

THE HOUSE OF GOLDEN JOSS

Sax Rohmer

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THE HOUSE OF GOLDEN JOSS

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THE HOUSE OF GOLDEN JOSS

I. THE BLOOD-STAINED IDOL

"Stop when we pass the next lamp and give me a light for my pipe."

"Why?"

"No! don't look round," warned my companion. "I think someone is following us. And it is always advisable to be on guard in this neighbourhood."

We had nearly reached the house in Wade Street, Limehouse, which my friend used as a base for East End operations. The night was dark but clear, and I thought that presently when dawn came it would bring a cold, bright morning. There was no moon, and as we passed the lamp and paused we stood in almost total darkness.

Facing in the direction of the Council School I struck a match. It revealed my ruffianly looking companion in whom his nearest friends must have failed to recognize Mr. Paul Harley of Chancery Lane.

He was glancing furtively back along the street, and when a moment later we moved on, I too, had detected the presence of a figure stumbling toward us.

"Don't stop at the door," whispered Harley, for our follower was only a few yards away.

Accordingly we passed the house in which Harley had rooms, and had proceeded some fifteen paces farther when the man who was following us stumbled in between Harley and myself, clutching an arm of either. I scarcely knew what to expect, but was prepared for anything, when:

"Mates!" said a man huskily. "Mates, if you know where I can get a drink, take me there!"

Harley laughed shortly. I cannot say if he remained suspicious of the newcomer, but for my own part I had determined after one glance at the man that he was merely a drunken fireman newly recovered from a prolonged debauch.

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"Where 'ave yer been, old son?" growled Harley, in that wonderful dialect of his which I had so often and so vainly sought to cultivate. "You look as though you'd 'ad one too many already."

"I ain't," declared the fireman, who appeared to be in a semi-dazed condition. "I ain't 'ad one since ten o'clock last night. It's dope wot's got me, not rum."

"Dope!" said Harley sharply; "been 'avin' a pipe, eh?"

"If you've got a corpse-reviver anywhere," continued the man in that curious, husky voice, "'ave pity on me, mate. I seen a thing to-night wot give me the jim-jams."

"All right, old son," said my friend good-humouredly; "about turn! I've got a drop in the bottle, but me an' my mate sails to-morrow, an' it's the last."

"Gawd bless yer!" growled the fireman; and the three of us an odd trio, truly turned about, retracing our steps.

As we approached the street lamp and its light shone upon the haggard face of the man walking between us, Harley stopped, and:

"Wot's up with yer eye?" he inquired.

He suddenly tilted the man's head upward and peered closely into one of his eyes. I suppressed a gasp of surprise for I instantly recognized the fireman of the Jupiter!

"Nothin' up with it, is there?" said the fireman.

"Only a lump o' mud," growled Harley, and with a very dirty handkerchief he pretended to remove the imaginary stain, and then, turning to me:

"Open the door, Jim," he directed.

His examination of the man's eyes had evidently satisfied him that our acquaintance had really been smoking opium.

We paused immediately outside the house for which we had been bound, and as I had the key I opened the door and the three of us stepped into a little dark room. Harley closed the door and we stumbled upstairs to a low first-floor apartment facing the street. There was nothing in its appointments, as revealed in the light of an oil lamp burning on the solitary table, to distinguish it from a thousand other such apartments which may be leased for a few shillings a week in the neighbourhood. That adjoining might have told a different story, for it more closely resembled an actor's dressing-room than a seaman's lodging; but the door of this sanctum was kept scrupulously locked.

"Sit down, old son," said my friend heartily, pushing forward an old arm-chair. "Fetch out the grog, Jim; there's about enough for three."

I walked to a cupboard, as the fireman sank limply down in the chair, and took out a bottle and three glasses. When the man, who, as I could now see quite plainly, was suffering from the after effects of opium, had eagerly gulped the stiff drink which I handed to him, he looked around with dim, glazed eyes, and:

"You've saved my life, mates," he declared. "I've 'ad a 'orrible nightmare, I 'ave a nightmare. See?"

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He fixed his eyes on me for a moment, then raised himself from his seat, peering narrowly at me across the table.

"I seed you before, mate. Gaw, blimey! if you ain't the bloke wot I giv'd the pigtail to! And wot laid out that blasted Chink as was scraggin' me! Shake, mate!"

I shook hands with him, Harley eyeing me closely the while, in a manner which told me that his quick brain had already supplied the link connecting our doped acquaintance with my strange experience during his absence. At the same time it occurred to me that my fireman friend did not know that Ah Fu was dead, or he would never have broached the subject so openly.

"That's so," I said, and wondered if he required further information.

"It's all right, mate. I don't want to 'ear no more about blinking pigtails not all my life I don't," and he sat back heavily in his chair and stared at Harley.

"Where have you been?" inquired Harley, as if no interruption had occurred, and then began to reload his pipe: "at Malay Jack's or at Number Fourteen?"

"Neither of 'em!" cried the fireman, some evidence of animation appearing in his face; "I been at Kwen Lung's."

"In Pennyfields?"

"That's 'im, the old bloke with the big joss. I allers goes to see Ma Lorenzo when I'm in Port o' London. I've seen 'er for the last time, mates."

He banged a big and dirty hand upon the table.

"Last night I see murder done, an' only that I know they wouldn't believe me, I'd walk across to Limehouse P'lice Station presently and put the splits on 'em, I would."

Harley, who was seated behind the speaker, glanced at me significantly.

"Sure you wasn't dreamin'?" he inquired facetiously.

"Dreamin'!" cried the man. "Dreams don't leave no blood be'ind, do they?"

"Blood!" I exclaimed.

"That's wot I said blood! When I woke up this mornin' there was blood all on that grinnin' joss the blood wot 'ad dripped from 'er shoulders when she fell."

"Eh!" said Harley. "Blood on whose shoulders? Wot the 'ell are you talkin' about, old son?"

"Ere" the fireman turned in his chair and grasped Harley by the arm "listen to me, and I'll tell you somethink, I will. I'm goin' in the Seahawk in the mornin' see? But if you want to know somethink, I'll tell yer. Drunk or sober I bars the blasted p'lice, but if you like to tell 'em I'll put you on somethink worth tellin'. Sure the bottle's empty, mates?"

I caught Harley's glance and divided the remainder of the whisky evenly between the three glasses.

"Good 'ealth," said the fireman, and disposed of his share at a draught. "That's bucked me up wonderful."

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He lay back in his chair and from a little tobacco-box began to fill a short clay pipe.

"Look 'ere, mates, I'm soberin' up, like, after the smoke, an' I can see, I can see plain, as nobody'll ever believe me. Nobody ever does, worse luck, but 'ere goes. Pass the matches."

He lighted his pipe, and looking about him in a sort of vaguely aggressive way:

"Last night," he resumed, "after I was chucked out of the Dock Gates, I made up my mind to go and smoke a pipe with old Ma Lorenzo. Round I goes to Pennyfields, and she don't seem glad to see me. There's nobody there only me. Not like the old days when you 'ad to book your seat in advance."

He laughed gruffly.

"She didn't want to let me in at first, said they was watched, that if a Chink 'ad an old pipe wot 'ad b'longed to 'is grandfather it was good enough to get 'im fined fifty quid. Anyway, me bein' an old friend she spread a mat for me and filled me a pipe. I asked after old Kwen Lung, but, of course, 'e was out gamblin', as usual; so after old Ma Lorenzo 'ad made me comfortable an' gone out I 'ad the place to myself, and presently I dozed off and forgot all about bloody ship's bunkers an' nigger-drivin' Scotchmen."

He paused and looked about him defiantly.

"I dunno 'ow long I slept," he continued, "but some time in the night I kind of 'alf woke up."

At that he twisted violently in his chair and glared across at Harley:

"You been a pal to me," he said; "but tell me I was dreamin' again and I'll smash yer bloody face!"

He glared for a while, then addressing his narrative more particularly to me, he resumed:

"It was a scream wot woke me a woman's scream. I didn't sit up; I couldn't. I never felt like it before. It was the same as bein' buried alive, I should think. I could see an' I could 'ear, but I couldn't move one muscle in my body. Foller me? An' wot did I see, mates, an' wot did I 'ear? I'm goin' to tell yer. I see old Kwen Lung's daughter "

"I didn't know 'e 'ad one," murmured Harley.

"Then you don't know much!" shouted the fireman. "I knew years ago, but 'e kept 'er stowed away somewhere up above, an' last night was the first time I ever see 'er. It was 'er shriek wot 'ad reached me, reached me through the smoke. I don't take much stock in Chink gals in general, but this one's mother was no Chink, I'll swear. She was just as pretty as a bloomin' ivory doll, an' as little an' as white, and that old swine Kwen Lung 'ad tore the dress off of 'er shoulders with a bloody great whip!"

Harley was leaning forward in his seat now, intent upon the man's story, and although I could not get rid of the idea that our friend was relating the events of a particularly unpleasant opium dream, nevertheless I was fascinated by the strange story and by the strange manner of its telling.

"I saw the blood drip from 'er bare shoulders, mates," the man continued huskily, and with his big dirty hands he strove to illustrate his words. "An' that old yellow devil lashed an' lashed until the poor gal was past screamin'. She just sunk down on the floor all of a 'cap, moanin' and moanin' Gawd! I can 'ear 'er moanin' now!"

"Meanwhile, 'ere's me with murder in me 'eart lyin' there watchin', an' I can't speak, no! I can't even curse the yellow rat, an' I can't move not a 'and, not a foot! Just as she fell there right up against the joss an' 'er blood

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trickled down on 'is gilded feet, old Ma Lorenzo comes staggerin' in. I remember all this as clear as print, mates, remember it plain, but wot 'appened next ain't so good an' clear. Somethink seemed to bust in me 'ead. Only just before I went off, the winder there's only one in the room was smashed to smithereens an' somebody come in through it."

"Are you sure?" said Harley eagerly. "Are you sure?"

That he was intensely absorbed in the story he revealed by a piece of bad artistry, very rare in him. He temporarily forgot his dialect. Our marine friend, however, was too much taken up with his own story to notice the slip, and:

"Dead sure!" he shouted.

He suddenly twisted around in his chair.

"Tell me I was dreamin', mate," he invited, "and if you ain't dreamin' in 'arf a tick it won't be because I 'aven't put yer to sleep!"

"I ain't arguin', old son," said Harley soothingly. "Get on with your yarn."

"Ho!" said the fireman, mollified, "so long as you ain't. Well, then, it's all blotted out after that. Somebody come in at the winder, but 'oo it was or wot it was I can't tell yer, not for fifty quid. When I woke up, which is about 'arf an hour before you see me, I'm all alone see? There's no sign of Kwen Lung nor the gal nor old Ma Lorenzo nor anybody. I sez to meself, wot you keep on sayin'. I sez, 'You're dreamin', Bill.'"

"But I don't think you was," declared Harley. "Straight I don't."

"I know I wasn't!" roared the fireman, and banged the table lustily. "I see 'er blood on the joss an' on the floor where she lay!"

"This morning?" I interjected.

"This mornin', in the light of the little oil lamp where old Ma Lorenzo 'ad roasted the pills! It's all still an' quiet an' I feel more dead than alive. I'm goin' to give 'er a hail, see? When I sez to myself, 'Bill,' I sez, 'put out to sea; you're amongst Kaffirs, Bill.' It occurred to me as old Kwen Lung might wonder 'ow much I knew. So I beat it. But when I got in the open air I felt I'd never make my lodgin's without a tonic. That's 'ow I come to meet you, mates.

"Listen I'm away in the old Seahawk in the mornin', but I'll tell you somethink. That yellow bastard killed his daughter last night! Beat 'er to death. I see it plain. The sweetest, prettiest bit of ivory as Gawd ever put breath into. If 'er body ain't in the river, it's in the 'ouse. Drunk or sober, I never could stand the splits, but mates" he stood up, and grasping me by the arm, he drew me across the room where he also seized Harley in his muscular grip "mates," he went on earnestly, "she was the sweetest, prettiest little gal as a man ever clapped eyes on. One of yer walk into Limehouse Station an' put the koppers wise. I'd sleep easier at sea if I knew old Kwen Lung 'ad gone west on a bloody rope's end."

II. AT KWEN LUNG'S

For fully ten minutes after the fireman had departed Paul Harley sat staring abstractedly in front of him, his cold pipe between his teeth, and knowing his moods I intruded no words upon this reverie, until:

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"Come on, Knox," he said, standing up suddenly, "I think this matter calls for speedy action."

"What! Do you think the man's story was true?"

"I think nothing. I am going to look at Kwen Lung's joss."

Without another word he led the way downstairs and out into the deserted street. The first gray halftones of dawn were creeping into the sky, so that the outlines of Limehouse loomed like dim silhouettes about us. There was abundant evidence in the form of noises, strange and discordant, that many workers were busy on dock and riverside, but the streets through which our course lay were almost empty. Sometimes a furtive shadow would move out of some black gully and fade into a dimly seen doorway in a manner peculiarly unpleasant and Asiatic. But we met no palpable pedestrian throughout the journey.

Before the door of a house in Pennyfields which closely resembled that which we had left in Wade Street, in that it was flatly uninteresting, dirty and commonplace, we paused. There was no sign of life about the place and no lights showed at any of the windows, which appeared as dim cavities eyeless sockets in the gray face of the building, as dawn proclaimed the birth of a new day.

Harley seized the knocker and knocked sharply. There was no response, and he repeated the summons, but again without effect. Thereupon, with a muttered exclamation, he grasped the knocker a third time and executed a veritable tattoo upon the door. When this had proceeded for about half a minute or more:

"All right, all right!" came a shaky voice from within. "I'm coming."

Harley released the knocker, and, turning to me:

"Ma Lorenzo," he whispered. "Don't make any mistakes."

Indeed, even as he warned me, heralded by a creaking of bolts and the rattling of a chain, the door was opened by a fat, shapeless, half-caste woman of indefinite age; in whose dark eyes, now sunken in bloated cheeks, in whose full though drooping lips, and even in the whole overlaid contour of whose face and figure it was possible to recognize the traces of former beauty. This was Ma Lorenzo, who for many years had lived at that address with old Kwen Lung, of whom strange stories were told in Chinatown.

As Bill Jones, A.B., my friend, Paul Harley, was well known to Ma Lorenzo as he was well known to many others in that strange colony which clusters round the London docks. I sometimes enjoyed the privilege of accompanying my friend on a tour of investigation through the weird resorts which abound in that neighbourhood, and, indeed, we had been returning from one of these Baghdad nights when our present adventure had been thrust upon us. Assuming a wild and boisterous manner which he had at command:

"Urry up, Ma!" said Harley, entering without ceremony; "I want to introduce my pal Jim 'ere to old Kwen Lung, and make it all right for him before I sail."

Ma Lorenzo, who was half Portuguese, replied in her peculiar accent:

"This no time to come waking me up out of bed!"

But Harley, brushing past her, was already inside the stuffy little room, and I hastened to follow.

"Kwen Lung!" shouted my friend loudly. "Where are you? Brought a friend to see you."

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"Kwen Lung no hab," came the complaining tones of Ma Lorenzo from behind us.

It was curious to note how long association with the Chinese had resulted in her catching the infection of that pidgin-English which is a sort of esperanto in all Asiatic quarters.

"Eh!" cried my friend, pushing open a door on the right of the passage and stumbling down three worn steps into a very evil-smelling room. "Where is he?"

"Go play fan-tan. Not come back."

Ma Lorenzo, having relocked the street door, had rejoined us, and as I followed my friend down into the dim and uninviting apartment she stood at the top of the steps, hands on hips, regarding us.

The place, which was quite palpably an opium den, must have disappointed anyone familiar with the more ornate houses of Chinese vice in San Francisco and elsewhere. The bare floor was not particularly clean, and the few decorations which the room boasted were garishly European for the most part. A deep divan, evidently used sometimes as a bed, occupied one side of the room, and just to the left of the steps reposed the only typically Oriental object in the place. It was a strange thing to see in so sordid a setting; a great gilded joss, more than life-size, squatting, hideous, upon a massive pedestal; a figure fit for some native temple but strangely out of place in that dirty little Limehouse abode.

I had never before visited Kwen Lung's, but the fame of his golden joss had reached me, and I know that he had received many offers for it, all of which he had rejected. It was whispered that Kwen Lung was rich, that he was a great man among the Chinese, and even that some kind of religious ceremony periodically took place in his house. Now, as I stood staring at the famous idol, I saw something which made me stare harder than ever.

The place was lighted by a hanging lamp from which depended bits of coloured paper and several gilded silk tassels; but dim as the light was it could not conceal those tell-tale stains.

There was blood on the feet of the golden idol!

All this I detected at a glance, but ere I had time to speak:

"You can't tell me that tale, Ma!" cried Harley. "I believe 'e was smokin' in 'ere when we knocked."

The woman shrugged her fat shoulders.

"No, hab," she repeated. "You two johnnies clear out. Let me sleep."

But as I turned to her, beneath the nonchalant manner I could detect a great uneasiness; and in her dark eyes there was fear. That Harley also had seen the bloodstains I was well aware, and I did not doubt that furthermore he had noted the fact that the only mat which the room boasted had been placed before the joss doubtless to hide other stains upon the boards.

As we stood so I presently became aware of a current of air passing across the room in the direction of the open door. It came from a window before which a tawdry red curtain had been draped. Either the window behind the curtain was wide open, which is alien to Chinese habits, or it was shattered. While I was wondering if Harley intended to investigate further:

"Come on, Jim!" he cried boisterously, and clapped me on the shoulder; "the old fox don't want to be disturbed."

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He turned to the woman:

"Tell him when he wakes up, Ma," he said, "that if ever my pal Jim wants a pipe he's to 'ave one. Savvy? Jim's square."

"Savvy," replied the woman, and she was wholly unable to conceal her relief. "You clear out now, and I tell Kwen Lung when he come in."

"Righto, Ma!" said Harley. "Kiss 'im on both cheeks for me, an' tell 'im I'll be 'ome again in a month."

Grasping me by the arm he lurched up the steps, and the two of us presently found ourselves out in the street again. In the growing light the squalor of the district was more evident than ever, but the comparative freshness of the air was welcome after the reek of that room in which the golden idol sat leering, with blood at his feet.

"You saw, Harley?" I exclaimed excitedly. "You saw the stains? And I'm certain the window was broken!"

Harley nodded shortly.

"Back to Wade Street!" he said. "I allow myself fifteen minutes to shed Bill Jones, able seaman, and to become Paul Harley, of Chancery Lane."

As we hurried along:

"What steps shall you take?" I asked.

"First step: search Kwen Lung's house from cellar to roof. Second step: entirely dependent upon result of first. The Chinese are subtle, Knox. If Kwen Lung has killed his daughter, it may require all the resources of Scotland Yard to prove it."

"But "

"There is no 'but' about it. Chinatown is the one district of London which possesses the property of swallowing people up."

III. "CAPTAIN DAN"

Half an hour later, as I sat in the inner room before the great dressing-table laboriously removing my disguise for I was utterly incapable of metamorphosing myself like Harley in seven minutes I heard a rapping at the outer door. I glanced nervously at my face in the mirror.

Comparatively little of "Jim" had yet been removed, for since time was precious to my friend I had acted as his dresser before setting to work to remove my own make-up. There were two entrances to the establishment, by one of which Paul Harley invariably entered and invariably went out, and from the other of which "Bill Jones" was sometimes seen to emerge, but never Paul Harley. That my friend had made good his retirement I knew, but, nevertheless, if I had to open the door of the outer room it must be as "Jim."

Thinking it impolite not to do so, since the one who knocked might be aware that we had come in but not gone out again, I hastily readjusted that side of my moustache which I had begun to remove, replaced my cap and muffler, and carefully locking the door of the dressing-room, crossed the outer apartment and opened the door.

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It was Harley's custom never to enter or leave these rooms except under the mantle of friendly night, but at so early an hour I confess I had not expected a visitor. Wondering whom I should find there I opened the door.

Standing on the landing was a fellow-lodger who permanently occupied the two top rooms of the house. Paul Harley had taken the trouble to investigate the man's past, for "Captain Dan," the name by which he was known in the saloons and worse resorts which he frequented, was palpably a broken-down gentleman; a piece of flotsam caught in the yellow stream. Opium had been his downfall. How he lived I never knew, but Harley believed he had some small but settled income, sufficient to enable him to kill himself in comfort with the black pills.

As he stood there before me in the early morning light, I was aware of some subtle change in his appearance. It was fully six months since I had seen him last, but in some vague way he looked younger. Haggard he was, with an ugly cut showing on his temple, but not so lined as I remembered him. Some former man seemed to be struggling through the opium-scarred surface. His eyes were brighter, and I noted with surprise that he wore decent clothes and was clean shaved.

"Good morning, Jim," he said; "you remember me, don't you?"

As he spoke I observed, too, that his manner had altered. He who had consorted with the sweepings of the doss-houses now addressed me as a courteous gentleman addresses an inferior not haughtily or patronizingly, but with a note of conscious superiority and self-respect wholly unfamiliar. Almost it threw me off my guard, but remembering in the nick of time that I was still "Jim":

"Of course I remember you, Cap'n," I said. "Step inside."

"Thanks," he replied, and followed me into the little room.

I placed for him the arm-chair which our friend the fireman had so recently occupied, but:

"I won't sit down," he said.

And now I observed that he was evidently in a condition of repressed excitement. Perhaps he saw the curiosity in my glance, for he suddenly rested both his hands on my shoulders, and:

"Yes, I have given up the dope, Jim," he said – "done with it for ever. There's not a soul in this neighbourhood I can trust, yet if ever a man wanted a pal, I want one to-day. Now, you're square, my lad. I always knew that, in spite of the dope; and if I ask you to do a little thing that means a lot to me, I think you will do it. Am I right?"

"If it can be done, I'll do it," said I.

"Then, listen. I'm leaving England in the Patna for Singapore. She sails at noon to-morrow, and passengers go on board at ten o'clock. I've got my ticket, papers in order, but" he paused impressively, grasping my shoulders hard "I must get on board to-night."

I stared him in the face.

"Why?" I asked.

He returned my look with one searching and eager; then:

"If I show you the reason," said he, "and trust you with all my papers, will you go down to the dock it's no great distance and ask to see Marryat, the chief officer? Perhaps you've sailed with him?"

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"No," I replied guardedly. "I was never in the Patna."

"Never mind. When you give him a letter which I shall write he will make the necessary arrangements for me to occupy my state—room to—night. I knew him well," he explained, "in the old days. Will you do it, Jim?"

"I'll do it with pleasure," I answered.

"Shake!" said Captain Dan.

We shook hands heartily, and:

"Now I'll show you the reason," he added. "Come upstairs."

Turning, he led the way upstairs to his own room, and wondering greatly, I followed him in. Never having been in Captain Dan's apartments I cannot say whether they, like their occupant, had changed for the better. But I found myself in a room surprisingly clean and with a note of culture in its appointments which was even more surprising.

On a couch by the window, wrapped in a fur rug, lay the prettiest half—caste girl I had ever seen, East or West. Her skin was like cream rose petals and her abundant hair was of wonderful lustrous black. Perhaps it was her smooth warm colour which suggested the idea, but as her cheeks flushed at sight of Captain Dan and the long dark eyes lighted up in welcome, I thought of a delicate painting on ivory and I wondered more and more what it all could mean.

"I have brought Jim to see you," said Captain Dan. "No, don't trouble to move dear."

But even before he had spoken I had seen the girl wince with pain as she had endeavoured to sit up to greet us. She lay on her side in a rather constrained attitude, but although her sudden movement had brought tears to her eyes she smiled bravely and extended a tiny ivory hand to me.

"This is my wife, Jim!" said Captain Dan.

I could find no words at all, but merely stood there looking very awkward and feeling almost awed by the indescribable expression of trust in the eyes of the little Eurasian, as with her tiny fingers hidden in her husband's clasp she lay looking up at him.

"Now you know, Jim," said he, "why we must get aboard the Patna to—night. My wife is really too ill to travel; in fact, I shall have to carry her down to the cab, and such a proceeding in daylight would attract an enormous crowd in this neighbourhood!"

"Give me the letters and the papers," I answered. "I will start now."

His wife disengaged her hand and extended it to me.

"Thank you," she said, in a queer little silver—bell voice; "you are good. I shall always love you."

IV. THE SECRET OF MA LORENZO

It must have been about eleven o'clock that night when Paul Harley rang me up. Since we had parted in the early morning I had had no word from him, and I was all anxiety to tell him of the quaint little romance which unknown

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to us had had its setting in the room above.

In accordance with my promise I had seen the chief officer of the Patna; and from the start of surprise which he gave on opening "Captain Dan's" letter, I judged that Mr. Marryat and the man who for so long had sunk to the lowest rung of the ladder had been close friends in those "old days." At any rate, he had proceeded to make the necessary arrangements without a moment's delay, and the couple were to go on board the Patna at nine o'clock.

It was with a sense of having done at least one good deed that I finally quitted our Limehouse base and returned to my rooms. Now, at eleven o'clock at night:

"Can you come round to Chancery Lane at once?" said Harley. "I want you to run down to Pennyfields with me."

"Some development in the Kwen Lung business?"

"Hardly a development, but I'm not satisfied, Knox. I hate to be beaten."

Twenty minutes later I was sitting in Harley's study, watching him restlessly promenading up and down before the fire.

"The police searched Kwen Lung's place from foundation to tiles," he said. "I was there myself. Old Kwen Lung conveniently kept out of the way still playing fan-tan, no doubt! But Ma Lorenzo was in evidence. She blandly declared that Kwen Lung never had a daughter! And in the absence of our friend the fireman, who sailed in the Seahawk, and whose evidence, by the way, is legally valueless what could we do? They could find nobody in the neighbourhood prepared to state that Kwen Lung had a daughter or that Kwen Lung had no daughter. There are all sorts of fables about the old fox, but the facts about him are harder to get at."

"But," I explained, "the bloodstains on the joss!"

"Ma Lorenzo stumbled and fell there on the previous night, striking her skull against the foot of the figure."

"What nonsense!" I cried. "We should have seen the wound last night."

"We might have done," said Harley musingly; "I don't know when she inflicted it on herself; but I did see it this morning."

"What!"

"Oh, the gash is there all right, partly covered by her hair."

He stood still, staring at me oddly.

"One meets with cases of singular devotion in unexpected quarters sometimes," he said.

"You mean that the woman inflicted the wound upon herself in order "

"To save old Kwen Lung exactly! It's marvellous."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "And the window?"

"Oh! it was broken right enough by two drunken sailormen fighting in the court outside! Sash and everything smashed to splinters."

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He began irritably to pace the carpet again.

"It must have been a devil of a fight!" he added savagely.

"Meanwhile," said I, "where is old Kwen Lung hiding?"

"But more particularly," cried Harley, "where has he hidden the poor victim? Come along, Knox! I'm going down there for a final look round."

"Of course the premises are being watched?"

"Of course and also, of course, I shall be the laughing stock of Scotland Yard if nothing results."

It was close on midnight when once more I found myself in Pennyfields. Carried away by Harley's irritable excitement I had quite forgotten the romance of Captain Dan; and when, having exchanged greetings with the detective on duty hard by the house of Kwen Lung, we presently found ourselves in the presence of Ma Lorenzo, I scarcely knew for a moment if I were "Jim" or my proper self.

"Is Kwen Lung in?" asked Harley sternly.

The woman shook her head.

"No," she replied; "he sometimes stop away a whole week."

"Does he?" jerked Harley. "Come in, Knox; we'll take another look round."

A moment later I found myself again in the room of the golden joss. The red curtain had been removed from before the shattered window, but otherwise the place looked exactly as it had looked before. The atmosphere was much less stale, however, but there was something repellent about the great gilded idol smiling eternally from his pedestal beside the door.

I stared into the leering face, and it was the face of one who knew and who might have said: "Yes! this and other things equally strange have I beheld in many lands as well as England. Much I could tell. Many things grim and terrible, and some few joyous; for behold! I smile but am silent."

For a while Harley stared abstractedly at the bloodstains on the pedestal of the joss and upon the floor beneath from which the matting had been pulled back. Suddenly he turned to Ma Lorenzo:

"Where have you hidden the body?" he demanded.

Watching her, I thought I saw the woman flinch, but there was enough of the Oriental in her composition to save her from self-betrayal. She shook her head slowly, watching Harley through half-closed eyes.

"Nobody hab," she replied.

And I thought for once that her lapse into pidgin had been deliberate and not accidental.

When finally we quitted the house of the missing Kwen Lung, and when, Harley having curtly acknowledged "good night" from the detective on duty, we came out into Limehouse Causeway.

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"You have not overlooked the possibility, Harley," I said, "that this woman's explanation may be true, and that the fireman of the Seahawk may have been entertaining us with an account of a weird dream?"

"No!" snapped Harley "neither will Scotland Yard overlook it."

He was in a particularly impossible mood, for he so rarely made mistakes that to be detected in one invariably brought out those petulant traits of character which may have been due in some measure to long residence in the East. Recognizing that he would rather be alone I parted from him at the corner of Chancery Lane and returned to my own chambers. Furthermore, I was very tired, for it was close upon two o'clock, and on turning in I very promptly went to sleep, nor did I awaken until late in the morning.

For some odd reason, but possibly because the fact had occurred to me just as I was retiring, I remembered at the moment of waking that I had not told Harley about the romantic wedding of Captain Dan. As I had left my friend in very ill humour I thought that this would be a good excuse for an early call, and just before eleven o'clock I walked into his office. Innes, his invaluable secretary, showed me into the study at the back.

"Hallo, Knox," said Harley, looking up from a little silver Buddha which he was examining, "have you come to ask for news of the Kwen Lung case?"

"No," I replied. "Is there any?"

Harley shook his head.

"It seems like fate," he declared, "that this thing should have been sent to me this morning." He indicated the silver Buddha. "A present from a friend who knows my weakness for Chinese ornaments," he explained grimly. "It reminds me of that damned joss of Kwen Lung's!"

I took up the little image and examined it with interest. It was most beautifully fashioned in the patient Oriental way, and there was a little hinged door in the back which fitted so perfectly that when closed it was quite impossible to detect its presence. I glanced at Harley.

"I suppose you didn't find a jewel inside?" I said lightly.

"No," he replied; "there was nothing inside."

But even as he uttered the words his whole expression changed, and so suddenly as to startle me. He sprang up from the table, and:

"Have you an hour to spare, Knox?" he cried excitedly.

"I can spare an hour, but what for?"

"For Kwen Lung!"

Four minutes later we were speeding in the direction of Limehouse, and not a word of explanation to account for this sudden journey could I extract from my friend. Therefore I beguiled the time by telling him of my adventure with Captain Dan.

Harley listened to the story in unbroken silence, but at its termination he brought his hand down sharply on my knee.

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"I have been almost perfectly blind, Knox," he said; "but not quite so perfectly blind as you!"

I stared at him in amazement, but he merely laughed and offered no explanation of his words.

Presently, then, I found myself yet again in the familiar room of the golden joss. Ma Lorenzo, in whom some hidden anxiety seemed to have increased since I had last seen her, stood at the top of the stairs watching us. Upon what idea my friend was operating and what he intended to do I could not imagine; but without a word to the woman he crossed the room and grasping the great golden idol with both arms he dragged it forward across the floor!

As he did so there was a stifled shriek, and Ma Lorenzo, stumbling down the steps, threw herself on her knees before Harley! Raising imploring hands:

"No, no!" she moaned. "Not until I tell you I tell you everything first!"

"To begin with, tell me how to open this thing," he said sternly.

Momentarily she hesitated, and did not rise from her knees, but:

"Do you hear me?" he cried.

The woman rose unsteadily and walking slowly round the joss manipulated some hidden fastening, whereupon the entire back of the thing opened like a door! From what was within she shudderingly averted her face, but Harley, stepping back against the wall, stopped and peered into the cavity.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Come and look, Knox."

Prepared by his manner for some gruesome spectacle, I obeyed and from that which I saw I recoiled in horror.

"Harley," I whispered, "Harley! who is it?"

The spectacle had truly sickened me. Crouched within the narrow space enclosed by the figure of the idol was the body of an old and wrinkled Chinaman! His knees were drawn up to his chin, and his head so compressed upon them that little of his features could be seen.

"It is Kwen Lung!" murmured Ma Lorenzo, standing with clasped hands and wild eyes over by the window.

"Kwen Lung and I am glad he is dead!"

Such a note of hatred came into her voice as I had never heard in the voice of any woman.

"He is vile, a demon, a mocking cruel demon! Long, long years ago I would have killed him, but always I was afraid. I tell you everything, everything. This is how he comes to be dead. The little one" again her voice changed and a note of almost grotesque tenderness came into it "the lotus-flower, that is his own daughter's child, flesh of his flesh, he keeps a prisoner as the women of China are kept, up there" she raised one fat finger aloft "up above. He does not know that someone comes to see her someone who used to come to smoke but who gave it up because he had looked into the dear one's eye. He does not know that she goes with me to see her man. Ah! we think he does not know! I I arrange it all. A week ago they were married. Tuesday night, when Kwen Lung die, I plan for her to steal away for ever, for ever."

Tears now were running down the woman's fat cheeks, and her voice quivered emotionally.

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"For me it is the end, but for her it is the beginning of life. All right! I don't matter a damn! She is young and beautiful. Ah, God! so beautiful! A drunken pig comes here and finds his way in, so I give him the smoke and presently he sleeps, but it makes delay, and I don't know how soon Kwen Lung, that yellow demon, will wake. For he is like the bats who sleep all day and wake at night.

"At last the sailor pig sleeps and I call softly to my dear little one that the time has come. I have gone out into the street, locking the door behind me, to see if her man is waiting, and I hear her shrieks her shrieks! I hurry back. My hands tremble so much that I can scarcely unlock the door. At last I enter, and I see and I know that yellow devil has learned all and has been playing with us like cat and mouse! He is lashing her, with a great whip! Lashing her that tiny, sweet flower. Ah!"

She choked in her utterance, and turning to the gilded joss which contained the dead Chinaman she shook her clenched hands at it, and the expression, on her face I can never forget. Then:

"As I shriek curses at him, crash goes the window and I see her husband spring into the room! The tender one had fallen, there at the foot of the joss, and Kwen Lung, his teeth gleaming like a rat like a devil turns to meet him. So he is when her man strike him, once. Just once, here." She rested her hand upon her heart. "And he falls and he coughs. He lie still. For him it is finished. That devil heart has ceased to beat. Ah!"

She threw up her hands, and:

"That is all. I tell you no more."

"One thing more," said Harley sternly; "the name of the man who killed Kwen Lung?"

At that Ma Lorenzo slowly raised her head and folded her arms across her bosom. There was something one could never forget in the expression of her fat face.

"Not if you burn me alive!" she answered in a low voice. "No one ever knows that from me."

She sank on to the divan and buried her face in her hands. Her fat shoulders shook grotesquely; and Harley stood perfectly still staring across at her for fully a minute. I could hear voices in the street outside and the hum of traffic in Limehouse Causeway.

Then my friend did a singular thing. Walking over to the gilded joss he reclosed the opening and not without a great effort pushed the great idol back against the wall.

"There are times, Knox," he said, staring at me oddly, "when I'm glad that I am not an official agent of the law."

While I watched him dumfounded he walked across to the woman and touched her on the shoulder. She raised her tear-stained face.

"All right," she whispered. "I am ready."

"Get ready as soon as you like," said he tersely.

"I'll have the man removed who is watching the house, and you can reckon on forty-eight hours to make yourself scarce."

With never another word he seized me by the arm and hurried me out of the place! Ten paces along the street a shabby-looking fellow was standing, leaning against a pillar. Harley stopped, and:

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"Even the greatest men make mistakes sometimes, Hewitt," he remarked. "I'm throwing up the case; probably Inspector Wessex will do the same. Good morning."

On towards the Causeway he led me for not a word was I capable of uttering; and just before we reached that artery of Chinatown, from down-river came the deep, sustained note of a steamer's siren, the warning of some big liner leaving dock.

"That will be the Patna," said Harley. "She sails at twelve o'clock, I think you said?"