

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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# Vials of Insects

By Paul Ellsworth Triem

CLOSETED with the Surveyor of Customs were his chief inspector, a clean-cut young fellow named Greaves, and a bullet-headed, thick-

Chief Jordan, a florid old fellow with iron-gray hair and kindly, observant gray eyes, regarded Burke with disfavor, as if he were examining a partic-



shouldered man who went by the name of Burke.

Burke was speaking:

"There's just two of 'em in on this job. One is Lee Hin, a Chink that dresses like a white man and spends money like it was water. The other is the man I got acquainted with and got the dope out of. His name is Ward—Jerry Ward. He's boatman and runner for Lee Hin. I've found out that they're intending to pull off a job in a day or two. We can make a cleaning on them—get them with the goods on!"

ularly noxious variety of insect or reptile. He pursed his lips and looked deprecatingly at his assistant.

"What do you think, Charlie?" he asked.

"We haven't much to go on," Greaves replied, his voice also tinged with dislike.

"If Mr. Burke would tell us a little more—"

Burke shook his bulldog head and growled deep down in his throat.

"You gents know as well as me that I'm taking my life in my hands as it is. This Lee Hin is bad medicine. He's got the craft of a Chink and the education of a white man. If you'll leave it all to me, I'll frame things so's you'll get your birds. If you don't—"

Mr. Burke clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth with an air of finality. His furtive eyes were defiant, as if he perceived the disgust his presence created. Moreover, there had been a dogged restraint and circumspection in all that he said—carefully selecting his details, presenting some which would

serve his purpose, suppressing others which might incriminate him.

"All right," Jordan whirled his chair toward his flat-topped desk. "You keep in touch with Mr. Greaves here, and we'll work with you. Of course you're after the reward—"

Again Burke interrupted, doggedly, obstinately:

"Not altogether, Chief. I could have made more by setting in with Lee Hin. I'm an honest man, and I don't take to this kind of job. But of course I'll accept whatever money there is in it."

Charlie Greaves escorted Burke to the outer office and, with a feeling of relief, saw him depart.

"Well, Charlie, this is one end of the business that I call nasty," Chief Jordan said, as the inspector re-entered the inner office. "I'd give five dollars for a chance to kick that scoundrel all the way out of here and down into the street!"

"I'll raise you five: I'd give ten!" Greaves replied. "Of course, he's in on this thing, but he'll fix it so that we can't do a thing to him!"

Jordan nodded.

"Sure! And we've got to take up with even a cur like this, when he has anything definite to offer. All right—you keep tab on him and let me know if anything develops."

**I**N LEE HIN'S shack two lights were burning. One was in the front room, furnished with a square pine table (on which stood the first light) and two steel cots covered with drab army blankets.

The second light was in Lee Hin's study, at the back of the shack. On a high stool, before an enameled bench, which ran the entire length of this second room, sat Lee Hin himself. He was clad in white, from head to foot, and over his mouth and nose he wore a mask of padded cotton.

The part of his face that was visible outside of this mask was keen and animated. His dark eyes glowed, and there was a double furrow of concentration between them. He was stooping over a glass slide, on which he had just dabbed a drop of a milky culture from a test tube. He worked fast, adding a minute drop of stain, then dropped a cover glass into place and slipped the slide upon the revolving stand of his microscope.

This done, Lee Hin looked up at the young man standing at the other side of the room.

"Better not come too close, Jerry," the Chinaman warned, with a singularly tranquil and impersonal voice. "You know—there is death in the air of this room sometimes. I'm willing to risk my

own life, but not the lives of my friends."

In spite of the impersonality of his voice, there was a subtle magnetism about the Oriental: a radiation of power, which marked him as a born leader of men. His eyes warmed with the mellow light of friendship as he raised them to Jerry Ward's face.

Jerry shuffled nearer the door, glancing suspiciously at the rows of culture tubes stacked in orderly ranks at the back of the enameled bench.

"I never can make out what the devil you want to tinker with them crazy little bugs for, Hin," he observed discontentedly. "If I had as much jack as you got—"

"Money is not all there is in life, Jerry," Lee Hin interrupted. "There is friendship—and service! I am doing this for my country. Her fisheries represent a tremendous source of wealth. The fungology and the bacteriology of fishes—it is an inexhaustible subject!"

He paused, glanced keenly at his companion, then abruptly changed the topic:

"I see you have not changed your clothing, my friend. I know only too well what that means. The *Shanghai* is due in this evening. Jerry, can't you see how this is going to end? Let me tell you something: that false friend of yours, Burke, is even now scheming to get the best of you. Do you know what is in his mind?"

Jerry shook his head, defiance and wonder in his eyes.

"I will tell you. He has fallen in love with Irene—with your girl. In his malignant pig brain, he is thinking how he can get you out of the way. I can feel it whenever he comes near—he radiates hatred like a pestilence!"

Jerry laughed uneasily.

"You're buggy, Hin," he replied. "Burke won't try to put no Indian sign on me—he daresn't. He'd pull himself in, if he shoved me!"

Lee Hin turned to his microscope.

"What is willed to be, will be," he observed sententiously. "No man can overcome his destiny."

Jerry tiptoed out of the room presently, much after the manner of an embarrassed gentleman with a hiccup trying to get quietly out of church. He felt ill at ease. There was something about Lee Hin—

He reflected, as he seated himself on the bench outside of the shack and stared out toward the open sea, that this Chinaman was a novel sort of employer. During the six months or better that Jerry had worked for him, pulling the oars in the skiff while Lee Hin fished with variously baited hooks at the end of

his long, sea-green line, the Chinaman had never given him a curt word or an uncivil order. He had treated Jerry as an equal, discounting the white man's early dislike of Orientals and his later uneasy recognition of Lee Hin's intellectual superiority. From that first moment to the present, there had been an impersonal gentleness about the Chinaman that had reduced Jerry to a position of almost worshiping obedience.

Only on one matter had there been any disagreement between them: Lee Hin felt strongly on the subject of opium smuggling. He would not positively forbid the young fellow to mix in this illegal traffic, but he was gradually bending him to his way of thinking, as much by his silent will force as by his occasional incisive criticism.

**N**IGHT had fallen, and with it a fog shifted over the rocky shore and out upon the broad channel. Yellow lights flashed here and there, and the mournful voice of the fog signal kept up its doleful iteration.

Jerry shook himself and peered down toward the little cove. His skiff lay there on its side, well above the reach of the rising tide.

Through the mists there came a low, resonant, deep-throated whistle. Jerry stood up abruptly and entered the front room of the shack. From one corner he took a lantern with a strip of red bunting tied over the chimney. This he lighted and carried down to where the skiff lay. On the end of a six foot stake, with a forked end, Jerry hung the lantern. Then he took from his pocket an electric flashlight, snapped it a few times to be sure bulb and battery were in good condition, and finally returned the flashlight to his pocket and pulled the skiff down into the water.

Five minutes after he had pulled away from the shore, he would have been invisible to anyone standing at his point of departure. The skiff was painted a slate gray; and, save for the whitish blotch of the man's face in the darkness, there might have been nothing there but a partially submerged log floating out to sea.

The whistle came again, much nearer. Between the skiff and the shore the cough of a motor boat sounded. Jerry let his oars rest, with their dripping blades an inch above the water. The launch passed on, and he resumed his rowing.

The fog lifted. He could see it hanging over the distant city, a lurid, angry glow where the illumination of the streets struck against it.

Now the lights of the steamer showed in the darkness, high above the water, moving silently and majestically down upon the man floating there like a chip—

Jerry threw his weight against the oars. The steamer was almost upon him. He sent the boat back its own length, measured with one keen glance the distance he had allowed for clearance, and took from his pocket the flashlight. The *Shanghai* was opposite the spark of red that indicated the position of the lantern on the shore when Jerry flashed his signal—three short flashes and a longer one.

Next moment he had caught up his oars. From a port hole high above there shot a dark object which swooped down and struck the water with a smashing impact; two other bundles followed it.

The ship continued on its way, but at three points on the dark water a tiny glow showed where the cork-buoyed packages of smoking opium were floating. To each had been attached a small glass tube containing phosphorus, invisible at any great distance, but easily distinguished by the man in the boat.

Jerry pushed the skiff forward with sturdy breast strokes. He reached over the side for the first of the packages and hauled it in. Another stroke carried him within reach of the second bundle.

He was just about to seize it when a warning sound reached him—the cough of a gas engine. In a flash he remembered the launch which had passed seaward close to shore. They had taken advantage of the same darkness that had protected him.

A light blazed out—the search light of the revenue boat.

In that instant the young man thought of his mother, old, placid, credulous, to whom he had told fairy stories to account for the money he gave her so prodigally at times. And he saw the dark eyes and the oval face of a girl—his girl, Irene—and the face of Lee Hin, serene and impassive as if carved of ivory. It was Lee Hin who had warned him this very evening; and warned him of the business itself, and of Burke, Jerry's associate in it.

As if it had been a spectre, summoned by this racing thought, a face stood out of the darkness ahead: the red, threatening face of Burke, standing at the shoulder of another man in the prow of the launch.

"That's him!" Burke was saying, in his hoarse, growling voice. "Look out for the dope—"

Jerry gripped an oar and swung himself to his feet. He cast a burning look upon the informer.

"You dirty dog—"

The nose of the launch rose on the swell. As it came down it caught the forward end of the skiff under its sharp keel.

In the same instant there was the crack of a pistol, and Jerry pitched from his skiff into the water. Burke, the gun still quivering in his hand, stared over, searching the glistening surface of the tide.

"Take that gun away from him!" a voice from the rear of the launch commanded. "He had no business to shoot—"

"I did it in self-defense!" Burke growled. "In another moment he would have got me with that oar! Get a move on, you fellows! Grab that package! We've got to get ashore before Lee Hin makes his getaway!"

But when they came to the shack of Lee Hin, ten minutes later, the lights were out and the place was deserted.

The Chinaman was gone.

ON THE money he had saved from his profits in opium running Burke was able to travel north in first-class style. He sojourned for a time in Canada, then went east and visited New York.

He told himself he was through with dope. Every man's hand was against the drug-runner, while the vender of good moonshine or smuggled liquor was looked upon as a public benefactor. No more opium for him—he would become a bootlegger.

He stayed in New York ten days, and discovered that the business he had contemplated entering was organized like a trust or a shipping pool, and that to enter it he must have "real money." His little roll, which he had looked upon with considerable complacency, was reduced to microscopic size by comparison with the financial resources of these eastern operators.

Burke cut his New York visit short. Memories were stirring uneasily within him—the face of a dark-eyed girl, which flashed upon him sometimes out of the dusk, and the smell of fog blowing gustily down Market Street. There was nothing like that in the East. He went to Chicago.

In Chicago he stayed two days. He had purposed to remain at least a week, but on that second day a feeling, which had come to him before, returned with increased energy. It was what Burke called a "hunch."

"That little dame is thinking about me," he growled down in his burly throat. "She's forgetting that scut, and I'm going back! I got a hunch she'll

treat me right, now that she's forgotten him!"

Three nights later Burke was standing on the upper deck of the Oakland ferry, looking with ferocious tenderness at the lights of his native city. The clock in the tower of the Ferry Building showed that it was still early; but a powdery fog was blowing down street, making it seem late.

Burke secured a room at a waterfront hotel. He scrubbed and groomed himself, anointed his hair with perfume, and presently sallied forth. He was going to test that hunch of his.

He journeyed to an outlying residential district. Down a side street he tramped stolidly. He turned a corner—and hesitated.

There, a few doors away, was the apartment house. He slipped along to the tradesmen's entrance and stepped into its sheltering gloom. He didn't feel exactly comfortable. He had pictured himself going boldly up to the door and ringing the bell. Now he decided to wait a while—to reconnoiter.

People came and went—elderly people; children; occasionally a girl whose half-perceived figure brought him forward, tense and breathless. Then as he was starting toward the entrance of the apartment, the girl he was hoping yet fearing to see came down the street from the opposite direction, passed within five feet of him, and went into the house. She had not seen him, but he had seen her.

Burk realized that the impression of that pale, sorrowful face would be with him till he died.

He left his retreat a few minutes later and walked slowly away. He could feel the perspiration trickling down his forehead into his eyes. His heart pounded steadily at his ribs.

Burke decided, without thinking much about the matter, to walk the two miles back to his hotel. He struck off down a street lit with old-fashioned gas lamps, whose straw-colored flames gleamed green and witchlike in the eddying fog. He had steadied down to his habitual pace, and had no premonition to look behind him. If he had only had one of his hunches now. . . .

But he didn't. Perhaps it would have made little difference, in any case; for the lithe figure, which had detached itself from the shadows of a vacant lot across from the apartment house as Burke departed, blended easily with the gloom of the late evening.

He returned to his hotel, somewhat reassured by his walk. His blood tingled and he felt thoroughly alive. He even grinned to himself as he took his key

from the night clerk and went up to his room on the second floor. He had had a case of "nerves," that was all.

"Damned if I don't think I've got kind of out of the habit of breathing this fishy night air," he told himself, with heavy jocularly. "Well, something give me the creeps, for sure!"

He closed his window and latched it securely. He had already locked his door, and now he braced a chair under the knob. There was no transom—no other opening through which a breath of night air could come, except a rather wide crack beneath the door.

He ignored this.

**FIFTEEN MINUTES** after Burke had locked himself into his room, the figure of a young Chinaman might have been seen journeying up Clay Street.

The face of this Chinaman was not an ordinary one. The lips were thin and passionless. The eyes were inscrutable. There was something imposing—something of impersonal power—in the serene and almost pitying expression of that yellow, mask-like face.

The Chinaman wore a loose-fitting silk blouse and silk trousers, and thick-soled felt slippers and a black silk cap. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his hands were concealed in the wide sleeves. He walked with his head bowed, evidently in deep thought.

Instinctively, he followed his rather devious way until it brought him to a basement door, opening off from an obscure alley. Here he let himself in with a great brass key.

Once inside the room, he paused to shut and lock and finally to bar the door before turning on a light. It was a low-ceiled apartment of unusual extent, so that its farther walls were lost in obscurity. It was warm, almost steamy; and there was a pungent smell as of seaweed, and the salt wind from the ocean.

A bench with a white-enameled top was built against one wall. This bench was covered with racks for test tubes and culture bottles, and with bell-jars, reagents, stains, a compound microscope with a revolving stand and other apparatus of various sorts.

The newcomer crossed over to this bench and selected a wide-mouthed vial, into whose neck he fitted loosely a pledget of absorbent cotton. He placed the bottle on the bench, convenient to a high stool on which he evidently intended to seat himself.

Next he selected a surgeon's forceps with long, thin points, and, with this in

his hand he crossed over to a keg placed on a wooden bench in a corner of the room. The light, though dim here, sufficed to enable him to peer down through the netting that covered the keg and to perceive a myriad of filmy creatures which clung to the under side of the netting.

Deftly he raised the netting at one side, thrust his hand, armed with the forceps, underneath, and clipped one of the captives by its black-veined wings. Replacing the netting, he crossed over to the bench and seated himself on the stool.

With the precision of one accustomed to the handling of minute objects, he selected from a rack in front of him a tube, plugged with cotton and partly filled with a milky, clouded fluid. Still holding the little creature he had taken from the keg by its captured wings, he removed the cotton stopper from this culture tube, dipped a tiny glass rod into the turbid fluid within, and applied the rod to the head of the captive. He then placed the latter in the wide-mouthed vial, replaced the cotton stopper, and returned to the miniature rain-barrel for a new specimen.

It was slow work, but the man at the bench performed every action with a machinelike regularity and an unrelaxing attention that showed the importance he attached to it. At the end of half an hour he had two dozen prisoners in the vial. He held them up toward the light and crooned gently to them:

"Little friends—little angels of justice! Justice? But how may I be sure—"

He laid the vial gently down and stood looking at it. His lips moved. Then his eyes lighted, and hastily he turned and selected another vial, the exact counterpart of the one he had filled with the "little friends."

Equipped with this second vial and the forceps, he returned to the keg and presently he had placed in it a score or so of untreated insects. He placed the two vials side by side, arranged the cotton which filled the necks so that it furnished no clew to the identity of the bottle containing the original captives, and finally he closed his eyes and shuffled the vials swiftly about.

When he had finished this queer juggling of the bottles, the Chinaman betook himself to a distant part of the basement, and from behind a piece of striped ticking, hanging against the wall he took a bundle of clothing. Quickly divesting himself of the garb he wore, he changed into this new costume. It was a dilapidated suit, such as might have

been worn by a Chinese laundryman in indigent circumstances.

Next he secured some newspapers, which he folded in such a way as to approximate the size of laundered shirts. He placed six of these dummy shirts on a sheet of wrapping paper, folded the latter neatly, and tied it. Returning with this package to the bench, he wrote the name "Burke" clumsily on it with a soft leaded pencil, and, after it, some Chinese characters.

All this time he had resolutely refrained from glancing at the two vials, but when the package was ready he moved backward along the bench, fumbling behind him till his slim hand encountered one of the bottles.

Without glancing at it, he placed it carefully in an inner pocket of his ragged blouse, tucked the bundle under his arm, crossed to the door, and turned off the light and went out.

**THE NIGHT** clerk of the Great Eastern Hotel, many of whose patrons were sea-faring men, was accustomed to seeing Chinese laundrymen delivering special orders of shirts and underwear at all hours of the day and night. He therefore glanced negligently over his shoulder when a meek voice hailed him from the counter:

"I say, Bossy Man—you sabe Captain Buck? Him come all same today?"

"Captain Burke? All right, John—you'll find him up in two-one-seven, street side, back of the hall. He's in his room now."

The Chinaman shuffled away, went padding up the stairs and down the long hall, and found the door of two-one-seven. Here he paused and considered. He must make no mistake.

He tried the door softly. It was locked, of course. Then he knocked and raised his voice, speaking English in a way that would have startled the night clerk:

"Is this Mr. Peter Fitzgerald's room?"

A rumbling growl ended in a curse.

"No, damn your silly eyes, it ain't! Get away from that door!"

The Chinaman muttered an apology and retreated audibly. Half way down the hall he stopped, took the vial from his pocket, and returned to two-one-seven.

Noiselessly he approached the door and knelt down. He removed the pledget of cotton from the neck of the bottle and by the light of the hall lamp gently blew each tiny insect under the door as it was shaken clear of its glass prison.



**H**ALF an hour later, Lee Hin undressed and climbed into bed in the little chamber adjoining the basement laboratory.

Just before he snapped off the light, he took a pledget of cotton out of the neck of a wide-mouthed bottle and shook from the latter a score of so of buzzing insects.

"Little friends!" he said gently. "May the spirit of justice which rules all things—which holds the suns in their appointed orbits as they swing through infinite space, and which guides the destinies of the tiniest insect—may the God of all good men, of Moses and Confucius, decide—and strike through you!"

Then he turned out the light and went placidly to bed.

**B**URKE slept but poorly that first night after his return.

He was just dropping into a doze when some blundering fool knocked at his door by mistake; and after Burke recovered from the rage which this incident occasioned, a mosquito buzzed down out of the ceiling and bit him on the neck. He killed the insect with the first slap; but a few minutes later, just as he was again becoming drowsy, another bit him under the eye.

After that it seemed to him that the room was full of mosquitoes. He made up his mind that his nerves were playing him tricks. There *couldn't* be so many of the tormenting insects in one room! He had seen none during the evening. He must be imagining half of it—but there were the bites!

It was nearly three o'clock before he finally fell asleep. And he slept like a drugged man till late in the morning.

When he got up and looked at himself in the glass, he was furious to find his face disfigured by three great purple bites. There were at least a dozen others on his body, but those he didn't mind. He was thinking of the effect of these disfigurements on the girl, whom he had resolved to see tonight.

He killed half a dozen blood filled mosquitoes, perched heavily in the window, and tramped downstairs to berate the clerk.

The clerk listened to him with gathering wrath.

"Mosquitoes your grandmother!" he snarled. "We never have no mosquitoes in this house! I shouldn't wonder if you had the itch. You better find a room somewhere else!"

Burke looked ferociously at him, but the clerk returned the glare with interest. Not for nothing had he run a water-side hotel for ten years. He knew

how to meet threat with threat. Burke went out and ate breakfast, for which he discovered he had little appetite.

He put in most of the day walking the streets, thinking of his grievances, and treating his mosquito bites. He bought a bottle of lotion from a druggist. The latter eyed the bites dubiously.

"Those mosquitoes must have been some snapping turtles, friend!" he commented. "They look more like tick bites. You'd better take something for your blood—some of this compound—"

Burke seized the lotion he had paid for and dashed from the store. His head ached. Plainly, everyone was mad—everyone but himself.

For a time, during the middle of the day, the mosquito bites seemed to be getting better; but Burke continued to apply the lotion, and to inspect himself in the glass.

He would be fairly presentable by night, at this rate.

It was about four o'clock when he became aware of a shooting pain radiating from the bite he had first received—the one on his neck. He jumped up and ran to the looking-glass. The thing had puffed up like a walnut, and had turned an angry purplish color.

Feverishly, Burke applied more lotion. He made a compress with a wet towel and wrapped it around his neck. Hardly had he accomplished this when he perceived that another of the bites was swelling and growing painful. Within an hour and a half, he had a dozen of these inflamed places.

Burke realized that he would have to put off his visit to the girl until next day. Probably the druggist was right—his blood was too thick. He must buy a bottle of that stuff—that compound. He had been drinking too much bootleg whisky.

He went to bed early. The thought of food nauseated him. He sank into a heavy slumber, from which he was aroused by a voice in the room.

It was a thick voice, repeating long, meaningless strings of words. Burke tried to sit up to listen, and the voice ceased. He was not able to raise himself, however. Something was wrong inside his head. . . .

It was some time later that Burke discovered that the flat, babbling voice was his own! It rose to a scream, then shifted into a screechy laugh. . . .

Strange faces were bending over him. There was a man with a pointed beard, who looked at him with pursed lips. This man was speaking:

"I never encountered a case of the kind before. I would call it anthrax, but for the number of the primary

lesions. The interest is purely academic, of course. He'll be dead within twelve hours. Has he had any visitors? Any way you can find out if he has any relatives or friends?"

With a strange detachment, as if he were already a spirit, Burke listened. The night clerk was speaking:

"There has been no mail for him, and no visitors—except a Chinaman, who brought him a package of laundry. I guess he's a stranger—"

Burke's face became purple, and his body drew itself into a great knot. *A Chinaman to see him! Laundry—he had had no laundry!*

Suddenly he understood. Perception shone through him like a searchlight.

*A Chinaman never forgets! Lee Hin—*

He tried to shout the name. He must get his accusation into writing—

In the act of sitting up to demand paper and pen, he was caught up into a great darkness. He fell heavily back upon the bed.

"Syncope!" said the man with the pointed beard. "I must write up this case for the National Medical Journal."

**L**EE HIN, looking upon the last scene in the drama, meditated deeply.

"No man can escape his destiny," he mused.

The last shovel of dirt was thrown over the mound, and the man who threw it deftly patted it into place with the rounded back of his spade.

Lee Hin walked gravely away. He passed along a graveled path and approached a distant part of the cemetery. In the shade of a hawthorne he paused and stood gently regarding the figure of a girl, kneeling beside a grave.

"Poor little Irene!" he murmured.

And then he strode silently down the path and out at the cemetery gate.