

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 317 Baldwin Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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THE SOUL CATCHING CORD



MOH-CHIEN should have lived in the days of Confucius, or tippled wine and made glorious lyrics to the moon with Li T'ai-po. For he was one of those now fast-vanishing folk, relic of a medieval scholastic day, a Chinese scholar and mystic. His faded, scarlet-rimmed eyes had peered into strange places. He had pieced together the legends on ancient stone tablets. He had muttered the talismanic words disclosed. Then he had watched the curtain of reality swing back. He had seen a forest of imploring arms, raised toward him, asking to return from that shadowy world, the Western paradise—the myriads who had tasted of the Yellow Springs.

Early one evening he was returning to his home, a village not far from the city of Soochow. The path was too narrow to admit a rickshaw, and he was walking, feebly. The distance before him was still ten *li*.

A wrack of clouds tumbled in a vast hurry across the sky, like breakers on the shore when the typhoon rages. And something resembling a typhoon was brewing to the southwest. Lightning flashed with fitful petulance. Moh-chien gazed up-

ward, not without trepidation; old bones do not stand the buffeting of the water gods with impunity.

The weather was unusual, and unseasonable, for the mid-autumn festival. This vaguely troubled Moh-chien; the moon goddess must be angry, since she was veiling her face during the time that men wished to worship her.

With a howl, the storm suddenly broke; directly over his head it seemed. The night dropped like a gigantic cloak, a clinging sable velvet, stifling. Then rain, sheet upon sheet of cold, stinging musketry-fire.

Moh-chien shaded his eyes and peered through the deluge. At first he could make out nothing except that whirling gray-blackness. Later, he thought he could discern a wavering cluster of lights, a *li* away. A momentary lull confirmed his observation. A tiny hamlet. Staggering beneath the screaming menace of wind and rain, he made for the home with the nearest light.

As he neared the habitation he stumbled over a grave-mound and fell. He picked himself up with a groan. The brick wall of the mound seemed newly built; it had not crumbled and showered tile upon him.

Reaching the house he pounded on the door; but the typhoon's song was deafening—a Gargantuan roar. After a moment's hesitation Moh-chien undid the latch and entered. The tiny, open courtyard was empty. He pushed back under the eaves and philosophically sat himself down.

With the passing of a half hour the roar of the wind lessened, but the rain continued. At first he had thought the habitation empty, but now with the partial cessation of sound he could hear the murmur of voices directly at his back. He rose, to knock again at this inner door. As he was scrambling to his feet, a woman's voice rang shrilly, "I saw you! You smiled at her! You ogled at her! A brazen hussy! Her cheeks flaming scarlet with sin—and paint!"

"But, Mei-an," came a man's worried reply, "I swear I—"

His words were blanked by the torrent that poured forth: "I know! You would make her your 'small wife'! Her feet are bound—golden filices—and she can do no labor. I will become your drudge—and hers. You would have me do her bidding. Never! Rather than that, I would—"

"Stop! You stress too much my smiling upon a singsong girl—"

"Aiceeeeee!"

Then shriek after shriek echoed through the court, mingled with the dying obligato of the storm.

"Aiee! Aiee!"

Moh-chien frowned, pausing with his hand lifted to knock and demand entrance. Then he shook his head. He dared not break into this family quarrel. He knew the symptoms here, a fit of *ch'i*—"wrath matter," that queer Oriental form of hysteria which so often attacked his countrymen. He had heard women screeching on their housetops for hours. He had seen men, under its influence, stagger sightlessly to an enemy's door and

thrust a dagger into their own bosoms. And in China to have men die on one's doorstep is a worse fate than death itself: the Gods do not forgive the living. *Ch'i*.

The woman's cries continued. The door opened, and Moh-chien hastily stepped back. A young man, little more than a boy in age, ran out, muttering. The husband.

Moh-chien leaned back and ruefully gazed out upon the storm, the steady downpour of rain. It was better to stay where he was, till the torrent slackened.

With the slow crawling gait of time the mournful wail of the woman changed to racking sobs.

The air grew perceptibly colder and danker.

The scholar shivered. There was a feeling, in that courtyard, as if the door of a crypt had been opened. A rush of wind, long pent up with dusty bones. . . .

IN A distant corner a light appeared, a tiny point of flame. It flickered dimly for a moment, gave a desperate leap and went out.

The sobbing of the woman inside became dulled to catching, quick-drawn inhalations of breath. But now, from the corner of the courtyard, whence had come the light, he heard a scratching sound. A pause, then a mewling and whining in one.

An overmastering fear drove him to his feet and to the outer door of the house. Thick darkness was about him. Suddenly that grave-mound was illumined; blue lights began to dance about its new-bricked walls.

The sound inside was following him. He tried to console himself with the thought that he was an old man; if death were imminent, surely a place was prepared for him in that land of demigods who had once been scholars.

The noise whirled round and round like a top, in the brick-paved yard.

It neared him; but as it did so it ascended and gave place to the musical reverberation of a thousand peachwood temple bells.

At this, the grave-mound, with a great detonation, burst asunder. Perhaps the roar was a thunderclap, for the fields an instant before had been suddenly ash-colored, drenched in a great flood of lightning.

Moh-chien threw up his hands and ran back into the court.

There, all was still. A silence that pained his temples, like the sharp prickle of a hundred needles, then like the pressure of a gigantic vise. Black.

Ten minutes, perhaps it was an hour of this, moved lethargically, when the chuckle of a woman was heard. A senile chuckle, cracked and wavering. He gasped. That whirling sound had been filled with awful mystery; but this eery laughter was appalling.

Again that dancing cobalt light. It fused itself into the night, making the darkness transparent. The pupils of Moh-chien's eyes dilated.

In the courtyard appeared a woman, old, and dressed in somber black. Her face was pallid. Gold trinkets in her ears and hair glittered in that weird, unearthly light. Her step was soundless; she seemed to float rather than walk. Apparently without seeing Moh-chien she crossed the open space and entered the door at the left of the room in which the young wife was still sobbing.

Curiosity overwhelmed the scholar. He followed and stood at that door. The room she had entered housed the family shrine—a small Buddha, in red and gold lacquer.

Before the image was a long, carved table of teak; on this stood a pair of candlesticks, and between them a bronze incense jar, a *hyang-loo*.

The woman dropped upon her knees, with seeming reverence. She

kowtowed three times, touching her forehead to the stone flagging. Rising, she picked up the *hyang-loo*. Furtively she took something from a pocket in her gown and tucked it under the jar, whose blackwood base offered room for concealment. Assuring herself that the object was concealed, she turned and vanished. The scholar rubbed his eyes. Gone! With her disappeared the cobalt light.

FROWNING, Moh-chien stood at the door. He wondered, debated, then decided to investigate. He felt his way cautiously into the room. He groped for the incense jar. The roughness of its bronze cover met his fingers. He reached underneath, and felt something—coiled, inanimate, cold, repulsive.

He snatched up the object and thrust it into the pocket of his robe. Then he stopped and stood still, in wonderment. For the thought was flooding over him, with all the insistence of a mania, that he must not part with that slippery coil. He must give up his life, first. But he must never lose it. . . .

"Why do you look so downhearted, my child?"

A voice came suddenly out of the adjacent chamber, the room of the young wife. The tone of the questioner was singularly hollow and feeble.

"Why do you weep so bitterly?"

"It's unfair of my husband!" answered the young girl. "The 'flower' bed of our marriage will be deserted."

"He would take another wife?"

Moh-chien recognized it as the voice of the old woman who had chuckled.

There was a moment of silence.

"Y-yes. And then my life will be a mockery. Death were preferable."

"Good," replied the old woman.

"It is fortunate for you that I am here. I am Vaung-tsan. I have the

power to bring healing to bruised hearts, to give you sweet revenge on your unfaithful husband."

"Then give it to me."

The old woman nodded.

"Inhale this current of fragrant air."

The young wife sighed wonderingly.

"Now, take that braided cord there, at the side of the brass-bound chest."

Followed a rustling sound.

"Fasten it here, to the beam above your head. Wait! Let me make a noose. . . . Peep through it. Now, —what do you see?"

The girl gave a hysterical laugh.

"What paradise is this? The light is glowing; it beckons. Have you been there?"

"No!" answered the old woman, rather unexpectedly to Moh-chien. And he heard her whispering, as if to herself, "But I *will* be there, this night."

Another rustling movement.

"But we delay. Are you ready, my child?"

The scholar softly opened the door and peered in. From the ceiling fell a braided, horsehair rope. Before it stood the young wife. She swayed slightly.

"Ay, lead on, Vaung-tsan *Tha-thu*. I will follow."

She draped the loop about her throat.

Moh-chien's brain insistently sent out message after message: to interfere, to aid, to stop her. But his body refused to answer. Instead he could only clasp that slippery coil the tighter in his numbed fingers. He turned to the old woman. She was watching the movements of the girl with intense excitement and eagerness, Moh-chien felt. Her withered hands clenched and unclenched rapidly. Her eyes glittered, like the cold fire of jewels.

The wife was standing now on the brass-bound chest, the loop about her

throat. Catlike the woman crept up on her. Flecks of foam stood at the corners of the withered, sagging mouth.

The woman gave a low, triumphant cry, and pushed violently against the girl.

With a horrible snapping noise, the noose tautened. The small unbound feet could not touch the floor. The young wife gasped, once, and was silent.

"*Ey-ah!* I've caught you! You are mine! Your body hangs now! Mine! Quick! I must go to the *hyang-loo!* There is the cord that will catch your *soul!* And will ransom mine! . . . Will ransom mine! For three years I have waited for this hour."

Still muttering, the woman glided from the room. At the door, she brushed near Moh-chien, but did not appear to see him.

Once she had left the room, the blood seemed to flow again in his veins. The imperative messages now were answered. He rushed to the young woman and cut the cord. She sank limply at his feet. Already her body appeared lifeless, his delay fatal. As he knelt over her, he became conscious of twin points, dagger sharp, boring into his shoulders. The pain was excruciating.

He turned. The old woman stood in the doorway, gazing at him. About her now was a nimbus of fiery orange light. A smile, half of fear, half of derision, played over her chalky features. For the first time she seemed to be conscious of his presence. Moh-chien felt again that paralysis of mind and body creeping over him.

She approached him gracefully. Stretching forth a clawlike hand, she began, "Please give me back the cord."

"What cord?" he mumbled evasively, his voice coming as if from a great distance.

"The cord I placed under the incense jar."

"What—is it—for?"

"That is not for you to know. Give it back to me."

The hollow voice vibrated with intensity.

"Why?"

"Better you should not know, oh, mortal! Give it back to me or I will—"

"What?" It was a tremendous effort to speak the monosyllable.

"I will force you to!" Her voice rose shrilly.

But the scholar shook his head doggedly. The effort drained heavily on his will power.

The woman gazed searchingly at his face and seemed dazed to find him firm. She took three steps toward him and flung up both her arms. Darkness instantly enveloped them. Clammy. Like the dripping death sweat of a tortured body in *extremis*. Black. . . .

MINUTES. Deadly minutes of thick, cold blackness. Powers of evil unseen seemed to be struggling to reach him. His hand, grasping that coil in his pocket, had lost all feeling; but the fingers were still curved around its braided surface.

Finally he felt a current of warm, perfumed air. Out of the darkness slowly appeared the figure of a woman, young and ethereally lovely. She stood in a flood of rosy light which seemed to emanate from her exquisitely tapering fingers. Hers was the beauty of milk-white jade, imperial and flawless. Her robe, of shimmering white, held on its surface golden dragons—dragons that seemed to move. Her face was bloodless, except for two pink spots on her cheeks, unchanging, as if some grisly farceur had daubed carmine on the face of a corpse. Death blushing.

Painfully Moh-chien began to probe in his benumbed mind, back through

the storehouses of his life, for words that warded off evil machinations, for phrases known to thrust back restless spirits into the world whence they had wandered. Once, even a few hours before, he had known such phrases; but now no answer came.

Her eyes beamed upon him, yet they showed no spirit of laughter. In her hands she held a shining string of baubles.

"Do you see this?"

The scholar watched the play of iridescent light.

"They are only the treasure of dead mollusks," he said.

"But these pearls are more precious than that cord in your pocket. Give it to me, oh, please! To you it is valueless. But to me—"

And, in a whisper, he heard the words, "—the cord that will ransom my soul."

That pain in his temple again.

"No."

"You can have this—"

She took a step toward him and offered the gleaming strand of pearls.

"—if you will give me back the cord."

The voice came to Moh-chien, an echo sibilated by a shadow.

"No."

"So? You refuse? Then bitter wo unto you!"

She took another step near him and exhaled a current of hideous black smoke. It surrounded him, like a cloud.

Instinctively he closed his eyes and buried his nose and mouth in his sleeve. The smoke made his face tingle.

"Will you give my cord back now?" she asked.

"No!" came his muffled answer from the folds of the sleeve.

Again he prodded his unwilling brain, back along a path filled with dim-cut inscriptions and musty scrolls. Some one of those ancient archives contained foils for this

malign necromancy. But still the answer eluded him.

The sharp prickling sensation of the smoke died away. He ventured to open his eyes. Blackness. Again that blackness.

Would the horror of it never cease? None of the fiendish arts of this woman preyed upon him like this.

But this time Moh-chien did not have long to wait. Perhaps the old woman was too eager. A glow appeared before him. It was that now-familiar cobalt flame, and the visage of the old specter.

She took a step forward and frowned. With a leisurely movement she grasped her own throat with both hands. They were like claws, those hands. He saw the tendons suddenly stand out.

Behind him, the young wife stirred and moaned in some extreme of agony.

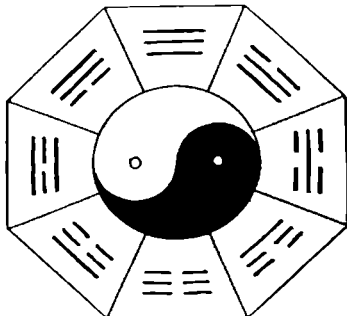
Slowly the pressure appeared to deepen, and the old woman's eyes began to bulge, as if they would come out of their sockets. A black, lengthening tongue was slowly forced between her teeth. Dark blood trickled from the corners of her mouth. Out of her throat came the gurgling plea, "The cord—oh—give—"

Moh-chien raised his arm to stop that horrible self-strangulation. Something in the movement of his hand. . . . It was a Chinese mystic's habit: to draw certain ancient characters in the air. By doing so, the scholar loosed their magic properties and made them potent.

Something in that movement opened wide the floodgates of memory. And over the barren spillway came a score of answers, from the "Canon of Changes."

AUTOMATICALLY he chose the basic character. First he drew, with his finger, a circle in the air. This represented *T'ai-gee*, the Great

Monad. He bisected the circle with an airy S-like line. Thus he obtained the *Yang* and the *Yin*, the male and the female principles which began the process of evolution. This not only cut a clean division between Man and Woman, but also (more important) between day and night, between the world of substance and the realm that is of shadows.



MOH-CHIEN'S DIAGRAM

As he finished this, the diabolical woman tumbled back several paces. A look of fright came over her face.

Mechanically Moh-chien continued his diagram of the foundation character of this wondrous book of antiquity. The blue nimbus about the woman began to fade; her features became more shadowy. Her hands dropped away from her throat. The young wife, back of him, ceased to groan. The air he breathed became less dank and cold.

He bent forward over this drawing he was making. When again he looked up, he now discerned a bleached skeleton, standing in a foggy light.

The skeleton shook and swayed, its rotted cerements clinging to its body in tatters. Backward and forward it moved, like an inverted pendulum.

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The Soul-Catching Cord

(Continued from page 36)

The bony hands raised to the skull, took it off and made a desperate attempt to hurl it at him. The skull clung to the blackened fingers as if magnetized.

Before the scholar had completed the diagram, the skeleton fell to the ground. It moved feebly, until darkness screened it from him.

Then out of the night came a final mournful and piteous cry, "Oh, spare me, and give back the cord of my soul!"

As if in answer came the clear early-morning call of a vendor of greens, the first always of the day, "*Mai shia tsai! Mai shia tsai!*" The world, the world of restless, moving, everyday life, of reality, was upon him.

Overcome by a drowsiness that was almost a swoon, Moh-chien sank back with a groan and lost consciousness. His hand relaxed on the cold, braided cord in his pocket.

IT was broad daylight when the scholar awoke. As he opened his eyes he saw a knot of people surrounding a young woman—the wife. They had picked her up from the floor, where he had last seen her, and even now were loosening a heavy, braided horsehair cord from around her neck. She was pale, and her head lolled back. On her throat were great livid bruises.

A young man, frightened and breathless, was chafing her hands. No one paid the least attention to Moh-chien.

The girl-wife showed no signs of life; and they carried her to the family hall, where stood the shrine. Her husband kowtowed before the god, and burned silver and gold-foil

spirit money. He lighted two candles.

At that moment Moh-chien spoke, wearily.

"All that is unnecessary. She is not dead. Here—I have the cord that holds her soul."

He felt in his pocket for the cold bit of braided rope. But the cord was gone.

Yet, in proof of his first statement, the wife stirred. She sighed and muttered, "Lead on Vaung Tsan, *Tha-itha*. And I will—will—"

"Will—*not*—follow!"

The scholar completed her sentence with forcible distinctness.

"What?" ejaculated an elderly man, a neighbor. "This is more than strange! The old wife, Vaung Tsan, used to live here! Why, she died just before you were married! She hanged herself, three years ago! Yes!"

The man became visibly more excited.

"Yes, it was just three years ago last night! I remember, because it was the third day of the mid-autumn festival. In that room, Mei-An, *Tha-itha*—in your bedroom."

The young husband knelt by his wife with tender remorsefulness. But gone from her were the shadowy vapors of *Ch'i*. She smiled weakly back. Then they both turned toward the old scholar, as if subconsciously aware that there, at their side, stood their deliverer.

Before either of them could speak, he, too, smiled. His faded, far-seeing eyes were gentle. He picked up his traveler's staff and left the house.

It was still some ten *li* to his home, a village not far from the city of Soochow.