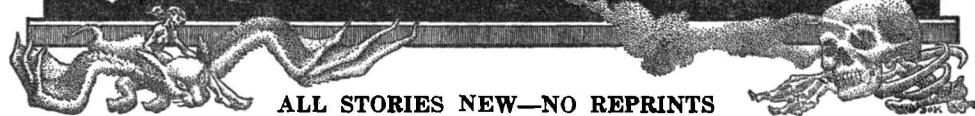


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1942

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, 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, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1942, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

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Vol. 36, No. 8

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.



After all, the mandarin had only sent Peter Larkin a coffin, a knife and other pleasant little gifts . . .

The Lips of Caya Wu

By FRANK OWEN

I
PETER LARKIN'S death had been accomplished with complete efficiency. At four-thirty on Wednes-

day he had locked the door of his private office, written terse farewell notes to a few business associates, consumed half a quart of whiskey, then fired a bullet into his heart.

Death was instantaneous. He was still clutching the revolver when they found him.

The authorities tabulated it as suicide, and the case was closed. But his friend, Kerle Andrews, a free-lance feature writer had a hunch that it was murder, and not without reason. Francis Channing had phoned him and there was panic in his voice. He was Peter Larkin's greatest friend. Why was he so perturbed? Why did he want Kerle Andrews to come to his office at once? It was an interesting item to chew on. He was always on the alert for new ideas, and here was a plot ready-made.

II

When Kerle Andrews arrived at Channing's office in the Graybar Building, the architect was in a state bordering on hysteria, walking up and down the room, his colorless face resembling a death mask.

As Kerle Andrews was announced by a clerk, he said, "I came as quick as I could."

"It's a relief to see you," Channing declared huskily.

"What's the matter? Are you sick?"

Channing laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, I'm sick, sick of living, and yet afraid to die. I lack Pete Larkin's courage. I do not feel sorry about his passing; on the contrary, I envy him."

"Perhaps he, too, was sick of living."

"Anyway, he's dead."

"But that doesn't explain your present state, or does it? You appear as though you had seen a ghost."

"I've seen worse than that."

"What do you mean?"

"Chan Kien is in town."

"That doesn't mean a thing to me," said Kerle Andrews bluntly. "What should my reaction be, one of terror?"

"If you were in my place, it would be."

"If you'd tell a coherent story, perhaps I could help you."

Francis Channing collapsed into a chair as though his knees had buckled under him. "Without the shadow of a doubt, Chan Kien is the key to Peter Larkin's murder. As you know, for many years Pete and I were inseparable friends. Once we toured the Orient together. It was a most lucrative enterprise. We dabbled in a hundred different schemes, trading in silks, porcelains, amber and jade after a fashion. Peter had a faculty for shrewd buying. We shipped all the stuff we bought to August Galt, an import and export merchant in New York City who happened to be our mutual friend. All three of us shared equally in the profits. Later, years later in fact, Galt and Larkin quarreled over this partnership."

"You do not suspect Galt of being implicated in any way with the murder," Kerle Andrews broke in. As he put the question, he studied his companion's expression intently. Though he was extremely upset, there could be no denying his sincerity.

"Not in the slightest degree," Channing answered quickly. "May I proceed?"

"Do."

"Now it so happened that in our travels we met Chan Kien. His home was in the Gobi Desert, a legendary home, for it was rumored he lived in a cave in the mountains and crept forth only at night. Some even said he was a fox who dashed about the country in the moonlight. He could change his form at will. Pete Larkin and I met Chan Kien in Peiping. He laughed over the fantasies that were told about him. 'It is good for a man not to be understood,' he averred, 'for then people never lose interest in him.' What nobody knew about Chan Kien would have filled a book. He was immensely rich and had homes scattered over a wide area of China. No one knew where he would be sleeping on a certain night. He did this to confound his enemies. A rich man is always

at the mercy of brigands and frequently brigands had been at the mercy of Chan Kien in his office of magistrate, for among his host of duties was that of meting out justice. In this he was somewhat of an epicure. When a head had to roll in the dust, he insisted that the axe be sharp so there need be no unnecessary suffering. Pete and I did much trading with him in carved ivories, amber, nephrites and jades. Chan Kien was a connoisseur of jade and women and it so happened that in his house in Peiping where he was accustomed to receive us, lived a girl of languid beauty named Caya Wu. She was slim and dark and lovely. Her lips were like splashes of blood against the pearls of her teeth. When she walked through the enclosed garden upon which the rooms of the house opened, she swayed in so reed-like a manner it was impossible not to be charmed. Pete Larkin beheld her through an open window as she walked in the garden. Impulsively, he said, 'Who is yon lovely girl?' Chan Kien did not like the question. In China it is bad form to discuss the women of the household with the master. Nevertheless, Chan replied, 'She is a golden slave that I recently purchased.'

IMPULSIVELY Peter Larkin asked, 'Care to sell?' At that an expression flitted momentarily across the face of Chan Kien that was not pleasant to behold, even though his voice remained affable, as he said, 'She was a slave but she is a slave no longer. Any woman I hold in my arms is thereafter a free woman. That is the gift I bestow upon her. As for Caya Wu, she is happy here. All my wealth I lay at her feet. She commands my heart.' That ended the discussion but Pete Larkin smiled as he lighted a cigarette. Chan Kien went back into the Gobi the next morning and we returned to our hotel.

'I thought the incident was closed but I reasoned incorrectly. Something about

Caya Wu had imbedded itself so deeply in Pete Larkin's mind he could think of nothing else. And he decided that he must possess Caya Wu though it was the last thing he did on earth. The Chinese believe that woman is a wanton creature always waiting to go astray. Whether or not that is true, it certainly was the case with Caya Wu. She was nothing more than a lovely courtesan. She had no soul. Fire did not burn her. When Peter made overtures to her, her smile was warm and friendly. Before long they were meeting clandestinely in the garden of her house under the spell of a spring moon. When two people are happy, the Chinese believe, it is always spring even though it be fur coat weather. Then one night Chan Kien returned unexpectedly. When he did not find her in any of the various rooms of the house that squared the garden, he walked down one of the marble paths to where a willow tree formed friendly shadows, and there he found them in close embrace. Chan Kien sighed. It was a perfect night. It seemed a shame to be forced to shatter the rhythm of the garden by unseemly actions, but there was work for him to do. Like steel claws he extended his fingers. They groped about in the dark until they found her white jade throat. How soft was her flesh as his fingers leaped to destroy it. It was a night of poetry and dream. Had Tu Fu still lived, he might have written a lyric, 'To the Blue Face of Caya, Dying.' Even as her breath ceased, even as the perfume of her lips no longer mingled with the soft songs of the flowers, Chan Kien noticed the startled, masklike, terror-stricken face of Peter Larkin. When Chan Kien had assured himself that Caya Wu would no longer be disturbed by figures of earth, his fingers wearily relaxed. Now they sought the neck of Pete Larkin to complete their handiwork, but Pete fled ignominiously with the speed of the wind as though all the terrors that haunt the

dusk were at his heels. It was the only time to my knowledge he had ever been frightened of anything. When he returned to our hotel he was a pitiable, craven thing."

Francis Channing paused for a moment and licked his dry lips. When he spoke again his voice was almost inaudible. "A few hours later we left Peiping never to return, banished by fear, fear of the retribution Chan Kien would exact from us if we remained in China, for Pete Larkin had intruded upon a romance so beautiful it might have inspired T'ang poets. We returned to New York. Several years passed and we had begun to breathe easier. Then Chan Kien suddenly appeared in New York. He had been in town about three months. I am sure that Peter Larkin collided with him many times. I am sure that Chan Kien committed the murder."

III

BY APPOINTMENT that evening, Kerle Andrews called at the house on upper Fifth Avenue which Chan Kien had rented temporarily during his sojourn in America. Of all people, the Chinese are the most courteous; therefore when Kerle Andrews telephoned Chan Kien, he had been at once invited to share a cup of pearl-orchid-scented tea with him. As Kerle Andrews stood on the doorstep and rang the bell, immediately, as if by magic, Shung Kung appeared in the doorway, bowing graciously. Shung Kung was Chan Kien's personal servant, constant companion, and friend.

"My master is awaiting you," he said.

Through a dimly lighted hall he led the way. Kerle Andrews was astonished and enthralled at the wealth of porcelains, tapestries and carved jade ornaments that made the hall lush with subdued color and warmth. On the air floated fragrance like unto sandalwood. The next moment they

had entered the library and Chan Kien came forward to greet his guest.

"Welcome," said he graciously. "In this world we are all travelers and I am gratified that you chose to stop for a moment at my house. It is thereby honored."

As he spoke, he motioned Kerle Andrews to a chair in the shadows while he himself seated himself by an ebony table on which a lamp was lighted. "So that you may study my expression with less difficulty," he smiled. "But even though the rays of the lamp fall flush upon my face, a proverb of my people comes to mind, 'A candle as big as a cup cannot illuminate tomorrow.' Ask me whatever question you wish but I assure you I will keep my broken arm inside my sleeve."

He clapped his hands together and Shung Kung brought tea. The fragile cups were no thicker than flower petals. As Shung Kung poured the tea, Chan Kien said, "Let us drink, tea makes all men brothers."

As Kerle Andrews lifted a cup to his lips, he surveyed his host.

Chan Kien had exceptionally good features. His nose was well formed, his mouth was firm though somewhat cruel. He smiled too much. His eyes were keen, black, brilliant as new steel. They told nothing except that the mind they mirrored was indomitable. Channing had pointed out that in his own country Chan Kien was, among other things, a magistrate who dispensed justice at a city on the fringe of the Gobi Desert with the relentlessness of an absolute monarch. In that small city his word was law. In high circles he was all powerful. Besides there was a mysterious hidden side to his life. Few knew anything about this, and those who did spoke of it only in whispers to people whom they could trust.

Chan Kien was a student of character. Kerle Andrews interested him. He liked rapier-like minds that he could challenge

to verbal combat. He knew his visitor was shrewd, that he had come there with a definite purpose, that he was a worthy antagonist. A war of words was a tonic of relaxation. It burned away ennui, it quickened the blood. But he waited for his opponent to make the first move. Therefore with a fine air of studied casualness, he picked up a volume of fragile poems, legends, sketches, lyrics in jade.

"The vexing thing about these poems," he reflected, "is that they are better than the originals, from an American viewpoint, which is true of so many things in this amazing country. The greatest lie in any of your great men's lives is their obituaries. The way dead men are eulogized gives me the feeling that they must have been guilty of grave crimes. In our country we believe that the vast power of Heaven and Earth make them like unto deities. Therefore the dead, buried in the earth, are protected by the great powers of the universe."

"No thought could be more beautiful," Andrews interposed, "but then the Chinese people have acute understanding. What better emblem could be found than their bundled firewood as a symbol of contentment!"

"I am humbled that you appreciate the simple philosophy of my people." He sighed gently, before he added, "However, I doubt if you came here today merely to repeat proverbs. Surely there must be some slight service I can render you."

"There is indeed," said Andrews, equally as abrupt. "The reason I came here tonight was because I wished to converse with you about Caya Wu."

At that Chan Kien's expression underwent a change. The mask slipped and his face was horrible to behold. He sprang from his chair, his fingers clawing the air.

Kerle Andrews eyed him coolly, seeming in no way perturbed, but his muscles were taut, ready to go into action instantly if occasion required. Then with a visible

effort, Chan Kien caught control of himself and with a sigh that was almost a groan he fell back into his chair. He closed his eyes. Now once more the mask was adjusted. But his face bore a sickly pallor and he seemed to have trouble in breathing.

"You came to my house as a friend," he whispered intensely, "then why did you mention Caya Wu?"

"What matter, since she is dead?"

"She is not dead! She dwells in my heart. And when I sit alone in a room I can feel her presence as though she is reading over my shoulder. Man's life is naught but a tragedy, a tragedy with laughter. But what interest can you possibly have in my beloved?"

"Because I believe that the death of Peter Larkin is traceable to his association with her."

"So you are aware of what happened in China?"

"Definitely. Now I am attempting to discover what happened in New York since your arrival. It is my belief you are traveling down the long old road of memory."

"If you mean I never forget, I plead guilty. That is my fault. But I did not kill Peter Larkin. It would have been a pleasure, but he saved me the trouble. He committed suicide. Your police have spoken. Who am I to contradict?"

"So I see," said Kerle Andrews curtly, "you only know what you read in the papers."

"Do you doubt that Peter Larkin committed suicide?"

"No, but I am interested in the motive. Why did he commit suicide while you were in America?"

"That was his concern, not mine. To show him I bore him no ill will I sent him a long thin knife with a carved ivory handle. It was a beautiful thing. Again I sent him a mahogany coffin. In my coun-

try that is esteemed as a present to cherish. What more could I do for him?"

"What more did you do?" asked Kerle Andrews bluntly. "As for your gracious gifts, I'd say a sharp knife biting into one's flesh might cause death comparatively without pain. Therefore I am surprised that Peter Larkin chose death by a bullet. The thin knife death would have been far more poetical. As for the gift of a coffin to a man with overwrought nerves, it's appalling. You chose your presents well. They are interesting to muse over. It is subtle revenge indeed to send such implements to the man whom you are stalking."

"They were tributes to mark my forgiveness."

"And also symbols of death."

"YOU are both blunt and keen at the same time. In China we have a saying that a man cannot live under the same sky as the murderer of a member of his family. And Caya Wu was closer to me than a wife. Peter Larkin killed her, even though it was my hand that drove the knife. He created the need for it. Caya Wu was my slave but once she belonged to me, thereafter it was I who belonged to her. When Peter Larkin came, an evil force, into my garden, he caused me to lose face. In my own estimation I shrunk to dwarf size. He had caused Caya Wu to violate my confidence; so I killed her. But she is still living. Wherever I go, she is near. She invades my thoughts. She causes all other women to be ugly in my eyes. Sometimes in the hush of the night she speaks to me and her voice is flower soft. When I called at the office of Peter Larkin he was almost in complete collapse. He gazed at me, speechless, his eyes glazed. I did not raise my voice. In a quiet tone I told him that he would not live throughout the year, that I was planning a torturous death for him that would make men's flesh creep merely to read about it. To

emphasize my statements I left with him an elegantly bound copy of 'Torture Garden.' Thereafter I met him frequently. I was seldom far away. When he ate at various restaurants, invariably I would be at an adjoining table. Once at 'The Lyceum Theater' on an opening night I sat directly in front of him. On another occasion he flew to Washington and I was a passenger on the same plane. Always I was courteous to him. I bowed formally, and smiled, but he seldom acknowledged my greeting. His mind was in tumult. He could not sleep, and looked it. Once while he was driving back from Philadelphia, his car sideswiped a farm truck and he missed death by a fraction. He attributed the accident to me, even though I was in a car fully a quarter mile behind him. Actually I never once raised my hand against him. I knew his own nerves would solve the problem for me. I understand that he always slept in a room with the lights turned on, nor were they extinguished till morning came. He must have imagined that I was some fabulous monster who could assemble out of the very air. It was pleasant to watch his gradual disintegration. Nothing is more stimulating than the sight of an enemy gradually cracking up. Finally the nerves of Peter Larkin snapped and he committed suicide. He believed there was no escape, that he was helpless against my power. He believed I had numerous hidden alliances, that my schemes spread out like an octopus to cover the country. A fantastic delusion. Can I be censured for believing that his death was in the sweet nature of a blessing?"

"So it *was* murder after all," mused Kerle Andrews.

"It was suicide. The police have spoken," said Chan Kien. "In only one detail were they wrong. It was not a bullet that killed Peter Larkin, rather it was a woman's kiss, the caressing soft pressure of the lips of Caya Wu."