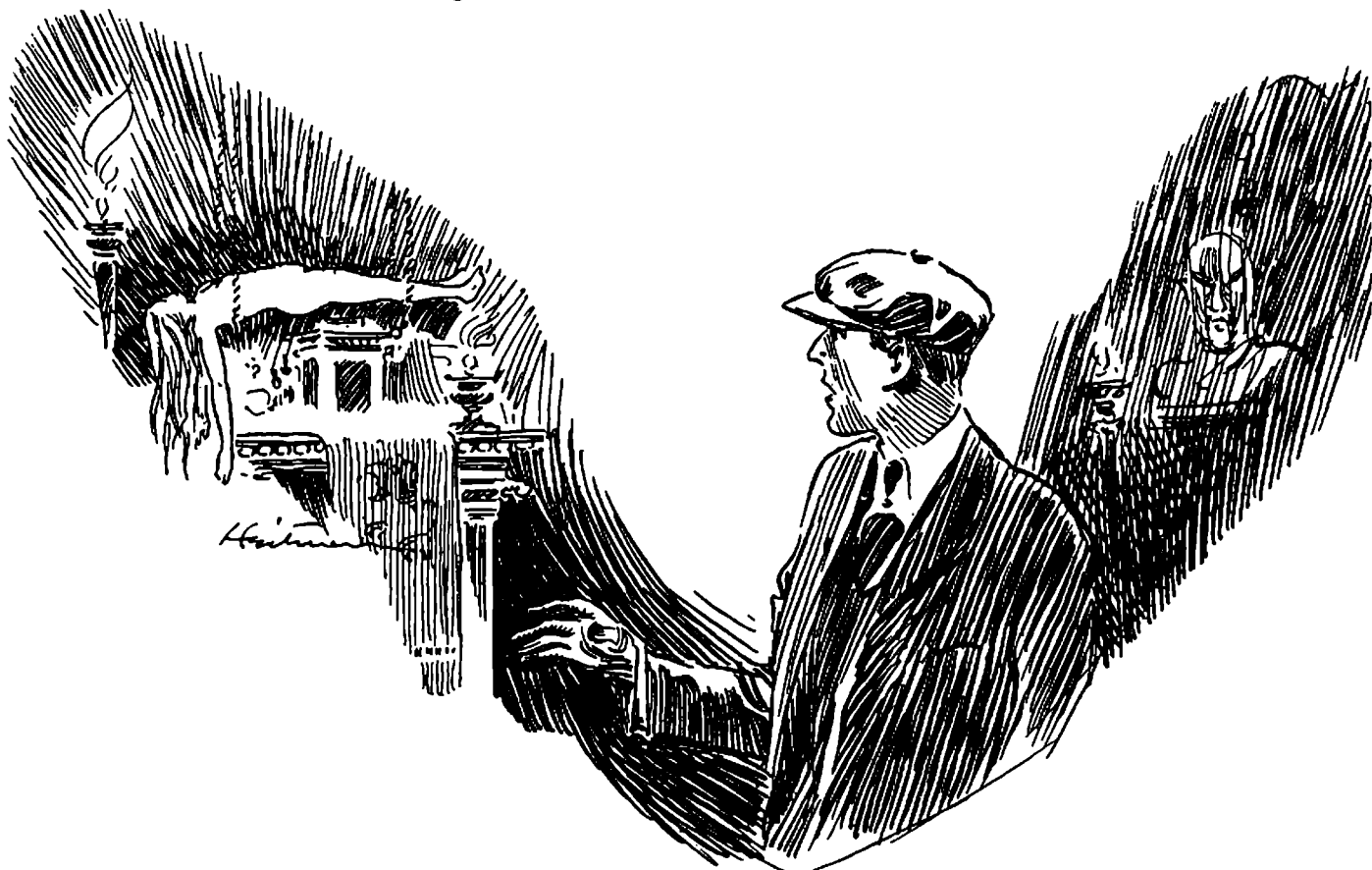


*Here's a Truly Remarkable Story
of Oriental Mysticism*

YELLOW AND WHITE

By GEORGE FULLER



MEETING your one-time inseparable college chum, after a lapse of ten years, is a dubious adventure. College memories are tin-selly things; resurrected suddenly. They have a fashion of giving the lie to the aura of glory which surrounds the thought of Alma Mater.

Jimmy Belden was fully aware of this fact. He had met others of his former college mates during that decade, men he had not seen for years. And he had come to know that, while the boy is father to the man, the family resemblance is sometimes surprisingly remote. But the change had never been acutely distressing before. It had remained for the best friend of all—keen, clean, virile Arch Pennington—to present the strongest, most disturbing, and yet most baffling impression of having let down into a compromise, of some kind, with “the sort of things no fellow can do.” Belden was uncomfortable and puzzled.

During a lull in the conversation, which on both sides had been half

formal, half clumsily shaped by wistful attempts to get back to the boyhood footing, he sat taking in his surroundings. Nine years in China had certainly changed “Old Pen,” he thought. Even his apartment showed it. The close, incense-burdened air was unlike him. The dim lighting was unlike him. The rich, dull, heavily embroidered draperies, the dark, ivory-and-pearl-inlaid furniture, the gaudily flowered dressing gown—all were utterly, grotesquely unlike him.

But most of all, the incense seemed out of place. Different from any Chinese incense he had ever smelled; sweet, elusive, and insistently penetrative, in some weird fashion it was the soul of the place, the key and expression of every incongruous change. He looked at the heavy table. The incense arose from it. At the silken draperies. It seemed to breathe from their mysterious folds. At the bright silk hosiery, the straw sandals, or at that mandarin's robe, which denied that it was Arch Pennington's face that showed above it.

Always it was the incense that was the strongest impression. Jimmy could almost believe that he *saw* it.

“China is a peculiar place. The Chinese are peculiar people,” said Pennington abruptly. “Quiet, simple, faithful, generous, trustful—but, with it all, cruel, fanatical, treacherous, and with a habit of thought as unfathomable to the Western mind as the symbolism of Egypt.”

He lapsed as abruptly into silence again. Only his lips and eyes had moved as he spoke. The lean, fallow face, with its lustreless skin—“smoke cured by incense,” thought Belden—so unlike the former rosy, animated face Jimmy had once known, had not varied the fraction of a line in expression. Only the eyes, quick, wary, changing from cold indifference to dreamy reminiscence, lighting with a sudden uncanny gleam which faded as quickly into a look of dull hopelessness—only the eyes were apart from the Oriental mask which had hidden Arch Pennington.

Belden rose, with a slight shudder.

"I must be going," he said, somewhat uncertainly.

Pennington jumped to his feet with surprising animation, and caught him by the hand.

"Come again, Jimmy, won't you?" he said eagerly. "I—oh, damn it, Jimmy, it's been *great* to see you. I know—I've seen it—I'm strange to you. I just haven't gotten loose from China yet, old man; but I will, after a bit. Come again tomorrow night, won't you?"

Jimmy promised, and left, a sudden warming in his heart for the "Old Pen" who had flashed out from behind his mask for an instant, mingled with shame for his own coolness and distrust.

He came back to the bit of transplanted China the next evening, and the next. Gradually the old intimacy returned, until they were together every spare moment that Belden had. Little by little, the feeling that Pen had lost the "high heart" was dulled by constant contact, as some of his old-time vivacity returned, and Jimmy thoroughly enjoyed his company.

He told, whimsically, inimitably, the most fascinating stories of his unconventional travels, poking around in obscure corners of that ancient, mysterious land. Finally only one barrier to complete friendly confidence seemed to remain—a sense that Arch had approached some directly personal subject and then avoided it skilfully at the last instant.

When Pennington at last brushed the barrier aside, it was with his usual abruptness. They had been indulging, one evening, in the sort of musing, communicative silence which their renewed intimacy made possible, when he unexpectedly spoke.

"I married a Chinese girl," he said.

Belden blinked. "You—*what?*" he gasped, after a dazed silence.

"I married a Chinese girl," repeated Pennington. "Chinese style. Still married, in fact. Married her because I loved her. Still love her. Promised to come back after this visit. She wouldn't believe me."

Jimmy blinked again. Arch sat watching him through narrowing eyelids, the smoke from his cigarette clinging fantastically to his fingers, swaying upward, and wreathing slowly about his face in the still, heavy air. After a moment Jimmy jerked himself together.

"Forgive me, old man," he said quickly. "That was too unexpected for me to understand, all in one lump. Tell me about it."

PENNINGTON'S tense features relaxed. His face had been gathering an unpleasant expression as he waited for Belden's comment.

"It was 'way over in an out-of-the-way corner of southwestern China," he said, "about three years ago. I had been rambling across country in native costume for months. You used to kid me at college, you know, about my Chinese eyes; and a stretch of fever had left me with this beautiful ochre-tinted complexion; so, with my knowledge of the country, I had no trouble passing as a native.

"China had fascinated me from the moment I landed at Hong Kong. For six years I had studied the people. Their dialects, their customs, their facial expressions, their mannerisms, gestures, and costumes—everything Chinese was of the most absorbing interest to me. I almost forgot my American ways. Even in my home, I dressed, thought, lived, *breathed* as a Chinese, until I could pass for one anywhere, without suspicion touching me.

"That was when my travels began. From then on I wandered constantly, living the uncertain but fascinating life of an adventurer, seeking always the most obscure, least-known corners of that obscure, little-known land. For the most part, I passed as a traveling merchant—trading, I must admit, chiefly on my wits, for it was too dangerous to try to carry anything of value.

"Late one afternoon I entered a beautiful little valley in the foothills. The air was full of the sunset glow. Fruit trees and flowers were blossoming everywhere on the rich, carefully terraced hillsides. A village of white walled, red roofed houses clustered around the groves and gardens of a huge, rambling, ornate temple, fire-tipped in the setting sun. I never smelled such wonderful air, or saw such quiet beauty, any place else in the world."

His eyelids drooped and he fell silent, as if he were living over again that faraway afternoon.

"I made up my mind to stay there for awhile," he resumed, after a bit. "I did stay, nearly six months. I found the inhabitants to be a simple rural people, friendly, unsuspicious, and intelligent, and I did a good business—if you could call my short-card, shell-game, fly-by-night operations 'business'. They were in better circumstances than the average Chinese, and it showed not only in their better physical condition, but also in a comelier cast of countenance than usual. Some of the women were really pretty. One of them—Great Guns, man! What are you staring at!"

Belden jumped clear out of his chair.

"Lord, Pen, but you startled me!" he said. "You brought me clear from China in one jerk! What's the matter with you? I was just watching that smoke around your head. It takes some queer shapes."

"The devil it does!" said Pennington, a look of nervous excitement coming over his face. "What does it look like?"

"Why, nothing in particular, I guess. It's just that the smoke hangs forever in this confounded close air of yours, and this incense gets me light-headed. Where do you get that peculiar 'flavor,' anyway? I smell the damned stuff in my sleep."

"I was coming to that," said Pennington, shortly. "Ugh! You gave me the shivers, staring over my head that way. Where was I?"

"You had just begun on the women," said Belden.

"Oh, yes." Arch lapsed into another silence.

"There was one girl I saw one day, going to the temple," he went on, finally. "It was a good while before I risked that, for Oriental temples are not healthy places to be unduly curious about. After a couple of months, though, I felt sure enough of my standing to chance it, and I mixed into the crowd one day when a large number were going. After a bit I noticed her beside me."

He stopped. Jimmy had begun to wonder if he had decided not to tell any more, when:

"Gad, man! She was wonderful!" he said reverently. "No Chinese woman you ever saw gives you any basis for imagining how beautiful she was. She was little, and graceful, and dainty as a bird, but with a full-rounded daintiness that was maddening. I kept close to her as long as I could. She fairly hypnotized me. But the shifting of the crowd separated us, and, try as I would, I couldn't find her again. For weeks I searched for her every place, forgetful of everything else. I probably would have gotten myself into a peck of trouble if it had kept up, for I got to poking into places that weren't safe even for a Chinese, and I must have acted suspiciously. But at last I found her.

"We met by accident, outside the village, and she recognized me with a quick, fluttering, upward glance out of her glorious brown eyes that scattered what few wits I had left. I stopped her, determined not to lose her again. She was incredibly shy, but too utterly innocent to be coquettish; and she had

noticed me that day, as I had her, and before I left her I had her promise that she would meet me that evening if she could. She seemed unreasonably frightened, somehow, and yet not at all afraid of me.

"Well, no need of a lot of detail; you'll be thinking me a mushy idiot. It was a case with us both, though, of love at first sight, if ever there was such a thing. We met only at night, out of the village; but we met every night that she was able to slip away, which was nearly always, and we lived our lives as if one instant were all of eternity. Ah! those nights! Jimmy, you never saw moonlight! Chinese or not, her flesh was like ivory—not yellow, but like fine ivory, and she was formed like an angel. Well—" he passed his hand wearily over his eyes "—never mind that.

"She was the daughter of a high priest of the temple. That was why she had been so frightened when we first met; men, for her, were absolutely taboo. She was just beginning to serve some sort of novitiate in the temple, which would gradually claim more and more of her time, until she was absorbed body and soul. But the call of the heart was too strong for the bonds of the temple, and she came to me like a bird to its mate. How we ever kept it up as long as we did without being caught, and punished as only the Chinese can punish, I can't imagine. For sheer foolhardiness it beat anything I ever heard of. But I never thought of it, then—maybe that's how I got away with it. At any rate, I did. We were never disturbed.

"I began going to the temple whenever any number of the people went, to get occasional glimpses of her during the day. She was usually gathering flowers in the temple gardens, to be used in making incense. They used mostly the kind of incense I have here; she gave me some of it when I came away. It gives me the shivers, sometimes, but I love it, because it has come to mean *her* to me. They make it from a gorgeous yellow flower, different from any I ever saw, which grows in great beds in the temple gardens. It seemed to grow nowhere in the valley except the temple gardens, and all of the beds there were too far from the public paths for me to examine them closely, although their rich, penetrating odor was everywhere. I used to beg her to bring me some, partly from curiosity, but mostly because their odor was so inseparably connected with her in my mind. She was among them so much that their fragrance was with her always.

"But, although love had conquered her training in most respects, she never would consent to that. When I asked for flowers, a frightened look would come into her eyes and she would murmur, No! No! The incense is good for men, in the temple. The flowers are good for men, in the gardens. But outside they are bad! Bad! You understand, of course, that I am translating for you; she never learned to speak English. Finally I stopped asking her for flowers, it worried her so. I think the work in the flowers was the only part of their religion she understood, although I never questioned her. The rest . . ."

He paused, and a slow, violent shudder shook him from head to foot.

"The rest is too horrible to believe. It is hard to imagine how it could exist in the midst of such beautiful surroundings and among such a superior people. I learned its true significance quite by accident. I was in the temple one day at a sort of festival; nearly everyone in the valley was there. A storm was brewing, and the air was almost intolerably sultry; what with that, and the crowd in the temple, I nearly went to sleep on my feet. I got to watching the smoke as it rose from the altar, and—" he shuddered again, "—it seemed to hang in the air, over the idol, in the form of a gigantic bat."

Jimmy Belden turned cold to his toes, controlling himself only by a mighty effort. Could he be going mad, he thought wildly? For it was the likeness of a *bat* that he had been staring at, in the smoke over Pennington's head, and now, as he glanced furtively upward, he could see it again! Not for worlds would he have had Pennington notice where he was looking; but it required all his will-power to look casually away. A feeling of deathly nausea came over him.

"WELL?" he said hoarsely.

Luckily, Pennington was too absorbed to notice the strangeness in his face and manner.

"Well, it certainly gave me the creeps," he said. "I was primed just exactly right for what followed, and it surely got a world of action out of me! As I said, a storm had been brewing; and suddenly it burst, with the most unearthly racket I ever heard in my life. It turned pitch dark and the wind screamed like ten million devils. There was no lightning, in the usual sense of the word, but the air was tingling with electricity until it was physically painful, and the thunder was one continuous, deafening, ear-splitting roar. We

seemed to be right in the middle of it. Every hair on the back of my hands—every hair on the heads of the people around me—was stiff as a bristle. It was the spookiest thing that ever happened!

"The crowd stood it for about thirty seconds, too scared to wiggle, and then went stark, staring, raving crazy, priests and all, and made a wild rush for the doors—and I don't mind saying that I was the wildest man in the place. In the darkness and excitement I went the wrong way, and—Lord! what a place I got into!

"After passing through several rooms and passages I came into a dimly-lighted inside room, with a peculiar, sickening odor. One glance told me that I was where no one but a priest was safe for a second. The next—br-r-r! I can see it yet!—the next look showed me, hanging from a beam at the other side of the room, a tremendous vampire bat, gorged, and asleep,—and under it—"

He paused, and dropped his head on his hands, his elbows on his knees.

"—under it, hanging limply on the cords which bound it to a post, was the naked body of a young girl—dead—and bled white!"

Belden's breath was whistling through his teeth.

"PRETTY thing, isn't it?" said Pennington, looking up with a crooked grin. "Well, boy! I was the worst scared man in Asia. I don't want to brag, but you can't get any worse scared than I was; if you could, I'd have *been* worse scared. I don't know how I got out of there. I never *would* have gotten out, if anyone had seen me; but the storm had scared everyone clear away from the temple, and it was as dark, outdoors, as the inside of a jug, so no one saw me leaving. I never stopped running until I was clear across the village and out into the fields—not until a thought came to me that drove fear completely out of my mind, leaving nothing but blind rage, horror, and a weakness that tumbled me on my face, gasping."

"You mean—*her*?" asked Belden.

"She wasn't the girl in the temple, if that's what you mean," Pennington replied, "but it was a thought of her that stopped me. It suddenly flashed upon me that they were saving *my* little girl for that horrible, filthy, unspeakable monster—that sooner or later *she* would be bound to that post. I could picture the beast fastened upon that delicate throat, draining the life, and

warmth, and rosy flush—I tell you, for awhile I was a madman!

“Luckily, it was only a short time before I saw her, or I might have done something downright suicidal. The storm had scared her half to death, and her first thought had been to find me. The thunder and lightning had given way to a tremendous downpour of rain, lashed by a furious wind. It was still dark, although only mid-afternoon; but not too dark to see her, coming through the sodden grass with her white, wet, wind-driven robes clinging to her.

“I don’t know just how I persuaded her to leave with me. I know I pleaded frantically, for I had the black horrors at the mere thought of her ever going near that temple again, and I realized that the storm was our opportunity. And I remember that for a time I was almost hopeless, her old habits of thought, and her fear of the idol’s revenge, were so strong. But love conquered, and we got away safely. Perhaps they thought, when they missed us, that the storm had been sent by the gods to hide their taking her away, and that I was some sort of advance guard; at least, we never saw any sign of pursuit. But we took no chances. Until we were hundreds of miles away we traveled only by night; and we never wasted a minute that we could use for travel, until we reached the coast country—the China that the white man knows.

“Somehow, the sight of Europeans in the coast towns immediately made me consider the question of our relations. I loved her. Jimmy, I *loved* her, I tell you! And I married her—Chinese style, as I said, but I married her just the same, and for two years I was utterly, completely happy.”

He got to his feet and began tramping nervously around the room, running his hands through his hair, snapping his fingers, and whistling snatches of music. He was plainly under a terrible strain.

“For two years?” insinuated Jimmy, gently.

His friend dropped wearily into a chair.

“Yes, for two years,” he said dully. “Jimmy, yellow and white won’t mix; not even cream-yellow and white. Even love can’t make them do it. I thought it could, even when I left China. I fully expected to go back. *She* knew, better than I did. *She* wouldn’t believe I was coming back; I couldn’t make her believe it. And I know now that she was right—I’m *not* going back. I’ll never know another happy minute in my life, but I can’t leave here, and I wouldn’t bring her over here, even if

I could, although I’d gladly die this minute if it would bring us together.

“I came back to America because I was getting homesick, and because I was disgusted with myself for being that way. I thought I was so saturated with China that if I came here once more it would cure me for life, and that I could go back and be happy and contented with her to the end of time. I believed it was working that way, at first. I felt like a cat in a strange garret, and I was fool enough to think I had turned Chinese. Jimmy, it can’t be done. If I went back there now I’d go crazy inside of a week, much as I love her. I knew it when I first ran across you. The old life came back over me with a rush, and that first night you were here I suffered the tortures of the damned. Even the thought of her was spoiled, because it was part of China, I’ve fought against it: my heart is dead, here—dead! I want to go back; but I can’t. I’ve given up, Jimmy. I’m not going.”

THERE was a long silence. Pennington had slumped back in his chair, and sat with his eyes closed, his face drawn and old. Belden’s heart ached for him, but he realized that silent sympathy was all he could offer; there was absolutely nothing a friend could say. It was for Pennington alone to decide—to choose which of his two conflicting wills was to ride above. No advice could help him. All of which had nothing to do with the fact that Belden pitied him from the bottom of his heart, and the silence grew painful as he waited for Pen to speak. When he did, he had controlled himself, with the Oriental fatalism he had so largely absorbed.

“It is simply that the Western mind is constructed differently from the Eastern, Jimmy,” he said quietly, “different from the ground up. Each has followed its own line of development for centuries, untouched, or practically untouched, by the other. Not one white man in fifty who goes to China ever studies the Chinese as I did. But I only scratched the surface. With all my knowledge, I had to admit, even while I was there, that in some of the simplest things in life I couldn’t understand even my own wife, close to each other though we were. She realized the difference, too. I was the first white man she ever saw, but she knew that my Chinese was only a veneer. Yet—here is one of the differences—she never gave the faintest sign of it until I spoke of coming here for a visit. Then she begged me not to come, and told me that if I did I’d never come back.

“I laughed at her, man-fashion. I told her that nothing could keep me away from her—that I was only taking a last farewell of America. She gave in, but she was never convinced; and time has proved that she was right. She knew I wasn’t deserting her, for she never doubted me; but she knew how it would be. How did she know, Jimmy? A little hill girl—how did she know?”

“Search me!” said Jimmy helplessly.

“Yes, and search me!” said Pennington. “Well, she’s well provided for; and it’s the kindest thing I can do for her, now—to stay away. Better for both of us to lose the old life entirely, than go on with it, spoiled and desolated, and mocking us with its half-presence and memories.”

He took a package from the table, and began turning it over and over in his slim, nervous hands.

“She gave me this when I left,” he said, with a wistful smile. “She made me promise a dozen times that under no consideration would I open it until I decided not to come back. Not *unless*, mind you, but *until*. Well—I suppose I can open it, now.”

He toyed with it nervously. Finally he began unwinding the oiled silk in which it was wrapped. Turn upon turn he removed, then a covering of straw matting, then more oiled silk, revealing at last a beautiful lacquered box, resembling a jewel casket. He opened it, and his face turned gray with pain.

“The yellow flowers,” he murmured. “See, Jimmy! The yellow flowers.”

Jimmy leaned forward, almost giddy from the heavy, cloying perfume that rose from the box. Inside were three gorgeous yellow blossoms, lying in a bed of purple silk. He touched one with the tip of his finger, and involuntarily shuddered. The petals were unnaturally stiff and waxy, and the picture came to his mind of that terrible temple whose gardens were the only place in which these flowers grew. He shrank back.

Pennington took the flowers from their silken bed and lifted them to his face.

“Poor little Girl of the Flowers!” he whispered. “Ah, if I could only go back! If I could only go back!”

He sat with the heavy-headed, voluptuous blossoms in his hands, staring at them with unseeing eyes. Over his head the cigarette and incense smoke swayed and shifted. Belden avoided the sight of it, obstinately. His nerves were fraying out. Finally he rose, unable to stand it any longer.

“I must be going, Pen,” he said. “It’s nearly morning, and I’m doing

you no good—I wish I could, God knows, but it's something beyond a friend."

"Yes, lad, go," said Pennington, with one of his infrequent smiles. "I'm better off alone, tonight; I'm sorry I gave you such an evening. I'll take a shower to clear my head, after a bit, and go to bed. Come again tomorrow, though, won't you? This will pass, and I'll be needing you for a few weeks."

He stood toying with the flowers as Belden struggled into his coat.

"I wish he'd quit fooling with those things," thought Jimmy, with a sudden feeling of irritation. Then, aloud, "Good-night, Arch."

"Good-night, Jimmy," said Pennington, laying his hand for a minute on Belden's shoulder as they shook hands. "You're a brick, old man!" And, as Jimmy turned slowly away, "I've often thought," musingly, "that we've sacrificed a good deal, perhaps, for our material progress here in the West. The Chinese have come down, almost unchanged, since 'way back at the beginning of things. Does it suggest anything to you, Jimmy? They know things, and *use forces*, that we forgot—centuries ago. But yellow and white won't mix."

Belden almost ran down the stairs.

ARRIVING home, he stepped into his bathroom to wash his hands. As he dipped them into the water he felt an intolerable burning in his shoulder, while the fingers of his right hand felt almost ready to burst.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, jerking his hands out of the water. They were red

and swollen, and on the right forefinger were tiny beads of blood.

"How the devil did I do that?" he wondered. "Ouch! Water makes it worse, that's sure! Lord, I've got the Willies from Pen's confounded heathen yarns! . . . Poor old Pen: he's hard hit."

Putting some ointment on his sore hand, he bound it up and began to prepare for bed, cursing the clumsy bandages as he struggled with his collar.

"Uh!" he exclaimed, as his telephone rang suddenly. "Man, but I'm jumpy! Who the devil is calling at this time of night . . . Belden speaking," he called into the instrument.

"Jimmy!" came a horrible, rasping travesty on Pennington's voice, over the wire. "—God's sake—doctor—here quick—"

There was a clatter, as if the receiver at the other end had been dropped.

"Hello, Pen!" he shouted. "Hello!"

There was no answer. He listened tensely for a moment, then dashed from the room. On the sidewalk he met his neighbor, Dr. Fairchild, just leaving a taxicab.

"Back in!" he cried, hurling the astonished doctor into the cab and flinging himself in after. "37 Court Place, and drive like hell!" he called to the driver. "And pick up a cop at the Sixth Street station."

IT couldn't have been done quicker. Barely six minutes had elapsed since the ringing of Belden's telephone, when the big policeman crashed through Pennington's door.

There was a light in the bathroom, and the shower was running, but Pennington was not there. They found him on the floor by the telephone, when Jimmy switched on the lights. He was naked, as though he had run to the telephone from the shower; and he was lying in an incredibly wide pool of blood, quite dead.

"Well, I'll be—!" gasped Dr. Fairchild, wiping cold sweat from his forehead as he straightened up from a quick examination. "Maybe the coroner can find a name for this, but I can't! Not a scratch or a bruise on him, but he has bled from every pore in his body! He's bled dry—bone dry!"

On the wall was a scrawled attempt at writing—in blood: "*She came—gether al—ight appy now.*"

Jimmy turned away, sick and choking. "I hope so! I hope so! Maybe yellow and white don't count, where he is now."

On the table lay the three yellow flowers, *as withered as though they had lain there for years.*

AS he stumbled weakly down the stairs in the dismal gray of the city's early dawn, Pennington's last words came back to him:

"*The Chinese have come down, almost unchanged, since 'way back at the beginning of things. . . They know things, and use forces, that we forgot—centuries ago. But yellow and white won't mix.*"

"No, yellow and white won't mix—not on this earth," he thought. "But, God! How they can collide!"

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