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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Man Who Would Not Die

By FRANK OWEN

The strange story of a sea-captain who was twice murdered, and the curious fate that befell his murderer

TWICE Jan Breedon had committed murder and both times he had killed the same man. The affair bothered him. Breedon was not a born killer. True, he had a vicious temper, easily aroused; but as a rule he curbed his passions before they got him into difficulties that would be followed by prison sentences.

He had not meant to kill Lee Grandon, but the job was done and it was too late for apologies.

The trouble had started in a notorious gambling-resort in Macao, that accursed port that stands out like a festering fever-sore on the lips of China. The gambling-house had been kept by Zaneen, a crafty little man of Portuguese and Chinese extraction with a dash of French for good measure.

Zaneen was as evil as his house, but he was a born host. He knew how to make his guests feel at home. Cards, women, perfume and whisky were blended together to make a tasty broth. His house, *The Singapore Hotel*, was ill-lighted. All the figures that moved about in it seemed like ghosts. Over each gambling-table was suspended a dim-lit lantern. Back in the shadows slender girls crept about with dark lustrous eyes and alluring lips. Usually they appeared at the exact moment when a guest was pro-

claiming vociferously about his losses at cards. Thereafter his voice continued, but in a key far more moderate.

That night Jan Breedon had played a game in one of the private rooms upstairs. There were only three men seated at the table. One was Gustafson, a Swedish seaman who had more forehead and less intelligence than any other frequenter of *The Singapore*. The other player was Lee Grandon, captain of the tramp steamer, *Banzai*.

Lee Grandon had been slightly drunk. He was quarrelsome. Breedon, who was a past master at card-manipulation, made the fatal error of fumbling as he dealt. Immediately Lee Grandon had sprung to his feet, overturning the table and almost petrifying Gustafson, the moron, who slunk whimpering into a corner.

Without pausing for a moment, Lee's arm shot out and caught Jan Breedon flush on the jaw. He went down as though he had been hit by a sledge-hammer. The room swam dizzily about him but with almost superhuman effort he fought to save himself from losing consciousness. Like a being without reason, Lee Grandon stood over him. His eyes were blood-shot with fury. Cheating at cards was the worst sin in the decalog, according to his way of reasoning. Lee Grandon was not particularly worried



"It was easy to forget Grandon when he had so magnificent a face to gaze upon."

about whether or not he fought fair. He had come from a long line of seamen. Many of his ancestors had been smugglers. The sea was in his blood.

As Jan Breedon lay on the floor struggling to rise, he beheld Lee Grandon draw back his foot as though he were about to kick him. He knew that kick would send him to a hospital, perhaps to his grave. With an oath, Jan Breedon

drew his gun and fired once. The foot stopped in midair. Lee Grandon toppled over without a murmur. The bullet had caught him right between the eyes.

In horror Jan Breedon staggered to his feet. He rushed to the open window and dropped to the ground. Before morning he had left Macao on a tramp steamer. Once out of port, he knew he was safe. Zaneen would make no dis-

turbance. It would not be the first time he had found it convenient to dispose of a body that had ceased to be of use. Zaneen had no desire to get into difficulties with the authorities. Nor had the authorities any desire to prosecute him. *The Singapore Hotel* was a pleasant place wherein to loiter when the nights were wearisome. The wine was good, the girls were slender.

DURING the next few months, Jan Breedon drifted about from one steamer to another. He usually signed on for a single voyage. He was restless, nervous, haunted by the fact that he had killed a man. Jan Breedon was cursed with a conscience. He had too vivid an imagination. Once in a café in Batavia he had heard a man speak. The voice had sounded like that of Lee Grandon.

As soon as possible he booked passage on a ship for Singapore. He drank heavily to forget. By day he was able to quiet his nerves, but the nights were awful. When he was on shore he always slept with a light burning beside him. On shipboard this was impossible. The other seamen wouldn't stand for it. Night after night he lay staring with hollow eyes into the velvet blackness. Even on those occasions when he had to stand watch, his nerves were flayed to ribbons. Why was there so strange a coldness in the air? It seemed like a wind that had blown through a tomb. And the water lapping against the side of the ship seemed like the moans of the restless dead.

One day as he walked through the streets of Penang, he received a shock that almost unbalanced him completely; for walking along the street was Lee Grandon. He seemed in the best of health. Yet he was dead. He had been dead for weeks. Jan Breedon imagined he could even see the mark between the eyes where

the bullet from his gun had plowed through his brain. Jan Breedon staggered so, he almost fell. At the moment he needed a drink. Fortunately he had a flask of whisky in his back pocket. He took a long hard swig of it. Already that day he had drunk an immense quantity of liquor. He decided that he would get blind-drunk. There was no better way to drown sorrow. So he went to a grogshop owned by Charley Tzu, who prided himself that he was half English.

Charley had been born in London's famous Limehouse. His mother had been an Irish waitress who eventually amassed a fortune because she was able to supply her patrons with food they liked. She was a big, bluff, boisterous woman who strode through Limehouse with the arrogance of a queen. And somewhere along the way she acquired a husband, Tom Tzu, who dealt in porcelains and tea and occasionally a few pounds of opium. With such parents and in such an environment it was quite easy for Charley Tzu to pick up a smattering of education, with an over-emphasis on cupidity and shrewdness. Eventually he had drifted to the Orient and opened his establishment in Penang. He was still in the same business as his mother and his father, with numerous ramifications. He still occasionally sold tea and porcelain; though when he sold opium it was in far smaller quantities. At Charley Tzu's bar was sold forgetfulness. In the room beyond was sold oblivion. It was Charley's desire to please all customers. His rates were not high for the solace he dispensed. That is why his place was so often frequented by seafaring men. Whenever Jan Breedon was in town that was where he did his thirst-trading.

But now as he stood at the bar and gulped huge quantities of whisky, he could not get drunk. The liquor failed completely. He might have been drink-

ing water for all the strength it had. His eyes were hot and bloodshot. He could not banish the face of Lee Grandon from his consciousness. The reflection seemed imbedded in his eyes as though they were mirrors.

Charley Tzu sidled over to him. "What's the matter?" he asked casually. "You look as though you had seen a ghost."

"I did," cried Jan Breedon hoarsely. "And I cannot forget it."

Charley Tzu tapped him on the arm and smiled. "Beyond yon door," he said, "there are no ghosts to trouble you. If there are spirits, they are friendly ones."

Jan Breedon seized Charley's wrist with such force his fingers bit into the flesh like steel talons. Charley only smiled.

"Take me into that room," Jan Breedon implored.

Charley shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he agreed laconically as he gently released the quivering fingers.

Without another word he led the way through the doorway. The door opened at his approach. The room in which Jan Breedon now found himself was shrouded in semi-darkness. In the center of the room a tiny shriveled Chinaman was working, preparing long bamboo pipes with the tiny bowl in which a pill of rolled opium was to be inserted. As he rolled the tiny gummy pellets into satisfactory roundness he placed them in a symmetrical row along a porcelain slab.

CHARLEY TZU led Jan Breedon to a rude divan in one secluded corner of the room. There were numerous similar bunks around him, on some of which seemingly lifeless forms were sprawled.

"Wait here," Charley directed. Then he withdrew.

A few minutes later a slim girl walked over to Jan Breedon. She was Chinese,

and her face shone golden in the feeble light. She held out to him a pipe which was already lighted. Then she crouched down beside him as he inhaled a few whiffs of the drug.

The girl was not good-looking. Her features were ill-formed and her lips were heavily painted. About her mouth there was the suggestion of a sneer as though she looked down on this white man. But to Jan Breedon she seemed a vision of loveliness. As he gazed at her it seemed as though she were peering down at him through an azure mist. It was easy to forget Lee Grandon when he had so magnificent a face to gaze upon. At last he lost consciousness.

His sleep was restless. He tossed and turned as though endeavoring to escape a thousand grasping hands. Gone was the girl of dazzling beauty. Beside him sat an old hag. She drooled at the mouth, and when she wiped her lips he noticed her fangs of teeth. She was laughing softly at his agony. Now his tongue was burning. He could scarcely breathe. All air had been drawn from the room. He was in a complete vacuum, panting, tossing, moaning, gasping helplessly. And it seemed as though thousands of insects were crawling under his skin. With a shriek, he leaped from the divan. He made as though he would seize the old hag and throttle her, so evil did she look. But now there was no one there.

In the center of the room, the old Chinaman still worked endlessly at his task, molding death into little black pearls. Jan Breedon staggered across the room. He stumbled over a divan which loomed in his path. Some uncanny power made him gaze into the face of the man who was sleeping there. It was Captain Grandon. With an oath, Jan Breedon drew a long knife and struck twice. Captain Grandon did not move. Without a murmur, he succumbed to the fu-

tility of life. He would never be able to swallow anything again. The old Chinaman had not been disturbed by the incident. He went on placidly working with his long slim fingers.

Drunkenly Jan Breedon staggered from the place, tears streaming from his eyes. He felt weak, completely exhausted. He returned to his hotel and gathered his few belongings together. Then he lay hidden in a notorious resort until the first train of the day left for Taiping. The journey took three hours, which to him seemed like years. Every passenger who got on board he was suspicious of. Intently he listened to their voices, alert to hear the voice of Captain Grandon. Of course Grandon was dead. He had killed him. But he had killed him once before; yet that had not prevented him from talking and walking about as though he still found life pleasurable. But this time, thanks to the knife, Grandon had been left in a condition that would render talking at least difficult.

THE months that followed were devoted entirely to fleeing from imagined pursuers. Now Jan Breedon seldom went to sea. He was afraid of the voices of the water, though they were no worse than the whispering voices of the swamp. His descent was rapid; yet strangely enough he was able to earn some measure of money. He knew the Orient like a native. He acted as guide to venturesome tourists, and usually he emerged from these adventures with far more money than his agreed fee.

He decided that he would stay away from the seaport towns; yet when he went inland he was unhappy. The sea was in his blood. So often had he gone down to the sea in ships he felt a kinship with them. When he was away from the docks he was unhappy. He knew that he ought to leave the Orient, but somehow

he couldn't tear himself away. Not for twenty years had he been home. He had a wife and two children somewhere in Europe, but he gave no more thought to them than if they had never existed. He was a thoroughly bad character and now he had become vicious. He attached himself to everyone like a leech. No beggar of Canton ever could have whined so pitifully.

Finally one day he drifted back to Macao. He wanted to visit *The Singapore Hotel*. Like many other criminals, he desired morbidly to visit the scene of his first crime.

ZANEEN smiled as he noticed Jan Breedon slinking in, but there was little of friendliness behind that smile. Jan Breedon looked as though he were on his way to the scaffold. His hands felt as cold as ice. His legs seemed so weak he marveled that he could keep his feet. And yet there was something weirdly fascinating about walking once more through the rooms of *The Singapore*. When for a moment his eyes met those of Zaneen and Zaneen nodded to him in greeting, he felt much relieved. At least he had nothing to fear from the one man in Macao who could have caused him trouble. Jan Breedon sat down at a table and ordered a cognac. Zaneen wandered over and sat down for a moment beside him.

"So you're back again," he said.

"I suppose you're surprized," Jan Breedon managed to whisper huskily.

"No, not exactly. After all, why should you have kept away? These little shooting affrays happen occasionally. They are unfortunate, but I have grown to think of them as purely a matter of business routine. You have nothing to fear from the authorities. The matter was never reported. It is a secret between you and me and the sharks. But let me

request that you try not to give way to temperament on this occasion. It is a bit annoying and makes so much extra work for my servants."

As a waiter brought the cognac, Zaneen rose to his feet.

"I trust you will enjoy your visit here," he observed as he sidled away.

Jan Breedon drank the cognac at a single gulp and ordered another. He felt better than he had felt for months. The cognac cleared his vision. It gave him new strength. Zaneen's gracious attitude had gone a great deal toward reviving his spirits. Perhaps this was the turning-point in his life. From now on there would be no more ghosts.

After the third cognac he began making plans for the future. He would go back to the sea again. Only on ships had he ever been happy. The sea was in his blood.

A great huge hulk of a man came and sat down opposite him. He looked like a Norwegian, yet there was no trace of foreign accent in his words as he spoke.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked pleasantly.

Jan Breedon liked him at once. The cognac was strong and it changed his entire view of life. Yes, it was good to have a companion to drink with.

"I've just come ashore," the man went on, "from the British freighter *Caswell*, and I don't know a soul in town. I hate to drink alone."

"Same here," said Jan Breedon. "Join me in a cognac?"

"My favorite drink," agreed the other. "My name is Webster. One of my very distant relatives wrote the dictionary and I can't even read. That's what they call evolution. This morning I deserted my ship because I got sick of smoked fish and corned pork. Might have been able to stomach the feed if occasionally they'd

switched to corned fish and smoked pork."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"Oh, from now on," was the airy response, "I'm just going to be a killer."

The casual remark was so great a surprise to Jan Breedon that he dropped his glass and it shattered to pieces on the hardwood floor.

"What?" he gasped.

"Be not disturbed, parson," the other assured him. "I merely mean that from now on I'm going to kill time. I've got quite a nest-egg hidden away, enough money to last for some time; so now I'm simply going to draw heaps of leisure about me and forget the absurdities of this world."

"For a man who cannot read," chuckled Jan Breedon, greatly relieved, "you certainly go in for elegant English."

"That is perhaps due to the family heritage," explained Webster. "It is a direct influence from the third cousin of my grand-uncle. Somehow words like that come natural-like to me, but reading is something else again."

BEFORE an hour had passed, the two were fast friends. They had reached a maudlin stage, and Jan Breedon was telling the history of his life. But even in his sodden condition he had sense enough not to mention the turmoil he had caused in the Grandon family. At Webster's suggestion, they had gone upstairs to a tiny private room where they could drink like gentlemen. Now they were ordering cognac by the bottle and Jan Breedon had long since forgotten how much he drank. Webster very accommodatingly filled up the glasses as soon as they were empty. Thus it was that Jan Breedon did not notice that his companion was actually drinking almost nothing. When he lifted a glass of cognac to his lips he scarcely sipped it. Nor

did he notice when Webster slipped a small powder into one of his drinks. After that he became very drowsy. Webster, too, closed his eyes. At last Jan Breedon buried his head in his arms and commenced snoring like a mountain lion.

Webster, of the elegant phrases, waited for about five minutes. Then he rose cautiously and shook the sleeping form. His manner was rough, but there was no response. He laughed shortly as he walked across the room and opened the hall door. Zaneen stood on the threshold.

"So your long period of waiting is over," he said.

"Come ahead, let's get him out," was the curt response. "If you will lead the way I'll sling him over my back. He'll be out for the next six hours anyway, and that'll be the easiest way to carry him."

Down the long winding hall they crept, and out into the night via a narrow hidden stairway in the back of the building. Outside, an automobile was waiting. Soon they were speeding down to the docks. Never once did Jan Breedon awaken, not even as he was carried on board a tramp steamer and flung on a bunk in a dirty forecabin. Zaneen returned in the auto to his hotel. That night at least Jan Breedon would cause him no trouble.

HOURS later, when Breedon awoke, he had no idea where he was. His mouth was dry and he felt as though he had been eating sawdust. When he struggled to a sitting position his head struck hard against the edge of the bunk above him, but of course he had no idea what had struck him. His head had been aching anyway, and now the pain increased until it felt as though it were almost bursting. He fell back on the blankets and closed his eyes. Even then everything seemed whirling dizzily about.

Still he was dying of thirst. He must find water.

Cautiously he rose to his feet. By the motion of the bed, he knew he was on shipboard. He decided he had been shanghaied. After all, what did it matter? He wanted to return to the sea and it was as well to accomplish this by an underground route as any other. But they needn't have gone to the trouble of shanghaiing him. He'd have signed up willingly. Had he not already decided to return to the sea?

He beheld a pail of water standing a short distance away. In it there was a tin dipper. The water was cool to the taste. Several times he filled the dipper. His body seemed porous. It absorbed the water like a sponge. He wondered if Webster had been shanghaied too. He imagined so. It would help make the voyage endurable if his friend was on board. What matter that he had known him only a few hours? They could not have gotten along better if they had been lifelong friends.

Unsteadily he made his way up to the deck. It was almost deserted, although there were a few figures moving about in the bow. Then he beheld a life-buoy tied to the railing. It held his gaze as though it were riveted, and as he gazed at it speechless, all color drained from his face. For on the life-buoy was printed *S. S. Banzai*. He was on board Lee Grandon's boat. He had not been shanghaied because the ship needed seamen. His being there was a deliberate plot. He knew that this was to be his last voyage. The *Banzai* was sailing for hell.

He clutched at the railing and moaned. At that moment, a Chinaman approached him. His face was so thin it seemed to Jan Breedon, in his overwrought condition, that it was the face of a living skeleton. As a matter of fact, the Chinaman was only the cook of the *Banzai*, and a

most excellent cook he was. He had no thought that rose above the preparation of foods. For more than a century his ancestors had all been cooks.

"Follow me," he said briefly.

Jan Breedon made no protest. He felt beaten. He could not have fought against the summons if he had tried.

The Chinaman led the way down to the closed door of a cabin.

"Go in there," he said.

Jan Breedon did so. It was a small cabin, the room such as a captain might occupy on any small ship. On one side there was a bunk. Next to it there was a desk on which lay a few books and some papers. There were also a few chairs and a small table. Beside the table Captain Grandon was sitting. He looked at Jan Breedon coldly. In the center of his forehead there was a small scar such as might have been made by a bullet. Around his neck were several reddish scars that might have come from knife wounds.

"Sit down," he ordered curtly.

Jan Breedon collapsed into a chair. All blood seemed to have drained from his body. The room was strangely cold.

CAPTAIN GRANDON sat and peered at him, and under the intense glowing hatred of those eyes Jan Breedon felt himself withering. He endured untold agony.

Finally, Captain Grandon spoke. "Twice you have killed me," he said slowly, "but I have no desire to remain dead. You can't kill me and make a success of it, because I will not die. But you are causing me a great deal of both-er. I hate these scars."

As he spoke he touched his forehead and his neck.

"They cause men to comment. I hate people to avoid me. That time in Penang when you slit my throat, stories got out

about it. Some said I had died and been reincarnated. They were afraid of me. I don't want to walk about the world having people believe that I am a ghost. The first time I did not mind so much. The scar between the eyes was a trivial thing. But after you had killed me the second time I vowed vengeance upon you. That is why you are here. But at heart I am a friendly person. I am offering you a preference in making your exit from this world. For a while I heeded the pleadings of my Chinese crew. They desire to bestow death upon you by *ling-chi*, which as you know is death by a thousand cuts, death by the slow or slicing process. They are waiting outside that door. If you leave this cabin they will know that that is the death you prefer. However, I am of a far more gentle nature. I believe in death without pain, death from a subtle poison, so that a man may die and suffer little hardship. In other words, a quiet release. On the table before you is a glass of a colorless liquid. It is tasteless. Yet in it there is dissolved death so potent that from it no man can escape. If you drink but a small quantity of that thirst-quenching potion, all the cares and troubles of this world will be gone. The choice is entirely yours. Death with dignity or from *ling-chi*."

Jan Breedon's face was colorless. He tried to speak, but no sound came. Captain Grandon gazed at him and now he was smiling. Jan Breedon's mouth was so dry, it was hard to believe that he had drunk so much water only a few moments before. And only a short distance away was that glass of poison. How cool and enticing it looked! After all, what had life to offer now? With trembling hand he lifted the glass to his lips and drank half the contents. Yes, it was tasteless. He put the glass back on the table. For a moment at least his thirst was assuaged.

"You have chosen wisely," Captain Grandon murmured.

He rose to his feet and lighted a lantern that hung above his head. It was an odd lantern. Pearl gray and very bright. Jan Breedon gazed upon it, fascinated.

Once more Captain Grandon seated himself in his chair. "After all," he said, "there is nothing so tragic about death, as you are perhaps discovering. Now your life is ebbing out. At longest you cannot live beyond sunset. After taking that drug no man ever has done so. You have no pain. Perhaps a suggestion of coldness. Still your face is turning slightly blue, but there is no pain in that."

Captain Grandon's voice had become so rhythmical it was almost a chant. He was singing a sort of dirge, describing the slow processes of death as they crept over Jan Breedon.

Meanwhile Jan Breedon kept gazing at the swaying pearl lantern. Its light hypnotized him. It seemed to be growing larger and larger, brighter and brighter. Then the light began to fade. He was dying. He could feel the coldness of death creeping up his body. A great peace seemed to envelop him. At least death was a means of escape. Now there would be no more ghosts. Perhaps death was but a long sleep, sleep without dreams. He imagined he could feel the poison creeping stealthily through his body, eating up his blood. But there was no pain. The light of the lantern had grown dim. At last, with one last bright shaft of life, it flickered out.

At that moment Jan Breedon's heart stopped beating. It was as though some invisible thread had bound his heart-beat to that light. His head fell forward on his breast and he slumped so grotesquely that he almost fell out of his chair.

CAPTAIN GRANDON smiled. He gazed at the pearl lantern that still blazed steadily as it swayed. Then he reached across the table, took the glass of poison in his hand. Jan Breedon had drunk half of it and he had died. Now Captain Grandon drank the other half.

"Water," he murmured, "nothing but water, the elixir of life, yet to Jan Breedon it brought death, death by suggestion."

He walked across the cabin to where there was a basin of water. Carefully he washed from the center of his forehead the spot that looked like a bullet-hole. Then from his neck he washed the red stains.

"Every man," he reflected, "that kills another, kills himself as well. For him there is no escape."

When he was through washing, he went up on deck. There were no Chinamen loitering outside the cabin door; in fact there were no Chinamen on board the *Banzai* except Wong, the cook, and he was busy in the galley.

Captain Grandon leaned against the railing of the ship and sighed deeply. He felt strangely content, for he had avenged the death of his two brothers.

