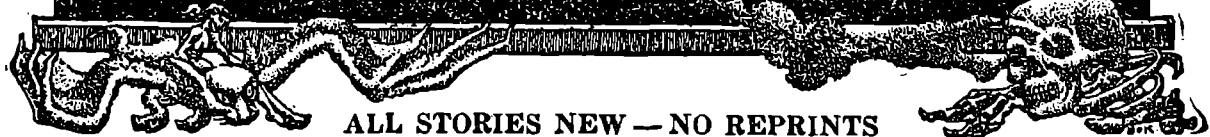


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1951

Cover by Charles A. Kennedy

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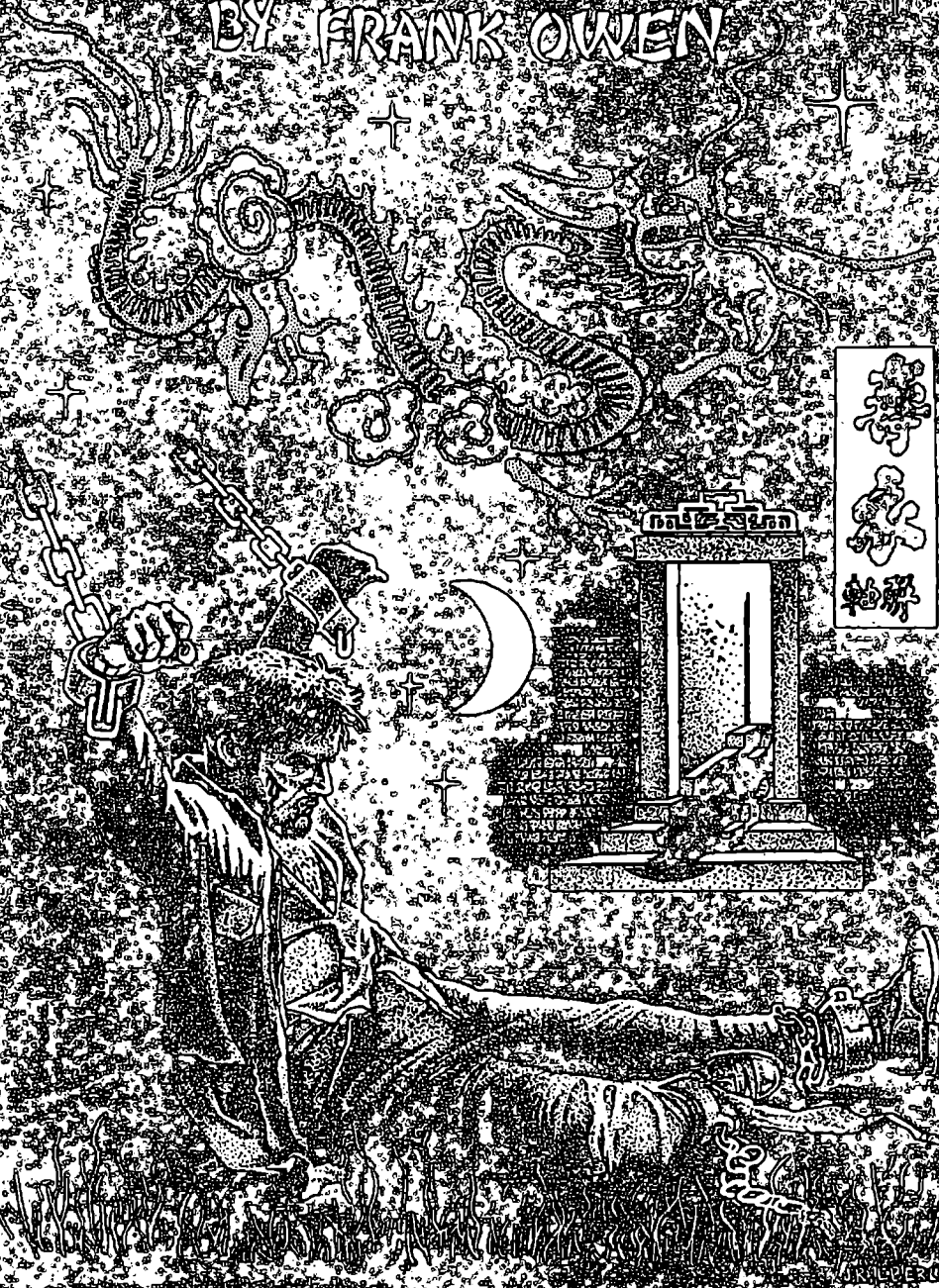
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D. McLLWRAITH, Editor

THE OLD GENTLEMAN WITH
THE SCARLET UMBRELLA
BY FRANK OWEN



*The worthy doctor's belief in dragons was fixed as his belief
in the eclipse of the moon.*

DOCTOR SHEN FU sipped his tea languidly. "It is ironic that you should be searching for dragons," he mused, "when plagues of war and famine are sweeping over China, decimating our people as though their lives are of less value than chewed mellow seeds."

"At such a time," John Stepling said, "surely we have need for dragons."

"I bow humbly before your wisdom," said the doctor. "I will give you all the help I can."

They sat in a room set aside for tea-drinking in the Drug Shop of a Thousand Years in Hangchow. Fighting had reached the fringe of the city but the doctor was not disturbed. In a land of 450,000,000 people with only 12,000 physicians, a doctor is not carelessly destroyed. Though enemy soldiers had been persuaded by their officers that they were invincible, they knew that they were helpless against the ravages of poison and disease. It was comforting to have a doctor in their midst. How were they to know that Doctor Shen Fu's hatred was more deadly than cobra venom?

"I approach my subject with an open mind," said John Stepling. "I am aware that thirty years ago near the city of Ichang on the Upper Yangtze River, about a thousand miles from the Yellow Sea, the fossils of several dragons were found in a cavern known as the Dragon Cave. According to legend, the cave extended for fifty li and led to the Lung Wong Tung or the Cave of the Dragon King. The length of the largest fossil was seventy feet. It was about two feet thick, with a flat head. An interesting article about it appeared in the Far Eastern Review for December, 1915."

"I refuse to be excited by your disclosures," said Doctor Shen Fu gently, "for my belief in dragons is as fixed as my belief in eclipses of the moon. For more than a thousand years this drug shop has been dispensing drugs in which powdered

dragon bones have been prime ingredients. Do you know that the most costly and aromatic of all perfumes is dragon saliva, or that rubies are drops of petrified dragon blood? Our sages have written, 'The small dragon is like a silk caterpillar. The large dragon fills heaven and earth. When it arises, it gallops over the clouds. When it hibernates, it crouches in an abyss. The scaly dragon becomes a true dragon in a thousand years. In five hundred years more he becomes a horned dragon and in a thousand years more he becomes a flying dragon.' The dragon through the ages has embodied our loftiest ideals. But it re-embodied our loftiest ideals.

"Dragons in summer live in the clouds and when they quarrel with each other the clouds are churned into rain. The dragon loves jade and the flesh of swallows, but he seems to have a fear of iron. He is fond of arsenic and if a bamboo grove is deserted he likes to repose therein. In the folklore of all peoples much space is given to dragons. If they do not exist and never have existed, why do your anthropologists write such weighty scrolls about them? However, the Chinese see them in true perspective. For thousands of years dragon robes were reserved exclusively for our Emperors who ruled from a Dragon Throne. It is said in the *Yih King*: 'The chief dragon has his abode in the sky, and all the clouds and vapors, winds and rains are under his control. He can send rain or withhold it at his pleasure. Hence all vegetable life depends upon him.' Therefore throughout the ages of written history the Emperor of China sat on his Dragon Throne, watching over the welfare of his people, and conferred upon them those temporal and spiritual blessings without which they would perish. Now we have no more Emperors and we are beset by one war after another and China is shaken by all the new ways that have been thrust upon her. I am an old man and can remember that in the days of my youth we

had an Emperor and were at peace with the world. But perhaps we are spending too much time over our tea, if that be possible, and you wish to set out on your quest."

"Now shall I begin?" asked Stepling. "Or rather I have begun. What better starting point than this drug shop where powdered dragon bones are sold?"

DOCTOR SHEN FU bowed. "I am honored that you have chosen my humble drug shop for so worthy a purpose. I shall expediate your quest with the limited means at my disposal." He smiled as he added, "And in your discourse you may perhaps spare a few words for beloved Li Po—a Drunken Dragon who has become an immortal."

Stepling smiled. "Dragon, indeed," he said. "Li Po reminds me in many respects of Shakespeare. Poets are the true citizens of the world. Like artists and musicians they speak a language all men understand. We of the west have our dragons also, and quite a few of them could join Li Po under the table though none are his equals in verse. But my quest now, alas, is not one for poets, though it might be for the Chinese coolies who carried a university on their backs to Chungking, and built the Burma Road, in the design of a dragon, with their bare fingers. What chance has any invader against such courage and fortitude as that?"

Doctor Shen Fu looked at John Stepling a long time before he spoke again. Then he asked abruptly, "How would you like me to tell you the story of the Old Gentleman With the Scarlet Umbrella?"

"Nothing would please me more," was the enthusiastic reply.

"He was a thin little wisp of a man, always smiling, always singing bits of verse that children loved. His costume was the simple blue of a coolie. There was nothing distinctive about him except his large scarlet umbrella that he carried with him everywhere. He first came into prominence when the hordes of diminutive Japanese swarmed over China. When they beheld the old gentleman with his scarlet

umbrella, they were amused. He reminded them of Punch in the Punch and Judy shows that they had occasionally beheld in their childhood. Of course he wasn't known as Mr. Punch which is eminently English, but for more than a thousand years this little puppet has been beloved by the children of many countries, until he became more illustrious than any king, besides having a perpetual existence.

"Now the Old Gentleman With the Scarlet Umbrella had many idiotic dances, which he performed with little songs. The invaders thought he was feeble-minded. How far wrong they were they had not the means of knowing. These few Chinese who had penetrated his disguise looked at him with inscrutable expressions. Actually he was a physician of renown. He knew all the medicines of the Asiatic pharmacopia and far more. Most of his knowledge had been snatched from experience. That he could speak seven languages was also a help for he was able to read the medical monographs of many nations. He was among other things a spy for the Chinese Military leaders. Since the Japanese considered him a jester, they made no effort to restrain him from going wherever he wished. Oftimes, at great personal risk, he laid aside his umbrella and ministered to the needs of the stricken among his own people. Yes, this merry old gentleman was a harmless dancer, that is, if the bite of sand-viper be harmless. My people have an adage, 'Beware of the man who has a smiling face.' And another, 'If you bow at all, bow low.'

"THE Old Gentleman With the Scarlet Umbrella cared not how much of a fool he made of himself as long as his beloved country was served. Serve it, he did, and well. At the bottom of his umbrella there was a long slim knife, not many times larger than a needle in circumference. A hidden device in the ornate handle released the knife when it could do the most good for China. Since he knew the exact position of the heart, he struck quickly and painlessly. That long slim knife did such strenuous work it was amazing how many enemy officers and soldiers failed to greet

the sun when morning came. Since there was so little blood shed, and merely the smallest dot of a scar on the bodies, the war lords were puzzled. They mulled over the matter, but to no avail. Finally they consulted me. It was an excellent decision. After much reflection, I suggested that their casualties had been bitten by some unknown deadly insect. Reluctantly they rejected this theory because on each body there was but one small red scar. An insect would not strike all its victims in the same spot, and bite only once. Then in an awed voice, I hoarsely whispered that I had heard that hordes of vampire bats were invading China. They came in the night's blackness, fastened themselves to the body of the victims until they had taken their full of blood. They bit as close to the heart as possible. With the dawn they departed to unknown realms.

"The Japanese Generals decided to pursue this explanation a bit further. They set sentries to watch. Since they were to report if they saw any weird bats flying about, they were vastly frightened. Fear, imagination, superstition did the rest. They reported at dawn that they had seen many strange flying creatures. They had tried futilely to catch them. Almost a hundred soldiers died that night, including an appalling number of officers, so the generals accepted my fable. Even without my help, the story got about that the bats were supernatural, probably witches in disguise. The power of hysteria is very droll. The numbers of bats that were reported ran into astronomical figures. Actually no bats existed, merely the bite of the slim knife concealed in a scarlet umbrella. Oh, strange little man who danced and sang so benign and carefree, even when he was beset with gravest danger, for General Hirato did not quite believe the story of the bats. Though he was not devoid of superstition, he nevertheless had been a warrior for the greater part of his life. He had had dealings with the Chinese in Manchuria. They had been able to trick him upon occasion, or so he imagined. He trusted no one, nor was particularly entertained by the Old Gentleman With the Scarlet Umbrella. Odd that such an ancient

one should be a traitor to his people by welcoming invaders with such relish. He had a suspicion that the Old Gentleman was not a buffoon at all but an extremely clever actor, an actor with a purpose, what purpose he decided to find out. Unfortunately he made the bad error of writing his thoughts in his eyes. It was not difficult to translate their meaning. What might have happened, alas, can never be found out, for that night he was bitten by one of the bats and succumbed quietly. The Chinese found his death to be entirely delectable.

"For centuries, my countrymen have looked on the bat as a symbol of happiness. Certainly in their hour of peril it came to their defence admirably even though it existed only in the imagination of the little men who had set out to conquer all Asia—not for the Asiatics but for the Nipponese. And now a nation of tall men to our north are directing a new invasion by using renegade Chinese as tools. How little they know my people, a nation of farmers, artists and poets who owe allegiance only to their own clan or family. Can it be possible that the bats will return again, bats that exist only because men believe in them enough. Certainly I know there are many men in China who carry scarlet umbrellas."

AS Doctor Shen Fu ceased speaking, Stepling said. "And there were dragons in the land." He paused for a moment, before adding, "I should like to have met that Old Gentleman. Was his name Shen Fu?"

The Doctor smiled. "He was my elder brother. He secured the drugs he needed for ministering to his wounded countrymen from my humble shop, through a secret cavern entrance, a natural entrance quite a distance away. Nature has been kind to the Shen family. This cavern was very convenient for the Old Gentleman, giving him a place to rest when the need of sleep was upon him."

"I wonder how long it will take the Kremlin to realize that when one catches a dragon by the tail it is very difficult to let it go."