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# The Copper Bowl

By MAJOR GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

YUAN LI, the mandarin, leaned back in his rosewood chair.

"It is written," he said softly, "that a good servant is a gift of the gods, whilst a bad one——"

The tall, powerfully built man standing humbly before the robed figure in the chair bowed thrice, hastily, submissively.

Fear glinted in his eye, though he was armed, and moreover was accounted a brave soldier. He could have broken the little smooth-faced mandarin across his knee, and yet——

"Ten thousand pardons, beneficent one," he said. "I have done all—having regard to your honorable order to slay the man not nor do him permanent injury—I have done all that I can. But——"

"But he speaks not!" murmured the mandarin. "And you come to me with a tale of failure? I do not like failures, Captain Wang!"

The mandarin toyed with a little paper-knife on the low table beside him. Wang shuddered.

"Well, no matter for this time," the mandarin said after a moment. Wang breathed a sigh of most heartfelt relief,

and the mandarin smiled softly, fleetingly. "Still," he went on, "our task is yet to be accomplished. We have the man—he has the information we require; surely some way may be found. The servant has failed; now the master must try his hand. Bring the man to me."

Wang bowed low and departed with considerable haste.

The mandarin sat silent for a moment, looking across the wide, sunlit room at a pair of singing birds in a wicker cage hanging in the farther window. Presently he nodded—one short, satisfied nod—and struck a little silver bell which stood on his beautifully inlaid table.

Instantly a white-robed, silent-footed servant entered, and stood with bowed head awaiting his master's pleasure. To him Yuan Li gave certain swift, incisive orders.

The white-robed one had scarcely departed when Wang, captain of the mandarin's guard, re-entered the spacious apartment.

"The prisoner, Benevolent!" he announced.

The mandarin made a slight motion with his slender hand; Wang barked an order,

and there entered, between two heavily-muscled, half-naked guardsmen, a short, sturdily built man, barefooted, clad only in a tattered shirt and khaki trousers, but with fearless blue eyes looking straight at Yuan Li under the tousled masses of his blond hair.

A white man!

"Ah!" said Yuan Li, in his calm way, speaking faultless French. "The excellent Lieutenant Fournet! Still obstinate?"

Fournet cursed him earnestly, in French and three different Chinese dialects.

"You'll pay for this, Yuan Li!" he wound up. "Don't think your filthy brutes can try the knuckle-torture and their other devil's tricks on a French officer and get away with it!"

Yuan Li toyed with his paper-knife, smiling.

"You threaten me, Lieutenant Fournet," he answered, "yet your threats are but as rose-petals wafted away on the morning breeze—unless you return to your post to make your report."

"Why, damn you!" answered the prisoner. "You needn't try that sort of thing—you know better than to kill me! My commandant is perfectly aware of my movements—he'll be knocking on your door with a company of the Legion at his back if I don't show up by tomorrow at reveillé!"

Yuan Li smiled again.

"Doubtless—and yet we still have the better part of the day before us," he said. "Much may be accomplished in an afternoon and evening."

Fournet swore again.

"You can torture me and be damned," he answered. "I know and you know that you don't dare to kill me or to injure me so that I can't get back to Fort Deschamps. For the rest, do your worst, you yellow-skinned brute!"

"A challenge!" the mandarin exclaimed. "And I, Lieutenant Fournet, pick up your glove! Look you—what I require from

you is the strength and location of your outpost on the Mephong River. So——"

"So that your cursed bandits, whose murders and lootings keep you here in luxury, can rush the outpost some dark night and open the river route for their boats," Fournet cut in. "I know you, Yuan Li, and I know your trade—mandarin of thieves! The military governor of Tonkin sent a battalion of the Foreign Legion here to deal with such as you, and to restore peace and order on the frontier, not to yield to childish threats! That is not the Legion's way, and you should know it. The best thing you can do is to send in your submission, or I can assure you that within a fortnight your head will be rotting over the North Gate of Hanoi, as a warning to others who might follow your example."

THE mandarin's smile never altered, though well he knew that this was no idle threat. With Tonkinese tirailleurs, even with Colonial infantry, he could make some sort of headway, but these thrice-accursed Legionnaires were devils from the very pit itself. He—Yuan Li, who had ruled as king in the valley of the Mephong, to whom half a Chinese province and many a square mile of French Tonkin had paid tribute humbly—felt his throne of power tottering beneath him. But one hope remained: down the river, beyond the French outposts, were boats filled with men and with the loot of a dozen villages—the most successful raiding-party he had ever sent out. Let these boats come through, let him have back his men (and they were his best), get his hands on the loot, and perhaps something might be done. Gold, jewels, jade—and though the soldiers of France were terrible, there were in Hanoi certain civilian officials not wholly indifferent to these things. But on the banks of the Mephong, as though they knew his hopes, the Foreign Legion had established an outpost—he must know exactly where, he

must know exactly how strong; for till this river post was gone, the boats could never reach him.

And now Lieutenant Fournet, staff officer to the commandant, had fallen into his hands. All night his torturers had reasoned with the stubborn young Norman, and all morning they had never left him for a minute. They had marked him in no way, nor broken bones, nor so much as cut or bruised the skin—yet there are ways! Fournet shuddered all over at the thought of what he had gone through, that age-long night and morning.

To Fournet, his duty came first: to Yuan Li, it was life or death that Fournet should speak. And he had taken measures which now marched to their fulfilment.

He dared not go to extremes with Fournet; nor yet could French justice connect the Mandarin Yuan Li with the bandits of the Mephong.

They might suspect, but they could not prove; and an outrage such as the killing or maiming of a French officer in his own palace was more than Yuan Li dared essay. He walked on thin ice indeed those summer days, and walked warily.

Yet—he had taken measures.

"My head is still securely on my shoulders," he replied to Fournet. "I do not think it will decorate your gate-spikes. So you will not speak?"

"Certainly not!"

Lieutenant Fournet's words were as firm as his jaw.

"Ah, but you will. Wang!"

"Magnanimous!"

"Four more guards. Make the prisoner secure."

Wang clapped his hands.

Instantly four additional half-naked men sprang into the room; two, falling on their knees, seized Fournet round the legs; another threw his corded arms round the lieutenant's waist; another stood by, club in hand, as a reserve in case of—what?

The two original guards still retained their clutch on Fournet's arms.

Now, in the grip of those sinewy hands, he was held immovable, utterly helpless, a living statue.

Yuan Li, the mandarin, smiled again. One who did not know him would have thought his smile held an infinite tenderness, a divine compassion.

He touched the bell at his side.

Instantly, in the farther doorway, appeared two servants, conducting a veiled figure—a woman, shrouded in a dark drapery.

A word from Yuan Li—rough hands tore the veil aside, and there stood drooping between the impassive servants a vision of loveliness, a girl scarce out of her teens, dark-haired, slender, with the great appealing brown eyes of a fawn: eyes which widened suddenly as they rested on Lieutenant Fournet.

"Lily!" exclaimed Fournet, and his five guards had their hands full to hold him as he struggled to be free.

"You fiend!" he spat at Yuan Li. "If a hair of this girl's head is touched, by the Holy Virgin of Yvetot I will roast you alive in the flames of your own palace! My God, Lily, how——"

"Quite simply, my dear lieutenant," the mandarin's silky voice interrupted. "We knew, of course—every house-servant in North Tonkin is a spy of mine—that you had conceived an affection for this woman; and when I heard you were proving obdurate under the little attentions of my men, I thought it well to send for her. Her father's bungalow is far from the post—indeed, it is in Chinese and not French territory, as you know—and the task was not a difficult one. And now——"

"André! André!" the girl was crying, struggling in her turn with the servants. "Save me, André—these beasts——"

"Have no fear, Lily," André Fournet replied. "They dare not harm you, any

more than they dare to kill me. They are bluffing——”

“But have you considered well, lieutenant?” asked the mandarin gently. “You, of course, are a French officer. The arm of France—and it is a long and unforgiving arm—will be stretched out to seize your murderers. The gods forbid I should set that arm reaching for me and mine! But this girl—ah, that is different!”

“Different? How is it different? The girl is a French citizen——”

“I think not, my good Lieutenant Fournet. She is three-quarters French in blood, true; but her father is half Chinese, and is a Chinese subject; she is a resident of China—I think you will find that French justice will not be prepared to avenge her death quite so readily as your own. At any rate, it is a chance I am prepared to take.”

**F**OURNET’S blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. The smiling devil was right! Lily—his lovely white Lily, whose only mark of Oriental blood was the rather piquant slant of her great eyes—was not entitled to the protection of the tricolor.

God! What a position! Either betray his flag, his regiment, betray his comrades to their deaths—or see his Lily butchered before his eyes!

“So now, Lieutenant Fournet, we understand each other,” Yuan Li continued after a brief pause to let the full horror of the situation grip the other’s soul. “I think you will be able to remember the location and strength of that outpost for me—now?”

Fournet stared at the man in bitter silence, but the words had given the quick-minded Lily a key to the situation, which she had hardly understood at first.

“No, no, André!” she cried. “Do not tell him. Better that I should die than that you should be a traitor! See—I am ready.”

Fournet threw back his head: his wavering resolution réincarnate.

“The girl shames me!” he said. “Slay her if you must, Yuan Li—and if France will not avenge her, *I will!* But traitor I will not be!”

“I do not think that is your last word, Lieutenant,” the mandarin purred. “Were I to strangle the girl, yes—perhaps. But first she must cry to you for help, and when you hear her screaming in agony, the woman you love, perhaps then you will forget these noble heroics!”

Again he clapped his hands; and again silent servants glided into the room. One bore a small brazier of glowing charcoal; a second had a little cage of thick wire mesh, inside of which something moved horribly; a third bore a copper bowl with handles on each side, to which was attached a steel band that glittered in the sunlight.

The hair rose on the back of Fournet’s neck. What horror impended now? Deep within him some instinct warned him that what was now to follow would be fiendish beyond the mind of mortal man to conceive. The mandarin’s eyes seemed suddenly to glow with infernal fires. Was he in truth man—or demon?

A sharp word in some Yunnan dialect unknown to Fournet—and the servants had flung the girl upon her back on the floor, spread-eagled in pitiful helplessness, upon a magnificent peacock rug.

Another word from the mandarin’s thin lips—and roughly they tore the clothing from the upper half of the girl’s body. White and silent she lay upon that splendid rug, her eyes still on Fournet’s: silent, lest words of hers should impair the resolution of the man she loved.

Fournet struggled furiously with his guards: but they were five strong men, and they held him fast.

“Remember, Yuan Li!” he panted. “You’ll pay!—damn your yellow soul——”

The mandarin ignored the threat.

“Proceed,” he said to the servants. “Note carefully, Monsieur le Lieutenant Fournet,

what we are doing. First, you will note, the girl's wrists and ankles are lashed to posts and to heavy articles of furniture, suitably placed so that she cannot move. You wonder at the strength of the rope, the number of turns we take to hold so frail a girl? I assure you, they will be required. Under the copper bowl, I have seen a feeble old man tear his wrist free from an iron chain."

The mandarin paused; the girl was now bound so tightly that she could scarcely move a muscle of her body.

Yuan Li regarded the arrangements.

"Well done," he approved. "Yet if she tears any limb free, the man who bound that limb shall have an hour under the bamboo rods. Now—the bowl! Let me see it."

He held out a slender hand. Respectfully a servant handed him the bowl, with its dangling band of flexible steel. Fournet, watching with eyes full of dread, saw that the band was fitted with a lock, adjustable to various positions. It was like a belt, a girdle.

"Very well," the mandarin nodded, turning the thing over and over in fingers that almost seemed to caress it. "But I anticipate—perhaps the lieutenant and the young lady are not familiar with this little device. Let me explain, or rather, demonstrate.

"Put the bowl in place, Kan-su. No, no—just the bowl, this time."

Another servant, who had started forward, stepped back into his corner. The man addressed as Kan-su took the bowl, knelt at the side of the girl, passed the steel band under her body and placed the bowl, bottom up, on her naked abdomen, tugging at the girdle till the rim of the bowl bit into the soft flesh. Then he snapped the lock fast, holding the bowl thus firmly in place by the locked steel belt attached to its two handles and passing round the girl's waist. He rose, stood silent with folded arms.

Fournet felt his flesh crawling with horror—and all this time Lily had said not one word, though the tight girdle, the pressure of the circular rim of the bowl, must have been hurting her cruelly.

But now she spoke, bravely.

"Do not give way, André," she said. "I can bear it—it does—it does not hurt!"

"It does not hurt!" the mandarin echoed the girl's last words. "Well, perhaps not. But we will take it off, notwithstanding. We must be merciful."

At his order the servant removed bowl and girdle. An angry red circle showed on the white skin of the girl's abdomen where the rim had rested.

"And still I do not think you understand, *Mademoiselle* and *Monsieur*," he went on. "For presently we must apply the bowl again—and when we do, under it we will put—*this!*"

WITH a swift movement of his arm he snatched from the servant in the corner the wire cage and held it up to the sunlight.

The eyes of Fournet and Lily fixed themselves upon it in horror. For within, plainly seen now, moved a great gray rat—a whiskered, beady-eyed, restless, scabrous rat, its white chisel-teeth shining through the mesh.

"*Dieu de Dieu!*" breathed Fournet. His mind refused utterly to grasp the full import of the dreadful fate that was to be Lily's; he could only stare at the unquiet rat—stare—stare—

"You understand *now*, I am sure," purred the mandarin. "The rat under the bowl—observe the bottom of the bowl, note the little flange. Here we put the hot charcoal—the copper becomes heated—the heat is overpowering—the rat cannot support it—he has but one means of escape: he gnaws his way out through the lady's body! And now about that outpost, Lieutenant Fournet?"

"No—no—NO!" cried Lily. "They will not do it—they are trying to frighten us—they are human; men cannot do a thing like that—be silent, André, be silent, whatever happens; don't let them beat you! Don't let them make a traitor of you! Ah——"

At a wave from the mandarin, the servant with the bowl again approached the half-naked girl.

But this time the man with the cage stepped forward also. Deftly he thrust in a hand, avoided the rat's teeth, jerked the struggling vermin out by the scruff of the neck.

The bowl was placed in position. Fournet fought desperately for freedom — if only he could get one arm clear, snatch a weapon of some sort!

Lily gave a sudden little choking cry.

The rat had been thrust under the bowl.

Click! The steel girdle was made fast—and now they were piling the red-hot charcoal on the upturned bottom of the bowl, while Lily writhed in her bonds as she felt the wriggling, pattering horror of the rat on her bare skin, under that bowl of fiends.

One of the servants handed a tiny object to the impassive mandarin.

Yuan Li held it up in one hand.

It was a little key.

"This key, Lieutenant Fournet," he said, "unlocks the steel girdle which holds the bowl in place. It is yours—as a reward for the information I require. Will you not be reasonable? Soon it will be too late!"

Fournet looked at Lily. The girl was quiet, now, had ceased to struggle; her eyes were open, or he would have thought she had fainted.

The charcoal glowed redly on the bottom of the copper bowl. And beneath its carven surface, Fournet could imagine the great gray rat stirring restlessly, turning around and around, seeking escape from

the growing heat, at last sinking his teeth in that soft white skin, gnawing, burrowing desperately. . . .

God!

His duty — his flag — his regiment — France! Young Sous-lieutenant Pierre Desjardins—gay young Pierre, and twenty men—to be surprised and massacred, horribly, some saved for the torture, by an overwhelming rush of bandit-devils, through his treachery? He knew in his heart that he could not do it.

He must be strong—he must be firm. . . .

. . . If only he might suffer for Lily—gentle, loving little Lily, brave little Lily who had never harmed a soul. . . .

Loud and clear through the room rang a terrible scream.

André, turning in fascinated horror, saw that Lily's body, straining upward in an arc from the rug, was all but tearing asunder the bonds which held it. He saw, what he had not before noticed, that a little nick had been broken from one edge of the bowl—and through this nick and across the white surface of the girl's heaving body was running a tiny trickle of blood!

The rat was at work.

Then something snapped in André's brain. He went mad.

With the strength that is given to madmen, he tore loose his right arm from the grip that held it—tore loose, and dashed his fist into the face of the guard. The man with the club sprang forward unwarily; the next moment André had the weapon, and was laying about him with berserk fury. Three guards were down before Wang drew his sword and leaped into the fray.

WANG was a capable and well-trained soldier. It was cut, thrust and parry for a moment, steel against wood—then Wang, borne back before that terrible rush, had the reward of his strategy.

The two remaining guards, to whom he had signalled, and a couple of the servants

flung themselves together on Fournet's back and bore him roaring to the floor.

The girl screamed again, shattering the coarser sounds of battle.

Fournet heard her—even in his madness he heard her. And as he heard, a knife-hilt in a servant's girdle met his hand. He caught at it, thrust upward savagely; a man howled; the weight on Fournet's back grew less; blood gushed over his neck and shoulders. He thrust again, rolled clear of the press, and saw one man sobbing out his life from a ripped-open throat, while another, with both hands clasped over his groin, writhed in silent agony upon the floor.

André Fournet, gathering a knee under him, sprang like a panther straight at the throat of Wang the captain.

Down the two men went, rolling over and over on the floor. Wang's weapons clashed and clattered—a knife rose, dripping blood, and plunged home. . . .

With a shout of triumph André Fournet sprang to his feet, his terrible knife in one hand, Wang's sword in the other.

Screaming, the remaining servants fled before that awful figure.

Alone, Yuan Li the mandarin faced incarnate vengeance.

"The key!"

Hoarsely Fournet spat out his demand; his reeling brain had room for but one thought: "The key, you yellow demon!"

Yuan Li took a step backward into the embrasured window, through which the jasmine-scented afternoon breeze still floated sweetly.

The palace was built on the edge of a cliff; below that window-ledge, the precipice fell sheer fifty feet down to the rocks and shallows of the upper Mephong.

Yuan Li smiled once more, his calm unruffled.

"You have beaten me, Fournet," he said, "yet I have beaten you, too. I wish you joy of your victory. Here is the key." He

held it up in his hand; and as André sprang forward with a shout, Yuan Li turned, took one step to the window-ledge, and without another word was gone into space, taking the key with him.

Far below he crashed in red horror on the rocks, and the waters of the turbulent Mephong closed for ever over the key to the copper bowl.

Back sprang André—back to Lily's side. The blood ran no more from under the edge of the bowl; Lily lay very still, very cold. . . .

Her heart was silent in her tortured breast.

André tore vainly at the bowl, the steel girdle—tore with bleeding fingers, with broken teeth, madly—in vain. He could not move them.

And Lily was dead.

Or was she? What was that?

In her side a pulse beat—beat strongly and more strongly. . . .

Was there still hope?

The mad Fournet began chafing her body and arms.

Could he revive her? Surely she was not dead—could not be dead!

The pulse still beat—strange it beat only in one place, on her soft white side, down under her last rib—

He kissed her cold and unresponsive lips.

When he raised his head the pulse had ceased to beat. Where it had been, blood was flowing sluggishly — dark venous blood, flowing in purple horror.

And from the midst of it, out of the girl's side, the gray, pointed head of the rat was thrust, its muzzle dripping gore, its black eyes glittering beadily at the madman who gibbered and frothed above it.

So, an hour later, his comrades found André Fournet and Lily his beloved—the tortured maniac keening over the tortured dead.

But the gray rat they never found.