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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Mandarin's Canaries

By ROBERT BLOCH

A grim and fascinating tale of a torture-mad Chinese ruler who fed strange food to the feathered songsters in his garden of horror

THERE was revelry in the garden of the Mandarin Quong; revelry as attested by the loud cries and supplications for mercy interspersed with high titterings of pleasure.

The Mandarin was amusing himself today in a new fashion. Through the bamboos it could be seen that the stakes were bare, their rusty iron shackles hanging empty in the sunlight. The lotus-blossoms and orchids swayed with the wind to reveal that the racks stretched along the garden-paths were likewise empty, and the iron beds beneath the vines untenanted. No whips lay amidst the grass and flowers, no pincers or knives or barbed flails.

Therefore, as the cries and laughter proclaimed, the Mandarin Quong had found some new sport here in the Garden of Pain.

In a remote bower, guarded by great trees whose limbs had been trained to twist in torment, and veiled by serpentine creepers that extended fangs of scarlet blossom, the Mandarin stood. There had been those who were kind enough to compare Quong to the Lord Buddha, and there were times when his fat little figure held a dignified serenity quite similar.

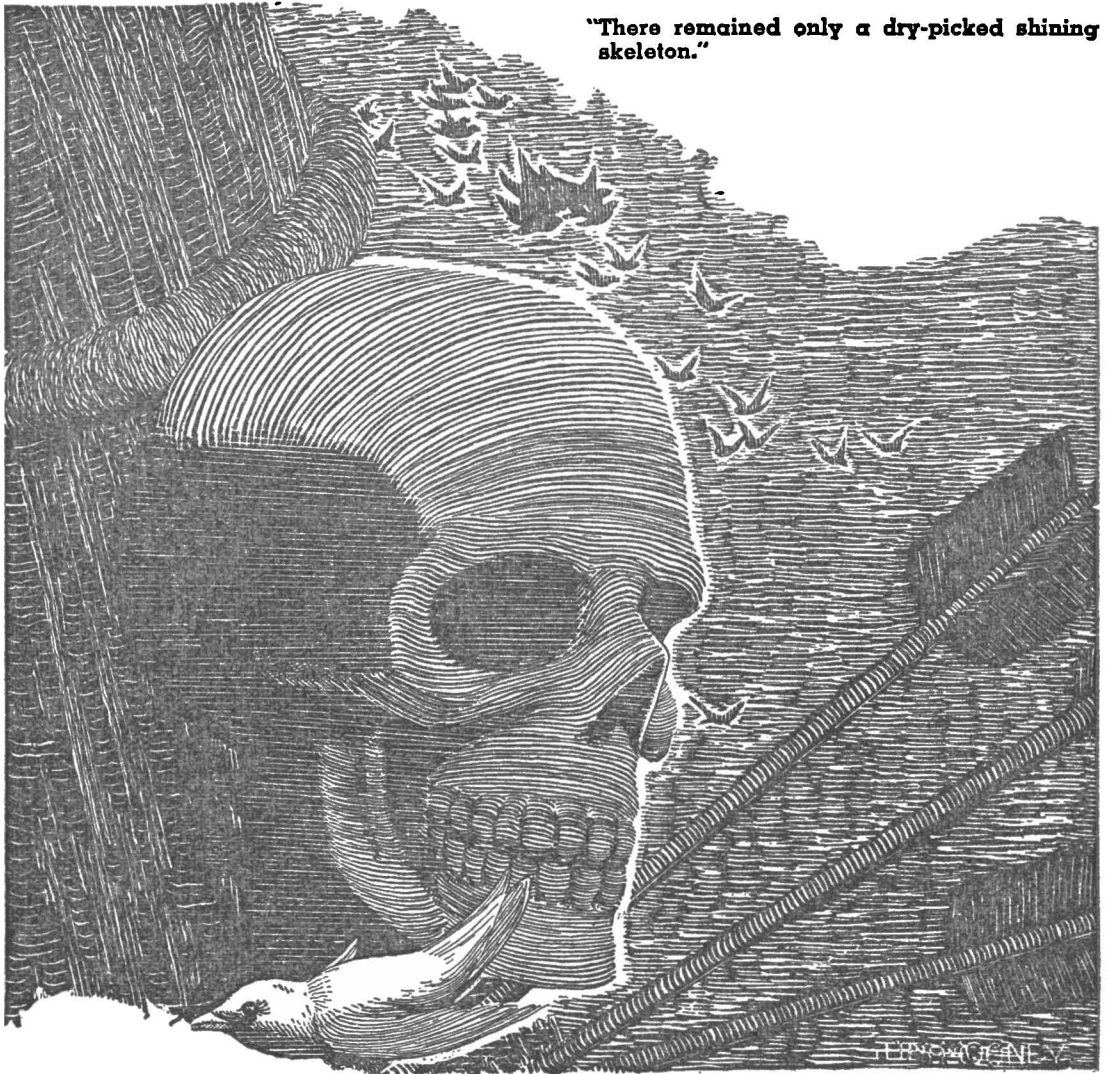
But in moments such as this, Quong was transfigured; his fleshy face creased into a mask of demoniac mirth; his red, full lips writhed back above his black beard, and his eyebrows were swords over slitted points of flame. Pleasure was an

intense emotion in the Mandarin, and his pleasure was Pain.

He stood staring across the bower at the two figures before him: the bound man against the great tree, and the robed figure confronting him some ten paces distant. The bound man was uttering the cries and the pleadings; the robed one was silent. He moved, but no sound emanated from those movements save an occasional twanging thrum. For the robed man held in his hands a great crossbow, and upon his back was a quiver bristling with barbed arrows. These he was swiftly and efficiently removing one by one; fitting them to his bow and taking expert aim as he released them at the bound, writhing figure of the captive.

His aim was remarkable—despite the agonized movements and convulsive startings of the victim, he never erred. The arrows sped to a living mark: the wrist, the ankle, the knee, the groin. With curious precision, he avoided placing the cruel shafts in a vital spot, and his arm carefully judged the depth with which each arrow would penetrate the shrinking yellow flesh of his tormented target.

But Quong did not notice this dexterity, or if he noticed it he gave the matter no heed. His laughing eyes were on the victim, watching the impact of each arrow, the jerk of the flesh as it sank in, and the thin trickle of blood that followed the piercing. To an observer it might almost be said that Quong ap-



"There remained only a dry-picked shining skeleton."

peared to be studying his victim's pain, studying with the amused and detached pleasure of a bibliophile who reads for the hundredth time some treasured volume—foretasting each delight, yet seeking unfelt nuances of enjoyment.

His delighted laughter fell as an arrow struck the bound man's left eye and penetrated the brain. The writhing ceased, the body sagged limply and hung from the ropes which restrained its fall.

The Mandarin Quong heaved a sigh—the sigh of the bibliophile when his book is closed—and with a wave of his saffron hands dismissed the archer. The bowman

bowed and backed from the bower with gestures of obeisance, leaving his master alone.

QUONG stood stock-still for an instant after the fellow's departure, and his features underwent a curious change. Gone was the sadist's smile, gone the passionate intensity which had made of his face a gargoyle's grimace. Serenity returned to shine from his slant eyes, and his lips relaxed into a softer smile of pleasure. He moved forward to the tree where the bound body hung, passing the gory thing without so much as a glance.

Behind the tree, suspended by the self-same ropes which upheld the victim, a series of thin metal pipes were hanging. From the sleeve of his robe the Mandarin drew forth a slender stick. With a gentle, caressing motion he drew the ivory head of the stick across the metal. A chiming rang forth—a soft, liquid, almost chirping series of notes holding a peculiar bird-like quality. The tones flooded forth, clear and mellow, as the Mandarin chose his notes with careful attention to harmonics. Music came from the tree where horror hung.

Again the Mandarin stepped back, and stood still as though waiting. And suddenly, while the last strains of metallic melody still floated through the garden, the air was filled with a curious rustling sound—hundreds of tiny sounds, rather, blurred into a single whirring note. And there came a cheeping and shrill whistling from all around which caused the yellow face of Quong to glow with kindly pleasure.

Without warning, the air turned to gold. A thousand yellow forms swirled to outshine the sun—moving yellow dots with bejeweled eyes that flamed. They whirled and dipped against the serene sky, then swooped about the tree in a golden cloud that spun round and round about the trunk and its grisly adornment.

And still they came, whirring and scudding down until the tree was covered with a yellow blossoming in all its boughs, and vines of living gold crawled across the bark and what sagged against it. The garden was filled with tiny birds, filled with the exquisite darting flight of graceful elfin swarms that chirped liquid cries of pleasure.

The Mandarin watched the golden pageant flow over the tree-trunk, watched the shining cluster as it moved across the tree in frantic life. The symphony of this

motion enthralled him so that the minutes passed unheeded.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the swarm dispersed. It rose suddenly in a golden spiral, swerving up from the tree-trunk to settle in the limbs. And now, in the space made vacant by the canaries' departure, a silver figure gleamed in the sunlight. Where the dead man had hung there remained only a dry-picked, shining skeleton.

The Mandarin stared quietly, then lifted his eyes to the boughs where the yellow horde rested in its repletion. He waited, and in a moment the melody came forth.

The song of pleasure was indescribable in its sweetness—soft, limpid, yet glowing with tonal color and pulsing with painfully ecstatic threnody. It rose and fell, faintly at first, then culminated in a burst of beauty as the chirping resolved into eery notes that were shrill yet vibrant.

For perhaps ten minutes the song continued, and then the last trills died away, the golden chain shattered link by link, and the birds departed.

Quong turned away toward the oncoming twilight, and as he walked toward the Palace the dusk hid the tears that streamed down his yellow cheeks.

2

THE Mandarin Quong loved his birds. This was a matter of common knowledge throughout the South, and the statement of it was generally coupled with the other known fact that Quong loved nothing else.

In these brave days China was used to cruel and dreadful masters, but in a land noted for the perversity of its overlords the name of Quong was feared above all others.

Shortly after the Mandarin usurped his father's throne in the Great Palace he had

given evidences of those qualities which caused many of his people to flee to Canton's coast where now the foreign devils had landed with many ships.

Those that remained after Quong's accession did so because they were unable to leave the lands; but in them was the same fear which had driven their more fortunate companions to seek the safety of seaward lands.

They feared Quong even as a boy, for he had given many instances of his cruel precocity when a mere lad in his father's house. With the impatience of youth he did not bother to amuse himself, as his brothers did, with the flogging and torturing of slaves. He was eager for death-throes, for the spasms of agony, and the servants he toyed with died swiftly in the dark dungeons. It was only in adolescence that he learned to control the intensity of his lusts; then he turned to the more subtle tortures. And not for long did he feel satisfied with the Copper Bowl, the Water-Death, or the Seven Bamboo Chastisements. The time-honored devices of his father's hired torture-masters he improved on, and his days were spent in the study of pain.

Now this was well, for the future Master must govern his people strictly and be quick to wrath, but even the conservative graybeards whispered that young Quong possessed a devil within him which knew delight only in debauches of cruelty.

It is true that his first favorites were seldom fated to survive his yearning for experiment over the period of a month; only families utterly destitute sold their daughters into the House of Quong. Each passing month saw the young man's quest of Pleasure in Pain increase its horror; he grew pale from long hours spent in dark cells and murky oubliettes. This could be readily understood in an old man, whose other pleasures were few,

but for a youth it was not seemly to be so confined. Still, Quong was precocious.

This precocity further evinced itself in Quong's judicious disposal of his three brothers, who found their last cups of rice wine to be very bitter indeed. They died quietly, without ostentation, and it was only to be expected when one morning the old Mandarin, Quong's father, went to his ancestors with the cord of a silken bowstring for a necklace about his throat.

Then Quong was Lord of the House, and high Mandarin over the jungles, the plains, and the village lands of all his people. His regal reign started with a most sumptuous funeral in honor of his father, and then he gave the people of his city a noble tiger-hunting in the streets of a little village close by. But these evidences of propriety did not wholly satisfy his subjects, who unkindly grumbled about the vast number of coolies who were immolated outside his father's tomb during the funeral ceremonies. Other ungrateful coolies said that the tiger-hunt was spoiled by the deaths of almost the entire populace in the village where it occurred.

But when Mandarin Quong made the pronouncement about his law, the flights to the coast began. Quong as Mandarin was the judge over all criminal trials in his domain, but he now specified that he would usurp the office of executioner as well. In the first three years of his official rule every case brought before him ended in conviction; and there were many cases, due to his increasing his force of guardsmen and the peculiar system whereby he paid them a bounty for each criminal obtained. This he could well afford, for an increasing number of crimes seemed to be discovered among the wealthier merchant and land-holding class, and conviction carried with it a con-

fiscation of money and property to Quong's house.

As an executioner, Quong scorned beheading or any of the accepted modes of torture. No longer was the sentence carried out in public; Quong preferred the darkness of his palace dungeons or his ivory Hall of State: Here, it was averred, the walls were lined with human heads, mounted as one might mount the head of a deer or a buffalo.

In an effort to discourage such unfortunate predilections toward torture, one of Quong's advisers subtly hinted that his constant stay indoors was injurious to the health of the Mandarin.

It was then that Quong built his garden—his beautiful Chinese garden behind the palace, where trees and flowers and mirroring-pools opened to the sky. And he built racks and wheels and scaffolds that blossomed with evil fruit, so that things went much the same as they had in the old dungeons below the Palace.

But Nature stirred a new love of beauty in the Mandarin's breast. He caused vines to grow upon the iron racks to conceal the rusty stains; trained creepers to hide the stark lines of his scaffolds. Sometimes he walked in the gardens alone, and was serenaded by musicians from concealed glades and dells.

For the birds did not rest here. Blood nourished the fantastic flowers, and the perfume of rare orchids was rich in the air; but over all was the carrion taint that brought crows and vultures but kept the songsters away. Nightingales and finches shunned the green confines, and those brought by the animal-venders flew away with peepings of terror rather than chirps of song. Even the scarlet macaws and green parrots refused to color the landscape with their presence, and the garden remained incomplete without its musical background.

BUT at this time the two missionaries came to Quong at the Palace, and asked if they might stay. They were foreign devils; Portuguese, in robes of black, who spoke a curious tongue and blasphemed against Lord Buddha, the Four Books, and Kwong-Fu-Tze with equally impartial fervor.

Some of their paraphernalia interested the Mandarin, who spent several days with the queer thunder-sticks which worked on principles so divergent from Chinese guns; the sextants, silver watches, and other marvels brought from the court of King John.

They had birds, in cages—tiny yellow birds, that sang with infinite sweetness. Canaries, the priests called them, and their golden beauty much impressed the Mandarin; so much so, that after listening to an especially severe tirade against his torturing and cruelties by the two missionaries, he conducted them to the garden and accorded them the fate of the One they called their Master.

And he loosed the canaries in the garden, and beheld with pleasure that they did not fly away but remained close to him. To his great amusement one of them perched upon the sagging shoulder of the first priest, and sang up into the dead face with affectionate fervor. He rewarded the birds with the most delicate of meats—the tongue of the priest.

Perhaps, he mused, it would instill the creatures with the eloquence of their former masters.

This did not occur, but the birds stayed. And within a few years they had multiplied a hundredfold, then grew to many thousands. They filled the garden by day, and then fared afield at will, returning only toward twilight to await the feast spread for them.

They had developed a terrible appetite for the ghastly fruit which ripened daily in the garden sunlight. It had arisen at

the first, and as generation after generation lived and bred and died in the torture-maze, the blood-strain carried with it the nameless hunger.

Formerly Quong had set aside a burial-ground on his lands, but now only bones need be piled in his great cellars. The birds, thousands strong, did the rest. And after a time they learned to await his signal.

Over all the garden Quong had set up little metal bars which played a curious scale. Upon completing his daily dispensing of justice, he would summon the flock with his chimes and they came to partake of his largess. Afterward they raised their voices in the sweet reward of song—and it was a song infinitely more beautiful than any the Mandarin had ever known. It soothed him like mellow wine, set his blood tingling like the hands of one well-beloved, thrilled his imaginative senses like moonlight over dragon-guarded pools. He loved his birds, loved their daily tribute.

But others feared them. Men learned of his canaries, saw the flocks speed over their fields and descend at will to ravish the grain and seeds. They were not molested lest this incur the Mandarin's displeasure. The growing horde swarmed about the cities and villages, and none might wave them from the streets. A dead bird meant a dead man if the Mandarin's guards found the creature.

The legend of their feastings in the garden became known, and after that strange tales were told of the foreign devils who had brought the birds as spies. It was whispered that the tiny chattering creatures possessed human souls; that they sucked evil nourishment from the dead, and absorbed the wisdom of men which they used when prying about the streets. Other lore hinted that they reported to the Mandarin the misdeeds which they observed in daily flight, and

they came to be hated and feared as living symbols of the terrible power which ruled the land.

3

Now lately Quong had devised a new torture which pleased him greatly. He was writing, on many parchments, a history of Pain to bequeath to the Great School in Peking, and it heartened him to be able to include interesting variations invented by himself.

This Death of a Thousand Arrows was such an invention. Barbed darts of various sizes, shot with various degrees of force into certain carefully-selected portions of a victim's body, produced a lingering torment delightful to members of the aristocracy of Pain.

Quong had devised the idea himself, but he needed an expert bowman to assist him. It was then that he sought Hin-Tze, the Emperor's archer, and offered him employment.

Hin-Tze came to the Palace with his wife Yu-Li, and the Mandarin noted with pleasure that his bowman was efficient and the bowman's wife lovely to look upon.

So it was not many days after Hin-Tze first employed himself with victims in the garden that the Mandarin caused the woman to be removed to his quarters and gave himself over to dalliance.

The archer learned of this, and his heart was sore. He did not like his dreadful task, but he had come at the Emperor's command and dared not disobey. He hated the cruelty, hated the Mandarin, and was repelled by the nauseous birds whose unnatural feastings gave him such qualms as he had never known on the battlefield. Indeed, one day he had accidentally pierced a yellow body with an arrow—and only the fact that the canary had winged itself within the line of flight

saved him from the Mandarin's wrath. He was a soldier, and to him the music of the canaries was not sweet after the spectacle of their dining.

Now that his wife had been taken, Hin-Tze was very bitter in his heart against Lord Quong, though he dared not speak. He feared, instead, for he had heard tales of the Mandarin's love.

And one evening not many weeks after the taking of his woman, Quong grew enraged and with his dagger slit the golden throat of his new favorite so that pretty Yu-li died sobbing her husband's name.

Hin-Tze saw, and said nothing, even when the pitiful limp form was carried into the garden by servants.

He returned to his quarters and sat alone in the moonlight, awaiting what he knew he would hear. And then came that sweet, detestable song from the tree-tops, the satisfied song of the canaries. At that moment Hin-Tze swore his oath against the Mandarin, against the desecration of his wife's body, which was not even accorded godly burial but sacrificed instead to a few moments of melody from the hateful tiny throats of Quong's friends.

Of this he said no word to the Mandarin, for that was not seemly; and with lordly courtesy Quong forbore mentioning the occurrence when they met the next day.

Hin-Tze carried a bound coolie into the garden sunlight; a poor, choking wretch who had stolen a few taels in some market outside the town. He pleaded with Hin-Tze as he walked, and it was curious to the archer to hear that the doomed man did not fear death nearly so much as he feared the loss of his immortal soul. He and all the people were afraid of the canaries of Quong, whose feasting deprived them of proper burial.

But Hin-Tze said nothing as he slipped

a knife through the man's bonds and awaited the Mandarin.

Quong strode down the path, smiling in the sunshine. A fat prisoner—a greater song. He advanced, beaming serenely on his bowman, whose gentle tact in ignoring the unfortunate accident of the previous evening he greatly admired. Quong clapped his hands to signal that the ritual binding begin, and indicated the great tree as the one to which the victim was to be tied.

But the Lord of Pleasure and Pain was chagrined when the prisoner suddenly wheeled and bolted off through the garden, his severed bonds trailing behind him. He opened his mouth, forming it for a shout of anger; but it gaped still wider in astonishment as Hin-Tze advanced and seized him by the throat. There was a great arrow in the bowman's hand, and its point was barbed. It moved slowly toward the Mandarin's neck as he struggled back against the tree-trunk. His face paled at what he read in his captor's gleaming eyes.

It was then that he babbled for mercy and screamed, and struck out wildly. But Hin-Tze drew the barbed point over the breast of Quong and pinned him to the tree.

Then the bowman stepped back and fixed an arrow to his great bow. He shot the dart, eyes blind with rage and ears deaf to the cries of his living target. He drew, fixed, fired automatically; a half-hundred times perhaps, he aimed with eyes dazzled by a sort of madness. Only then was vengeance appeased—only then did he cease and approach the living horror that still stood before the tree-trunk.

One of the hands was moving, a bloody claw. It curled around the bark, fumbling, fumbling. It rested, then moved again. And suddenly shrill chimes rang upon the air—chimes that summoned and commanded. The hand fell, but into the glaz-

ing eyes crept a look of triumph and of craftiness. The lips worked piteously.

"Lift me down," whispered the Mandarin.

Hin-Tze, confused, drew the pinioning arrow forth and the body of the dying Quong slumped forward as though fainting in his arms.

TOO late did Hin-Tze see the arrow torn from the flesh; the arrow in the hand that now struck with every ounce of strength that remained in the broken arms. With a last effort, the Mandarin had nailed him to the tree!

The figure in the gorgeous robes fell earthward, but Quong's triumphant eyes still stared up into Hin-Tze's pain-contorted face.

"I have summoned the birds," said the Mandarin, faintly. "They are my friends, and they come when the chimes call. You have heard the legends which say my canaries possess living souls—the souls of the dead that once hung upon the tree where you hang now."

The Mandarin shuddered a moment, then fell silent. At last he whispered again.

"This is not true. The birds are simply birds; they know me and they love me, for I have prepared for them many feasts. Therefore vengeance for my death shall rest with them. And—I shall hear one last song as I die."

Hin-Tze understood then. He struggled to free himself, but the arrow held him so that he hung by the barbs that nailed him to the tree of horror.

He clawed and screamed when he heard the rustling sounds, moaned aloud as the golden cloud hummed down toward him. And then they were all about with their beating wings, their tiny beaks that stabbed sharply, cruelly, with dreadful hunger. Blood blinded him, two

winged knives flew to his eyes, and the golden glow faded to black pain. For a few moments longer he writhed beneath the beaks of his tiny tormenters. Then the cloud settled down in silence.

Upon the ground lay the Mandarin Quong. His wounds were forgotten, for he had the nature of a poet. This final revenge, this last triumph in defeat, was atonement. He watched every movement of the raptorial birds, drank in their graceful beauty to the full. And soon he would hear the song—the final song before death.

For he had spoken truly to Hin-Tze. The birds loved him; and they were only birds. The notion of psychopomps—the absurd superstition that these creatures of his possessed the souls of the dead from his garden—was incredible.

Quong watched the yellow swarm move across the body of the bowman. They rose, chittering. In a moment the song would commence. The Mandarin awaited the perfection of the poet's death.

They rose—and suddenly one of the tiny birds detached itself from the sun-bright cluster. It was a tiny female—and it flew straight down toward the skeleton on the tree. It perched, absurdly, upon the fleshless ribs; as though peering into the bony bars of a cage.

Quong gazed with new interest. He drew himself up on one elbow, painfully. The bird was sitting there—and then—there were two birds!

Was it hallucination, dying delirium? Or had another bird suddenly appeared from *inside* the skeleton? A yellow form, whirring within the ribs where the heart had been?

And now the two winged out, together. Their beady little eyes rested upon the recumbent form of the Mandarin.

He sank back, strange horror tugging

at his heart. A female bird—Yu-Li. And a male from the skeleton of the dead bowman! *Psychopomps?*

The two flew upward, to where the yellow cloud hovered in midair. They flew to the forefront, shrilling as though in command. And then they wheeled, swooped down. Quong screamed in utter fear. Dead souls were exacting *their*

vengeance. Yellow knives stabbed and struck home; ten thousand fluttering forms tore and clawed at the writhing thing upon the ground.

And so there was no one to hear the final moment when it came—it was in a deserted garden that the last sweet serenade was sung by the canaries of the Mandarin Quong.