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# THE YELLOW SPECTER

By STEWART VAN DER VEER

LAST night I saw Alan Darkley on Canal Street. We brushed together in a corner crowd, and suddenly stood face to face. He had changed considerably, was thinner, more mature, and there were deep wrinkles about his eyes. For a moment he appeared not to place me, then he tried to smile in recognition, but it was a smile that failed to impress. It was as if someone had suddenly put pressure on the cheeks of a Mardi Gras mask, causing, for only an instant, the futile, meaningless crinkling of the cloth and paint.

This was the first time our paths had crossed since he made his wedding trip on the *Avoset*. For several minutes we stood on the curbing and talked. I noticed then that he was nervous and that the continuous stream of New Orleans folk, out on Saturday night's promenade, seemed to irritate him.

"Come on up to the house for a chat," he insisted, after I had already refused several invitations.

"But we pull out for Belize in the morning," I answered.

"I'll drive you down to the boat. You can spare a couple of hours; besides, I imagine the skipper could handle the *Avoset* without you, if you never showed up."

At this Darkley tried again to laugh. I wished he hadn't, for the futility of it gave me the creeps.

So I went, but I can't figure out why he wanted me to come, and why he showed me, of all people, what he did. Possibly, doubting the absolute sanity of his judgment, he desired to watch my expressions, and hear what I had to say. However, during my wanderings about the world, I have developed a poker face and a certain ability to hold my tongue. Last night I thanked my gods for these two acquired characteristics. But hardened as I am, I was on the ragged edge of fainting.

It was grotesque, horrible.

I shot a glance at Darkley, a glance as rapid as the movement of a serpent's tongue. But it was enough. His thin, worn face, aged ten years since last I saw him, was gray, the color of wood ashes. So this was why he wanted me to visit his home. But to start at the beginning.

ONE night last winter, just after I had signed on as supercargo of the *Avoset*, Darkley came aboard. The ship was down near the foot of Jackson Avenue, fully loaded, with papers all made out to clear the following morning.

It was a cold night, and a mist, like little wisps of smoke, rolled across the yellow face of the river. Along the miles of wharves, ships from far distant seas were made fast,

creaking occasionally as their hawsers strained under the stress of the Mississippi's mighty current. Silhouetted, a light here and there in the windows, the dozen or so tall buildings of New Orleans reared their heights toward a sky across which clouds scurried as if fleeing from some great monster of the infinite spaces.

I was standing deck watch; one of the seamen was sick, or drunk, I recollect. About 10 o'clock I saw the lights of an automobile up on Jackson Avenue. Under the lamp, from where I stood forward, I could see that it was a taxicab. As I watched, a young man alighted, followed by a girl, heavily veiled. With the chauffeur carrying two large suit-cases, they walked down to the wharf, stood as if undecided a few minutes, and then the young fellow came alongside.

"Is this the *Avoset*?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Right you are," I answered.

"My name is Darkley, Alan Darkley, and my wife and I are to make this voyage with you."

"Just a minute and I'll see the skipper," I told him, and hurried below. The captain was in his bunk.

"By the one horn of the sacred dolphin!" exclaimed the skipper when I told him. "I had forgotten all about it. He is old Eric Darkley's son, one of the company which is chartering the ship. He just got married today, and his father asked me if he could spend his honeymoon on board."

"Honeymoon on board a banana tramp?" I interrupted, but the old man answered me with a snort.

"Show him down," he continued, "and put him and his wife in the cabin next to the mate's. By the way, tell the boys to pipe down a bit, that there's a lady on board. I'll see young Darkley and his wife in the morning."

Captain Crichton, a slim, scholarly Englishman, turned over in his bunk, and I left to carry out his instructions, first going to the fore-castle to silence a couple of seamen who were sporadically breaking into song about some home "far away across the briny sea."

I found our passengers waiting patiently by the rail, the driver of the taxicab having been dismissed. In a short time I had the Darkleys comfortably stowed away.

At dawn the *Avoset* started to drop down the river. She was bound for Omoa, Spanish Honduras, with a general cargo, being scheduled to return with a cargo of bananas and a deck-load of coconuts.

The job of supercargo, after the lines have been cast off, is not a heavy one, so I did not crawl out of my bunk until the sun was well up above the levee, and the *Avoset* was well down below New Orleans. About 10 o'clock here came Alan Darkley and his wife. They had breakfasted with the skipper.

He was a blithe, blond young fellow of about twenty-five. His blue eyes fairly sparkled as he recognized me and again thanked me for my attentions of the night before. With his hand on the rail, and his white sailor cap on the back of his head, he did not seem to have a care in the world. A little later he introduced me to his wife, who had remained decidedly in the background while they were getting settled for their first night on board the *Avoset*.

In appearance she might have been his sister, so nearly did she conform to his type, the same blond hair, the same blue eyes, the same exuberance. She was pretty, almost beautiful.

**B**EFORE the bar pilot came aboard to guide the ship through the treacherous channel and out into the gulf, I knew a great deal of the per-

sonal history of both Darkley and his wife.

He was employed in his father's office in some minor position. She had been a newspaper woman, a "sob sister," as she termed it.

Theirs had been a hasty courtship, a matter of a few weeks, followed by an unannounced marriage, a surprize to their best friends. To look at them, one would know that this would be their procedure, not only in marriage, but in everything else as well. They were distinctly of dynamic temperaments, full of the restless urge of the generation to which they belonged. How they exclaimed over the beauties of the lower river! A porpoise coming to the surface, rolling and again seeking the depths, filled them with enthusiasm, and the first uneven swells of the gulf brought forth squeals of delight from the girl.

"What a wonderful atmosphere for my writings! This trip is going to give me a fresh start, an entirely new perspective. When I get back I am going to flood the magazines with so much excellent stuff that they are going to want to put me on contract."

Thus she talked to her husband, while he laughed, patting his young wife on her head of golden-brown hair.

"I can show you some strange places in Omoa," I told them.

"Tell us something about one of them, will you?" asked Mrs. Darkley.

"There are so many, but perhaps the most interesting is the tale of Ah Fong, a sort of Chinese Lothario."

"Splendid! Tell us about him."

And as the *Avoset* plunged through the blue water, leaving far behind the levees and the low fields of cane, I told them the weird narrative which had been recited to me by an old Jamaican negro one afternoon on the wharf at Puerto Cortes, located just around a protruding tongue of coast from Omoa.

"A half hundred years ago there came to Omoa, then only a collection of rude native huts, a Chinese, a sort of Oriental soldier of fortune. No one knew whence he came. One morning he was standing on the beach, suave and smiling . . . that was all. No questions were asked.

"As Chinese go, he was a handsome man, straight of body, with pleasing features, a keen mind, and a magnetic personality. In a short time he opened a little shop and sold trinkets to the Indians, negroes and mongrel Spanish.

"From the first he seemed to have a queer power over women. They would flock to his store on the slightest pretext. Some said he was a hypnotist, others claimed that Ah Fong was one of the devil's own lieutenants sent to earth to guide the way to hell. At any rate, everyone who wore a skirt along that section of the Central American coast was his devotee, his ardent admirer. It wasn't long before the whole male population was angry with him. In a way this anger was justified, because everyone who had a wife, a sister or a mother felt the vagrant Chinese's influence in his home.

"However, nothing was done, or could be done, until one afternoon when Betty, the pretty twenty-year-old daughter of a North American, was found in the back room of Ah Fong's little store, apparently drugged. On regaining her senses she told a story which caused Ah Fong to be brought immediately before an army court. The girl's father had a great deal of influence, and the Chinese was sentenced to the prison, a relic of the Spaniards, above Omoa, but farther inland, on a sort of natural shelf overlooking the Caribbean.

"It was a terrible place. Great stones were piled one upon the other to form a stockade and a series of caves. Here unfortunate prisoners were chained and left to rot under

the blazing tropic sun. Rats, large and vicious, roamed the prison at will, and buzzards, scavengers, floated down from out the sky to sit upon palms overlooking the inclosure. Only those convicted of the most serious offenses were confined here.

"When Ah Fong heard the court's sentence, he only smiled—a slow, enigmatical smile which made the flesh creep.

"On arriving at the prison Ah Fong was put in leg-irons. A stone roof, just a narrow ledge, was above his head. He was chained so that it was possible for him to crawl to a near-by spring, foul with sewage, in which a rat floated belly upward. For days the Chinese was left without food. Finally driven by desperation, he chewed leaves and bark. On one occasion he trapped a rat, and ate it as a coyote bolts a hen. The guards were following their instructions to the letter. There were only two other prisoners confined at the time, and these were chained at the other end of the inclosure.

"During the day Ah Fong's only companions were the buzzards, sitting solemnly in the tree-tops, the personification of a most infinite patience. At night, to relieve the monotony there were long and often exhausting battles with huge rodents, blood-thirsty and courageous.

"Toward the last, the Chinese would cry out in agony, the two other prisoners joining in his song of despair, until the three of them were chanting together in a sort of weird dirge, awful in its monotony.

"But the guards, who lived in a hut, some distance from the inclosure, would always find Ah Fong smiling whenever they made a visit to the prison, which wasn't often. One night, however, they heard him clanking his chains, and singing in a high-pitched voice characteristic of his race. By this time he was mere skin and bones, a suffering skeleton, with

sunken eyes, parchment face and disordered brain. For hours he sang to the accompaniment of the chain upon the stone. Then all was still.

"The next morning he was dead. In some way the key to the leg-irons had been lost, so the guards, the prison being in an isolated spot, decided to leave the body for the buzzards and starving rodents.

"One day and a night will be enough,' they said.

"And it was, for the birds, as tame as pigeons, settled on the cadaver and left little for the rats to devour during the night. On the second morning all that remained of Ah Fong was a moist skeleton, bleaching under the rays of the rising tropic sun. But the bones were still fastened by the leg-irons to the stone.

"We'll throw it away in a couple of days,' said one of the bare-footed guards.

"But they didn't get a chance, so the story goes. That night in the early hours of morning, there was a great commotion. The guards were awakened first by the shrieking of the two remaining prisoners. When the trouble was investigated, it was found that Ah Fong's skeleton was gone, yet the gate was locked, and the chains of the other convicts were sound.

"But the leg-irons, which had encircled the ankles of Ah Fong, were open.

"He came back to life,' one of the prisoners announced, when he had become sufficiently quiet to talk.

"The guards, being lazy fellows, somewhat superstitious, forgot the matter, so far as they were able. But in some way the story leaked out, and it has been handed about for years, until it is now almost a part of the folk-lore of the people on the coast.

"On my last trip I looked at the leg-irons, rusty reminders of the tragedy. Tourists often go up to view the scene of Ah Fong's death, but so far

they have all respected the superstition, and it is claimed that the shackles remain in the same position in which they were found by the guards on the morning following the disappearance of the Chinese skeleton.

"Some of the Indians declare that the spirit of Ah Fong returns every night, hovering over the crumbling ruins. Certainly strange sounds may be heard in the early morning hours. I know, for I have heard them. Inevitably grotesque, like someone laughing, the ghostly evidences of mirth appear to float on the breast of the breeze."

"How exciting!" said Mrs. Darkley. "Alan, we must visit that terrible prison."

Her young husband laughingly agreed, and at the time I gave the matter no further thought.

**D**URING our passage through the gulf and across the Caribbean sea, I didn't see much of the Darkleys. It was rough and apparently they were poor sailors. When we sighted the Central American coast, I was on deck.

It was rather an impressive experience. From a hazy blotch on the horizon, as we steamed nearer, it took shape. First the irregular line of the beach, then the great green mountains in the background, outlined against the blue of a cloudless sky. In between was the white-capped sea, like an undulating Kentucky meadow flecked here and there with bursting cotton bolls from a region farther south. As far-fetched as this simile may appear, this was the thought which came to me as I watched the tossing Caribbean. Perhaps, at the time, I was a trifle homesick.

"How perfectly beautiful!"

I turned, and the Darkleys were beside me at the rail.

"See those mountains?" I said. "That is where the banana planta-

tions are located, and those keys off to the right are the natural habitat of the coconut."

But Mrs. Darkley interrupted me.

"Mr. Bronston," she said, "you remember that terrible story you told us about the Chinese? You've just got to show us that horrid prison, and those ghastly leg-irons in which Ah Fong starved to death."

"We can go this afternoon, if you like," I replied; "it isn't far back in the interior, and there'll be nothing for me to do on board. We'll be tied up alongside the wharf in an hour."

"Fine!"

"All right with me," young Darkley stated. He seemed willing to do anything that would please his wife.

If I had known what was going to happen I wouldn't have been so glib about agreeing to go, but who can figure on the queer tricks of destiny?

So, after the excitement of our landing had quieted, we started on our expedition. Slowly we toiled up the slope, stopping from time to time to catch our breath, and to admire the view. A soft breeze from off the water fanned our cheeks. Two or three gay-colored birds drew shouts of delight from Mrs. Darkley, and a queer little land crab amused her for fifteen minutes. I have never seen anyone so thoroughly delighted with life as she was that afternoon.

At length we came to the flat acre or two of ground on which the prison once stood. From this point the sea, the mountains and the coast appeared like some vast tropic panorama, transferred to a huge canvas by some mighty painter. But Mrs. Darkley was far more interested in the ruins.

Shrubs and weeds had about taken possession, for it was seldom, at this season of the year, that there were any visitors to tramp down the underbrush. It was out of the beaten track, and marked with an indefinable pathos. In the light from the setting sun the rocks and mortar seemed to

drip gloom. Some sort of a bird, vivid in plumage, red, yellow and green, wheeled overhead, emitting weird, catlike calls. It was if a lonely soul had returned to the scene of its suffering, transmigrated. Far up in the sky a lonely buzzard floated on lazy wings.

I was just starting to explain some details to the young couple, when the girl broke forth impulsively: "Where are the leg-irons? I want to see where the Chinese starved to death and was eaten by buzzards and rats."

"Wait here a moment," I told her, "and I will go over here and see if I can locate the spot. The undergrowth is so thick that it won't be easy."

I pushed my way through the weeds. There it was, the large rock, and there were the leg-irons, a bit rustier, lying loosely on the gray stone. It didn't appear as if anyone had even looked at them since my last visit; certainly they had not been touched.

"Come over here!" I called.

They came through the tangle, the girl in the lead. Nothing would do but that she should have a close view of the shackles.

"I'm going to feel them," she declared, getting down on her hands and knees and crawling under a vine to the stone. Her husband looked on patronizingly, as one who humors a small child.

"Don't touch them," I cautioned.

"Give me a cigarette, Bronston," said Darkley, settling himself to wait for his wife to gratify her strange whim. I straightened up to comply. I was reaching into my pocket for the package, when "click" sounded from where Mrs. Darkley was sitting, hidden from our eyes. We looked at each other, and then stooped to see what the girl was doing. She was sitting, smiling delightfully, with the shackles about her slim

ankles. She held up her hands; they were red with rust.

"What in the world have you done?" Darkley asked her, thoroughly alarmed.

"Can't you see, goose?"

"You've certainly played the devil. How do you expect to get loose?" And Darkley looked at the sun burying itself in the sea.

"I don't want to get loose. I am going to spend the night here," Mrs. Darkley said, giggling like some foolish schoolgirl.

"Impossible!" Darkley barked.

As for me, I didn't know what to do or say. I had had no idea that the girl would be so utterly silly.

"You can file me out in the morning," Mrs. Darkley went on. "It'll make a wonderful feature story. The Sunday papers will snap it up. Besides, I don't believe ghosts come back."

"You're not a reporter now—you're my wife. What a little fool you are!"

Darkley was angry. The girl saw this and hastened with her argument.

"Look here, Alan Darkley, I've been a reporter for three years, and I'm still one, although I am also your wife. I'm not afraid and I really do want to get this story—there's a splendid tale in the Chinese, Ah Fong. Why, I've been planning this ever since Mr. Bronston told us all about it."

All this time she was sitting there under the leaves, feeling of the rusty shackles as she talked. Darkley appeared to be thinking, scarcely paying any attention to his wife's words.

"Just think!" the girl went on, "'Bride Spends Night in Irons'—why, I can see the headlines now, and old Davidson, the editor whom I worked for in New Orleans, rubbing his gnarled old hands and smiling."

There wasn't anything for me to say. It really wasn't any of my affair.



"Well, of all the foolish tricks!" Darkley stormed, but he was half smiling, beginning to see some humor in the situation. "No wonder they told me you had an insatiable thirst for the sensational," he continued, his voice losing its tone of disapproval.

"Come on, Alan," wheedled the girl, "it's warm, and you can sleep right over there under that palm. I'll be well chaperoned. Mr. Bronston will bring a file in the morning, and you can get me out of these leg-irons," she concluded, turning a bright smile on me.

"Oh, certainly," I said, but there was little enthusiasm in my voice. In fact, just at that time I wished I was almost any place else in the world. It was my opinion that the girl was too foolish to get along without being turned over her husband's knee and given a thorough spanking.

"What do you think, Bronston?" asked Darkley.

"It'll be rather uncomfortable, Mrs. Darkley, and you'll get very tired before morning. But there isn't any real danger, that I can see. Wouldn't you rather that I went down to the *Avoset* for a file, and that we took those fool things off of you right now?"

"No indeed!"

It was then about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Darkley and I gathered a pile of palm leaves and placed them about the young woman. From where we labored, fixing Mrs. Darkley for the night, we could see the ship alongside the wharf. A long string of banana cars from the distant upland plantations had just been switched on to the loading track.

"Guess I'd better be hurrying along," I said. "The skipper might need me."

There stood Alan Darkley, in a strange country, with his wife chained to a stone. I felt sorry for him as

I turned and started down the slope. However, with the girl feeling as she did, there seemed no way out of the situation.

"Stay about a hundred yards away from me," I heard Mrs. Darkley call to her husband, when she thought I was well out of hearing distance.

"If there are any ghosts, I want to see one, but don't go very far, because I may . . . . you. Come . . . . a minute . . . . this thing hurts my leg a little," and her voice trailed away, grew fainter and fainter, until I could hear no more.

MANY thoughts crowded into my brain on the way to the ship. Once I about decided to go back and insist that they return with me, but, then, it wasn't any of my affair. I was only the supercargo of the *Avoset*, not a nurse to the son of one of the men who had chartered the ship. Besides, there was work for me on board, perhaps. Maybe Captain Crichton was looking for me. I increased my walk to a dog-trot.

When I got back to the *Avoset* and told the skipper, he was all for going up immediately and getting "the blithering young idiots."

"It's all right, sir," I said, "nothing can really happen to them, except a long night in the open, and it's warm."

This seemed to satisfy him, for he didn't mention the matter again that night.

I arose at dawn, obtained a file from the engine room, and hurried up the slope. I called when I got within hailing distance of the ancient prison. There was no answer. Thoroughly alarmed, I pushed my way through the heavy tropical vegetation and hurried to the rock of the leg-irons. Parting the vines, I peered beneath.

Alan Darkley was sitting bolt upright, and his face was white, with

undried tears on his cheeks. He was holding his wife's head in his lap. Mrs. Darkley, her bobbed hair disheveled, her clothing disarranged, was sobbing softly.

"Thank God, you're here!" said the young husband.

In answer I crawled to his side. His wife was talking now, a bit hysterically.

"He came, he came," she repeated, "a yellow man, eyes like a cat . . . . in the darkness . . . . he stood over me . . . . smiling . . . . like a demon . . . . Alan, I've seen a ghost . . . . I tried to call you in time . . . . he had his arms about me . . . . snaky fingers over my mouth . . . . a yellow man . . . . the Chinese, Ah Fong . . . . Oh, if he had only killed me!"

Then she started the whole story over again, without seeming to realize that I had come. Tragedy was in her voice, and a strained, unnatural look was on Darkley's face.

"Bronston," said the husband, "I have been listening to that since 2 o'clock this morning. Have you got the file? Let me have it, and let's get her down to the ship."

While we filed at the rusty chain, Darkley told me what had happened. He had been sleeping only a short distance from his wife. About 2 o'clock he had been awakened by a terrified scream and had rushed to Mrs. Darkley's bed on the palm leaves. He had found her in a terribly nervous state, babbling incoherently, and going over and over again the details of her visit from the specter.

"You know, Bronston," Darkley told me, "I'm afraid she has lost her mind."

Darkley himself, I could see at a glance, was on the verge of collapse;

his hands were shaking, his voice unsteady.

"What fools we all were!" he said, turning to me as we carried his wife, who had quieted down somewhat, toward the ship, lying so peacefully in the harbor.

The captain and the crew never knew the details of that night, for we made up a story to shield the girl from unwelcome questions. Some of the men were curious, as was the skipper, but we told them that Mrs. Darkley had had a fainting spell. Of course, they never knew that her ankles were marked where the leg-irons had cut into the flesh.

If Mrs. Darkley ever smiled again on the voyage, I didn't see her, although she kept to the deck a great deal. There was a hunted look in her eyes, and, to be frank, I rather avoided her.

As I was saying, I saw Alan Darkley on the street last night. We went up to his home. Without a word of explanation he led me upstairs.

"Where is Mrs. Darkley?" I asked, remembering with pleasure her vivid, joyous personality, her blond hair, her round blue eyes. In fact, I only thought of her as she had appeared before the incident at the prison on the slope above Omoa.

"In the hospital . . . . some sort of a nervous trouble," he explained.

We entered an unlighted room, and Darkley switched on the current. Then he walked over and raised the coverlet on a crib. Without a word he motioned me to look.

There, gazing up at me, was a baby . . . . dark-skinned . . . . squinty-eyed . . . . black-haired, with receding forehead and horribly vacant stare . . . . an infant idiot, decidedly Mongolian.