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Tzo-Lin's Nightingales

By BEN BELITT

It was an unostentatious little Chinese shop, yet it was the scene of an incredible madness and a weird horror

ALL that day it had been raining; a swift, violent onslaught of long drops, slashing sharply upon the face, pelting against the body, seeping down past muffler and topcoat, into the very marrow of one's bones. I have no great affection for autumn rains, especially when they are inclined to spout into malicious pools and overflow into one's overshoes—that is, for me, the last of the proverbial straws. Accordingly, I sought shelter in the building nearest at hand—a small, unostentatious little shop wedged in securely between two rather dubious "hotels." A meager patch of window-glass constituted its front, upon which were painted in red several Chinese characters, and the name "Tzo-Lin." My plight had made me desperate and so, throwing caution and several drops of rain-water from my dripping umbrella to the winds, I turned the carved brass door-knob, and entered.

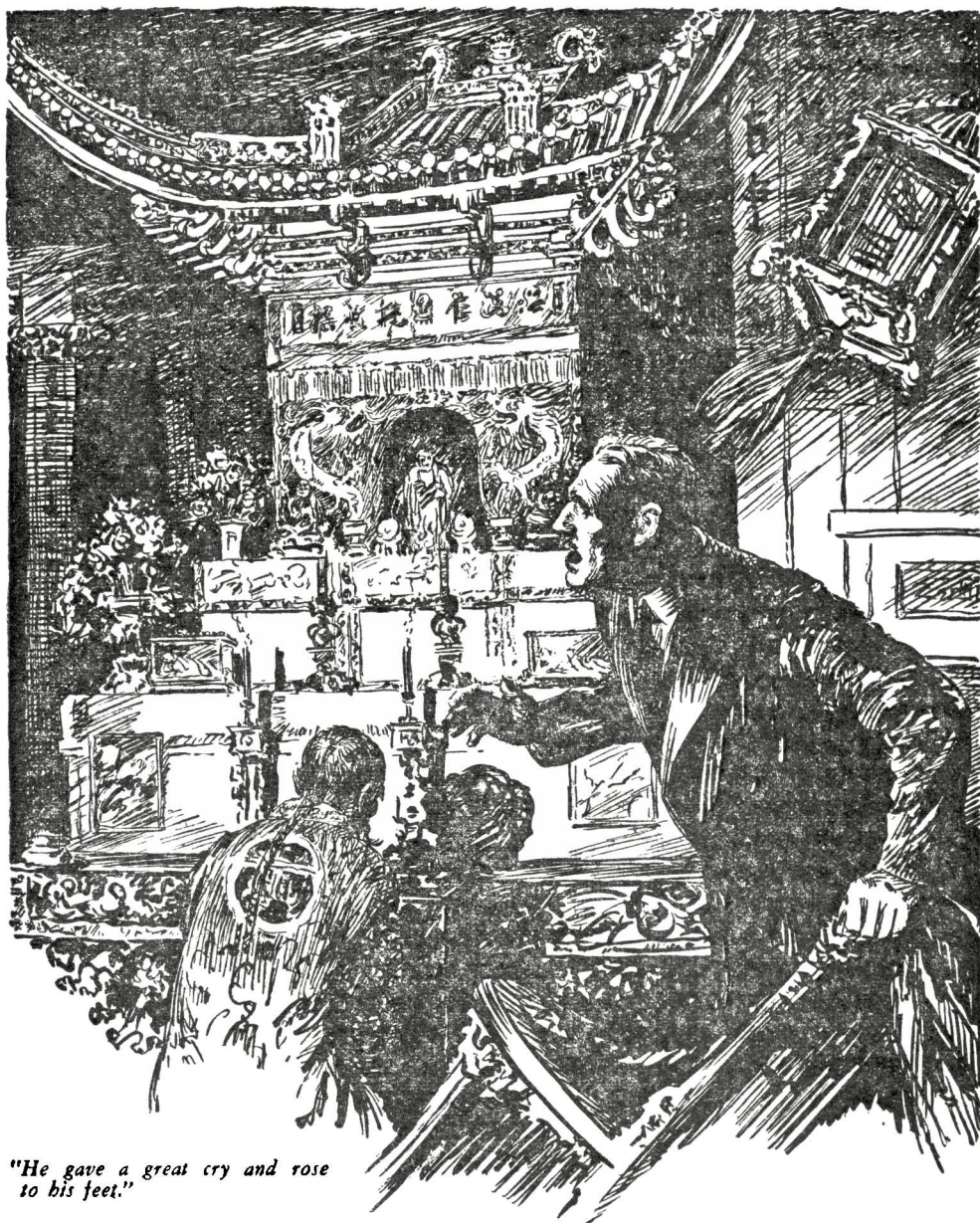
Could a snap of my fingers, a mere gesture of my head, have summoned some Nubian genii, ear-ringed and bewhiskered, from the depths of my vestcoat pocket, I should have been no whit more startled. I stood with my mouth agape and with the rain-water trickling from my forehead down my cheek, beading in little drops at my chin, and dropping slowly to the floor—staring dumbly ahead and trying to distinguish between the thousand different objects that confused my vision.

At first I was aware only of a rich, Oriental pungency, so acutely sweet and so heavy as to seem almost tangible. It swept through my brain like a fire. I

reeled. Then, gradually, my eyes became accustomed to the gloom and I could make out the innumerable objects arrayed before me.

I could discern that the rectangular walls of the shop were lined with long, dark shelves bearing a fragile burden of curios and *chefs-d'oeuvre* of every type and variety imaginable. Here and there, I could detect the mellowed lambency of bronze and beaten brass and copper—shallow serviettes, long, slim vases, fat and contented-looking pots, little clapperless bells hung in ebony belfries. There were rack after rack of figurines wrought in jade and ivory and green marble, upon whose highly polished glaze the light, subdued as it was, flickered in sharp contrasts of oily highlights and smooth, deep-purple shadows. There were pewter mugs and slender mirrors and metallic tapestries; there were simitars and black telescopes with bands of gold encircling their tips. Everything one could think of, or dream of and even more, was laid away upon those dusty, shadowed shelves. It was as though every people had, in passing, bequeathed some memento to adorn the shop of Tzo-Lin; to help fill his endless rows, and stack them more solidly from floor to ceiling; to dream in the warm silence and peace and grow old, hearing the chiming of the many clocks—slowly, sedately, mysteriously old. . . .

For despite the overwhelming reek of incense, there was everywhere an odor of age . . . incalculable age; of must and decay and mystery. I found myself somehow recalling the picture of a ruined Az-



tec city I had once explored by night—recalling the gray chillness of the moonlight upon those moldered stones; the horrible heaviness of the black shadows, unmoving as though they had been frozen into that parched soil; and oddly enough, the very same odor of age unfathomable clinging to those bat-infested ruins that

now pervaded the shop of Tzo-Lin. And recalling this, I shuddered.

By this time, every detail of the shop had grown quite visible, and I could penetrate into the darkest corners. Along the entire extent of the shop, hung from the ceiling with golden cords, placed upon low, lacquered tables, suspended from

every available support, every nook and corner, I could see tiers of bird-cages. Within them were discernible little gray shapes—shapes that seemed to be nightingales with their wings tightly pressed to their bodies and their heads drooped on their bosoms. "Artificial birds," I told myself. "Very clever imitation, though."

However, my observations were brought to a sudden end, for, somewhere in the darkness, I heard a soft, slow whisper of slippered feet. I turned my head; the rather emaciated figure of a man in a robe was making its way toward me. "This," I hazarded, "is Tzo-Lin!" And my surmise was correct, for, almost before I was aware of it, I found myself staring full into the face of the aged Chinaman.

TZO-LIN was an old man—a gnarled, ancient patriarch with the infinite look of one who had lived a million years—and lived them all in vain. Indeed, at my first glimpse of that shrunken, parchment-like face, those unwinking eyes of inexorable learning and wisdom, that yellowed mustache depending in long, fine wisps from either corner of his upper lip, below his meager shoulders and upon his breast, I wondered if Time had not been negligent with his hour-glass, and Death with his scythe; if they had not, for all their punctilious thoroughness, forgotten one mortal—and forgotten him for a long time. Perhaps the startling contrast of the brilliance of his silken robes with the faded colorlessness of his skin might have exaggerated the man's age. Perhaps . . .

All this occupied my mind for only an instant, and before I could recover sufficient equanimity to murmur an apologetic excuse, Tzo-Lin spoke. The clear freedom of his voice amazed me. I had anticipated a more or less unintelligible mumbling, cracked and thrown out of pitch by the unbelievable senility of the

man. Instead, in richest and almost gong-like tones, Tzo-Lin accosted me. "Ten thousand greetings on your head, in the name of Confucius, the many-eyed! Perhaps this most despicable of men may be of service to your so-enlightened self?"

I could not have repressed a smile at this naïve flow of eloquence, had not there been a distinctly ironic and ingratiating edge to his voice. Immediately I was on my guard, combatting fire with fire. I bowed deeply and countered by asking his hospitality in the lengthiest and most sonorous diction I could muster.

A ghost of a smile hovered for a moment about Tzo-Lin's lips and vanished. He returned my bow with imperturbable dignity, and indicated the little fireplace at the rear of his shop with a slow nod of his head. I made my way thence, through the dim aisles of dusty bric-a-brac. Behind me walked Tzo-Lin, serenely, lightly as a girl, fluttering his ivory fan.

I found the fire, for all its minuteness, to be quite satisfying and congenial. I sat on one side of it, luxuriously toasting my chilled knees before its pleasant warmth. Tzo-Lin sat on the opposite side on a little lacquered bench and stared into the fire, as oblivious of my presence as though I had not been there. For a time we both remained thus, hearing the flames crackle, the fresh wood hiss and splutter, the clocks ticking off the seconds, and the rain pattering softly, monotonously, unceasingly upon the roof. In the end, several questions that had been rankling in my mind forced me to break the silence.

"I could not help noticing how very natural those artificial nightingales are that you have all around. You made them yourself, I suppose?"

Tzo-Lin smiled and shook his head. A sort of contemplative dreaminess crept into his voice. He said: "No. How

could I? The birds—the nightingales are not artificial. . . .” And he resumed his reverie.

I laughed his words aside. “Come, come, my dear man, I am no prospective customer. You can be perfectly frank with me—and quite truthful.”

The old Chinaman seemed to be speaking in a dream. “I said they were real nightingales, and I repeat what I said. They are as much alive as you and I. Only—they have been—sleeping.”

I strove to conceal my contempt for what I knew to be an untruth. “Sleeping?” I asked. “And pray, for how long?”

The man’s lips scarcely moved. “Three hundred years ago, they were my wife’s betrothal-gift from her husband. . . .”

I drew my breath sharply. What pleasure did this man derive in doling me out such preposterous nonsense? I took no pains to repress my contempt now. “And when, dear sir, will they awake?”

“They will awake on the night—of the full moon . . . on the night when my bride—will return to me for an hour—from the Purple Halls of the—Dead.” His voice sank into a whisper.

It was quite enough. I arose from my seat and grasped the Chinaman by the shoulder. “What sort of a fool do you take me for?” I began. “Perhaps—”

Tzo-Lin cut me short with a steady glance. Very slowly he rose, as if in a daze, removed my hand from his person, and spoke with a keen deliberateness. “I will not have—doubted—my friend! If it is your pleasure, you may come and see for yourself—on the night of the full moon. Meanwhile—it will please me to have you—leave.”

Again he sank down into his seat, opened his fan, and stared into the fire as though he saw—what?

Despite my resentment of this indig-

nity, I had sufficient presence of mind to do as I was bid. I left—clanging the door shut with a reverberating report that set the brassware trembling and made the china tinkle, leaving the silence and the warmth and the solitude of the shop for Tzo-Lin’s sole enjoyment. . . .

THAT month the full moon came with a vivid silverness that dominated the entire length and breadth of the sky. It came floating up out of the darkness of the city, and hung in space like a vast bubble of ice just about to burst, with a transparent mist of cloud-scud clustered about it. On the ground the snow, soft as a new-shorn fleece, lay several inches thick, stretching away on every hand to a wilderness of pearl and diamond, and a low sky flushed to a dull mauve, as though it had been afire. . . .

There were a few flakes tumbling about in a rather lazy fashion when I first set out, but when I had finally reached the tiny lozenge of a shop bearing Tzo-Lin’s name, I found myself shuddering through nothing less than a blizzard. My coat flapped and cracked in the wind like a banner, and my umbrella was blown inside out. Hurling the tattered wreckage of the latter into the darkness, I opened the narrow door and entered. I was fairly catapulted inside by the violence of a savage gust that lifted the innumerable rugs and carpets from the floors and blew out the tapestries upon the walls like sails. I shook the snowflakes from my person and made my way back into the rear of the little shop to where the cheerful fire snapped on the hearth. There was a little recess I had not before noticed adjoining the rear compartments; a sort of niche sheltering a gilded idol mounted on a low pedestal of ebony, and lighted on either side by a pair of smoking joss sticks.

As I stood, silently looking on, the

overwhelming reek of a composite incense smote my nostrils again, this time more heavy and nauseating than ever. I coughed. The old Chinaman looked up from his devotions, motioned me to be seated, and then resumed his prayers.

Having no other alternative, I obeyed and soon gave myself up to the magic of watching the yellow flames that leaped and fell, and shod in pale blue slippers, ran swift, little races across the brown logs. And in the small alcove, Tzo-Lin went on praying to his pagan gods, tearing into bits the scarlet prayer-paper. And so the minutes passed on. . . .

Then, when I had almost drowsed off into sleep, the hour struck—slowly, deliberately, portentously. The heavy silence that followed lay like a weight upon my brain; seemed to pour, a tide of whirring soundlessness, into my ears. I gasped for breath, and waited for whatever might happen, my glance riveted upon the little cages that thronged the shop.

At first, all I saw was the quivering of a cage, and then of many cages. Then I could hear the brushing and thrashing of innumerable wings. And finally, to climax the entire inexplicable occurrence, a clear, shrill chirp cut the air like a tiny knife-thrust, soared upward, a silver skyrocket of sound, burst into a sudden confusion of trills, and spent itself, gradually, softly, like a shower of many-colored sparks. Almost immediately, before I could force myself to realize it, before I was even aware of it, the hundreds of little cages all about were swinging violently to and fro with their tassels waving frantically, like yellow hands. And of a sudden there arose such a burst of song, such a passion of mad, sweet music, that I felt my very body must crumble like a liquid beneath it and melt and be lost, quietly, into the turning vortices of that consecrated air. It seemed impossible

that such perfect, rounded harmony could come from the throat of any bird in such rapid and faultless succession. Fascinated and half reeling, I watched the nightingales. Their entire bodies seemed to shimmer and tremble in the ecstasy of their music. Each tiny throat so swelled and puffed and quivered that I marveled how like some bubble overweighted with air, they did not suddenly burst.

The whole shop was afire with their singing. The room seemed somehow to grow a hundred times more sweeping and spacious. Each wall seemed to have been thrust back and the ceiling cloven from its supports by some gigantic hand, leaving nothing but the broad and open blueness of heaven about it. The shop, strangely, unaccountably, seemed to fill with mist and vague vapors, twisting and rolling upward, with all the grotesque quietness of a nightmare.

Dimly, then, was borne to my ears the tireless chanting of Tzo-Lin. . . . And his voice, triumphant and exalted into something as beautiful and intolerable as the nightingales' flood of song, was full of love, as though he spoke to someone immeasurably dear to him . . . as though he addressed a—*bride*. I gave a great cry and rose to my feet. . . .

I shall never know what took place in the few moments that followed. A blackness, like the shadow of an enormous arm, seemed suddenly to creep out of the corners, to mount steadily like a flow of dark water, while down from the roof and ceiling fell silence, fold on fold, loop on loop, stilling the crying of the birds, choking the loud surge of my own pulsebeats. . . . More I can not remember.

But the horror, the incredible madness of the waking-hour—that will be with me always. I think it was the cold that first aroused me. I recall shuddering with an

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Tzo-Lin's Night- ingales

(Continued from page 174)

extreme violence that made my teeth knock; then my shoulder struck something sharp, and I awoke. A single glance above me, ahead of me, over my shoulder, and I leaped to my feet, shaking and shrieking for terror with all the strength of my lungs.

Where once shelf upon shelf had borne up a thousand odds and ends of brasses and statuary, many compartments layered with dust and cobwebs glowered emptily out of the darkness. The ceiling had fallen through at irregular intervals, and six or seven of the blackened beams strewed the floor, straddling the breadth of the room diagonally, like prone colossi. On every joint and cornice the spiders had woven heavily, and, as if to reinforce their workmanship, a dust, like pumice-powder, had settled on every thread, and clotted. But more than this, more than the horror of dust and spiders, it was the swift glimpse of the two figures in the rear of the room that left me weak and tortured with a terrible unrest for so many months after.

Two figures. And I saw them just at the moment the trap-door over my head was lifted, in response to my insane pummelings (I had heard the scrape of feet somewhere above me and guessed myself to be in a cellar of some sort). Two figures. One a man, the other a woman; both in glittering, flower-painted robes, lying with phosphorescent pallor and green horror on their faces, arms interlocked and veiled over three times with cobwebs, while cage after cage, each holding a single brown figure like a bird within it, glimmered silently in a wide circle above their heads. . . .