki beheld it and her expression changed. Even as she had cried for the moon, and been attracted by my lanterns, she could not resist the golden snare of Ching Ling. She looked at him with eyes that were brilliant with desire. Her lips trembled. For all the world she was like some exquisite Lantern Spirit.

"Ching Ling noticed her expression and beckoned to her. When my attention was diverted elsewhere she followed him into one of the veinlike alleys which are etched endlessly throughout the native quarter of Canton. Shrieking as though my head had collapsed I sped after them through all the alleys nearest to me, but to no avail. They had vanished as utterly as though they had dissolved into the very air."

Yin Wen paused in his story. His head was shaking as though he were palsied. His parchmentlike yellow-brown face was as haggard as a death's head, and he was drooling at the lips.

"And now," he said, when he had succeeded somewhat in getting his emotions under control, "she has gone from me, but it is only for a little while. The Lantern of Gold took her from me but the Love Lantern which I am making will bring her back again."

As he spoke he rose wearily to his feet. From a back room he fetched and lighted a lantern the like of which had never been seen in all the world before. What color it was, I cannot say. It was of all colors and of none. It seemed to have been painted with

dreams and poetry, mixed with subtle perfumes. Surely this wondrous maze of brilliance which scintillated and reflected, changing every second, made of all the glory of the sun, could not have been colored with coarse dyes and paints mixed by the hand of man. In that lantern there was hypnotism and mysticism, and more, there was enticement—a sensuous loveliness hard to understand in an inanimate thing.

"The lantern is not yet done," declared Yin Wen. "When it is completed it will draw her back to me."

Abruptly as he finished speaking, he went back to his work. And though I sat there without moving for perhaps an hour, or it may have been longer, he told me no more. At last, reluctantly, I rose to my feet and walked from the shop. As I did so, old Yin Wen was crooning over his work:

In spring for sheer delight  
I set the lanterns swinging through the trees,  
Bright as the myriad argosies of night.

IT WAS like living in a dream. I wanted to go to some quiet spot where I could meditate. Fortunately not fifty feet away there was a tiny tea shop and to this shop I retired. I felt in an extremely poetical mood and I could not wonder that the Chinese have almost made tea-drinking a religion.

When the little shopkeeper had brought me my tea I made no effort to drink it. I could not help thinking of Taki. How could a girl of such wondrous beauty have fallen in

love with the toadlike, shriveled, ugly old Yin Wen even for a single moment? Taki was as lovely as the caress of sunrise upon a coral beach, while Yin Wen was uglier than a night storm in the mountain solitudes.

The keeper of the tea-shop seemed desirous of conversing with me. He hovered ever near. So at last I spoke. I repeated to him in substance the story which Yin Wen had told to me.

When I had finished, he said, "The love of Taki for Yin Wen is not such a puzzle as you have concluded. In his youth the lantern-maker was a comely boy. All that he has told you happened forty years ago. He lost Taki then, nor has he ever seen her since. At the moment of her going his brain stopped, like a run-down clock. And it has never gone on again. He lives the moments he spent with her on the eve of 'The Feast of Lanterns' every hour of every day. For him time has ceased to exist."

"But the Love Lantern," said I, "will he not use it some day?"

The keeper of the tea-house shrugged his shoulders. "And if he does," said he, "it will avail him little. He still thinks of Taki as a gorgeous, graceful girl. Now, if she be living, she is probably an old hag almost as ugly and withered as himself. Even if they met he would, undoubtedly, not know her."

"It is a very sad case," I said thoughtfully.

"I think not," was the reply, "for he still has the memory, and oftentimes a memory is sweeter than the thing itself."

