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The Mandarin's Ear

By FRANK OWEN

An odd and curious story about a Chinese mandarin who had the ear of a thief grafted in place of the ear he had lost

THE mandarin Wang Mok was distraught. He had gone hunting in the hills west of Peking. Not only had he returned without any game, but he had returned without one of his ears. Where the ear had been, there was now a jagged wound which his numerous doctors hustled about in an effort to heal. Not only was the pain excruciating, but Wang Mok considered that he had lost face. Now he would not be able to be buried in completeness on that day when earth should cease to need him more. And another thing disturbed him. Now when he walked in the garden among his numerous slender slave-women, they might turn their heads that he would not behold them smiling. No longer was the face of Wang Mok round and bland as a full moon. It was a broken moon. Saurin the poet could no longer write sonnets about him.

How he lost his ear ever remained a mystery. Some said that it had been shot off accidentally, others that a wild beast of the mountains had attacked Wang Mox in savage fury, resentful of his desire to spread death through the mountains. But those in the mandarin's party wisely said nothing. Although as a rule the mandarin was a gentle master, upon occasion he had been known to slit the tongue of a cook because he had prepared food for him that had caused his stomach vexation.

And now the doctors shook their heads

as they gathered in conclave. For once their extensive resources were inadequate. They could not very well resort to acupuncture, nor for that matter could they prescribe shed snakeskins, asafetida or apricot gold pills. Only a magician could grow a new ear. Then Doctor Wen Hsi, who always walked alone in the pathways of therapeutics and philosophy, craved audience with the mandarin and was at once shown into his august presence.

"My master," he said humbly, after preliminary salutations had been exhausted, "if you will permit me to speak, I will advise you of my humble conclusions in regard to the replacement of your ear."

"Speak freely," the mandarin directed, "for I know you are a doctor possessed of remarkable powers, though I greatly doubt your ability to grow a new ear for me."

Doctor Wen Hsi bowed. "Most gracious master," he said slowly, "I make no claim that I can grow you a new ear, but I believe that with the help of the gods and your august sanction I can replace the one you have lost."

"You mean with an ear of wax?"

"No, with a living ear!"

The mandarin leaned forward on his chair. His eyes lit up and glowed like bright lanterns.

"If you could do that," he whispered tensely, "the fortunes of China would be yours."



"Her body was like warm white velvet."

It was an elegant exaggeration. Wang Mok could not have promised more had he been the emperor instead of only a mandarin. Nevertheless he was fabulously wealthy, so that within reason he could make good his boast.

"Up till now," the doctor went on, "I have only a theory."

"What more do you need?"

"An ear."

The mandarin leaned back and sighed. "A living ear? Where could we find one willing to part with so necessary an appendage save as the result of violence? Besides which, to make the matter more

difficult, an ear would have to be found that would match in symmetry the ear I have lost."

"That should not be hard," Wen Hsi said, musingly. "Surely among the hosts of condemned murderers, waiting to have their heads ignominiously chopped off, we could find one willing to give up his ear in exchange for his head."

"Vast approval do I bestow on your plan," the mandarin commented. "Proceed at once with it. Days will drag until that hour when the symmetry of my face shall be restored."

MING TI had only five days to live. He sat in his cell, his back against the wall, meditating over the sweetness of life. He smacked his lips. He had found the world a juicy plum and it had not been hard to bite into it. Among thieves, Ming Ti was an emperor; that is why he had the colossal effrontery to assume the name of one of the most illustrious of all Chinese emperors. But then Ming Ti held nothing sacred. He was tall, handsome. No emperor had ever had better features, nor had there been one whose face more truly resembled that of a full moon. And his skin was of a fine golden texture, like the color of the young moon rising. His nose was a bit too flat, but his eyes were glittering. They seemed to be laughing, but it was laughter without warmth. His mouth was firm and his chin strong. But greater in perfection than any other of his features were his ears. Alas! that so soon he would no longer be able to hear the faint swish of the wind through the willows or the glory-song of a Chinese nightingale!

Yet he knew that at his death, many slender girls would weep, girls like flowers, girls from many different provinces. And their tears would fall to form a mighty river on which his soul might flow into the Celestial Heaven. Ming Ti had no desire for immortality. He had little fault to find with a world so constructed that he had money hidden away everywhere. Occasionally there were those who spoiled his play. They protested at his taking money to which he had no right.

Now and then it was necessary to inflict death upon these misguided strangers. Never did he kill with malice. It was merely in the routine of business. But those in authority had become vexed. Protestations had come from various legations. So much pressure had been put

upon China that she winced. The result was that Ming Ti was scooped up and thrown into prison. His head was to be sliced from his body. Not in anger. That too was to be merely in the routine of business.

The contemplation of it spoiled the rhythm of Ming Ti's life, for more than anything else he was a poet. He liked to sing little songs to the moon, especially when a slender girl was standing in silhouette in front of it. Ming Ti was a born lover, a veritable emperor of hearts. It was his proud boast that no damsel had ever been able to withstand the ardor of his wooing. Even girls who became his captives ended up by being slaves of his love. Ming Ti knew all that there was to know about war and women. He was a braggart, a boaster, a swashbuckling buccaneer.

Through his life had passed a countless procession of women—women of every hue, women for every mood. Yet now the procession was about to end. The parade was over. Death would be his final mistress. Nor would she succumb to his charms. Rather would it be the other way about. He would join that endless procession of men upon whom death had smiled, then turned away.

Ming Ti sighed. How sweet life was! Life was a great melon. Women were the seeds.

But now the feast was over. In a few days his head would drop from his body, as the executioner demonstrated his skill before an assembled throng. Ming Ti drew his hand across his eyes and shivered. He hoped his head wouldn't roll when it fell to the ground.

And then came Doctor Wen Hsi. From his gracious and charming attitude no one would have imagined that his interest was concerned with trading. He was a merchant extraordinary, willing to trade a head for an ear.

Ming Ti was tired of being alone. His spirits drooped. He was alone in a stinking cell where there was no human about to whom he could boast. There were vermin and rats, to be sure, but they paid little heed to his ravings. Always he had wasted his time in wine shops and in the company of women, telling tall tales about his exploits. Everything was related with some degree of veracity, though slightly multiplied. If he fought one man it was a dozen. If he escaped from his pursuers by swimming a creek it was a mighty river. If he kicked a dog until it fled yelping from his path it became a tiger in the telling. And his exploits in love were equally as amazing. They too were warmed with boasting, but they were so Rabelaisian that they cannot be set down. Suffice to say that no woman could resist him, and certainly there was no woman strong enough to overcome him in nuptial combat. He was a singing troubadour, a Chinese Don Juan. For years he had been the center of his little world. His subjects had willingly grouped around him, for he told his stories well; but, far more important, he dispensed warm wine when the tales were concluded. Now he no longer had wine, and his subjects had dispersed to other tiny kingdoms not overcome by drought. So at the approach of Doctor Wen Hsi he was in a highly receptive mood.

Naturally he was unenthusiastic about the suggestion that he relinquish all claim to his ear, but he was enthusiastic about the opportunity to continue marching onward into life. Life had been too enjoyable for him to contemplate cessation of it without regret.

Now Doctor Wen Hsi was a man of action. Wherever possible he liked to accomplish his work with promptitude. Therefore he took Ming Ti back to the mandarin and amid great pomp and ceremony Ming Ti's ear was transplanted

onto the moon-like head of Wang Mok. And in the palace there was great rejoicing, for now the mandarin had not lost face; rather he had regained that part of his face that had been missing.

Ming Ti, the bandit, was amply rewarded. His wound was given the best of attention. When it had healed he was sent forth from the palace, a free man, and his purse had been filled with so much gold that it was burdensome to carry. But Ming Ti soon righted that. He stopped at numerous wine shops, dallied on love boats and squandered his new wealth in profligate living and with such speed that he was soon reduced to a rank little above that of a beggar. So once more he returned to his profession of banditry, which he had perfected until it had become a fine art.

MEANWHILE Wang Mok, the mandarin, walked once more among his slave-women in the vast gardens surrounding his house. Once more he was fit for the adoration of slant-eyed girls. How good it was to feel the caress of slender hands, the warmth and softness of lush red lips, under a Chinese moon! The garden was fragrant with the mingled perfumes of many flowers. And in that garden walked Jasmine, with a body like warm white velvet. When Jasmine smiled, the moon itself bowed in homage. Wang Mok was completely captivated by this slender gorgeous slave who had come to live with him, though now he found himself living with her. He obeyed her every wish. She was a delicate, fragile, perfumed tyrant. She cared not in the slightest for Wang Mok, but she was appreciative of the position in which she was placed through her association with him. Her family had been poor farmers who lived in the shadow of the Yellow River. Sometimes the shadows deepened and floods enveloped the land like great

laughter. It was a continuous struggle between man and the river, but eventually the river won. The little family, like a million others, was reduced to a state of starvation perched on the fringe of death. It was at this time that Jasmine urged her father to sell her into slavery, so that the rest of the family might be freed from their shackles of poverty. Despite the feeble protests of those dear to her, Jasmine's will prevailed. Through an agent in Peking who was famous for his traffic in women, she eventually found herself the property of Wang Mok. Never had she beheld a mansion more beautiful, nor a garden more fragrant. At night when the moon was high, Wang Mok lingered with her in one of the tiny pavilions that stood like a jewel on the edge of an artificial lake, and drew her to his breast.

Jasmine desired more than anything else to please Wang Mok, for Wang Mok had made her family comparatively affluent. Now they were the one prosperous clan in a village of beggars. It pleased them to flaunt their success. And though Jasmine gave herself to Wang Mok willingly, she was never stirred by his wooing. To her he had far less personality than the moon or the trees that grew in the garden.

Now that he had a new ear, Wang Mok's esteem of himself increased. He never appreciated the worth of his ear until it had been snatched from him. And so the sleep of Wang Mok was calm and serene, but unfortunately it did not remain so for long. Presently a night came when he tossed upon his kong and groaned in misery, for he seemed to be suffering torture, the same torture that he could hear as though on the breath of the wind from some far-distant place. Sighs and groans and much weeping. Hours on end of torture, and a man sitting in a jail

cell, pleading to the gods to smite him down and end sufferings so extreme.

Once more Wang Mok summoned the renowned Doctor Wen Hsi and related the strange occurrences of the night, but to the learned doctor such phenomena were far from a mystery.

"You are wearing the ear of Ming Ti," he explained, "and so you hear all the things that are happening to him. And I might add that at this moment things are happening to him in considerable quantities. For Ming Ti has been arrested once more for being a bandit, and hour after hour he is being tortured with all the refinements and perfection of that gentle art."

"But this must cease," the mandarin said irritably, "for by torturing Ming Ti they are torturing me. Arrange for his release at once."

"I will do so," the doctor said, "and I believe, as ever, your decision is a wise one. I suggest carrying it a step farther, however, to guard against such a thing happening again. Ming Ti is a bandit, and a bandit he will always remain. He will steal anything when urged by poverty, and so efficiently does he squander money that it is a practical impossibility to keep him always in funds. Given the wealth of all China, he would squander it in a few years. It is my thought that if Ming Ti were brought to this garden to dwell for ever in peace and plenty with his own servants to wait upon him the urge to steal would not be sharpened to so keen an edge. And both you and he would be able to sleep of nights, for there would be nothing to interrupt the calm measure of your dreams."

"That is an excellent plan," agreed Wang Mok, and his joy was far in excess of that warranted by the occasion.

SO MING TI was brought to the garden of the mandarin. He was bathed and dressed in elaborate clothes, after which he was served a meal fit for the gods, a meal that was a poem in fifty courses. And as the meal progressed the mandarin entered and sat at the table also. In glowing phrases he bade Ming Ti welcome.

"Henceforth," said he, "you will be permitted the run of my house, for you are now my brother. We are blood brothers, united by an exchange of ears."

Ming Ti smiled insolently. "Hardly that," said he, "for I did not receive any ear in return."

"That is true," the mandarin said blandly, "but in my eyes, you have an ear. This ear that I am wearing will ever be yours. And to seal the compact I give you this house and garden as your home till death."

Ming Ti bowed. "You are most gracious," he declared. "First you give me my life. And now you give me a new splendid world in which to enjoy it. Truly it is like being born anew. May I be worthy of the honors which you are showering down upon me."

"If you have a wife," Wang Mok went on, "she shall be brought here so that you may enjoy the pleasures with which she is able to supply you."

"I have no wife," Ming Ti said curtly. "There is no one I wish to bring here."

"If you have any desires, make them known to me," the mandarin told him at parting.

Before that day had drawn to a close and the sun had gone over the far hills to die, Ming Ti had flamed with a great desire, but he did not mention the matter to the mandarin. For as he walked through that enchanted garden in the late afternoon, he encountered Jasmine, who was walking alone. Her slender body

vied with the flowers in loveliness. There was fragrance in her breath, fragrance in her smile as she stepped aside for Ming Ti to pass. And though Ming Ti passed, his thoughts remained with Jasmine. He paused and looked back, scarcely believing that such enchantment could be reality. And at that moment, Ming Ti stepped into a dream, a dream that became more beautiful day by day. It warmed and grew rich in color. Now Ming Ti was no longer a bandit. He was merely a man, conquered by love. Nor was his love fruitless, for it stirred an echo in Jasmine's gentle breast.

In the ensuing days they contrived to meet each other frequently, and it happened, as such things do, that eventually their love blended and became one. Their two lives flowed onward like a peaceful river. But they were not happy, for Ming Ti knew that the mandarin shared the favors of Jasmine with him, and jealousy overcame him like a mighty flood. He felt as though he were drowning, unable to breathe. He must get Jasmine away from this enchanted prison. Not for a moment did Ming Ti think of all the comfort he would be surrendering by leaving the garden to go into an exile of poverty. Jasmine would go with him. Therefore nothing else mattered. Having Jasmine, he would have everything. At last Ming Ti had become as profound as any of the sages of old China. All that is worthwhile in life is reflected in the smile of a beloved woman.

When Wang Mok, the mandarin, was advised one morning that they had fled, he was distraught. It was as though sunshine had vanished from the garden. The birds no longer sang, there was no melody in the tree-tops, and the flowers had lost their fragrance. Night after night he lay sleepless, listening to the wooing of Ming Ti. Although he did not know where the lovers had gone, each night he list-

ened to their whispering. The ear of Ming Ti had restored symmetry to the mandarin's face, but it had taken away serenity of mind.

AS THE weeks rolled on and drearily grew into months, the agents of the mandarin scoured the empire for any trace of Jasmine or the bandit, but without success. Apparently they had vanished like spirits into the very air. It was a profound mystery, an event without reason. And yet, though none of the searchers suspected it, the explanation was so simple that it needed little explanation. Ming Ti and Jasmine had merely stepped over the threshold of China and it was as though a door had closed upon them. To the heart of Indo-China they went, where they could find heart's ease and serenity.

Now during his life Wang Mok had owned and possessed many women. Some were like fine bits of fragile porcelains, some like flowers, a few as smooth as jade. He had enjoyed a feast of love, a feast of many courses; nor did he care particularly when one was taken from him. And now that Jasmine was gone, he might have forgotten her if he had not been forced to listen to the music of her voice as she sang exquisite love-songs to Ming Ti. And the ear of Ming Ti on the face of the mandarin strained so hard to catch every note, it was almost like an attack of acute neuralgia. The pain kept Jasmine ever in his thoughts, which naturally kept her ever in his heart. Night after night his sleep was disturbed. He became irritable and fretful. He tried the salve of the velvet bodies of other women. But still his ear, the ear of Ming Ti, listened for the magic tones of Jasmine's rippling voice.

And then one night, surprisingly, Wang Mok slept through till dawn. No dreams, no pain. The soft golden body

beside him gave him warmth. The gentle breasts of the newest of his slaves were silken cushions against which he lay sleeping. When he awakened he gazed about him, unable to comprehend this new freedom that had been thrust upon him. He put his hand to his face. His ear was as cold as ice. It was without feeling. With it he could hear nothing. And once more Wang Mok sent for Doctor Wen Hsi and acquainted him with all that had occurred.

Wen Hsi examined the ear thoroughly.

"Strange are the ways of the gods," he mused.

"What do you mean?" asked the mandarin.

"This ear is dead. It must be cut from your body before it begins to rot. I strongly recommend that it be done within the hour."

"But how do you explain it?" the mandarin persisted.

"Somewhere, somehow," the doctor began, "Ming Ti has met death. He has gone to join the spirits of his ancestors and he has taken his ear with him. That ear still belongs to Ming Ti. It always heard the things that were happening to Ming Ti. We erred when we attempted to meddle with the affairs of the gods."

The mandarin smiled. After all, there were many nights to come, Chinese nights entertainments to rival any of those related of Bagdad in the book of a thousand and one stories.

Later that day, an operation was performed. For the second time Wang Mok lost an ear, but this time he did not mind, for he had grown to believe that by surrendering his ear, he had regained his "face," which was vastly more important. Better, he believed, to have one ear and enjoy the repose of yellow-velvet fragrant nights, than to have two ears and toss sleepless until dawn.