

The Faithful Amulet

W. C. Morrow

Table of Contents

<u>The Faithful Amulet</u>	1
<u>W. C. Morrow</u>	1

The Faithful Amulet

W. C. Morrow

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

A quaint old rogue, who called himself Rabaya, the Mystic, was one of the many extraordinary characters of that odd corner of San Francisco known as the Latin Quarter. His business was the selling of charms and amulets, and his generally harmless practices received an impressive aspect from his Hindu parentage, his great age, his small, wizened frame, his deeply wrinkled face, his outlandish dress, and the barbaric fitting of his den.

One of his most constant customers was James Freeman, the half-piratical owner and skipper of the "Blue Crane." This queer little barkentine, of light tonnage but wonderful sailing qualities, is remembered in every port between Sitka and Callao. All sorts of strange stories are told of her exploits, but these mostly were manufactured by superstitious and highly imaginative sailors, who commonly demonstrate the natural affinity existing between idleness and lying. It has been said not only that she engaged in smuggling, piracy, and "blackbirding" (which is kidnapping Gilbert Islanders and selling them to the coffee-planters of Central America), but that she maintained special relations with Satan, founded on the power of mysterious charms which her skipper was supposed to have procured from some mysterious source and was known to employ on occasion. Beyond the information which his manifests and clearance papers divulged, nothing of his supposed shady operations could be learned either from him or his crew; for his sailors, like him, were a strangely silent lot all sharp, keen-eyed young fellows who never drank and who kept to themselves when in port. An uncommon circumstance was that there were never any vacancies in the crew, except one that happened as the result of Freeman's last visit to Rabaya, and it came about in the following remarkable manner:

Freeman, like most other men who follow the sea, was superstitious, and he ascribed his fair luck to the charms which he secretly procured from Rabaya. It is now known that he visited the mystic whenever he came to the port of San Francisco, and there are some today who believe that Rabaya had an interest in the supposed buccaneering enterprises of the "Blue Crane."

Among the most intelligent and active of the "Blue Crane's" crew was a Malay known to his mates as the Flying Devil. This had come to him by reason of his extraordinary agility. No monkey could have been more active than he in the rigging; he could make flying leaps with astonishing ease. He could not have been more than twenty-five years old, but he had the shrivelled appearance of an old man, and was small and lean. His face was smooth-shaved and wrinkled, his eyes deep set and intensely black and brilliant. His mouth was his most forbidding feature. It was large, and the thin lips were drawn tightly over large and protruding teeth, its aspect being prognathous and menacing. Although quiet and not given to laughter, at times he would smile, and then the expression of his face was such as to give even Freeman a sensation of impending danger.

It was never clearly known what was the real mission of the "Blue Crane" when she sailed the last time from San Francisco. Some supposed that she intended to loot a sunken vessel of her treasure; others that the enterprise was one of simple piracy, involving the killing of the crew and the scuttling of the ship in mid-ocean; others that a certain large consignment of opium, for which the customs authorities were on the lookout, was likely to be smuggled into some port of Puget Sound. In any event, the business ahead must have been important, for it is now known that in order to ensure its success Freeman bought an uncommonly expensive and potent charm from Rabaya.

The Faithful Amulet

When Freeman went to buy this charm he failed to notice that the Flying Devil was slyly following him; neither he nor the half-blind charm-seller observed the Malay slip into Rabaya's den and witness the matter that there went forward. The intruder must have heard something that stirred every evil instinct in him. Rabaya (whom I could hardly be persuaded to believe under oath) years afterward told me that the charm which he sold to Freeman was one of extraordinary virtue. For many generations it had been in the family of one of India's proudest rajahs, and until it was stolen the arms of England could not prevail over that part of the far East. If borne by a person of lofty character (as he solemnly informed me he believed Freeman to be) it would never fail to bring the highest good fortune; for, although the amulet was laden with evil powers as well as good, a worthy person could resist the evil and employ only the good. Contrariwise, the amulet in the hands of an evil person would be a most potent and dangerous engine of harm.

It was a small and very old trinket, made of copper and representing a serpent twined grotesquely about a human heart; through the heart a dagger was thrust, and the loop for holding the suspending string was formed by one of the coils of the snake. The charm had a wonderful history, which must be reserved for a future story; the sum of it being that as it had been as often in the hands of bad men as of good, it had wrought as many calamities as blessings. It was perfectly safe and useful so Rabaya soberly told me in the hands of such a man as Freeman.

Now, as no one knows the soundings and breadth of his own wickedness, the Flying Devil (who, Rabaya, explained, must have overheard the conversation attending its transference to Freeman) reflected only that if he could secure possession of the charm his fortune would be made; as he could not procure it by other means, he must steal it. Moreover, he must have seen the price five thousand dollars in gold which Freeman paid for the trinket; and that alone was sufficient to move the Malay's cupidity. At all events, it is known that he set himself to steal the charm and desert from the barkentine.

From this point on to the catastrophe my information is somewhat hazy. I cannot say, for instance, just how the theft was committed, but it is certain that Freeman was not aware of it until a considerable time had passed. What did concern him particularly was the absence of the Malay when the barkentine was weighing anchor and giving line for a tow out to sea. The Malay was a valuable sailor; to replace him adequately was clearly so impossible a task that Freeman decided, after a profitless and delaying search of hours, to leave port without him or another in his place.

It was with a heavy heart, somewhat lightened by a confident assumption that the amulet was safe in his possession, that Freeman headed down the channel for the Golden Gate.

Meanwhile, the Flying Devil was having strange adventures. In a hastily arranged disguise, the principal feature of which was a gentleman's street dress, in which he might pass careless scrutiny as a thrifty Japanese awkwardly trying to adapt himself to the customs of his environment, he emerged from a water-front lodging-house of the poorer sort, and ascended leisurely to the summit of Telegraph Hill, in order to make a careful survey of the city from that prominent height; for it was needful that he know how best to escape. From that alluring eminence he saw not only a great part of the city, but also nearly the whole of the bay of San Francisco and the shores, town, and mountains lying beyond. His first particular attention was given to the "Blue Crane," upon which he looked nearly straight down as she rolled gently at her moorings at the foot of Lombard Street. Two miles to the west he saw the trees which conceal the soldier's barracks, and the commanding general's residence on the high promontory known as Black Point, and these invited him to seek concealment in their shadows until the advent of night would enable him to work his way down the peninsula of San Francisco to the distant blue mountains of San Mateo. Surmising that Freeman would make a search for him, and that it would be confined to the docks and their near vicinity, he imagined that it would not be a difficult matter to escape.

After getting his bearings the Malay was in the act of descending the hill by its northern flank, when he observed a stranger leaning against the parapet crowning the hill. The man seemed to be watching him. Not reflecting that his somewhat singular appearance might have accounted for the scrutiny, his suspicions were roused; he feared,

The Faithful Amulet

albeit wrongly, that he was followed, for the stranger had come up soon after him. Assuming an air of indifference, he strolled about until he was very near the stranger, and then with the swiftness and ferocity of a tiger he sprang and slipped a knife-blade between the man's ribs. The stranger sank with a groan, and the Malay fled down the hill.

It was a curious circumstance that the man fell in front of one of the openings which neglect had permitted the rains to wash underneath the parapet. He floundered as some dying men will, and these movements caused him to work his body through the opening. That done, he started rolling down the steep eastern declivity, the speed of his flight increasing with every bound.

Many cottages are perched precariously on this precipitous slope. Mrs. Armour, a resident of one of them, was sitting in a rear room near the window, sewing, when she was amazed to see a man flying through the sash close beside her. He came with so great violence that he tore through a thin partition into an adjoining room and landed in a shapeless heap against the opposite wall.

Mrs. Armour screamed for help. A great commotion ensued, but it was some time before the flight of the body was connected with a murder on the parapet. Nevertheless, the police were active, and presently a dozen of them were upon the broad trail which the murderer had left in his flight down the hill.

In a short time the Malay found himself in the lumber-piles of the northern water-front.

Thence, after gathering himself together, he walked leisurely westward in the rear of the wire-works, and traversed a little sand-beach where mothers and nurses had children out for an airing.

The desperate spirit of perversity which possessed the man (and which Rabaya afterwards explained by the possession of the amulet), made reckless by a belief that the charm which he carried would preserve him from all menaces, led him to steal a small hand-satchel that lay on the beach near a well-dressed woman. He walked away with it, and then opened it and was rejoiced to find that it contained some money and fine jewelry. At this juncture one of the children, who had observed the Malay's theft, called the woman's attention to him. She started in pursuit, raising a loud outcry, which emptied the adjacent drinking-saloons of a pursuing crowd.

The Malay leaped forward with ample ability to outstrip all his pursuers, but just as he arrived in front of a large swimming establishment a bullet from a policeman's pistol brought him to his knees. The crowd quickly pressed around him. The criminal staggered to his feet, made a fierce dash at a man who stood in his way, and sank a good knife into his body. Then he bounded away, fled swiftly past a narrow beach where swimming clubs have their houses, and disappeared in the ruins of a large old building that lay at the foot of a sandy bluff on the water's edge. He was trailed a short distance within the ruins by a thin stream of blood which he left, and there he was lost. It was supposed that he had escaped to the old woollen-mill on Black Point. As in all other cases where a mob pursues a fleeing criminal, the search was wild and disorderly, so that if the Malay had left any trail beyond the ruins it would have been obliterated by trampling feet. Only one policeman was in the crowd, but others, summoned by telephone, were rapidly approaching from all directions. Unintelligent and contradictory rumors bewildered the police for a time, but they formed a long picket line covering an arc which stretched from North Beach to the new gas-works far beyond Black Point.

It was about this time that Captain Freeman cast off and started out to sea.

The summit of Black Point is crowned with the tall eucalyptus trees which the Flying Devil had seen from Telegraph Hill. A high fence, which encloses the general's house, extends along the bluff of Black Point, near the edge. A sentry paced in front of the gate to the grounds, keeping out all who had not provided themselves with a pass. The sentry had seen the crowd gathering towards the east, and in the distance he noticed the brass buttons of the police glistening in the western sunlight. He wondered what could be afoot.

The Faithful Amulet

While he was thus engaged he observed a small, dark, wiry man emerging upon the bluff from the direction of the woollen-mill at its eastern base. The stranger made straight for the gate.

"You can't go in there," said the soldier, "unless you have a pass."

"Da w'at?" asked the stranger.

"A pass," repeated the sentry; and then, seeing that the man was a foreigner and imperfectly acquainted with English, he made signs to explain his remark, still carrying his bayonet-tipped rifle at shoulder-arms. The stranger, whose sharp gleam of eye gave the soldier an odd sensation, nodded and smiled.

"Oh!" said he; "I have."

He thrust his hand into his side-pocket, advancing meanwhile, and sending a swift glance about. In the next moment the soldier found himself sinking to the ground with an open jugular.

The Malay slipped within the grounds and disappeared in the shrubbery. It was nearly an hour afterwards that the soldier's body was discovered, and, the crowd of police and citizens arriving, it became known to the garrison that the desperate criminal was immediately at hand. The bugle sounded and the soldiers came tumbling out of barracks. Then began a search of every corner of the post.

It is likely that a feeling of relief came to many a stout heart when it was announced that the man had escaped by water, and was now being swiftly carried down the channel towards the Golden Gate by the ebb tide. He was clearly seen in a small boat, keeping such a course as was possible by means of a rude board in place of oars. His escape had occurred thus: Upon entering the grounds he ran along the eastern fence, behind the shrubbery, to a transverse fence separating the garden from the rear premises. He leaped the fence, and then found himself face to face with a large and formidable mastiff. He killed the brute in a strange and bold manner by choking.

There was evidence of a long and fearful struggle between man and brute. The apparent reason for the man's failure to use the knife was the first necessity of choking the dog into silence and the subsequent need of employing both hands to maintain that advantage.

After disposing of the dog the Flying Devil, wounded though he was, performed a feat worthy of his sobriquet; he leaped the rear fence. At the foot of the bluff he found a boat chained to a post and sunk into the sand. There was no way to release the boat except by digging up the post.

This the Malay did with his hands for tools, and then threw the post into the boat, and pushed off with a board that he found on the beach. Then he swung out into the tide, and it was some minutes afterwards that he was discovered from the fort; and then he was so far away, and there was so much doubt of his identity, that the gunners hesitated for a time to fire upon him. Then two dramatic things occurred.

Meeting the drifting boat was a heavy bank of fog which was rolling through the Golden Gate.

The murderer was heading straight for it, paddling vigorously with the tide. If once the fog should enfold him he would be lost in the Pacific or killed on the rocks almost beyond a peradventure, and yet he was heading for such a fate with all the strength that he possessed. This was what first convinced his pursuers that he was the man whom they sought none other would have pursued so desperate a course. At the same time a marine glass brought conviction, and the order was given to open fire.

A six-pound brass cannon roared, and splinters flew from the boat; but its occupant, with tantalizing bravado, rose and waved his hands defiantly. The six-pounder then sent out a percussion shell, and just as the frail boat

The Faithful Amulet

was entering the fog it was blown into a thousand fragments. Some of the observers swore positively that they saw the Malay floundering in the water a moment after the boat was destroyed and before he was engulfed by the fog, but this was deemed incredible. In a short time the order of the post had been restored and the police had taken themselves away.

The other dramatic occurrence must remain largely a matter of surmise, but only because the evidence is so strange.

The great steel gun employed at the fort to announce the setting of the sun thrust its black muzzle into the fog. Had it been fired with shot or shell its missile would have struck the hills on the opposite side of the channel. But the gun was never so loaded; blank cartridges were sufficient for its function. The bore of the piece was of so generous a diameter that a child or small man might have crept into it had such a feat ever been thought of or dared.

There are three circumstances indicating that the fleeing man escaped alive from the wreck of his boat, and that he made a safe landing in the fog on the treacherous rocks at the foot of the bluff crowned by the guns. The first of these was suggested by the gunner who fired the piece that day, two or three hours after the destruction of the fleeing man's boat; and even that would have received no attention under ordinary circumstances, and, in fact, did receive none at all until long afterwards, when Rabaya reported that he had been visited by Freeman, who told him of the two other strange circumstances. The gunner related that when he fired the cannon that day he discovered that it recoiled in a most unaccountable manner, as though it had been loaded with something in addition to a blank cartridge. But he had loaded the gun himself, and was positive that he placed no shot in the barrel. At that time he was utterly unable to account for the recoil.

The second strange occurrence came to my knowledge through Rabaya. Freeman told him that as he was towing out to sea that afternoon he encountered a heavy fog immediately after turning from the bay into the channel. The tow-boat had to proceed very slowly. When his vessel had arrived at a point opposite Black Point he heard the sunset gun, and immediately afterwards strange particles began to fall upon the barkentine, which was exactly in the vertical plane of the gun's range. He had sailed many waters and had seen many kinds of showers, but this was different from all others. Fragments of a sticky substance fell all over the deck, and clung to the sails and spars where they touched them. They seemed to be finely shredded flesh, mixed with particles of shattered bone, with a strip of cloth here and there; and the particles that looked like flesh were of a blackish red and smelled of powder. The visitation gave the skipper and his crew a "creepy" sensation, and awed them somewhat in short, they were depressed by the strange circumstance to such an extent that Captain Freeman had to employ stern measures to keep down a mutiny, so fearful were the men of going to sea under that terrible omen.

The third circumstance is equally singular. As Freeman was pacing the deck and talking reassuring to his crew his foot struck a small, grimy, metallic object lying on the deck. He picked it up and discovered that it, too, bore the odor of burned powder. When he had cleaned it he was amazed to discover that it was the amulet which he had bought that very day from Rabaya. He could not believe it was the same until he had made a search and found that it had been stolen from his pocket.

It needs only to be added that the Flying Devil was never seen afterwards.