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CHAPTER I-HOW HENNESSY K. WALDRON "TRIPPED AROUND"

We have heard it said, by those who are widely travelled, that there are three beautiful harbours in the world: Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil; Sydney Harbour, and-most beautiful of all-the harbour of Hong-Kong.

The famous Peak rises above the town of Victoria and, at a height of about two thousand feet, buries its crest in the clouds. The harbour itself is in the shape of a crescent, enclosing the red, bare hills of Kow-lung. By day, from Lyemun to Stonecutter's Island, ferry-boats, *sampans*, *wupans* and launches scurry here and there, in and out among the great anchored men-of-war, like so many mice romping in a cage of sleeping tigers.

The slopes of the mountain are green with palm-trees, mango, orange and lichen, in the midst of which can be seen innumerable white, flat-roofed villas, each with its upper-story verandah and green-latticed windows. To the east the hills are more rugged; streams, traced through the glens by straggling brushwood, descend in a succession of waterfalls to the level of the sea. In the Pass of Lyemun the traveller finds himself in the midst of an inhospitable grandeur, similar to that of the western Scottish isles.

It is, however, by night that Hong-Kong Harbour is at its best. With a sky of a million stars, and the pale, round China moon hanging like a lantern in the midst of the heavens, reflecting its light upon the surface of the dark, tranquil water, the moving lights upon the*sampans* and the countless lanterns in the streets of China town, this place is surely one of the most romantic in the world. Here the Far East and the West touch; it is the one place in all China where the foothold of the European is secure.

Upon this beautiful island, with its rugged hills and feathery palms, the white man stands, under his own flag-as it were, upon the very threshold of the mysterious, eternal "Middle Kingdom." Over the way, to the north-west, is the great estuary of the Canton river, the Chau-kiang-the main trade highway of the south. Canton itself, a city of two and a half million inhabitants, lies at the junction of three rivers, which meet almost at right angles: the first flowing from the east, the second from the north, and the third-and greatest-from the west. Canton is a city of mysteries and marvels; it is a city of many industries, insufferable heat, intolerable smells, and almost unbelievable devilry and crime.

The whole of the great province of Kwangsi and the eastern portion of Yunnan is drained by the West River and its hundreds of tributaries. These tributaries for the most part find their sources upon the watershed of the Nan-ling Mountains, which extend from the Tung-ting Lake to the city of Kin-yuen, a distance of over five hundred miles.

Of that great stretch of country little or nothing is known. Thanks to the early Jesuit explorers, we are provided with excellent maps. But a map is no more than a coloured piece of paper which-at the best-is backed with linen. Names in themselves convey nothing. Though you study the map of China for a fortnight you will know less of the Si-kiang, or West River, than the naval lieutenant who ran his gunboat past Wu-chau, and blew the mud huts of a pirate village into a dust-heap with the pound-and-a-half shells of his Maxim-Nordenfeldt. For, if to this day there are wild men anywhere upon the face of the earth, who know neither mercy nor pity nor the laws of God or man, they are to be found in the tract of country that lies between the West River and the Nan-ling Mountains to the north. And thither we are about to journey, into the midst of a land that is by no means a wilderness, but which is populated for the most part by peaceable, hard-working peasants.

There are, however, certain members of the community who are neither peaceable nor industrious, who care no more for the gunboats of His Britannic Majesty upon the wide reaches of the river than they do for the *yamen* of the Viceroy of Canton, who so terrorise the province that each honest man knows that it is more than his life is worth to give information against them.

The chiefs of these pirates or brigands are, as often as not, highly educated Chinese, sometimes entitled to wear the blue or red button of a mandarin. They hold sway by dint of their cruelty and their cunning.

Such a man was Cheong-Chau, whose headquarters were established in the town of Kong-chin, at the foot of the mountains. Thence he and his men were wont to descend to Pinglo, where they would board a sea-going junk, in which they would steal past Wu-chau to Canton, and thence to the open sea, to rob fishing-junks and sometimes even cargo ships. If they passed a gunboat or destroyer upon the broad waters of the estuary they were simple fishermen, on a cruise to Macao or Amoy. But under their fishing nets and tackle was always a veritable armoury of blood-curdling cutlasses and knives.

For the time being we will leave this cutthroat resting on his ill-gotten wealth, dazed from opium in a filthy den in the city of Pinglo, and return to the sublime and tranquil beauty of the harbour of Hong-Kong. There we are to meet a gentleman of appearance more personable, and personality more engaging, than the redoubtable Cheong-Chau. We refer to Mr Hennessy K. Waldron, of Paradise City, Nevada, U.S.A.

Mr Waldron was engaged upon what he termed a "trip around." He had made a pile of money out of cattle, silver, a patent egg-whisk, and pigs. His "trip around" had already lasted two and a half years. He had been to London, Paris, Switzerland, and Venice. He knew the height of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, the number of bricks in the Mont Cenis tunnel, and the names of all the famous Venetian painters. He had gazed at the Pyramids, he had contemplated the Coliseum, and standing upon the Bridge of Sighs in Venice, he had quoted Byron, sentimentalising over the narrow stretch of water that divides the Doges' Palace from the gloomy dungeon to the right.

And wherever Hennessy K. Waldron had been he had been well received. Before leaving New York he had taken the precaution of arming himself with so many letters of introduction to influential persons in all parts of the world that he was obliged to carry them about with him in a large tin-lined box. He had not been two hours in Hong-Kong before he had called upon his Excellency the Governor,*Sir* John Macintosh-with the accent, according to Mr Waldron, on the "Sir."

He had also a letter from the British Ambassador in Washington to Sir Thomas Armitage, the Chief Justice of the Colony, upon whose verandah he was now seated, with his legs sprawled out in front of him, a Manila cheroot in the corner of his mouth and a whisky-and-soda at his elbow. Hennessy K. Waldron believed in "tripping around" in comfort.

"Judge," said he, "I've scheduled Hong-Kong for a six weeks' stay. Calculate I can do South China in that time?"

Sir Thomas smiled and shook his head.

"Mr Waldron," he replied, "you can't 'do' South China in six years, and you'll know precious little about it even at the end of sixty."

"Waal, I guess I'm not slow in the uptake. I can run my eye over the Tower of London, the Matterhorn, or the Louvre, in less time than a New York elevator would take to conduct you to the thirteenth story of the Flat Iron Building. And, sir, I'm speaking of things I know. Guess I've got face value out of every dollar's worth of shoe leather I ever purchased, or I never knew the difference between glue and honey."

"That may very well be," said the judge, "but there is so much about China to learn, so much that is confusing, and even contradictory, that I must confess, even after thirty years in the country, I know very little about it."

"Reckon," observed Mr Waldron, "the lingo would twist the tongue of a rattlesnake. I'm not referring to that."

"Whilst you are in China," asked Sir Thomas, "what is it, Mr Waldron, you most desire to see?"

For some moments Mr Hennessy K. Waldron appeared to be deep in thought. It was as if he considered the question worthy of earnest consideration.

"Temples," said he, at last. "Judge, I'm just crazy on temples."

"It so happens," said Sir Thomas Armitage, "that I'm interested in the same subject. For many years I have made a study of the religions of China-a vast, and to me an absorbing subject, upon which I am writing a book."

"Waal, now," exclaimed Mr Waldron, "that's very interesting, Judge. I always understood the Chink worships the spirits of his ancestors, and that's about as far as he gets."

"That is by no means correct," said the judge. "There are many religions in China. The upper classes are, practically without exception, Confucianists. It is true Confucianism is scarcely a religion; it is a system of moral philosophy which, however, serves its purpose. There are few Mohammedans in China, though great numbers of Buddhists-Chinese Buddhism differing in several interesting particulars from the corruption of the religion which exists to-day in India. However, the great bulk of the people, especially in the rural districts, are Taoists. Taoism is extremely difficult to understand, and even harder to explain. The original Taoist doctrine was a philosophy of fatalism; it has deteriorated, however, into a belief in evil spirits, alchemy, black magic, and so forth. Taoism and Buddhism have become confused; in the Taoist temples images can be seen of Buddha and his disciples."

"Guess that's what I want to see," cut in Mr Waldron.

The judge was silent a moment.

"I am about to undertake a long and somewhat arduous journey," he continued. "I have had a great deal of work of late, and am taking a six weeks' vacation. In pursuit of my hobby I intend to journey up the West River, to visit a very famous and ancient Taoist temple, situated in the hills, not far from the town of Pinglo. If you would like to accompany me, Mr Waldron, I am sure I shall be delighted. I warn you, however, that it will be no picnic. The heat will be excessive-for the summer is here-and we shall be called upon to undergo certain inconveniences and even hardships."

"Sir," exclaimed the American, "I began life as a cow-puncher in Texas. I have consorted, in the course of my career, with Mexican caballeros, bar tenders and pugilists. I'm not likely to get cold feet at the sight of a mosquito or a heathen god."

The judge laughed, and rose to his feet. Mr Waldron knocked the ash from the end of his cigar.

The moonlit harbour lay immediately beneath them. The mast-head signalling-lights upon the anchored cruisers winked their dots and dashes from one to the other. The round Chinese lanterns upon the *sampans* moved restlessly, like fire-flies, upon the dark surface of the water. Somewhere, to the right, in the midst of the trees, a military band was playing; now and again they caught the strains of*Light Cavalry* or *The Pilgrim's March*, from*Tannhäuser*. To the left, the flaming lights in the streets of the Chinese quarter threw their reflection upon the dark foliage of the palms and orange-trees on the slopes of Mount Davis. Strange two-stringed instruments and shrill Chinese voices, heard faintly in the distance, conveyed to Mr Hennessy K. Waldron the impression that he was thousands of miles away from Paradise City.

"That's settled, then," said the judge. "We travel together, Mr Waldron. I shall be delighted to have the pleasure of your company."

"Judge," said Mr Waldron, "the pleasure is mine, sure. If it's temples, I'm your man. If there's going to be danger, I carry a six-shooter; and I can handle a gun as well as any."

"I trust," said the other, "that no such necessity will arise. However, in the region of the Nan-ling Mountains anything may happen. I myself will go unarmed."

At that moment a boy of about sixteen years of age entered the verandah from the dimly lighted drawing-room beyond, where he had been seated for some time engrossed in a book. Though he was a good-looking and well-built lad, he had the yellow complexion similar to that of the Chinese

themselves, which sooner or later comes to every European who has lived for any length of time in the Far East.

"Are you talking about your journey up the West River, uncle?" he asked, with his eyes upon the heavy Colt revolver that Mr Waldron had produced from the hip-pocket of his trousers.

"Yes," said Sir Thomas. "Mr Waldron has agreed to come with me. I have promised him that the expedition will be full of interest."

"I am going too?" asked the boy.

The judge laid a hand upon his nephew's shoulder. "I believe," said he, "that was arranged. Here, Mr Waldron," he added, turning to the American, "is our interpreter. I have studied the Chinese language all my life and can speak a little in the Mandarin dialect. But Frank is lucky. He learnt the language from his amah, or Chinese nurse. He could talk Cantonese before he knew fifty words of English. When I am travelling on the mainland I always take Frank with me. The Chinese are extraordinary people. If you speak their language badly they will not attempt to understand you, but Frank can talk the Southern dialect as well as the peasants themselves."

"I'm in luck's way," observed Mr Waldron. "In the old days in Texas, if I was prospecting for gold, I struck oil; if I was looking for oil, I found gold. That's how I made my pile. I guess there're not many globe-trotters who get such an opportunity of leaving the beaten track, of seeing China from the inside. And, Judge, I'm no good on the stump, but let me tell you, sir, I appreciate the honour; and if ever you find yourself in Paradise City, Nevada, U.S.A., you'll find my name a free pass to anything that's going, from a ten-cent circus to a pocketful of cigars. And that's a bargain, Judge."

Whilst Mr Waldron was expressing, in his own peculiar fashion, his sense of obligation, there appeared, in the shadows of the room that gave upon the verandah, a tall, dark-eyed Cantonese servant, a man of about thirty years of age, with a black glistening pigtail which reached almost to his knees.

Wearing soft, felt-soled shoes, he glided across the room as noiselessly and as stealthily as a cat. At the casement window he caught sight of the shining barrels of Mr Waldron's nickel-plated revolver. And at once he disappeared-behind a curtain.

"And now, Judge, may I ask when you intend to start?" asked the American.

"In a week's time," said Sir Thomas. "That will give you a few days in which to see the sights of Hong-Kong. Bring no more baggage than one man can carry. We are going into a country where there are no roads, only a few footpaths between the ricefields. And above all, Mr Waldron, I must request you to say nothing about it to anyone. Our destination must remain a secret. I do not trust even my own personal attendants."

"Your wishes will be obeyed, Judge," said Mr Waldron. "But may I ask, sir, why these precautions are essential?"

"They are not essential," said the judge, "but I think you will agree with me they are wise when I tell you that the West River abounds with pirates, and there are several gangs of Chinese bandits in the Nan-ling Mountains, especially in the neighbourhood where we are going. The town of Pinglo has an exceptionally bad reputation. You yourself, Mr Waldron, are a wealthy man, and I have a position of some importance in this colony. It might be well worth the while of some rascal who is in touch with the West River pirates to give information against us."

"I get your meaning, Judge," said Mr Waldron, returning his revolver to his hip-pocket. "I'm as dumb as a dewberry pie. And now I must get back to my hotel. Good-night, and, sir, I'm pleased and honoured to have met you."

"One moment," said the judge. "Let me send for a ricksha. I am afraid my own chair coolies have gone to bed."

Sir Thomas entered the drawing-room, unconscious of the fact there was a man not five paces away from him hiding behind the curtain. He rang a small bronze hand-bell and returned to the verandah.

The man behind the curtain dropped down upon his hands and knees, and keeping in the shade of the various chairs and tables he gained the door, opened it, and passed through silently.

Two seconds afterwards he re-entered, standing at his full height, with an expression of profound dignity, even of contempt, upon every feature of his face.

He closed the door with a bang, marched with a stately stride across the room, and presented himself at the window.

"Master rang," said he.

"Yes," said Sir Thomas. "Yung How, please order a ricksha for Mr Waldron, to take him to the King Edward Hotel."

The man bowed-if an almost imperceptible downward movement of the head may be so described.

"Yes, master," said he.

Stepping upon the verandah, he picked up the empty glass which had contained Mr Waldron's whisky-and-soda. Holding this in his hand, as if it were something sacramental, Yung How stalked gravely from the room.

That night, tossing restlessly upon his bed in the stifling heat of the breathless tropic night, Mr Hennessy K. Waldron, of Paradise City, Nev., dreamed of heathen gods.

CHAPTER II-OF AH WU'S OPIUM DEN

The small river-launch steamed away from the narrow creek which divides Canton city from the island of Shamien. The Chinaman at the wheel navigated the little craft into the very midst of the clustered shipping, the mass of junks and river-boats that thronged the entrance to the creek. Her prow cutting the water in a long, arrow-shaped, feathery wave, the launch gained the fairway of the main river, and thence worked up-stream. Seated in a comfortable chair in the bows, a cigar in his mouth and a pair of field-glasses in his hand, was Mr Hennessy K. Waldron, of Paradise City, Nevada, U.S.A.

Sir Thomas Armitage drew a basket-chair into the shade afforded by an awning. There he produced his spectacles and, opening a book, settled himself to read. His nephew, with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, was occupied with an oil-bottle in the little engine-room.

In the stern of the launch stood Yung How, with folded arms. His dark face was expressionless. For all that, his eyes were fixed upon the northern bank of the river, where the houses of the city were so close-packed that a man standing with outstretched arms in one of the narrow streets could have touched with his finger-tips the walls on either side.

At the extremity of one of these dark, stifling lanes stood a Chinaman, wearing a faded scarlet coat. This man was an old man, with a grey tuft of hair upon his chin, and a queue that was white and short and thin as a monkey's tail. He stood motionless, shading his eyes with the palm of a hand and looking out across the river. As the launch hove into sight he drew back a little, hiding himself in the doorway of an adjacent house. The launch passed within fifty yards of the shore.

He observed Mr Waldron and he observed Sir Thomas Armitage, who was engrossed in his reading. Moreover, he observed Yung How, who slowly raised his right hand and laid it upon the shaven forepart of his head.

At that the man disappeared. He vanished into the gloom of an even narrower side street. Five minutes afterwards he appeared in the open space on the western side of the Temple of the Gods. Here a coolie was standing, holding the bridle of a thick-necked, short-legged Mongolian pony, of the breed common in the north of China but seldom seen in the south. The man with the faded scarlet coat flung himself into the saddle.

"It is the West River!" he cried, and he was off like the wind, riding due north, leaving the suburbs of the great city to his right.

Such an extraordinary incident stands, perhaps, in need of explanation. The judge's party had spent a week in Canton, during which time Mr Waldron had inspected the Five-Story Pagoda, the Water Clock, the temples of the Five Genii and the Five Hundred Gods; he had witnessed theatrical performances and a public execution; he had smelled the smells of Canton.

As for Yung How, he also had not been idle. He had gone by night to a certain opium den in the vicinity of the Mohammedan mosque-the opium den of Ah Wu. Thither we must accompany him if we are to make head or tail of the narrative that follows.

Yung How had appeared before Sir Thomas Armitage. "Master," said he, "I have a brother in Canton."

The judge smiled. He had lived many years in China. He knew that Chinese servants always have brothers and aunts and grandmothers.

"And you want a day's leave, Yung How?" he asked.

"No, master," said Yung How. "Go away to-night, after dinner-time. Come back to-morrow morning."

Sir Thomas guessed that Yung How's "brother" was nothing more or less than an opium pipe. He knew, however, that it would be useless to refuse the man leave. Yung How was sadly addicted to opium; in Hong-Kong he often appeared in the morning with the pupils of his eyes no bigger than

pinheads. And Sir Thomas knew also that, once a Chinese has become a slave of the opium pipe, nothing will ever cure him. The judge shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, Yung How," said he, "you can go."

"Thank you, master," said Yung How. And he stalked in a majestic manner from the dining-room of the Shamien Hotel, where the judge and his party were staying.

Yung How crossed the little bridge of boats that connects the island with the main part of the city to the north. He found himself in narrow, twisting streets densely packed with people, the majority of whom were of the coolie class and wore little or no clothes. The shops and booths were ablaze. Everyone was shouting at once, swearing, wrangling, bargaining till they were hoarse. The heat was insufferable, the atmosphere humid. The foul smells of the city would have sickened a European, but they did not seem to affect the Oriental nostrils of Yung How, the Cantonese.

He walked slowly with long strides, turning to the left, then to the right, then to the left again. He was evidently familiar with the city. Brushing past half-naked, gesticulating coolies, and thrusting children aside, he came presently upon a great sow, sleeping in the middle of the street. Since there was no room to pass on either side he kicked the animal violently. As the pig got grunting to its feet, Yung How swept past with an expression of contempt upon his face.

He found himself, at last, outside the Mohammedan Mosque. Crossing what the Europeans call "West Street," he entered a dark thoroughfare, a blind alley, at the end of which was a solitary, blood-red Chinese lantern, suspended above a door.

Yung How did not knock. He walked straight in and found himself in the presence of Ah Wu.

Now Ah Wu was a notorious character; he was also a notorious scoundrel. He was a little, fat man, with a round, smiling, cherubic countenance-except that there was nothing cherubic about his eyes, which were small and evil, and glittered like those of a snake.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, the moment he set eyes upon Yung How. "You have returned to Canton! Ah Wu bids you welcome. If he eats rice under the roof-tree of Ah Wu, Yung How shall have of the best. He shall smoke the finest Chung-king opium."

"I desire none of these things," said Yung How.

Ah Wu looked disappointed, for Yung How was a rich man as Chinamen went, who paid for his night's entertainment in brand new Hong-Kong dollars.

"Ah Wu," said Yung How, in a low voice, "I desire to speak with you upon a matter which is private. It will be worth your while to help me if you can."

Ah Wu's eyes glistened. He rubbed his hands together. "Come with me," said he.

He drew aside a heavy, richly embroidered curtain and, passing through, they found themselves in the opium den. This was a room of two stories, with a flight of stairs in the middle leading to the upper story, which was a kind of balcony. All around the walls, both upstairs and downstairs, were couches, and by the side of each couch was a small lacquer table. Upon every table was an opium pipe, a small bowl containing a substance that resembled treacle, and a little spirit-lamp. And upon each couch was a man, stretched at full length, wearing no more clothes than a kind of towel tied around his waist, for the heat of the room was like that of a Turkish bath.

Some of these men were engaged in smoking, rolling the opium into little pills, holding these pills over the flame of the spirit-lamp until they frizzled in the heat. Some were lying flat upon their backs, with their arms folded behind their heads, staring with eyes wide open at the ceiling. Others were motionless, insensible, asleep-drugged into oblivion. The room reeked with the pungent smell of the drug.

Yung How, taking no notice of the occupants of the den, followed the proprietor into a small room under the stairs. There a paraffin lamp of European manufacture burned upon a table. Ah Wu offered his guest a chair and seated himself on the opposite side of the table. He produced a matchbox from the sleeve of his coat, struck a match, and lighted a small spirit-lamp. This, together with a bowl of opium and a large ivory pipe, he shoved across the table.

"You will smoke?" he asked.

Yung How could not resist the temptation. He snatched up the little skewer and dived it into the brown glutinous substance.

"Thank you," said he. "I can think better when I smoke. The matter of which I have to tell you, Ah Wu, is of some importance. It may be very profitable to me, and also, in some degree, to you-if you are able to assist me."

Ah Wu's little almond-shaped eyes glistened more than ever. His face became wreathed in smiles. He got to his feet and went to a cupboard, from which he produced his own opium pipe. Then he seated himself again at the table, and with their heads very close together these two sleek, shaven, unmitigated rascals rolled their little pills and filled the room with bitter-smelling smoke.

And as they fell under the influence of the wonderful and subtle drug that holds sway over the whole of the Far East, from Shanghai to Bombay, they discussed in low voices the affairs of Mr Hennessy K. Waldron, of Paradise City, Nevada, U.S.A.

"Tell me," asked Yung How, "do you ever see anything of Cheong-Chau, the robber?"

"He himself," said Ah Wu, "comes often to Canton. He invariably stays here. He is a great smoker. He smokes opium by day and walks abroad by night. He will not show himself in the streets by daylight, in case he should be recognised by the soldiers of the Viceroy."

"He is a brave man," said Yung How-avoiding, after the manner of the East, the point at issue.

"He fears not death," said Ah Wu. "But the day will come when he will be led to his execution, to the Potter's Yard, where they will cut off his head, and the heads of all his followers."

"How many men has he?" asked Yung How.

Ah Wu shrugged his shoulders.

"Some say twenty," said he; "some say thirty. Men-Ching, his second-in-command, is always here. He is one of my oldest patrons." Ah Wu nodded his head towards the door. "He is in there now," he added, "sound asleep. I saw him as we passed."

It is not the custom of a Chinese to convey surprise, satisfaction or displeasure, or any other emotion, upon the features of his face. Yung How's countenance remained expressionless. He did not raise an eyebrow. And yet he was delighted. He was in luck's way, and he knew it.

"What sort of a man is this Men-Ching?" he asked.

"He is an old man," said Ah Wu, "a grandfather. He wears a small grey beard, and his pigtail is almost white."

Yung How leaned across the table and whispered in Ah Wu's ear:

"I know of a party of Europeans," said he, "who are going up one of the rivers-I am not sure which. I have not yet discovered their destination. They are rich men. How much will Cheong-Chau give, do you think, if I deliver them into his hands?"

Ah Wu chuckled. Then, very carefully, he rolled another opium pill and puffed the smoke from his mouth.

"This can be arranged," said he, rising to his feet. "I will fetch Men-Ching. He returns to Pinglo to-morrow."

Ah Wu entered the opium den and, ascending the stairs, awakened a man who was sleeping upon one of the couches. This was an old man with a small grey beard and so little hair upon his head that his pigtail was not six inches long.

Men-Ching listened to Ah Wu's apologies, and then got slowly to his feet. He put on his faded scarlet coat and followed the proprietor down the stairs. In the little room below, he was introduced to Yung How, and a Chinese introduction is a serious and ceremonious occasion. For the better part of five minutes the two men paid each other compliments, which were neither the truth nor intended to be such. Then all three seated themselves at the table, and presently the smoke from three opium pipes, instead of two, was filling the room with the bitter, pungent smell.

They discussed the matter in every detail; they regarded it from every aspect. They calculated the risk and speculated upon their own share of the plunder. They tried to estimate the illimitable wealth of Mr Hennessy K. Waldron. Perhaps Ah Wu had visions of retiring from business and settling down in his native town of Chau-chau, on the banks of the Han river, where the rice is the best in China.

At all events they were three great scoundrels, and although Cheong-Chau himself may have been a greater one, there was a certain man who-even whilst they were closeted together-had entered the opium den, who was without doubt the greatest villain in all the thirteen provinces, in all that land of thieves and knaves and cut-throats, from the Great Wall of China to the Shan States, upon the borderland of Burmah.

And this man was Ling. He burst into the opium den with such violence that the outer door was in danger of being broken from its hinges. He thrust aside the embroidered curtains so roughly that several of the wooden rings that secured them at the top were broken. Once inside the room, he bellowed for Ah Wu, the proprietor of the establishment, and his voice was so great that he awakened many of the sleepers.

Being informed that Ah Wu was privately engaged, he strode into the little room beneath the stairs, and there found himself confronted by Men-Ching, whom he knew well by sight and reputation, and Yung How, whom he had never seen before.

For some moments he stood regarding the three men. Then he laughed-just as a jackal laughs.

"What's this?" he cried. "Three such heads were never brought together to discuss Confucius or the writings of the learned Lao Tzu. An old fox, Ah Wu-one of Cheong-Chau's paid assassins, and a smooth-faced Hong-Kong 'boy'! Vulgar men, all three, who breathe from their throats, and walk in fear and trembling. Fetch me a pipe, Ah Wu, and take us into your council. I have a mind to learn the reason of these whisperings."

We have said that the Oriental does not betray his innermost feelings upon his features. We have stated that the Chinese countenance is incapable of expression. The case was overstated, for all three of them, the moment they set eyes upon this self-confident intruder, became visibly alarmed. It is true that to no small extent the personal appearance of Ling may have been responsible for this.

The man was a giant. Yung How was a tall man; but when he stood at his full height, the shaven top of his head was not level with the shoulders of the new-comer, who must have been at least six feet eight inches in height. His complexion was so sallow as to be almost green; his cheeks were hollow like those of a human skull. At the same time, he had enormous features: a great hooked nose; a square, massive chin; a mouth that almost reached to his ears when he grinned. He had coal-black eyebrows which met upon the bridge of his nose, and slanted slightly upwards. Upon his upper lip was a long black moustache, the ends of which hung down below his chin. His bones were mammoth-like; he had enormous fists; and when he walked, his great shoulder-blades could be seen moving under his long blue silken robe. Ah Wu looked up at him, with the glint of fear in his little fox-like eyes.

"We were discussing the rice crop," said he.

"*Liar!*" roared Ling.

And he brought down his fist upon the table with such force that the opium bowls jumped, and one of the spirit-lamps went out.

"Liar!" he repeated. "Fetch me a pipe, as I bid you, and speak true talk. This is a human affair and concerns me as much as you. Were it a question of divine philosophy, I should be the last to intrude. Come, I propose to give you advice."

Thereupon, without the least warning, he seized Yung How by the scruff of his neck, and lifted him bodily out of his chair.

"This foreign devil's flunkey shall increase the wisdom of the mighty Ling," he shouted. "He shall tell me in his Hong-Kong jargon why he holds conference with one of Cheong-Chau's bandits,

and one who has grown so old in wickedness, and so rich in ill-gotten gains, that his eyes are sunk in the wrinkled fat of his face."

He dumped Yung How back into his chair, and for once the habitual expression of serene dignity had departed from that gentleman's countenance. Indeed, he looked terribly frightened-but not more so than Ah Wu himself, who now came forward, holding in his trembling hand an opium pipe, which he offered politely to this gigantic Oriental swashbuckler.

Ling examined the pipe critically; and then, apparently satisfied with the appearance of it, proceeded to roll opium pills in his huge, flat-tipped fingers.

"I smoke," said he, "not like fools, to dream. I smoke to fight, to think, and to make fools of others."

As he said these words he flung off his long coat. Underneath he was wearing a thin vest of the finest Chifu silk. Around his waist was a belt, attached to which was a great knife-a Malay *kris*-the handle of which was studded lavishly with jewels.

CHAPTER III-OF THE TIGER AND THE FOXES

Ling was a Northerner. He hailed from the province of Honan, a land of rugged hills and dark, inhospitable valleys, through which flows the unnavigable Hoang-Ho, the turbulent Yellow River that thrashes its way into the Gulf of Pe-chili, over cataracts and rocks, through dark, precipitous ravines.

The Honanese are a warlike race. From this province the viceroys of the north were wont to recruit the majority of their soldiers-wild, raw-boned men who, in the old days, guarded the sacred presence of the Emperor.

The pirates of the West River may be compared to wolf-packs that roam the southern provinces in search of plunder. But Ling may be likened to a solitary beast of prey, a man-eating tiger, or a rogue elephant-than which there is no more dangerous beast in all the world. He lived by his wits, his great strength and cunning. He had established such a reputation for himself in the provinces of Kwang-si and Kwei-chau that he was feared alike by peasants, priests, and mandarins. He committed crime openly and gloried in it; for in China there are no police, and prefects and magistrates can be bought with silver *taels*.

And Ling was a man of great wealth. He employed bribery when that was likely to succeed. Otherwise he relied upon his Malay kris, or his great hands, with which he could strangle the life out of an ordinary man in no more time than it would take to wring the neck of a hen.

The wonder of this man was that he was a great scholar. He had passed several of the public examinations in which the candidates could be numbered by the thousand. He was learned in the classic books: *Spring and Autumn*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects of Confucius*, and the books of History, Rites and Music, and the Odes.

He was in the habit of quoting Confucius and the writings of the sages; and he could always, by twisting the meaning of the proverbs of antiquity, find excuses for his crimes.

"To the good I would be good," he would quote, adding: "As there are no good on this earth, there is no necessity to be other than I am."

In no other country in the world would such a man have been allowed to walk at large in the streets of a populous city. Everyone knew him, and everyone feared him; but no one had the courage to step across his path. He came and went at his pleasure, laughing in his loud, boisterous manner, quoting from the writings of Confucius, Mencius, and the learned Lao Tzu, the founder of the Taoist religion. It must be remembered that China is a country in which everyone minds his own affairs. The sages have taught the Chinese to believe that the destiny of every man is in his own hands, and that whether he lives foolishly or wisely, whether he does evil or good, is a question solely between that man himself and the Spirit of the Universe. No one has the right to interfere.

In this world there are those who talk and those who act. Ling did both. He bullied and threatened and stormed; he was childishly vain of his learning, and in seven dialects he scattered his knowledge broadcast. At the same time, he was a man of action; he was resolute and brave, and without scruples or a sense of pity.

But neither courage nor brute strength nor wisdom, nor a combination of the three, can accomplish all things. And in Ah Wu's opium den, the mighty Ling found himself in the presence of three subtle, smooth-tongued Cantonese; and the whole world across, from San Francisco to Yokohama by way of Port Said, there is no more capable and fluent liar than the lemon-skinned, almond-eyed Chinese who hails from the province of Kwang-si. It is difficult to say who could lie most gracefully, who was the greatest hypocrite-Ah Wu, Yung How, or Men-Ching, the brigand. Each in his own way was a past master in the craft of falsehood.

Moreover, they had no intention of taking Ling into their confidence. They may have been frightened of the man, but not even fear could make them behave like imbeciles. They knew that if Ling gained knowledge of the presence of Mr Hennessy K. Waldron upon the upper reaches of one

of the rivers, there would be but little booty left for themselves. And so they lied-gracefully, easily, pleasantly, and with admirable consistency.

What that lie was is immaterial to the skein and texture of this story. It was a presentable and passable falsehood, you may be sure, but it was not good enough to deceive Ling, who, however, professed that he believed every word they had told him, whilst he complacently smoked pipe after pipe of opium-at Ah Wu's expense.

And then he left the opium den, paying for nothing, quoting from Mencius in regard to the virtue of hospitality. In the dark streets of the mammoth city his colossal figure became lost in the shadows; but he left behind him, in the opium den, in the little room beneath the stairs, an atmosphere of tension-a feeling that a great typhoon has passed, which by a miracle had caused but little damage. The three conspirators continued to discuss their plot, but they were no longer conscious of a sense of security. Once or twice Ah Wu, who was the most nervous of the three, glanced anxiously over his shoulder, whenever a heavy footstep was heard in the room beyond.

They had lied to Ling to the best of their ability-which was saying much. For all that, they had no reason to suppose that the gigantic Honanese had believed a single word of what they had told him. In consequence, they feared him all the more. The tiger was on the prowl, and the three foxes, their heads close together, whispered in the ears of one another and rolled their little pills.

They arranged matters to their satisfaction. Yung How was to attempt to discover the destination of Sir Thomas Armitage and the wealthy American. Men-Ching would lie in wait upon the river bank. Yung How would signal to him as the launch went by. If their destination was the North River, Yung How was to place his left hand upon the shaven fore-part of his head. If it was the West River, he was to raise his right hand. In either case, Men-Ching was to take horse and ride to Pinglo, where he would inform Cheong-Chau that the fish were swimming into his net. As for Ah Wu, at a later date, he was to play a certain part for which-on account of his cunning and secretive nature-he was eminently suited.

It was an exceedingly well-arranged plot, which will be duly explained in the appointed place. There was some discussion in regard to what sum it would be possible to obtain; but in the end it was decided that twenty thousand dollars would be sufficient, allowing that Cheong-Chau would take the bulk of it himself.

It was long past midnight when they came to the end of their deliberations. By then they were heavy with opium, and their eyes glazed from the drug. They threw themselves down upon the soft matted couches in the outer room, and slept and dreamed-as Chinese will-of things celestial, transcendental, such as cannot be expressed in words. For all that, the following morning Yung How presented himself at the breakfast-table of Sir Thomas Armitage in the Shamien Hotel.

"Well, Yung How," said the judge, "did you see your brother in Canton?"

"Yes, master," said Yung How, without moving a muscle of his face. "He makes bobbery with his wife."

"You mean," said Sir Thomas, for the edification of Mr Waldron, "that he and his wife have quarrelled?"

"Yes, master. She does not like that he smokes opium-once a week."

The judge made a wry face. "A nasty habit," said he.

"Yes, master," said Yung How; "only bad men smoke opium."

Sir Thomas looked at Yung How's eyes. The pupils were shrunken to the size of little beads.

"Yes," said he. "You are right, Yung How; only bad men smoke opium."

"Opium does harm," said Yung How, who, five minutes later, appeared in the hotel kitchen. Several coolies were eating rice upon a doorstep, and one of these was the engineer of Sir Thomas's river-launch. It is not pleasant to watch lower-class Chinese eat rice. They hold the bowl about two inches from their mouths, which they open very wide, and then they scoop up the rice with their fingers in much the same manner as one might brush pieces of fluff from the sleeve of a coat.

"Ah Su," said Yung How, to the engineer, "has the judge told you where we are going?"

"No," said Ah Su.

"The weather," said Yung How, "is very hot."

He then departed to the vestibule of the hotel, where he encountered the comprador. In China, the comprador knows everything.

"Are there any letters for the judge?" asked Yung How, in a lordly manner.

"He has them," said the comprador. "He himself took them into the breakfast-room."

"We leave to-day," said Yung How casually.

"So I understand," said the other.

"I suppose letters will be forwarded?"

"The judge has given instructions. All letters and parcels are to be forwarded to the British Consulate at Wu-chau."

"In Wu-chau," said Yung How, "I have a brother."

He turned away and went upstairs, where he entered the bedroom of Mr Waldron. In one of the small drawers of the dressing-table he discovered the millionaire's cheque-book; and since he could read English tolerably well, he spent a pleasant five minutes studying the counterfoils. Then quite suddenly Mr Waldron came in.

"Say," said he, "what are you doing here?"

"Have cleaned hairbrushes," said Yung How, without a moment's hesitation.

"Then, git!" cried Mr Waldron. "Guess I can fill my own grip-sack. When I want a slit-eyed son of Satan hanging around my boudoir, I'll send for him. So, git!"

And Yung How "got." He walked gravely from the room with his head held proudly in the air, and his eyes fixed upon the ground. He appeared grossly insulted.

He knew very well, however, that the great city of Wu-chau lies upon the West River, and is not so far-as the crow flies-from the town of Pinglo, where Cheong-Chau was in the habit of smoking opium.

CHAPTER IV-HOW CHEONG-CHAU CAME FORTH OF THE TOWN OF PINGLO

Mr Waldron appreciated the journey up the West River even more than the sights of Canton. Stretched comfortably upon his deck-chair, he surveyed through his binoculars the rich, prosperous landscape of Southern China. He interested himself in the straw-hatted peasants at work in the tea-gardens and the ricefields. As the launch steamed upon its way, he inspected river-side villages, temples, gateways and pagodas.

The party arrived at Wu-chau, spent two or three days seeing the sights, and then proceeded up-river. A few days later, the launch arrived at the town of Pinglo-three days after Men-Ching, seated astride his little Mongolian pony, had ridden in from the East.

Since there was little or nothing to see in Pinglo, Sir Thomas Armitage, Frank and Mr Hennessy K. Waldron, accompanied by Yung How and one other personal servant, set out on a journey across country towards the north. They carried knapsacks upon their backs, and proceeded by way of the narrow paths separating the ricefields. The heat was excessive, but as they progressed, and reached higher altitudes, it became cooler, and at the end of three days' march the Nan-ling Mountains stood out before them like a great wall.

They found the Taoist temple, surrounded by trees, tucked away in the corner of a picturesque valley, where there were great numbers of birds of brilliant plumage.

Mr Waldron was delighted. The temple was deserted, and appeared to have been neglected for centuries. The plaster had crumbled from the walls and lay in heaps upon the floor. The place consisted of one huge hall, with several smaller rooms on either side. Everything of value had been stolen; but the architecture remained, solid and fantastic, and of the greatest antiquity.

Ranged around the walls were the figures of scores of gods and goddesses, chief amongst whom was Buddha. Sir Thomas was able to identify several of the images, one of whom he recognised as Mohammed, another as St Paul, and a third as Marco Polo. That Marco Polo should have risen in China to the dignity of a deity is conceivable, since this dauntless adventurer was the first European to reside in the ancient Tartar kingdom of Kublai Khan. But it was indeed remarkable that the fame of such great preachers as St Paul and the founder of the Mohammedan religion should have reached-across the whole of Asia-the heart of the Chinese Empire. This is no treatise on Chinese theology, else we could write much concerning the Taoist temple on the southern slopes of the Nan-ling Mountains, at the very back of the beyond. It is sufficient to say that the judge took copious notes, and Mr Hennessy K. Waldron was delighted. As a memento of the expedition he knocked off a stone gargoyle from above the porchway of the temple.

In many ways the expedition resembled a delightful picnic, in a country that was charming and romantic. The ruined temple was surrounded by flowering shrubs and queer-shaped deciduous trees, and there were moss-grown banks upon which one could lie at ease during the heat of the day or sleep tranquilly by night, when thousands of frogs were croaking in the valley below, and crickets were singing in the long*kiao-liang* that grew upon the mountain-side.

The place was a natural garden, scented with almond and mimosa. During the heat of the day there was shade in plenty; after sunset the temperature was cool and refreshing. Yung How and his assistant attended to their wants; gave them four-course luncheons and dinners, produced from a saucepan and a frying-pan by means of a small wood fire laid between two bricks. Neither Mr Waldron nor the judge himself showed the slightest inclination to return to the steaming valley of the river. As for Frank, he was happy all day long, exploring the neighbourhood, climbing to the crest-line of the hills, whence he could survey a vast panorama of terraced paddy-fields, winding

rivers, scattered villages and towns, each with its joss-houses and its temples and its great horseshoe graveyards.

On the second day of their visit, whilst his uncle and the American were occupied in inspecting the temple, Frank Armitage ascended a steep bridle-path which crossed the mountains at a narrow pass. To the north he found his view obstructed by another and even more rugged range of mountains. Anxious to gain a more commanding position, the boy left the bridle-path and climbed, on hands and knees, the steep face of the adjacent peak.

It took him the greater part of an hour to gain the top, but there he found his efforts rewarded by a view that reminded him of many scenes pictured by Gustave Doré, illustrating *Don Quixote* or *Paradise Lost*-pictures that had fascinated and frightened him as a child.

Immediately before him was a second valley, at right angles to the one dividing the parallel ranges, resembling a huge, deep sword-cut in the barren, savage hills. This valley narrowed as it rose to a higher altitude, and finally became lost in mountain mist. There were few trees upon the steep, glistening slopes, and such as were to be seen were stunted and deformed. There were no roads or paths; no sign of life or civilisation. The sun itself appeared to have been shut out for ever from this stretch of desolation.

Frank turned and looked towards the south. In this direction were green trees, green fields-a plain, rich, fertile, well-watered and thickly populated. It was almost impossible to believe that a narrow watershed could divide landscapes so different that they might have been scenes from different planets. He glanced again at the dark sinister valley; and as he did so he caught a glimpse of something red, moving slowly across the spur that formed the angle of the two valleys immediately below.

He could not at first make out what this could be, for the moving object almost at once disappeared behind a hillock. When it appeared again, however, it was in mid-valley; and he recognised a party of men dressed in scarlet coats, who were marching in close formation, making in the direction of the pass across the range.

Frank knelt down behind a boulder and watched with interest, and not without apprehension, the approaching figures. A natural instinct warned him that it would not be wise to show himself. There was something in the forbidding nature of the valley itself that warned him that its sole occupants were not likely to be men whom one could trust.

They climbed the bridle-path, gaining at last the pass whence Frank himself had ascended to the hill-top. They were now easy to distinguish. The party numbered about thirty. They were brown-skinned Chinese, evidently mountain-born; all were armed with scythe-like spears or long, curved knives, and one or two carried pistols in their belts. All wore scarlet coats, some of which were bright and new, others being so faded that they were a kind of dirty pink. At the head of the party marched a little shrivelled man, whose scarlet coat was trimmed with gold. Frank Armitage did not know it-though within eight hours he was to learn the truth-but this was the redoubtable Cheong-Chau himself-the brigand chief who plundered the southern provinces from the Nan-ling Mountains to the sea.

As they passed, swinging on their way, these men sang a low, wailing chant that might have been a funeral dirge, but which was, in fact, a pirate song of blood and lust and murder. At the rear of the party was an old man, seated upon the back of a short-necked Mongolian pony. This was Men-Ching, who had ridden post-haste from the city of Canton, bringing greetings to Cheong-Chau from Ah Wu, who kept an opium den in the vicinity of the Mohammedan mosque.

Men-Ching had seen Yung How in the city of Wu-chau, and had there heard news of the ancient Taoist temple upon the southern slopes of the mountains. And Cheong-Chau had shaken off the sleep of opium and, gathering his men, had issued from the town of Pinglo, and had marched by night into the mountains, the sovereignty of which he shared with the eagles and the kites.

CHAPTER V-HOW CHEONG-CHAU STRUCK AT DEAD OF NIGHT

It was late by the time Frank returned to the temple, where he found his uncle and Mr Waldron engaged in an animated discussion upon the subject of the untapped resources of China. The boy had taken some time to climb down the mountain-side. Having no wish to fall into the hands of the scarlet-coated band who had descended into the valley to the south, he had given the bridle-path a wide berth, with the result that he had been obliged to go down upon all fours, and descend stealthily foot by foot.

He lost no time in relating to his uncle all that he had seen. The judge was somewhat surprised, but he did not show any signs of being nervous.

"I trust they didn't see you, Frank?" he asked.

"I have no doubt as to that," replied the boy. "I remained hidden all the time. Besides, they were immediately below me, and I should have noticed if any man had looked up."

The judge shrugged his shoulders.

"All's well that ends well," said he. "Nevertheless we may consider ourselves lucky. There can be no question that the party you saw was one of the brigand bands that are said to infest these mountains. We are far from civilisation. We could expect neither mercy nor consideration if we fell into the hands of such desperate rascals."

"Judge," said Mr Waldron, "it looks as if I may have a use for my six-shooter after all."

"I don't think so," said the judge. "Frank was wise enough not to show himself, and the men went down into the valley. There is no reason why they should know anything about our presence in the neighbourhood."

It was then that Yung How appeared, silently, from the midst of the deep shadows beneath the temple ruins. He moved stealthily and with something of the supple grace of a cat.

"Master," said he, "dinner is served."

"Thank you," said the judge. But Yung How remained, his features calm and expressionless, a table-napkin thrown over his left forearm, after the manner of waiters all the world across.

"Guess," said Mr Waldron, "I shall sleep with my gun ready loaded."

"That is no more than a wise precaution," said the judge, "and we should be well advised to post a sentry. We could divide the night into three watches of three hours each. Frank, as the youngest, shall take the first watch, from nine to twelve; I myself propose to take the middle watch, from twelve to three-unless you, Mr Waldron, would prefer it?"

"As you like, Judge," replied the American. "Early morning suits me well enough. In the old days in Texas, six days out of seven I was in the saddle before sunrise."

"Master," repeated Yung How, "dinner is served."

The judge whipped round upon his servant. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "You have announced dinner already. We are all hungry enough not to forget it."

"Very good dinner," said Yung How, lapsing into pidgin-English, and without moving a muscle of his face. "Hot soup, all belong one piece tin; number one fish, all belong river; two piece chicken and top-side apricots, all belong tin, all same soup."

"And a very good dinner too," said the judge. "The sooner we get to work the better."

They dined by the light of a Chinese lantern suspended from one of the branches of an almond-tree, beneath the temple wall, where they were sheltered from the cool evening breeze that was blowing from the west. The thin mountain air, after the insufferable, humid atmosphere of the river valley, had served to give them a healthy appetite. The soup was half cold, the chickens were very tough, and the West River fish tasted horribly of mud; for all that, hungry men, encamped in a wilderness many miles from the nearest outpost of civilisation, will regard such fare as delicacies.

They ate with a relish everything that Yung How placed before them, and washed down their meal with pannikins of crystal-clear water from the mountain spring that flowed past the temple.

After dinner the judge lighted his pipe, and Mr Hennessy K. Waldron one of his choice Manila cheroots. They talked of many things, but above all of China, of its immensity and mystery, its wealth, vitality, and future. And then the judge and Mr Waldron spread their blankets and laid them down to sleep.

There is no life in the world to compare with that which is lived in the open air. A moss-grown bank supplied a bed as comfortable as any spring mattress. The wind, gently stirring the leaves of the trees, the distant croaking of the frogs, and the singing of the crickets, combined to form a sort of lullaby that soothed and enticed the wayfarers to slumber. There was no moon that night; but in a sky unbroken by a single cloud, a gorgeous canopy of stars illumined a scene that might have made a fitting setting for a fairy-tale.

Frank Armitage selected his sentry-post at the foot of a great tree immediately before the temple steps. Hence he was able to obtain a fair view both of the bivouac and the mountain slope to the south. Knowing, however, that it would be wise not to neglect the northern side of the temple, he decided to patrol the entire building at least once every quarter of an hour. Armed with Mr Waldron's revolver, he kept well in the shade, knowing that a good sentry is one who observes without himself being seen.

An hour passed and then another hour, without the occurrence of anything unusual. The judge and Mr Waldron were both sound asleep, the latter snoring loudly. Yung How and his companion lay in the shadow of the temple wall: the former curled up in his blankets, the coolie lying flat upon his back, his mouth wide open, dreaming, perhaps, that he was back in the Chinese quarter of Hong-Kong, where lived his wife and seven children, all of whom he supported upon the astonishing sum-expressed in English coinage-of nineteen shillings a month.

Frank, as he went his rounds, frequently paused to listen. The frogs and the crickets continued their uproar. The wind murmured in the trees; once or twice he could hear wild-duck flying high in the night sky towards the north, towards the great marshes of the Yangtsi and the Yellow River. But no other sound disturbed the silence of the night.

In course of time he came to consider the utmost vigilance unnecessary. He began to interest himself in trivial things. Mr Waldron had ceased to snore and Yung How was engaged in a kind of duet with the coolie. They snored alternately, the one on a deeper note than the other. Frank paused upon one of his rounds and stood for a moment looking down upon the two sleeping Chinese, thinking how vastly different from himself they were. Then he passed on upon his way, conscious that as the hour grew later the air was becoming colder. On that account, it was advisable to keep moving. He walked round the front of the temple, across the great stone steps leading to the entrance, and found himself on the farther side of the ruined, rambling building. There, in the deep shadow of a tall, gabled gateway, he stopped quite suddenly, thinking that he had heard a twig snap underfoot.

He was so sure of this that almost at once he became aware that his heart was beating rapidly. He held the revolver in his hand, gripping the handle tightly. The starlight enabled him to see a considerable distance, except where the shadows were deep under the temple wall itself and beneath the trees.

At his right hand was a massive stone pillar that supported the roof of the gateway. He stood stock-still, listening; and then, close to him, he heard a sound that might have been the wind, but which, on the other hand, might have been the heavy breathing of a man. As quick as thought, he stepped behind the pillar, and at once, quite suddenly, and yet without noise or violence, his revolver was taken from his hand.

For the fraction of a second he was too astonished to cry out. He took a quick step backward, which brought him into the starlight, and at that moment both his wrists were grasped, and he beheld

before him a face, sinister, fierce, and yet expressionless. It was the face of Yung How, his uncle's servant.

He let out a shout, a loud cry for help-a shout that was stifled in a second. Someone had seized him from behind. The palm of a hand was placed so tightly upon his mouth that he found it difficult to breathe.

For a moment he endeavoured to struggle, but soon realised the uselessness of an attempt to extricate himself by physical force. He had been seized by at least three men; and almost before he had time to recover from his surprise, he was thrown violently upon the ground, his hands bound behind his back, and a gag thrust between his teeth.

He lay quite motionless, wondering what had happened, and what would happen next. Men were talking in whispers in harsh Cantonese voices, but too softly for him to catch the meaning of their words.

He was bidden rise. He hesitated a moment, and was then lifted bodily to be dumped down upon his feet. He found himself confronted by a Chinaman who was small in stature, the skin of whose face was wrinkled and weather-beaten. This man wore a scarlet coat, richly embroidered with gold thread that glittered in the starlight. He came quite close to Frank, and peered into the boy's face, grinning from ear to ear, showing dirty, fang-like teeth-teeth that resembled those of a dog.

The boy turned away in disgust, and looked straight into the face of Yung How. Yung How neither smiled nor lowered his eyes. He appeared to be neither delighted nor ashamed. His features were expressionless; his eyes looked straight into Frank's. Behind Yung How stood some twenty men, all dressed in scarlet coats. Frank took them in at a glance, and the thought flashed across his mind that it would be difficult to select from the party the one who appeared the greatest villain, whose countenance was the most hideous and repulsive. They were Cantonese of the coolie class, high of cheek-bone, with low, receding foreheads, and cruel, snake-like eyes.

The man who was wearing the gold embroidered coat turned and walked rapidly towards the temple steps, ordering the others to follow him. Frank was led forward, a great raw-boned Chinaman on either side of him, each of whom grasped him tightly by an arm. He was made to ascend the steps, and was brought to a halt in the shadow of the porchway of the temple.

Hence he could look down upon the sheltered glade where he and his friends had been encamped for two days. In the starlight he could see the figures of his uncle and Mr Waldron, both of whom were still fast asleep.

So far, all that had happened had come to pass so rapidly that Frank had not had time to feel alarmed. But now, when he beheld his uncle-as he had every reason to believe-in the greatest danger, he was filled with apprehension. He made a lurch forward as if he would escape-for his feet had not been bound-but he was at once roughly thrown back by the men who guarded him, one of whom struck him a violent blow in the face.

At that moment it was as if the boy was incapable of feeling physical pain or moral indignation. He was filled with remorse. He had been given a position of responsibility and trust-and he had failed pitifully. And now, perhaps his uncle's life was in danger.

He was obliged to remain an impotent and conscience-stricken spectator of the scene that followed. He could neither cry out nor hasten to the assistance of his friends. He saw both his uncle and Mr Waldron seized whilst they were sound asleep, handled roughly by savage, lawless men; gagged and bound, and then led into the great hall of the temple.

As soon as they were all inside, about a dozen torches were lit, and these were planted upright between the stone flags that paved the floor; so that they resembled as many candles, illuminating that fantastic, mediæval chamber.

Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine a scene more weird and dream-like. The three captives in the centre of the hall; the evil-looking, criminal faces of the brigands, made to look even more alarming and sinister by the flickering light of the torches; and around that great, dingy room,

the implacable, sedate, inevitable figures of the Chinese gods and goddesses, over whom presided the huge Buddha, seated cross-legged upon a stone plinth, immediately opposite the entrance.

Frank Armitage caught his uncle's eye. He tried his utmost to convey in a glance the remorse and anguish he endured. Sir Thomas must have understood him, for he slowly shook his head. Then someone from the back of the room commanded that everyone should be seated; and when this order had been complied with, one man alone remained upon his feet. This was he whose scarlet coat was embroidered heavily with gold, who now stepped into the centre of the circle, where he stood in the full light of the torches.

"I am Cheong-Chau," he cried. "And those who fall into the hands of Cheong-Chau must pay in silver *taels* or else in blood."

CHAPTER VI-HOW CHEONG-CHAU STATED HIS TERMS

The situation in which the judge and his companions found themselves was certainly not of the pleasantest. It so happened that Sir Thomas knew nothing of the reputation of the redoubtable Cheong-Chau. However, the man's character was made evident upon every feature of his face.

Standing in the centre of the hall, gesticulating wildly, he harangued his audience for the better part of twenty minutes without once pausing for breath. Sir Thomas was sufficiently acquainted with the Cantonese language to follow the drift of the man's speech, whereas Frank was able to understand every word. Mr Waldron, of course, comprehended nothing.

The American was under the impression that he was about to be put to death. He regarded, with a kind of timorous curiosity, the murderous weapons of the bandits and the villainous facial contortions of Cheong-Chau. The man held forth in the flowery language of the Chinese of the southern provinces. He talked a great deal about his own power and cruelty. He did not seem to care in the least whether or not anyone listened to him. He boasted in regard to his past crimes; he spoke of his courage and audacity; he uttered innumerable threats. And in the end the captives were led away into one of the smaller rooms that gave upon the great hall of the temple.

There they remained until late the following evening, when the whole party-with the exception of Yung How, who returned to Canton-set out across the mountains, traversing the narrow pass from above which Frank Armitage had first beheld the brigands. They entered, at dead of night, the bleak, desolate valley extending towards the north. Cheong-Chau himself led the way, following a path, carrying in his hand a large Chinese lantern suspended from a pole about six feet long.

Daylight found them still upon the line-of-march. They had by then ascended to a high altitude, where the atmosphere was both cold and damp. The crests of the mountains were wreathed in a thin white mist, similar to that which is found in Scotland, which drenched them to the skin.

They were brought to a halt at the mouth of a certain cave, in a very desolate, inhospitable region-a country of sheer barren slopes, rugged peaks and turbulent mountain streams that descended thousands of feet in series of roaring cataracts. They had been conducted to a spot upon the globe's surface where, in all probability, no white man had ever been before.

The entrance to the cave was hidden behind an enormous boulder, almost as big as a fair-sized house, which balanced itself upon the very brink of a steep slope that descended at an angle of about forty-five degrees. Upon these slopes a few withered shrubs were growing: leafless, twisted things, tortured by the bitter east winds that swept those cheerless valleys.

Inside, the cave was comparatively comfortable. In the centre a wood fire was burning brightly, and though this filled the place with smoke, it served to introduce both light and warmth into that gloomy prison; for indeed the cave was destined, for many days to come, to play the part of a prison. For all that, some attempt had been made to give this place a homely aspect. Several Chinese mats were spread upon the floor, and there were wooden shelves loaded with provisions: dried fish, rice, and bags of green China tea.

To give so redoubtable a rogue as Cheong-Chau the little justice he deserves, it must be stated that his captives were treated with every consideration. They were well fed, on simple Chinese food, which must have been carried miles across the desolate mountains upon the backs of coolies. They were given straw mattresses upon which to sleep, and were allowed to warm themselves by the fire. Mr Waldron-as the only member of the party who was a stranger to the country-expressed the greatest anxiety in regard to their fate. His mind was filled with vague fears to the effect that their lives were being preserved in order that they might eventually be tortured. He had interested himself in all manner of gruesome subjects; he had heard of the "death by a thousand cuts," the Chinese

"corkscrew," and the wholesale manner in which Cantonese executions were usually carried out. None the less, he was not afraid. He was a man who had led a hard life, who had faced danger more than once, and who had learnt-in spite of his riches-to regard his own existence as by no means an essential part of the great scheme of universal things. He speculated in regard to his destiny after the manner of a man who backs horses without knowing anything whatsoever about what-for some reason or other-has been called "the sport of kings."

"Say, Judge," said he, "I don't cotton to this notion of a thousand cuts. Guess one cut's enough for me. If they're going to kill us, why don't they do it and have done with it, instead of stuffing us full of rice and rotten fish?"

Sir Thomas shook his head.

"There is every reason to suppose," he answered, "that this is a case of ransom. If this rascal had meant to murder us he would have done so before emptying our pockets of all the money, watches and valuables in our possession. You may be sure, Mr Waldron, he has brought us here for a purpose. That is not troubling me in the least."

"It troubles me," said the American. "I left Paradise City with the idea of seeing the world; but I guess, Judge, this is one side of human experience that it was not my original intention to investigate. Wish I was back in Nevada."

Frank Armitage laughed aloud. It was the first time he had done so since the calamity had befallen them. Sir Thomas sat cross-legged by the fire, stirring the embers with a stick, his brows set in a frown.

"Even now," said he, in a quiet voice, "even now I can't realise that Yung How is the unmitigated villain he is."

Frank bit his lip. "If I ever get the chance," said he, "I'll be even with that scoundrel."

"He has been in my service," continued Sir Thomas, "for nearly seven years. During the whole of that period he has never once given me cause to suspect or to mistrust him. That shows you very clearly, Mr Waldron, what a subtle rascal a Chinaman can be. For seven years he has been obedient, faithful, and even honest; and yet-it is now apparent-all that time he was but waiting his chance."

Mr Waldron made a wry face.

"Guess he might have waited another seven years," said he, "or at least till I was clear of Hong-Kong. Why his chance should have come the moment I arrive in the colony is a mystery to me."

"I am sorry to say, Mr Waldron," said Sir Thomas, "I can't regard that coincidence in the light of a mystery. I have a very shrewd suspicion that your wealth is the sole cause of all our trouble."

"Not the first time," added Mr Waldron, "by a long chalk, that money has led to disaster. I tell you frankly, I was a happier man in the old days-when I lived on fifteen dollars a week-than after I had made my pile."

"I can very well believe it," said Sir Thomas. "That, however, doesn't alter the situation in the least. Mark my words, very soon Cheong-Chau will show his hand."

It is clear that the judge had correctly estimated both the circumstances of the case and the character of Cheong-Chau; for scarcely had the last words left his lips when the brigand chieftain himself entered the cave, accompanied by Men-Ching, his second-in-command.

Cheong-Chau seated himself cross-legged upon the ground, and for a few moments warmed his hands by the fire, without uttering a word. Then he spoke in the Cantonese language, addressing himself to the judge:

"Those who fall into the hands of Cheong-Chau," said he, "must purchase their freedom in silver *taels* or in blood."

The judge did not reply. After a pause Cheong-Chau continued. Though he was a little man, his voice was both deep and guttural. He spoke slowly and with great deliberation, as if particularly desirous that his words should not be misunderstood.

"I make you a fair offer," said he. "It is not my habit to mince matters. I hold you captive. You are my prisoner. I can do with you what I like. No one will ever find you here. Neither can you escape; day and night there are sentries at the mouth of the cave. They tell me that you have the reputation of being a wise man. If that is so, you cannot fail to see that you and your companions are in my power-birds caught in the fowler's net."

He paused again and looked at the judge, who merely nodded his head.

"This is my offer," he continued. "After I have explained matters I shall give you ten minutes in which to make up your mind. You are to write a letter to the Governor of Hong-Kong, or to anyone else you may choose. In that letter you are to say that your life, and the lives of those who are with you, are in the hands of Cheong-Chau, and that Cheong-Chau demands, as the price of your freedom, the sum of twenty thousand Hong-Kong dollars, to be paid in cash before the new moon."

Having laid down his conditions, the man remained silent whilst the judge explained the meaning of his words to Mr Waldron.

"It is as I told you," said Sir Thomas. "Twenty thousand dollars. The rascal certainly cannot be accused of being modest."

Mr Waldron snapped his fingers.

"So far as I am concerned," said he, "he can have it. Don't let the money worry you, Judge. I've paid that for a picture."

The judge turned to Cheong-Chau and asked him to continue. The man grinned-an unholy grin of fiendish satisfaction. To him and his cut-throats the sum was more than a fortune; it would serve to keep the whole gang of them in luxury for the rest of their lives.

"The matter," said he, "is quite simple to arrange. Write your letter, and I will undertake to have it conveyed to Hong-Kong. The moon is but three days old. We have therefore twenty-five days. Together with your letter I will send one of my own, in which I propose to demand that the money be left hidden in a certain place upon the Sang River, not far from Canton. If the whole of this sum is safely deposited in the proper place before the conclusion of the waning of the moon, you and your friends shall be set at liberty. If, however, for any reason, the ransom is not paid, I swear by the Five Sacred Books that all three of you will be put to death. Concerning the manner of your death," he added, "I say nothing-beyond a warning that those who die by order of Cheong-Chau die neither easily nor swiftly."

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