

The Wax Image

A Weird Chinese Story

By BURTON HARCOURT

SO AH FOO is really dead! I had expected this, fearfully, for some time, yet the curt paragraph in the *Dispatch* is still a ghastly surprise. I am tempted to believe I have been dreaming—that it is all a weird and inexplicable mistake. One has adventures that do not really occur, when one dabbles in opium.

And newspapers, they say, generally lie. But that is a fallacy. They do not lie. When a newspaper says that a man is dead and that he was picked up on the sidewalk in front of his tea-shop, he is generally dead. Ah Foo is dead. I must admit it. And Sam Wong is a devil. I shall not go to his shop again. There are other places in Chinatown where one can smoke pipes.

I have always feared that there exist in the world certain sublimated forces and powers which transcend our ordinary concepts, that in the queer substances of the human soul there exist forces as inexplicable as electricity—that weird goblin of the material world. I have always feared it, but we shrink from believing such things.

In the bright sunlight, by day, and even by night, close in touch with the solid realities of our environment we are oblivious to the strange Forces and Powers of the spiritual world, and we dupe ourselves into a firm faith in that which is seen and felt. We conclude that the human mind is a creature close-confined in the solid walls of the skull, circumscribed and imprisoned by bone and flesh; and that its powers are likewise limited to those narrow chambers of the body. We conclude that its processes are but those simple *localized* processes which we name sensation, memory, thought.

It does not occur to us—we do not allow it to occur to us—that the powers of the human mind may extend far beyond the walks of the individual skull, out and beyond into the exterior world, as intangible and powerful as electricity, as deadly, as effective, as potent for good or evil. After all, what are Time and Space? The wisest men of ten thousand years have been unable to explain these mysteries. Perhaps Space itself is but an illusion, a phantom, a wraith. *Perhaps a thought grown into intense reality*

in one place becomes a reality in all places. I think so, now, since Ah Foo is dead.

Ah Foo, talking to a customer last night at *ten minutes past ten*, fell in his tracks stone dead. I did not see it. I was at Sam Wong's. But the facts are here in the paper. I must admit it.

I was first directed to Sam Wong's by an English sea-captain, well advanced in years, who had known him long ago in Shanghai. We went together the first time, and, having made friends with Sam Wong, I went to see him thereafter alone. I went frequently, for, though the habit of opium smoking is a vile one, it is the hardest of all to break.

Immemorially old, Sam Wong is immemorially wise. His ancient Chinese face, wrinkled like a monkey's, is a comical one, but his small and brilliant eyes reveal a high intelligence. He knows more of the Oriental secrets than any Chinaman it has been my fortune to meet, and though his English is atrocious, his vocabulary is large. He taught me early in our acquaintance much about Buddhism, much about Taoism, which I had never suspected.

As his customers are few—for the New Orleans police are none too lenient on opium-smoking and Sam Wong is a cautious merchant—we had many friendly chats. I came to know him well, and to admire him more. His wife—a tiny yellow woman, not pretty, but young and delightfully gracious—filled my bowl for me as I sat with Sam Wong in his hidden reception-room, where the lucky half dozen of us who were granted his hospitality, enjoyed, always separately, the forbidden drug.

It was from Mrs. Wong I learned of the quarrel between Sam Wong and Ah Foo. She was non-committal, but I am quite sure that the quarrel was somehow intimately concerned with Mrs. Wong. Ah Foo was a handsome and very engaging fellow, as Chinamen go. His tea-shop was only three doors from Sam Wong's. Ah Foo was handsome: Sam Wong was as hideous as an ape. I am sure that the quarrel concerned Mrs. Wong. But all that she revealed to me was the sudden venomous hatred of Sam Wong for

Ah Foo. She was afraid, she said, that Sam Wong would actually murder Ah Foo.

I only laughed at this, for, as I told her, Sam Wong was much too intelligent a man to kill anyone in America. However lenient our courts may be in general, they have small mercy for Chinamen.

"Sam Wong is too clever for that," I said. "He knows he would hang. And a philosopher like Sam Wong, no matter how angry he was, would never be foolish enough to go to the gallows in order to get the best of a quarrel."

Mrs. Wong shook her head dubiously.

It was soon after quite plain to me that Sam Wong was desperately suspicious of his wife. His eyes narrowed as he looked at her when her back was turned. There was a malignant gleam in them. But I did not dare to broach personal questions with Sam Wong, as our conversation was always of a philosophical order. And I learned nothing more for some time.

Then, one night, when Sam Wong invited me above-stairs into his sanctum to show me a bronze image which was one of his particular prides, I received a queer shock.

THE room was large and furnished completely in a Chinaman's style. The light from the braziers was somewhat dim and, as I was accustoming my eyes to the twilight, endeavoring to see the wealth of Oriental furnishings among which Sam Wong passed his leisure hours, I noticed someone standing very still in the far corner.

It was a Chinaman, certainly, but Sam Wong had not spoken to him nor so much as noticed him when we entered. He stood so still that it suddenly occurred to me that he did not wish to be detected. I called to Sam Wong, who was removing his bronze relic from a cabinet, and pointed toward the corner.

He laughed. Then, stepping to the wall, he pressed a switch, flooding the room with electric light.

The figure was not a man but a wax doll; a Chinaman, life size, standing upright in the corner. It was not, indeed, a living likeness of the human face and body, and if the light had been better I

should not have been startled by it at all.

"What is this, Sam Wong?" I asked, amused.

"Ah Foo," said Sam Wong.

I was puzzled.

Sam Wong laughed.

"Ah Foo," he said. "My velly good flend, Ah Foo."

We descended to the smoking-room without my having seen the bronze image. We had both forgotten it.

Although at the moment the strange affair both puzzled and alarmed me, it had almost escaped my memory next day. I thought no more of it. Sam Wong had so many queer things in his establishment—and a wax doll which he might have acquired from any bankrupt traveling showman did not seem particularly remarkable.

But two weeks later I noticed a familiar small figure in the shooting gallery on Magazine Street, two blocks from Chinatown. I turned in, to see if my surmise was at all correct. It was really Sam Wong. He was firing with remarkable accuracy at the round targets. Two times out of three he penetrated the bull's-eye, and the bell rang.

He smiled when I accosted him.

"Me velly good shlot," he said.

The gallery-keeper smiled patronizingly.

"He's learning fast," he said. "Three weeks ago he couldn't have hit a barn."

I decided at once that this activity on Sam Wong's part boded no good for Ah Foo. And yet I could hardly believe that Sam Wong would really shoot his enemy. There are so many better ways that a Chinaman knows to dispose of an "obstacle."

"Sam Wong," I said at his den that night, "don't make a fool of yourself. The penalty for shooting a man in this country is hanging."

He smiled.

"In Lome," said Sam Wong, "Chinaman do as the Lomans do. Melican gentlemen shoot and kill. Sam Wong follow clustom of cluntry. Hang? All same, no difference."

MRS. WONG whispered in my ear for the hundredth time, that she was desperately afraid Sam Wong was soon going to murder Ah Foo. He caught the words—or the last words, anyway. He turned from his task at the other side of the room, smiling affably.

"Ah Foo," he said. "My velly good flend, Ah Foo."

Mrs. Wong shuddered.

That was five days ago.

I was at Sam Wong's last night. It was a very strange thing I saw there. If it were not for the morning paper before me, I would think I had dreamed it.

When I arrived Sam Wong was in a very nervous state. He was highly excited. He did not wish me to smoke at once. He wished me to talk. I sat down, rather impatiently. Sam Wong sat down on the couch beside me, nervously, and began to talk.

"Many thing you know nothing about," he said, "Chilaman know. Melican men velly iglorant. 'Lectricity? Yes. 'Lectricity, all. Mind? Nothing. You know nothing in this cluntry. 'Lectricity not wisdom. Mind is wisdom."

I followed him but vaguely. He was too excited for coherent speech.

"You Orientals know much more than we do about the mind, Sam Wong," I said, "and nobody is quicker to admit it than we. You are older and wiser in China. Hypnotism and clairvoyance are still, with us, in their infancy—"

"You my velly good flend?" demanded Sam Wong, suddenly interrupting.

"Why, yes," I said.

"Clum," said Sam Wong.

I followed him above-stairs to his sanctum.

As I entered the room, the first thing that met my eye was the waxen image—his very good friend, Ah Foo—which was in bright light. Two braziers on either side on the floor, from the flames of which thin fiery vapors mounted with a pungent odor, cast over it a golden illumination. Otherwise the room was not lighted. The waxen image of Ah Foo stood out

very brilliantly. And I noted that the figure had been dressed in ceremonial robes of violet and silver. Also, with a queer premonition of impending evil, I saw that a small red card, no larger than a postage stamp, was pinned on the left breast, precisely over the heart.

"Slit down," said Sam Wong.

I sat down upon a couch toward which he motioned. I felt a sudden nausea of horror, which I could not explain. I glanced about nervously for Mrs. Wong, but she was not in evidence.

"What's the meaning of this, Sam Wong?" I demanded. "You don't mean to say that you worship this gargoyle?"

Sam Wong stepped to a small table directly across the room from the figure. He laughed.

"Worship?" he asked. "Sam Wong worship? This figure not for *worship*."

Suddenly he became very quiet and restrained. He carefully picked up some object from the table. With his left hand he waved toward the figure as if to introduce it to me again. He was very ceremonious.

"Ah Foo," he said. "My velly good flend, Ah Foo."

And suddenly he raised a revolver and leveled it before him. For five seconds he aimed tensely, unwaveringly, his small eyes boring fierily at the figure between the braziers. Then he fired. I had sat dumbfounded at the spectacle. The deafening report in the small room startled me back into my wits. As the smoke cleared I saw with admiration that the bullet had pierced the little red card at its geometrical center. I laughed nervously.

"Good shot, Sam Wong," I said. "I hope this has eased your spleen."

He lay the revolver on the table, laughing softly.

"Tlen minutes past tlen," he said.

I glanced at my watch. It was, precisely, ten minutes past ten.

"Clum," said Sam Wong, very affably, rubbing his withered hands. "Clum. We smoke. No pay. You my velly good flend."

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