THE YELLOW SNAKE

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

The Yellow Snake

CHAPTER ONE

There was no house in Siangtan quite like Joe Bray's. For the matter of that, Joe was unique even in China, to which so many unusual personalities have drifted since the days of Marco Polo.

The house was of stone and had been designed by one Pinto Huello, a drunken Portuguese architect, who had left Portugal in circumstances discreditable to himself, and had drifted via Canton and Wuchau to this immense and untidy town.

The general theory is that Pinto drew his plans after a night of delirium in a paradise of smoke, and had amended them in remorse. The change of plans came when the building was half erected, so that the portion of 'Northward' which had so strong a resemblance to the porcelain tower, stood for Pinto in his unregenerate mood, and all that had any likeness to a riverside go-down fairly represented the erratic Portuguese in the period of reaction.

Joe was big and many-chinned, a mountain of a man who loved China and gin and his long daydreams. He dreamt of wonderful things, mostly impracticable. It was his joy and delight to feel that from this forgotten corner of the world he could pull levers and turn switches that would produce the most profound changes in the lot of mankind.

A lethargic Haroun al-Raschid, he would have walked in disguise amidst the poor, showering gold upon the deserving. Only he could never find the right kind of poor.

China is a land greatly conducive to dreaming. From where he sat he could glimpse the crowded waters of the Siang-kiang. In the light of the setting sun a streak of purple oil that appeared and disappeared behind the rambling skyline of Siangtan. The rhomboid sails of the sampans that go down to the big lake were bronze and golden in the last red rays, and from this distance the buzzing life of this vast hive of a city was neither apparent nor audible; nor, for the matter of that, smellable.

Not that old Joe Bray objected to the scent which is China's. He knew this vast land from Manchuria to Kwang-si—from Shan-tung to the Kiao-Kio valley where the queer Mongolian folk talk pidgin French. And China was the greater part of the world to him. The sin and the stink of it were the normalities of life. He thought Chinese, would have lived Chinese but for that inexorable partner of his. He had tramped the provinces on foot, fought

his way out of more forbidden towns than any man of his years, had been stripped for death in the Yamen of that infamous Fu-chi-ling, sometime governor of Su-kiang, and had been carried in honour in a mandarin's palanquin to the very court of the Daughter of Heaven.

It was all one to Joe Bray, English by birth, American by barefaced claim when America found most favour, for he was a millionaire and more. His house on the little hill where the river turns was a palace. Coal had helped, and copper, and the trading-posts of the syndicate that went up as far as the Amur goldfields had added to the immense reserves which had accumulated with such marvellous rapidity in the past ten years.

Joe could sit and dream, but rarely had his dreams materialized so faithfully as the vision which lolled in a deep deck-chair. Fing-Su was tall for a Chinaman and good-looking by European standards. But for the characteristic slant of his black eyes there was nothing that was typically Chinese about him. He had the petulant mouth and the straight, thin nose of his French mother, the jet-black hair and peculiar pallor of old Shan Hu, that crafty old merchant and adventurer, his father. He wore now a thick padded silk coat and shapeless trousers that ran into his shoes. His hands were respectfully hidden in the loose sleeves of his coat, and when he brought one to daylight to flick the ash from his cigarette, he returned it mechanically, instinctively, to its hiding-place.

Joe Bray signed and sipped at his potion.

"You got everything right, Fing-Su. A country that's got no head has got no feet—it can't move—it's just gotter stand still and go bad! That's China. There's been some big fellers here—the Mings and—and old man Hart and Li Hung."

He sighed again, his knowledge of ancient China and her dynasties was nothing at all.

"Money's nothing unless you use it right. Look at me, Fing-Su! Neither chick nor child, an' worth millions—millions! My line as they say, is finished—almost."

He rubbed his nose irritably.

"Almost," he repeated, with an air of caution. "If Certain People do what I want 'em to do it won't be—but will Certain People do it? That's the question."

Fing-Su surveyed him with his fathomless eyes.

"One would have imagined that you had but to express a wish for that wish to be fulfilled."

The young Chinaman spoke with that queerly exaggerated drawl which is peculiar to the University of Oxford. Nothing gave Joe Bray greater pleasure than to hear his protégé's voice; the culture in it, the pedantry of each constructed sentence, the unconscious air of superiority of tone and manner, were music to the ears of the dreamer.

Fing-Su was indeed a graduate of Oxford University and a Bachelor of Arts, and Joe had performed this miracle.

"You're an educated man, Fing, and I'm a poor old roughneck without hist'ry, geography or anything. Books don't interest me and never did. The Bible—especially Revelation—that's a book and a half."

He swallowed the remainder of the colourless liquor in his glass and exhaled a deep breath.

"There's one thing, son—them shares I gave you——"

A long and awkward pause. The chair creaked as the big man moved uncomfortably.

"It appears from somethin' He said that I oughtn't to have done it. See what I mean? They're no value—it was one of His ideas that they was ever got out. Not worth a cent 's far as money goes."

"Does He know that I have them?" asked Fing-Su.

Like Joe, he never referred to Clifford Lynne by name, but gave the necessary pronoun a significant value.

"No, He doesn't." said Joe emphatically. "That's the trouble. But he talked about 'em the other night. Said that I mustn't part with one—not one!"

"My revered and honoured father had nine," said Fing-Su, in his silkiest tone, "and now I have twenty-four."

Joe rubbed his unshaven chin. He was in a fret of apprehension.

"I give 'em to you—you've been a good boy, Fing-Su...Latin an' philos'phy an' everything. I'm crazy about education an' naturally I wanted to do somep'n' for you. Great stuff, education." He hesitated, pulling at his lower lip. "I'm not the kind of man who gives a thing and takes it back again. But you know what he is, Fing-Su."

"He hates me," said Fing-Su dispassionately. "Yesterday he called me a yellow snake."

"Did he?" asked Joe dismally.

His tone conveyed his utter helplessness to rectify a distressing state of affairs.

"I'll get round him sooner or later," he said, with a wan effort to appear confident. "I'm artful, Fing-Su—got ideas back of my mind that nobody knows. I gotta scheme now ..."

He chuckled at a secret thought, but instantly became sober again.

"...about these shares. I'll give you a couple of thousand for 'em—sterling. Not worth a cent! But I'll give you a couple of thousand."

The Chinaman moved slightly in his chair and presently raised his black eyes to his patron.

"Mr Bray, of what use is money to me?" he asked, almost humbly. "My revered and honoured father left me rich. I am a poor Chinaman with few necessities."

Fing-Su threw away his burnt-out cigarette and rolled another with extraordinary dexterity. Almost before paper and tobacco were in his hands they had become a smoking white cylinder.

"In Shanghai and Canton they say that the Yun Nan Company has more money than the Government has ever seen," he said slowly. "They say that the Lolo people found gold in Liao-Lio valley——"

"We found it," said Joe complacently. "These Lolo couldn't find anything except excuses to burn down Chinese temples."

"But you have the money," insisted Fing-Su. "Idle money——"

"Not idle—gettin' four 'n' half per cent on it," murmured Joe.

Fing-Su smiled.

"Four and a half per cent! And you could get a hundred! Up in Shan-si there is a billion dollars worth of coal—a million times a billion! You can't work it, I know—there is no strong man sitting in the Forbidden City to say 'Do this' and it is done. And if there was, he would have no army. There is an investment for your reserves; a strong man."

"I dessay."

Joe Bray looked round fearfully. He hated Chinese politics—and He hated them worse.

"Fing-Su," he said awkwardly, "that long-faced American consul was up here to tiffin yesterday. He got quite het up about your Joyful Hands—said there was too many 'parlours' in the country anyway. An' the central government's been makin' inquiries. Ho Sing was here last week askin' when you reckoned you would be goin' back to London."

The Chinaman's thin lips curled in a smile.

"They give too great an importance to my little club," he said. "It is purely social—we have no politics. Mr Bray, don't you think that it would be a good idea if Yun Nan reserves were used——?"

"Nothin' doin'!" Joe shook his head violently. "I can't touch 'em anyway. Now about them shares, Fing——"

"They are at my bankers in Shanghai—they shall be returned," said Fing-Su. "I wish our friend liked me. For him I have nothing but respect and admiration. Yellow Snake! That was unkind!"

His palanquin was waiting to carry him back to his house and Joe Bray watched the trotting coolies until a turn of the hill road hid them from view.

At Fing-Su's little house three men were waiting, squatting on their haunches before the door. He dismissed his bearers and beckoned the men into the dark mat-covered room which served him as a study.

"Two hours after sunset, Clifford Lynne" (he gave him his Chinese name) "comes into the city by the Gate of Beneficent Rice. Kill him and every paper that he carries bring to me."

Clifford came to the minute, but through the Mandarin Gate, and the watchers missed him. They reported to their master, but he already knew of Clifford's return and the way by which he came.

"You will have many opportunities," said Fing-Su, Bachelor of Arts. "And perhaps it is well that this thing did not happen whilst I was in the city. Tomorrow I go back to England, and I will bring back Power!"

CHAPTER TWO

It was exactly six months after Fing-Su left for Europe, that the partners of Narth Brothers sat behind locked doors in their boardroom in London, facing an unusual situation. Stephen Narth sat at the head of the table; his big, heavy, white face with its perpetual frown indicated that he was more than usually troubled.

Major Gregory Spedwell, yellow and cadaverous, sat on his right. Major Spedwell with his black, curly hair and his cigarette-stained fingers, had a history that was not entirely military.

Facing him was Ferdinand Leggat, a wholesome John Bull figure, with his healthy-looking face and his side-whiskers, though in truth the wholesomeness of his appearance was not borne out by his general character, for 'John Bull Leggat' had endured many vicissitudes which were not wholly creditable to himself—before he came to the anchor of comparatively respectable harbourage of Narth Brothers Ltd.

There had been a time when the name of Narth was one with which one could conjure in the City of London. Thomas Ammot Narth, the father of the present head of the firm, had conducted a very excellent, though limited, business on the Stock Exchange, and had for his clients some of the noblest houses in England.

His son had inherited his business acumen without his discrimination, and in consequence, whilst he had increased the business of the firm in volume, he had accepted clients of a character which did not find favour with the older supporters of his firm, and when he found himself in court, as he did on one or two occasions, disputing the accuracy of clients' instructions, the older supporters of his house had fallen away, and he was left with a clerk and speculator which offered him the opportunities rather of sporadic coups than the steadiness of income which is the sure foundation of prosperity.

He had eked out the bad times by the flotation of numerous companies. Some of these had been mildly successful, but the majority had pursued an inevitable and exciting course which landed them eventually before that official whose unhappy duty it is to arrange the winding up of companies.

It was in the course of these adventures that Stephen Narth had met Mr Leggat, a Galician oil speculator, who also conducted a theatrical agency and a moneylending business, and was generally to be found on the ground floor of jerry-built flotations.

The business which had brought the three members of the firm at nine o'clock in the morning to their cold and uninviting offices at Minchester House had nothing whatever to do with the ordinary business of the firm. Mr Leggat said as much, being somewhat oracular in his methods.

"Let us have the matter fair and square," he said. "This business of ours is as near to bankruptcy as makes no difference. I say bankruptcy, and for the time being we will let the matter stay right there. What may be revealed at the bankruptcy proceedings doesn't affect Spedwell and doesn't affect me. I haven't speculated with the company's money—neither has Spedwell."

"You knew——" began Narth hotly.

"I knew nothing." Mr Leggat waved him to silence. "The auditors tell us that the sum of fifty thousand pounds is unaccounted for. Somebody has been gambling on 'Change—not me; not Spedwell."

"It was on your advice——"

Again Mr Leggat held up his hand.

"This isn't the moment for recrimination. We're short fifty thousand, more or less. Where and how are we going to raise the money?"

His eyes met Spedwell's, and for an instant of time that saturnine man showed evidence of approval and amusement.

"It is all very well for you fellows to talk," growled Narth, wiping his moist face with a silk handkerchief. "You were all in the oil speculation—both of you!"

Mr Leggat smiled and shrugged his broad shoulders, but made no comment.

"Fifty thousand pounds is a lot of money." Spedwell spoke for the first time.

"An awful lot," agreed his friend, and waited for Mr Narth to speak.

"We didn't come here today to discuss what we already know," said Narth impatiently, "but to find a remedy. How are we going to face the music? That is the question."

"And simply answered, I think," said Mr Leggat, almost jovially. "I for one have no desire to face again—when I say 'again' let me correct myself and say for the first time—the miseries of Wormwood Scrubbs. We have—I should say you have—got to raise the money. There remains only one possibility," said Mr Leggat slowly, and all the time he was speaking his

keen eyes did not leave Stephen Narth's face. "You are the nephew or cousin of Mr Joseph Bray, and, as all the world knows, Mr Joseph Bray is rich beyond the dreams of avarice. He is reputedly the wealthiest man in China, and I understand—correct me if I am wrong—that you and your family are in receipt of a yearly stipend—pension—from this gentleman——"

"Two thousand a year," broke in Narth loudly. "That has nothing whatever to do with this business!"

Mr Leggat glanced at the Major and smiled.

"The man who allows you two thousand a year must be approachable on one side or another. To Joseph Bray fifty thousand pounds is that!" He snapped his finger. "My dear Narth, this is the situation. In four months' time, possibly sooner, you will stand your trial at the Old Bailey, unless you can secure the money to lock up the bloodhounds who will soon be on your trail."

"On all our trails," said Narth sullenly. "I'm not going alone—understand that! And you can get out of your head the idea that I can persuade old Joe Bray to send me a cent more. He is as hard as nails and his manager is harder. You don't suppose that I haven't tried him before, do you? I tell you he is impossible."

Mr Leggat looked at Major Spedwell again, and they both sighed and rose as though some signal, invisible to Narth, had been given.

"We will meet the day after tomorrow," said Leggat, "and you had better work the cable to China, because the only alternative to Mr Joseph Bray may be even more unpleasant than penal servitude."

"What do you mean?" demanded Narth, rage in his smouldering eyes.

"I mean," said Mr Leggat, as he lit a cigar with great deliberation, "the assistance of the gentleman named Mr Grahame St Clay."

"And who the devil is Grahame St Clay?" asked the astonished Narth.

Mr Leggat smiled cryptically.

CHAPTER THREE

Stephen Narth ordinarily left his office in Old Broad Street at four o'clock, at which hour his limousine was waiting to carry him to his beautiful house at Sunningdale. But this evening he lingered on, not because he had any especial business to transact, or because he needed the time to brood over his unfortunate position, but because the China mail was due by the five o'clock post, and he expected the monthly draft to which Leggat had made reference.

Joseph Bray was his second cousin, and in the days when the Narths were princes of commerce and the Brays the poorest of poor relations (they called themselves Bray-Narth, but old Joseph had dropped the hyphenated style, being a man of little education), the great family was scarcely cognisant of Joe Bray's movements. Until, ten years before, Mr Narth had received a letter from his cousin saying that he was anxious to get in touch with his only relative, they were unaware that such a man as Joseph existed, and Mr Stephen Narth's first inclination, as he read the ill-spelt, illiterate letter, was to tear it up and throw it into the wastepaper basket, for he had sufficient troubles of his own without being called upon to shoulder the burden of distant relatives. It was only at the tag-end of the letter that he discovered his correspondent was that Bray whose name was famous in the Stock Exchanges of the world—the veritable Bray, of Yun Nan Concession. Thereafter, Joseph assumed a new importance.

They had never met. He had seen a photograph of the old man, grim and grey and hard, and it was probably this picture which had inhibited those appeals for further help which he so glibly claimed to have sent.

Perkins, his clerk, came in with a letter soon after five.

"Miss Joan came this afternoon, sir, whilst you were at the board meeting."

"Oh!" replied Stephen Narth indifferently.

Here was a Bray that represented a responsibility, one of the two members of the cadet family he had known about until old Joseph's letter came. She was a distant cousin, had been brought up in his home and had received the good but inexpensive education to which poor relations are entitled. Her position in his household he would have found it difficult to define. Joan was very useful. She could take charge of the house when the girls were away. She could keep accounts and could replace a housekeeper or, for the matter of that, a housemaid. Though she was a little younger than Letty, and very much younger than Mabel, she could serve to chaperone either.

Sometimes she joined the theatre parties that the girls organized, and occasionally she went to a dance when an extra partner was wanted. But usually Joan Bray remained in the background. There were times when it was inconvenient even that she should join one of his select little dinner parties, and then Joan had her meal in her big attic room, and, if the truth be told, was more than a little relieved.

"What did she want?" asked Mr Narth as he cut open the flap of the only letter that counted.

"She wanted to know if there was anything to take back to Sunningdale. She came up to do some shopping with Miss Letty," said his old clerk, and then: "She asked me if any of the young ladies had telephoned about the Chinamen."

"Chinamen?"

Perkins explained. There had appeared that morning in the grounds of Sunni Lodge two yellow men, "not wearing much clothing either." Letty had seen them lying in the long grass near the farm meadow—two powerful-looking men, who at the sight of her had leapt up and had fled to the little plantation which divided Lord Knowesley's estate from the less pretentious domain of Mr Narth.

"Miss Letty was a little frightened," said Perkins.

Miss Letty, who lived on the raw edge of hysteria, would be frightened, undoubtedly.

"Miss Joan thought the men belonged to a circus which passed through Sunningdale this morning," said Perkins.

Mr Narth saw little in the incident, and beyond making a mental note to bring the matter to the notice of the local police, dismissed from his mind all thought of Chinamen.

Slowly he tore open the flap of the envelope. The cheque was there, but also, as he had realized when he handled the package, a letter of unusual length. Joe Bray was not in the habit of sending long epistles. As a rule, a sheet of paper bearing the inscription 'With Comps.' was all that accompanied the draft.

He folded the purple-coloured draft and put it into his pocket, and then began to read the letter, wondering why this relative of his had grown

suddenly so communicative. It was written in his own crabbed hand and every fourth word was mis-spelt.

Dear Mr Narth (Joe never addressed him in any other way).
I dare say you will wonder why I have written to you such a long letter. Well, dear Mr Narth, I must tell you that I have had a bad stroke, and am only getting better very slowly. The doctor says he can't be sure how long I've got to live, so I thought I would fix up the future and make a will, which I have now done, through Mr Albert Van Rys, the lawyer. Dear Mr Narth, I must tell you that I have got a great admiration for your family, as you well know, and I have been long thinking how I should help your family, and this is what I have done. My manager, Clifford Lynne, who has been with me since a boy and was my partner when I found this reef, is a good young fellow (Clifford Lynne, I mean), so I have decided he should marry into my family and keep the name going. I know you have several girls in your house, two daughters and a cousin, and I want Clifford to marry one of these, which he has agreed to do. He is on his way over now and should be with you any day. My will is as follows: I leave you two thirds of my share in the mine, one-third to Clifford, on condition that one of these girls marries him. If these girls refuse, all the money goes to Clifford. The marriage is to occur before the thirty-first of December of this year. Dear Mr Narth, if this is not agreeable to you, you will get nothing on my death.

Yours sincerely,
Jos. Bray.

Stephen Narth read the letter open-mouthed, his mind in a whirl. Salvation had come from the most unexpected quarter. He rang a bell to summon the clerk and gave him a few hasty instructions, and, not waiting for the lift, ran down the stairs and boarded his car. All the way to Sunningdale he turned over in his mind the letter and its strange proposal.

Mabel, of course! She was the eldest. Or Letty—the money was as good as in his pocket...

As the car went up the drive between bushes of flowering rhododendrons he was almost gay, and he sprang out with a smile so radiant that the watchful Mabel, who saw him from he lawn, realized that something unusual had happened and came running to meet him, as Letty appeared at the big front door. They were handsome girls, a little plumper than he could wish, and the elder inclined to take a sour view of life which was occasionally uncomfortable.

"...Did you hear about those horrid Chinamen?" Mabel fired the question as he stepped from the car. "Poor Letty nearly had a fit!"

Ordinarily he would have snapped her to silence, for he was a man who was irritated by the trivialities of life, and the irruption of a yellow trespasser or two was not a matter to interest him. But now he could afford to smile indulgently and could make a joke of his daughter's alarming experience.

"My dear, there was nothing to be afraid of—yes, Perkins told me all about it. The poor fellows were probably as much scared as Letty! Come into the library; I have something rather important to tell you."

He took them into the handsomely appointed room, shut the door and told his astonishing news, which, to his consternation, was received silently. Mabel took out her perennial cigarette, flicked the ash on the carpet and looked across at her sister, and then:

"It's all very fine for you, father, but where do we come in?" she asked.

"Where do you come in?" said her parent in astonishment. "Isn't it clear where you come in? This fellow gets a third of the fortune——"

"But how much of the third do we get?" asked Letty, the younger. "And besides, who is this manager? With all that money, father, we ought to do better than a mine manager."

There was a dead silence here which Mabel broke.

"We shall have to depend on you for the settlement, anyway," she said. "This old gentleman seems to think it quite good enough for any girl if her husband is rich. But it wouldn't be good enough for me."

Stephen Narth turned suddenly cold. He had never dreamt that opposition would come from this quarter.

"But don't you see, girls, that unless one of you marries this fellow we get nothing? Of course I would do the right thing by you—I'd make a handsome settlement."

"How much is he leaving?" asked the practical Mabel. "That's the crux of the whole question. I tell you frankly I'm not going to buy a pig in a poke; and besides, what is to be our social position? We'd probably have to go back to China and live in some horrible shanty."

She sat on the edge of the library table, clasping her crossed knee, and in this attitude she reminded Stephen Narth of a barmaid he had known in his

early youth. There was something coarse about Mabel which was not softened by the abbreviation of her skirts or by the beauty of her shingled head.

"I've had enough scrimping and saving," she went on, "and I tell you honestly, that so far as marriage with an unknown man is concerned, you can count me out."

"And me," said Letty firmly. "It is quite right what Mabel says, there is no position at all for this wretched man's wife."

"I dare say he would do the right thing," said Stephen Narth feebly. He was entirely dominated by these two daughters of his.

Suddenly Mabel leapt to her feet and stepped down to the floor, her eyes shining.

"I've got it—Cinderella!"

"Cinderella?" He frowned.

"Joan, of course, you great booby! Read the letter again."

They listened breathlessly, and when he came near to the end, Letty squeaked her delight.

"Of course—Joan!" she said. "There's no reason why Joan shouldn't marry. It would be an excellent thing for her—her prospects are practically nil, and she'd be an awful bore, father, if you were very rich. Goodness knows what we could do with her."

"Joan!" He fondled his chin thoughtfully. Somehow he had never considered Joan as a factor. For the fourth time he read the letter word by word. The girls were right. Joan fulfilled all Joe Bray's requirements. She was a member of the family. Her mother had been a Narth. Before he had put the letter down, Letty had pressed the bell on the table and the butler came in.

"Tell Miss Bray to come here, Palmer," she said, and three minutes later a girl walked into the library—the sacrifice which the House of Narth designed to propitiate the gods of fortune.

CHAPTER FOUR

Joan Bray was twenty-one, but looked younger. She was slim—Letty was in the habit of describing her as 'painfully thin', without good reason. The Narths were full-faced, full-chinned people, fair-headed and a trifle lethargic. Joan was supple of body and vital. Every movement of her was definite, intentional. In repose she had the poise of an aristocrat. ("She always knows where to put her hands," admitted Letty reluctantly.) In movement she had the lithe ease of one whom movement was a joy. Ten years of snubbing, of tacit suppression, of being put away and out of sight when she was not required, had neither broken her spirit nor crushed her confidence.

She stood now, a half-smile in the grey eyes that laughed very readily, looking from one to the other, realizing that something had happened which was out of the ordinary. Her colour had a delicacy that the bold beauty of her cousins could not eclipse, nor yet set off, for she was as a picture that needed no lighting or contrasts to reveal its wonders.

"Good evening, Mr Narth." She had always called him by the formal title. "I've finished the quarter's accounts, and they are terrific!"

At any other time Stephen would have writhed at the news, but the sense of coming fortune made the question of a hundred pounds, more or less, a matter of supreme indifference.

"Sit down, Joan," he said, and wonderingly she pulled up a chair and sat sideways upon it, resting one arm on the back.

"Will you read this letter?" He passed it across to Letty who handed it to the girl.

She read in silence, and when she had finished, smiled.

"That's awfully good news. I'm very glad," she said, and looked quizzically from one girl to the other. "And who is the lovely bride to be?"

Her unconquerable cheerfulness was an offence in the eyes of Mabel at the best of times. Now the cool assumption that one or other of them was to efface herself in the obscurity of a Chinese town, brought the red to her full neck.

"Don't be stupid, Joan," she said sharply. "This is a very serious question——"

"My dear"—Stephen saw the need for tact—"Clifford Lynne is a very good fellow—one of the best," he said enthusiastically, though he had no more

knowledge of Clifford Lynne's character, appearance or general disposition than he had of any labourer his car had passed that afternoon. "This is one of the greatest chances that has ever—er—come our way. As a matter of fact," he said very carefully, "this is not the only letter I have had from dear old Joseph. There was another which—urn—put his view more clearly."

She looked as though she expected him to pass this mysterious letter to her, but he did not, for the simple reason that it had no existence except in his imagination.

"The truth is, my dear, Joseph wishes you to marry this man."

The girl rose slowly to her feet, her thinly pencilled eyebrows gathered in a frown of amazement.

"He wishes me to marry him?" she repeated. "But I don't know the man."

"Neither do we," said Letty calmly. "It isn't a question of knowing. Anyway, how do you know any fellow you are going to marry? You see a man for a few minutes every day and you haven't the slightest idea what his nature is. It is only when you are married that his real self comes out."

She was not making matters any easier for Mr Narth, and with a nod he silenced her.

"Joan," he said, "I have been very good to you—I've given you a home, and I've done something more than that, as you well know."

He looked at the girls and signalled them out of the room. When the door had closed on Letty:

"Joan, I am going to be very frank with you," he said.

It was not the first time he had been frank, and she could guess what was coming. She once had a brother, a wild, irresponsible youth, who had been employed by Narth Brothers, and had left hurriedly, carrying with him the cash contents of the safe—a few hundreds of pounds. He had expiated the crime with his life—for he was found on a Kentish road dead by the wreckage of the car in which he was making his way to a Channel port. And there was an invalid mother of Joan Bray's whose last years of life had been supported on Mr Narth's bounty. ("We can't let her go to the workhouse, father," Mabel had said; "if it gets into the newspapers there will be an awful scandal"—Mabel was Mabel even at the tender age of sixteen.)

"It is not for me to remind you of what I have done for your family," began Stephen—and proceeded to remind her. "I have given you a home and a

social life which ordinarily would not have been yours. You have now a chance of repaying me for my generosity; I particularly wish that you marry this man."

She licked her dry lips, but did not raise her eyes from the carpet on which they were fixed.

"Do you hear me?"

She nodded and rose slowly.

"You really want me to marry him?"

"I want you to be a rich woman," he said emphatically. "I am not asking you to make any sacrifice. I am putting in your way an opportunity that nine girls out of ten would jump at."

There was a tap at the door: it was the butler and he bore on a silver salver a brown envelope. Mr Narth took the telegram, opened it, read, and gasped.

"He's dead," he said in a hushed voice. "Old Joe Bray!"

Swiftly he made a mental calculation. It was the first day of June. If he could get her married within a month he could stave off the ruin that threatened Narth Brothers. Their eyes met: hers calm, steady, questioning, his speculative and remorseless.

"You will marry him?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said quietly, and his sigh of relief brought the first twinge of bitterness that her heart had known.

"You are a very sensible girl, and you'll not regret it," he said eagerly, as he came round and took her cold hands in his. "I can assure you, Joan——"

He turned his head at the knock. It was the butler.

"There is a gentleman to see you, sir."

He got so far, when the visitor pushed past him and walked into the room. He was a tall man, dressed in a stained, ill-fitting suit of rough homespun. His shoes were of undressed leather and apparently home-made. He was collarless. A soft shirt, opened at the throat, a battered hat in his hand almost completed the picture. But it was at his face that the girl was gazing.

Joan could only stare in amazement, for never had she seen his like before. His hair was long and brown and wavy. He wore a long, straggly beard that came down to his breast.

"Who the devil——" began the astonished Mr Stephen Narth.

"My name is Clifford Lynne," said the apparition. "I understand I've got to marry somebody. Who is it?"

They stared at the uncouth man, and then Letty, who had followed him in, began to laugh hysterically.

"Mr Lynne——" stammered Stephen Narth.

Before the man could reply, came a dramatic interruption. There was a whispered colloquy between the butler and somebody in the hall outside. Looking past them, Mr Narth saw a maid holding a square box.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

The butler reached out of the door and came back with the box in his hands. It was a new box with a sliding lid, about a foot square.

"Mr Lynne?" he said awkwardly, like one who found himself in a situation which he did not fit.

"Yes?"

The bearded man spun round. All his movements, Joan noted unconsciously, had a certain abruptness.

"For me?"

He put the box on the table and frowned at it. Painted neatly on the top in red letters were the words:

CLIFFORD LYNNE, ESQ. (to await arrival)

As his hand went out to slip back the lid, a cold shiver ran down the girl's spine. She had an unaccountable premonition of some terrible danger, she knew not what.

"What the devil is this?" demanded the amazing stranger.

The lid was off; there was nothing to be seen but a mass of fleecy cottonwool…but it was moving in weird undulations.

Then suddenly from the white fleece poked up a spade-shaped head and two black bead-like eyes that glittered malignantly.

In a fraction of a second the head was followed by a long, sinuous body that swayed for a moment, then, whipping back, darted the ugly head forward.

The snake had misjudged the distance—and missed! It lay across the table, its head dangling, the tail still concealed in the cottonwool. Only for an infinitesimal space of time it sprawled thus.

Whilst the terrified company stood paralysed to silence by the horror of it, the black thing slid greasily to the floor. Up went the head again, swayed for a while and then again was flung back to strike...

The explosion deafened them—through a haze of blue smoke Joan saw the headless thing coil and uncoil in death agony...

"Hell's bells!" said Mr Clifford Lynne in wonder. "Who threw that brick?"

CHAPTER FIVE

"A Chinaman brought it, sir," stammered the butler.

"Chinaman!"

The servant pointed feebly through the French window that led to the lawn. For a second he stood, this ludicrous figure with his ragged beard and his fantastically ill-fitting clothes, and then with a leap he was through the open window and flying across the strip of grass like the wind. In two seconds he had vanished over the high hazel hedge—this he took in his stride in some miraculous fashion.

With his disappearance the spell was broken. Joan found a half-fainting girl on her hands, sobbing and laughing, hands clenched and feet inclined to tap the carpet in a way that was neither modern nor pretty. Under the table wriggled the dying snake—the room was hazy with smoke that smelt pungently.

At the sound of the shot, Mabel came running in. She saw the snake on the floor, stared from his sister to Joan, from Joan to her white-faced father.

"That horrible man—he tried to kill Letty!" She was shrill in her misdirected fury.

"Shut up!"

When Stephen Narth snarled that way there was an end to hysteria. He became the dominant giver of household laws.

"Shut up, all of you—damn you!...none of you has the sense of Joan. Get up!"

Letty rose untidily, staggered, her eyes pleading for sympathy.

"It was a snake." He stared down at the writhing thing with ludicrous solemnity. "Ugh! Throw that beast out of the room—use the tongs. Did he shoot it, Joan? I didn't see him use a pistol."

She shook her head.

"Nor I—I just heard the shot and that was all."

Mr Narth pointed to the snake; the butler, tongs in hand, was snapping the ends tremblingly.

"He said 'Hell's bells,'" nodded Joan gravely.

The girls looked at their father.

"Who was he—a tramp, daddy?" asked Letty.

Mr Narth shook his head.

"Clifford Lynne," he said, and they gasped in unison. That scarecrow! Letty's proper indignation overcame her more feminine emotions.

"That ...! Was he the man you wanted me...us ...?"

He glanced significantly at Joan. She was at the open window, her eyes shaded by a white hand from the glare of the afternoon sun. At the moment the butler was staggering to the lawn, a rope-like object gripped at the end of the tongs, Clifford Lynne came over the hedge, one leg after another in a flying leap, his absurd whiskers flowing all ways. He stopped at the sight of the snake.

"Yellow head!" he said thoughtfully. "Yellow head—what a lad!"

Letty dropped her voice as the queer man came leisurely into the room, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"Has anybody seen a Chink about here?" he asked.

Letty and Mabel spoke together, though he was addressing the one person in the ornate library who was neither obviously palpitating or patently fearful.

"Chinamen—two?" he said thoughtfully. "I thought so! Moses!"

He walked to the window and stared out. Then he came back to the table, lifted the cottonwool gingerly from the box, layer by layer.

"Only one, by gum! But what a perfect houndski!"

He peered out into the sunlit garden.

"Thought they'd use a knife. These fellows can throw a knife wonderfully. One of 'em killed a foreman of mine a year ago from a distance of a hundred and twenty yards."

He was addressing Joan, and his voice was friendly and conversational.

"Did you catch him?" she asked.

The bearded man nodded.

"Got him on the law and order side of the mountains and hanged him. A nice fellow in many ways," he mused, "but temperamental. There is only one way to deal with a temperamental coolie, and that is to hang him."

He was looking at Letty now, and she regarded his views on temperament as ill-timed, if not actually insulting. He saw her rosebud lips curl up in a smile, but did not feel uncomfortable.

"You?" he asked.

She started.

"No—I—I mean, what do you mean?"

She knew very well what he meant. Clifford Lynne could broadcast thought, and in the tenseness of the moment her receptivity was particularly good.

"I've got to marry somebody."

He glanced now at Mabel Narth, darkly red, her baby blue eyes malignant with the contempt she felt.

"Neither my sister nor I is the lucky girl," she said with a certain malicious sweetness. "You ought to know Joan..." She glanced round at Mr Narth. "Father!"

Awkwardly enough he introduced the girl.

"Oh!"

Just "Oh!" It might have meant disappointment or relief or just surprise.

"Well—I am here. Ready for the——" He hesitated for a word. Joan could have sworn that the word he almost used was "sacrifice," but he changed it to "occasion."

"Old Joe Bray is dead," said the stranger. "I suppose you know that? Poor old lunatic! It would have been better for a lot of people if he had died six months ago. A dear old soul, a great old sportsman, but slightly mad."

Again he addressed Joan. She could observe him now, for he was emerging from the blinding flash of his dramatic arrival. Close upon six feet in height, even his nondescript clothing could not disguise a fine physique. The face was tanned a deep mahogany. His straggling beard was as brown as his long hair and his rather shaggy eyebrows. This bearded man was alive—every inch of him. That was her first impression—his immense vitality. She

glanced down at his shapeless shoes; they were home-made, she guessed, and whilst one was fastened with a thin piece of hide, the other lace was of string, and unravelled string at that.

It was a moment for Mr Narth to assert his authority. Natural circumstances made him the most important person in the room. He was not only the head of the house, but he was the principal beneficiary under the will. And this man was old Joe Bray's manager, one to be ordered rather than persuaded; the merest employee—Mr Narth's employee in prospect, for if he was inheriting old Joe's wealth, he also inherited the indubitable authority which wealth carries with it.

"Er—Mr—um—Lynne, I think this discussion of my poor cousin's—state of mind is not quite proper, and I cannot allow you to asperse his—um—revered memory without protest."

The stranger was looking at him curiously.

"Oh, you're Narth, are you—I've heard about you! You're the gentleman who speculates with other people's money!"

Stephen Narth went red and white. He was for the moment speechless. The crudeness of the statement was paralysing. Had Mr Narth been wise, he would have arrested all further comment, either by walking from the room or by a direct and tremendous rebuke.

"These things get about," said Lynne, stroking his beard. "You can't turn the light off a business like yours."

Stephen Narth got back his voice.

"I am not prepared to discuss such wanton slanders," he said. There was murder in his eyes if Clifford Lynne had ever seen murder. "For the moment it is necessary to tell you that as the sole beneficiary under Mr Bray's will and—er—proprietor——"

"In prospect," murmured Lynne, when he paused. "You feel that I ought to keep in my place? I am almost inclined to agree. Do you want me?"

He stared at Joan, his expression blank, almost fatuous. She had an odd inclination to laugh.

"Because," he went on, "if you want me I'm here and ready. The Lord knows I don't want to force my attentions upon any shrinking maiden, but there's the position. Joe said, 'Will you give me your word?' and I said 'Yes.'"

He was still staring at her thoughtfully. Did he expect an answer, she wondered. Apparently not, for he went on:

"This complicates matters—I had no idea we should annoy the Joyful Hands—but I've been and gone and done it!"

Mr Narth thought that it was a moment when he might without loss of dignity edge himself into the conversation on nearly equal terms.

"The Joyful Hands, I think you said—who on earth are the Joyful Hands?"

The stranger did not seem to resent the intrusion, and Stephen Narth had the queer sensation that the admonishment directed to him a few seconds before was in the nature of a statement of fact made without any real disapproval or malice. Clifford Lynne knew but did not condemn.

"I have taken the Lodge—the Slaters' Cottage, don't they call it?" said Clifford in his strangely abrupt way. "A weird hole, but suitable for me. I'm afraid I've made rather a mess of your carpet."

He looked down gloomily at the evidence of tragedy.

"Anyway, snakes have no right to be on carpets," he said in a tone of relief, as though he had found an unexpected excuse for the disorder he had created.

Mr Narth's face fell.

"You're staying here, are you?" he asked, and it was on the tip of his tongue to suggest that the stranger, in all his future visits, should come into the house by the servants' entrance. But something inhibited this discourteous expression. A man who could treat grand larceny as a matter of indifference, who carried on his person lethal weapons which he could draw, use and replace so quickly that no mortal eye could see his hand's movement, was not to be insulted with impunity. Instead:

"The Slaters' Cottage isn't a very nice place for you," he said. "It is little better than a ruin. I had it offered to me the other day for a hundred and twenty pounds and refused it——"

"You missed a bargain," said Cliff Lynne calmly. "It has a Tudor fireplace worth twice that amount."

He was looking absently at the girl as he spoke.

"I shouldn't be surprised if I settled down in the Slaters' Cottage," he was musing aloud. "There's a lovely scullery, where one's wife could do one's washing, and three perfectly good rooms—once the rat-holes are stopped up. Personally, I have no objection to rats."

"And I am rather fond of them," said Joan coolly, for she was quick to see the challenge and as quick to take it up.

For a second the faintest ghost of a smile showed in his eyes.

"Anyway, I'm staying here. And don't be scared of losing your reputation, because I shan't call very often." He pursed his lips. "Chink! And of course the heathen saw me come in, and delivered the goods instanter! Daren't do it before, or you'd have heard the wriggler lashing out inside the box. Or he'd have died—there were no holes in the lid. I'll have to put the Dumb Friends' League on to these fellows!"

Mr Narth cleared his throat.

"Do you suggest that that reptile was sent to you—maliciously?"

Clifford Lynne turned his amused eyes upon the questioner.

"A live, poisonous snake is not my idea of a birthday present," he said gently. "And I hate Yellow Heads—they hurt!" He slapped his thigh with sudden energy and laughed. "Why, of course! Yellow snake! Fancy my forgetting that!"

Again his eyes sought the girl's.

"You're getting a pretty careless husband...I didn't get your name ... Joan, is it? I thought all the Joans were married, but perhaps I'm thinking of the Dorothys! You're about twenty-one, aren't you? All the Joans are about twenty-one, all the Patricias are seventeen, and most of the Mary Anns are drawing their Old Age Pensions."

"And all the Cliffords are on the stage," she retorted, and this time he laughed. It was a soft, musical gurgle of sound, so unlike his forbidding appearance that it seemed to be a new and a different man breaking through the outward sham and disguise of him.

"You made that up on the spur of the moment!" he said, lifting an admonitory finger. "But I deserved it."

He dived into the pockets of his nondescript coat, brought out a large gunmetal watch and consulted it.

"Not going!" he said disgustedly and, shaking, held it to his ear. "What's the time?"

"Six," said Mr Narth, recovering his voice.

"I knew it couldn't be half past twelve," said the visitor, calmly adjusting the hands. "I'll be getting back. I'm renting a place in London for the moment, but I'll be down tomorrow or the day after. Church of England?"

Joan, to whom this question was fired, nodded.

"I'm a bit that way myself," admitted Mr Lynne, "but with leaning towards incense and good music. But I admire Baptists—how they keep good on varnish and harmoniums beats me! So long, Dorothy!"

"You mean Agnes," said Joan, and her eyes gleamed again.

She held out a hand and felt her own enfolded in a strong grip. Apparently he deemed no other member of the family worthy of such a salute, and with a bright nod, which embraced them all, he walked briskly to the door and into the hall. Mr Narth thought he had gone, and was about to speak when the bearded man reappeared.

"Anybody know a man called Grahame St Clay?" he asked.

In a flash Mr Narth remembered the conversation of the morning.

"I know a Mr St Clay. I don't exactly know him, but one of my directors is a friend of his," he said.

Clifford Lynne's eyebrows rose.

"Is that so?" he said calmly. "You've never met him?"

Mr Narth shook his head.

"You might tell me tomorrow night what you think of him."

"But I'm not seeing him," said Mr Narth.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Clifford softly, and again that hint of mischief shone in his clear blue eyes. "Oh, indeed you are! St Clay! Who canonized Yellow mud?"

In another second he had gone, slamming the front door behind him. He was a man of violent habits, as Mr Narth subsequently insisted.

"Thank God, I'm not marrying him!" said Mabel, and Letty, hardly yet recovered from her swoon, murmured agreement.

Joan said nothing. She was more than a little bewildered, very interested, but not in the slightest degree frightened.

CHAPTER SIX

At the end of the drive, drawn up on the verge by the roadside, was Mr Clifford Lynne's car. 'Car' is perhaps a dignified description of a machine that he had purchased a few days previously for £35. He had left the engine running because it was his experience that failure to take this precaution might mean half an hour's work in starting. With a rattle and a clank, a groaning and a squeaking, he brought the machine to the road, drove noisily for a hundred yards, then turned along a wagon track that ran into the pines.

The end of the path brought him to the grey stone Slaters' Cottage. Every window was broken; the pathetic little portico which a pretentious owner of the '60's had added sagged dismally in the centre; a dozen slates were missing from the roof—this one-storied cottage was a picture of desolation and neglect.

A group of three men stood before the door, and his arrival had evidently interrupted a unanimous decision, which the first of the men voiced as Clifford sprang from the quivering machine.

"You'll never be able to do anything with this place, sir," said the man, evidently, from the pocket-rule that protruded from his hip pocket, engaged in the building trade. "The floors are rotten, the house wants a new roof, and you'll need a new water and drainage system."

Without a word Lynne strode past them into the building. It consisted of two rooms, one to the left and one to the right of the passageway he had entered. At the end of the hall was a tiny kitchen with a rusted stove, and from this led a scullery. Looking through the broken windows at the back, he could see a weatherworn shed which in point of repair was the superior of the cottage.

The floorboards creaked and cracked under his weight. In one place they had rotted and a great hole appeared. The ancient paper hung in dismal, colourless shrouds from the walls, and the ceilings were almost indistinguishable under festoons of cobwebs.

He rejoined the group before the door and filled his pipe deliberately from a long canvas sack which he hauled from his pocket.

"Are you a builder or a poet?" he asked the man with the foot-rule.

The builder grinned.

"I'm a pretty good builder," he said, "but I'm not a magician, and to get this house in order in a week you want three Aladdin's lamps."

Clifford put his pipe in his mouth and lit it deliberately.

"Cutting out the possibility of engaging the slave of the lamp, how many men would it require to carry out the repairs?"

"It isn't a question of men, it's a question of money," said the builder. "I could certainly get everything done in a week, but it would cost you the greater part of a thousand pounds, and the cottage isn't worth that."

Clifford sent a cloud of smoke into the air and watched it dissolve.

"Put on a gang of two hundred men," he said; "work them in eight-hour shifts day and night. Have them started this evening tearing up the floors. Get all the trolleys you need, all the material you need, and have it specially delivered. I want oak floors, a bathroom, electric light laid on, a hot-water system, steel shutters to the windows, this wagon-track made into a good road, a swimming-pool behind the house, and that's about all, I think."

"In seven days?" gasped the builder.

"In six preferably," said Lynne. "You can either take it on or I'll find a man who will do it."

"But, Mr Lynne, for the money it will cost you you could get one of the best houses in Sunningdale——"

"This is my ideal home," said Clifford Lynne, "and it's got to be snakeproof!"

He looked round his little estate. The fence that marked the boundaries of the grounds was invisible behind the screen of the trees.

"All these firs had better be cut down," he said. "I want a clear line of fire."

"Line of what?" almost squeaked the builder.

"And the steel shutters must have loopholes—I forgot to tell you that. Give me that book."

He almost snatched the builder's notebook from his hand and began to sketch.

"That shape, and those dimensions," he said, handing the book back. "Are you taking on this job?"

"I'll take it on," said the builder. "I can promise you that the house will be fit for occupation in a week, but it's going to cost you——"

"I know what it will cost me if this house is not ready," interrupted Clifford Lynne.

He put his hand in his pocket, took out a fat notebook and, opening it, extracted ten bills, each for a hundred pounds.

"I'm not asking you for a contract, because I'm a business man." (He was given to that kind of paradox.) "This is Wednesday; the furniture will arrive on Tuesday next. Have fires lit in every room and keep them going. I may or may not see you for a week, but here is my telephone number. By the way, open a trench to the main road. I want a 'phone in here, and the wire must run underground—and deep at that. Snakes dig!"

Without another word he stepped into the car and sent it bumping and swaying along the rough road, and presently was lost to view.

"This is where I start not sleeping," said the builder, and he was very nearly right.

It was raining the next morning, a gentle drizzle that looked like continuing for the whole of the day, according to Mr Narth's chauffeur, who took a melancholy interest in the vagaries of the English climate.

It was Mr Stephen Narth's boast that he never noticed what the weather was like. But there was something in the gloomy skies and dismal landscapes that so accorded with his own mental condition that the weather obtruded itself upon him, and added something to his depression.

And yet, he told himself a dozen times between Sunningdale and his office, there was no reason in the world why he should be depressed. It was true that the apparition that had dawned upon him was hardly conducive to cheer. But he had found a way of fulfilling the conditions of old Bray's will, and Joan's readiness to comply with his wishes was really a matter for congratulation.

Clifford Lynne was an irritation and an eyesore. He was also the fly in the ointment. (The illustrations were Mr Narth's own.) Curiously enough, the advent of the poisonous snake in his drawing-room did not greatly perturb Stephen Narth. It was unusual, a little startling, but since he knew nothing of the deadly nature of yellow heads, and could not see anything particularly significant in the mysterious arrival of the box, he followed his practice of

dismissing from his mind the problem he could not elucidate. It was all the easier because it was somebody else's problem.

The incident, so far as he was concerned, had importance only because his drawing-room carpet had to be taken up and sent to the cleaners for repair—there were two neatly punctured holes which had to be filled. Clifford Lynne was theatrical. It was a favourite description of Mr Narth's invariably applied to all phenomena of life that produced an emotional reaction. When all was said and done—and this thought cheered him considerably—Joe Bray's fortune was within his grasp. The clouds that had obscured his horizon the day before were dissipated, and all that was necessary for him to do was to hurry on the wedding and secure the large fortune which was to be his as soon as the conditions were satisfied.

He was almost happy as he went through the private door of his office, and could turn a genial face upon the two men who were awaiting him. Major Spedwell sprawled across one end of the table, a cigar clenched between his teeth, while Mr Leggat was standing by the window, his hands clasped behind him, staring out into the driving rain.

"Hallo, you fellows!" said Narth jovially. "You look as cheerful as mutes at a funeral."

Leggat turned round.

"What are you happy about, anyway?" he asked.

Stephen Narth had not made up his mind whether he should take his colleagues completely into his confidence. With the money that was coming from the Bray estate he could afford to drop his questionable acquaintances, and wipe out, as only money can wipe out, the delinquencies of his past, starting fresh with a clean slate and a fat and comfortable balance at the bank.

"Joe Bray is dead," he blurted, "and he's left me the greater part of his money."

In his exhilaration he was trapped into this incautious declaration, and cursed himself for his stupidity before the words were out of his mouth.

If Stephen had expected the news to create a sensation, he was disappointed.

"Is that so?" said Leggat sarcastically. "And when does the money come into your hands?"

"In a month or two," said the other airily.

"A month or two is a month or two late," said Major Spedwell, his dark face creased in an unpleasant smile. "I've seen the auditors this morning, and it is imperative that the fifty thousand pounds should be found by tomorrow."

"In fact," broke in Leggat, "we're up against it, Narth. We've got to raise that money in the next twenty-four hours. Of course, if there are no 'ifs' and 'buts' about the legacy, you'd be able to borrow the money on the strength of it. Is there a contingency in the will?"

Narth frowned at this; what did the man know? But the other met his eyes unflinchingly.

"There is a contingency," admitted Narth, "but that has practically been overcome."

Leggat shook his head.

"'Practically' doesn't cut any ice," he said. "Is the will such that you could tomorrow borrow fifty thousand pounds upon it?"

"No," said Narth shortly. "In point of fact, I don't know the value of the estate. And there is a contingency——"

"Exactly!" said Spedwell. "That's the position, and it's a pretty bad position! You couldn't raise a fiver on a will with a contingency that had not been satisfied, and on an estate the exact value of which you do not know. I'll bet you haven't even a copy of the will."

Stephen Narth's eyes narrowed.

"You're talking by the book, Major," he said. "Somebody has been telling you a great deal more than I know."

Major Spedwell shifted uncomfortably.

"Somebody's told me nothing," he said loudly. "The only thing that interests Leggat and me is whether you can raise that fifty thousand pounds and, knowing that you can't, we've saved you a whole lot of trouble by asking our friend St Clay to come along and see you."

"Your friend St Clay? The man you mentioned yesterday?"

And then there flashed into the memory of Stephen Narth the recollection of Clifford Lynne's prophecy, "You are seeing him tomorrow."

"Grahame St Clay, eh? Has he got money to burn?" he asked.

Spedwell nodded slowly.

"Yes, he's got money to burn, and he's willing to burn it; and if you take my tip, Narth, you will be the furnace!"

"But I don't know him. Where do I meet him?"

Spedwell walked to the door that led to the general office.

"He's been waiting outside till we had a word with you."

Stephen Narth looked at him in bewilderment. A man with fifty thousand pounds to lend, waiting for the opportunity of making the loan!

"Here?" he said incredulously.

Major Spedwell opened the door.

"Meet Mr Grahame St Clay," he said, and there walked into the office an immaculately dressed gentleman.

Even Narth stared at him open-mouthed, for Grahame St Clay was beyond all question a Chinaman!

CHAPTER SEVEN

"This is Mr Grahame St Clay," Spedwell introduced the visitor again, and mechanically Stephen Narth put out his hand.

Until that moment all Chinamen were alike to Stephen Narth, but somehow, as he looked into the brown eyes, he distinguished in this man a difference that he could not exactly define. The eyes were set wide apart; the nose, thin and long, and the thin lips, differed from those features he was used to associating with men of the Mongolian type. Perhaps it was the full chin which gave Grahame St Clay his distinction. Certainly when he spoke he was like no Chinaman that Stephen Narth had ever seen or heard.

"This is Mr Narth? I am delighted to meet you. In fact, I have sought many opportunities of making your acquaintance."

It was the voice of an educated man, with just that slight drawl and exaggerated pronunciation which is peculiar to one trained in a public school and finished at one of the great universities.

"May I sit down?"

Narth nodded mutely, and the newcomer laid a handsome portfolio on the table before him.

"You are a little dazed to discover that I am a Chinaman?" Mr St Clay laughed softly. "'Yellow Peril' is the term which is usually employed, is it not? I would object to being called a peril, for I am the most unoffending man that ever came from China," he said good-humouredly.

As he spoke, he was opening the portfolio, and took out a flat-covered pad, tied with red ribbon. Very carefully he slipped the bow, took off the top layer of cardboard and revealed to the eyes of Stephen Narth a thick pad of banknotes. From where he stood he saw they were thousand-pound notes.

"Fifty, I think, is the amount you require?" said Mr St Clay presently, and with the dexterity of a bank cashier he counted the requisite number, placed the little bundle on one side, carefully retied the pad, and slipped it back into the leather case. "We are all friends here, I think." Mr St Clay beamed from one of Stephen Narth's partners to the other. "I can speak without restraint?"

Narth nodded.

"Very well." He folded the fifty notes and, to the surprise of the senior partner, put the money into his waistcoat pocket. "There is naturally a

condition attaching to this loan," he said. "Even I, poor, untutored Chinaman though I be, am not so utterly lost to the practice of commerce that I could loan this large sum of money unconditionally. Frankly, Mr Narth, it is required of you that you should become one of us.".

"One of you?" said Stephen Narth slowly. "I don't quite get you."

It was Spedwell who supplied the information.

"Mr St Clay is running a big organization in this country. It's a sort of——" He paused awkwardly.

"Secret society," suggested Mr St Clay pleasantly. "That sounds very mysterious and terrifying, does it not? But really there's nothing to it! I have a certain mission in life, and I require the help of intelligent men on whom I can rely. We Chinamen have rather the qualities of children. We love pomp and mystery. We are, in fact, the true exotics of the world. Mostly we like to play at things, and the Joyful Hands is frankly my invention. Our object is to uplift the Chinese people, to bring as it were light into dark places." He paused, and added: "And all that sort of thing."

Stephen Narth smiled.

"It seems quite a praiseworthy object," he said. "I shall be delighted to join you."

The brown eyes had an hypnotic quality. They transfixed him in that second, and he had the terrifying sensation that he had momentarily surrendered his will to a dominating but beneficent power. That was the strange thing about the Chinaman: he created of himself an atmosphere of beneficence.

"That is well," he said simply, took the wad of notes from his pocket and placed them gently on the table. "No, no, I do not require a receipt—between gentlemen that is unnecessary. You are not a graduate of Oxford? It is a pity. I prefer dealing with men who have that bond with me, but it is sufficient that you are a gentleman."

He rose abruptly.

"I think that is all," he said. "In three days you will hear from me, and I must ask you to hold yourself free to keep any appointment which may be made for you at any hour of the day or night in the course of the next week. I hope that is not too irksome a condition?"

His eyes were smiling as he put the question.

"No, indeed," said Stephen, and gathered up his money with a shaking hand (for the life of him he could not trace the cause of his agitation). "I must say, Mr St Clay, I'm very grateful to you. You have got me out of a very embarrassing situation. How embarrassing, you cannot know."

"Indeed, I know everything," said the other quietly.

And then Stephen remembered.

"Why did he call you the Yellow Snake?"

The Chinaman was staring at him with round, unwinking eyes, and, thinking that he had not heard, Stephen repeated the question.

"Mr Clifford Lynne called me that," said St Clay slowly.

Only for a second did the inscrutable face of the man show that the shaft unconsciously directed had got home.

"Yellow Snake...how vulgar! How like Clifford Lynne!"

He recovered himself instantly, and with a deep laugh, both pleasant and musical, he gathered up his portfolio.

"You will hear from me——" he began.

"One moment, Mr St Clay," said Narth. "You spoke about the object of your league. What is that object?"

The native looked at him thoughtfully for a second, and then:

"The dominion of the world," he said simply, and with a nod he turned and was gone.

In this way came Grahame St Clay, Bachelor of Arts, into the life of Stephen Narth, and henceforth his fate was to be bound by hooks of steel to the will of one who was first to dominate and then to crush him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joan Bray was an early riser from necessity. Her position in the Narth household had been reached by a series of drifts—mainly in the direction of the servants' hall. Mr Narth did not employ a housekeeper: it was an unnecessary expense in view of the fact that Joan was available; and gradually she had accumulated all the responsibilities of an upper servant, without any of the emoluments. She was, in fact, a liaison officer between the pantry and the parlour. It was she who had to arrange the monthly settlements with tradesmen, and confront the raging protests of a man who regarded household expenses as an unnecessary waste of money.

So fully occupied was her day that she had formed the habit of rising at six and taking an hour in the open before the household was awake. The rain of the previous day had left the ground wet and the air cold, but it was such a morning as invited the feet of youth, for the sky was blue, save where it was flecked by a lacing of white cloud.

This morning she had a special objective. The tremendous happening at Slaters' Cottage was the talk of Sunningdale. From her window on the previous evening she had seen the loaded trolleys disappearing into the wood, and the night had provided a strange and fascinating spectacle. She lived near enough to the Slaters' Cottage to hear the sound of hammer and pick, and she had seen the trees silhouetted against the blinding radiance of the naphtha lamps.

Mr Narth had also been an uncomfortable witness of this extraordinary activity, and had made a journey late at night to the Slaters' Cottage, there to discover the extent of Clifford Lynne's folly. So far, Joan had learnt of these doings at third hand. The early morning offered an opportunity for a more intimate investigation, and she diverged from the road to satisfy her curiosity. She could not go far; a gang of men were tearing up the path. Three laden lorries were parked unevenly before the cottage, which was alive with men, and reminded her of a troubled ant-hill. The local builder, whom she knew, came up with a smile.

"What do you think of this, Miss Joan—a thousand pounds worth of repair work on a hundred pound cottage!"

She could only look and wonder. In the night, the roof had been stripped of slates and supporting beams, so that only the bare shell of the cottage remained.

"We got the floors out and the pipes laid by four o'clock," said the builder proudly. "I've hired every labourer within twenty miles."

"But why on earth is Mr Lynne doing all this?" she asked.

"You know him, Miss?" asked the man, in surprise, and she went red. It was impossible to explain that the Slaters' Cottage was to be her home (as she believed) and that his eccentric employer was her future husband.

"Yes, I know him," she said awkwardly. "He is—a friend of mine."

"Oh!"

Evidently this statement checked a certain frankness on the part of Mr Carter. Joan could almost guess what he would have said.

She was smiling as she came back to the road. This freakish and feverish rebuilding of Slaters' Cottage was exactly the thing she would have expected from Clifford Lynne. Why she should, she did not know. Only it seemed as though he had been especially revealed to her; that she alone of the family understood him.

She heard a clatter of hoofs behind her, and moved to the side of the road.

"Bon jour—which I understand is French!"

She turned, startled. It was the man who at that moment was in her thoughts. He was riding a shaggy old pony, sleepy-eyed, almost as dishevelled as himself.

"What an awful trouble you must have had to find a horse that matched you!" she said. "I've seen your car—that was a perfect fit!"

Clifford Lynne's eyes puckered as though he was laughing, but no sound came; yet she could have sworn he was shaking with laughter.

"You're very rude," he said, as he slipped from the pony's back, "and offensive! But don't let us start quarrelling before we are married. And where did you see the car?"

She did not answer this.

"Why are you rebuilding this awful old cottage?" she asked. "Mr Carter said it will cost you thousands."

He looked at her for a little while without speaking, fingering his beard.

"I thought I would," he said absently. "I'm kind of eccentric. Living in a hot climate for so long may have affected my brain. I've known lots of fellows go like that! It's rather romantic, too," he mused. "I thought I'd get some

climbing roses and honeysuckle, and perhaps run a cabbage patch and chickens—are you fond of chickens?" he asked innocently. "Black Dorkings or White Wyandottes, or vice versa? Or ducks perhaps?"

They had reached the end of the road, the shaggy pony following obediently.

"Old Mr Bray was rather set on your marrying one of our family, wasn't he?" she asked, so unexpectedly that for the moment he was taken aback.

"Why, yes," he said.

"And you were awfully fond of Mr Bray?"

He nodded.

"Yes, I think so. You see, we lived together for so long, and he was a likeable old devil. And he nursed me through cholera, and if it hadn't been for him I should have pegged out—which is Spanish for died. I certainly liked him."

"You liked him so much," she challenged, "that when he asked you to come to England and marry one of his relations, you promised——"

"Not immediately," he pleaded. "I made no promise for an awful long time. To tell you the truth, I thought he was mad."

"But you did promise," she insisted. "And shall I tell you something else you promised?"

He was silent.

"You told poor Mr Bray you would say nothing that would make the girl reject you and spoil his plans!"

Only for a moment was the bearded man embarrassed.

"Clairvoyance was never a favourite science with me," he said. "It's too near witchcraft. I knew an old woman up in Kung-chang-fu who——"

"Don't try to turn the subject, Mr Lynne. You promised Mr Bray that when his relations produced a girl of the family for you to marry, you would say nothing which would make her change her mind, that you would in fact express no unwillingness to marry."

He fondled his invisible chin.

"Well, maybe you're right," he confessed. "But I've said nothing," he added quickly. "Have I told you that I'm not a marrying man, and loathe the idea of

matrimony? Have I told you how poor old Joe has blighted my young life? Have I gone on my knees and begged you to refuse me? Own up, Joan Bray!"

She shook her head; the smile that was in her eyes was now twitching at her lips.

"You've said nothing, but you've made yourself look a scarecrow."

"And fearfully repulsive?" he asked hopefully.

She shook her head.

"Not quite. I'm going to marry you; I suppose you know that?"

The gloom in his face was such that she could have smacked him.

"I don't want to marry you, of course," she said tartly, "but there are—there are reasons."

"Old Narth has forced you into it," he said accusingly.

"Just as old Mr Bray forced you into it," she replied at once. "It is a queer position, and it would be tragic if it wasn't laughable. I don't know what's going to happen, but there's one thing I wish you to do."

"What is that?" he asked.

"Go to a barber's and have that ridiculous beard shaved," she said. "I want to see what you look like."

He sighed wearily.

"In that case I'm booked," he said. "Once you see my face you will never, never give me up. I was the best-looking man in China."

He held out his hand.

"Congratulations," he said simply, and she dissolved into laughter, and was still laughing when she came up the drive and met Mr Narth's suspicious frown.

CHAPTER NINE

"What is amusing you?" asked Stephen, who at the moment had good reason for being anything but amused.

"I've just been talking to my—fiancé," she said, and Stephen's face cleared.

"Oh, the wild man!" he said.

He had a letter in his hand. The morning post came early at Sunningdale.

"Joan, I want you to come to the City today—to lunch."

This was a surprising invitation. As a rule when she went to the City she lunched alone.

"A little bit of a lunch in the office," he said awkwardly. "And I want you to meet a friend of mine—er—a rather brilliant fellow, an Oxford graduate and all that sort of thing."

His manner rather than his words puzzled her. He was so obviously ill at ease that she could only wonder at the cause of his embarrassment.

"Is Letty coming?" she asked.

"No, no," he said quickly. "Only you and I and my—um—friend. I suppose you've none of those stupid prejudices against—er—foreigners?"

"Foreigners? Why, no—you mean he isn't European?"

"Yes," said Mr Narth, and coughed. "He is Asiatic; in point of fact, he's a Chinaman. But he's an awfully important person in his own country, my dear, a mandarin or a governor or something, and a perfect gentleman. I wouldn't ask you to meet anybody I shouldn't care to meet myself."

"Why, of course, Mr Narth, if you wish me to ..."

"His name is Grahame St Clay. He has large commercial interests both in this country and abroad."

Grahame St Clay?

Where she had heard that name before, she could not for the moment recall. She asked a question as to the hour and went into the house, wondering for what especial reason she had been chosen as Mr Narth's luncheon guest and why he was so anxious for her to meet his new acquaintance. She had never heard the name before until——

Try as she did, she could not remember when it had been mentioned.

Mr Narth, somewhat relieved, went back to the library and read the letter again. This was the first consequence of his loan, and already he was regretting a transaction which gave a Chinaman the right of addressing him as 'My dear Narth.' There were only a dozen lines of neat writing:

Since I met you today, I have heard that your niece, Miss Joan Bray has become engaged to Clifford Lynne, whom I know slightly. I should very much like to meet this young lady. Won't you either bring her to lunch at the Albemarle, or, if it is more convenient to you, to the City? Perhaps you would fix your own time and place. Please arrange this and telephone me as soon as you get to your office.

The letter had been expressed and posted in London the night before, and the tone of assurance which St Clay had adopted was particularly irritating to a man of Narth's susceptibilities. To do full justice to his character, it may be said in truth that he had no very strong objection to Joan meeting the man. Where Joan was concerned he took a broad view. Had it been Letty or Mabel, he might have felt differently—but it was Joan.

But, being strangely minded, he was by no means anxious to be seen in public lunching with an Oriental, and for that reason had decided that the meal should be in the boardroom, where he had given many little repasts to his business associates.

When he reached his office that morning he found Major Spedwell waiting for him, and that military gentleman was less saturnine than usual.

"I've just seen St Clay," he said. "Have you fixed that luncheon for him? He's rather keen on it."

"Why?" asked Narth.

Spedwell shrugged his shoulders.

"God knows. He's a queer bird, St Clay. He's as generous as a prince—don't forget that, Narth. You'll find him a very useful man."

"What is he in?" asked Narth.

"Business, you mean? He's in all sorts of things. He's got a big factory at Peckham, but he has other means as well. You're in luck, Narth; he's taken a liking to you."

"Oh!" grunted the other; he was by no means enthusiastic.

Spedwell was looking at him with a queer, dry smile on his unprepossessing face.

"You've led a quiet sort of life, haven't you, Narth? I mean the kind of life that the average City man has. You've never gone in for adventure or bloodshed, or things of that sort?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Stephen Narth, staring at him. "Why?"

"I only asked," said the other indifferently. "Only—you can't expect to be a gentle crook all the days of your life."

"'Crook' isn't a word I like, Spedwell," said Stephen sharply.

"I didn't suppose it was," said the other with cool indifference. "I'm merely pointing out the impossibility of getting away with—everything by sitting down in an easy chair and thinking out new ramps. There's no sense in getting up in the air about it, Narth. We're men of the world, and we understand that Narth Brothers has been a sham and a fraud for the past ten years. The gentle crook either drifts gently into a fortune or into jail—and you've made no fortune, and never will."

Stephen Narth faced him squarely.

"What's the idea of all this stuff?" he demanded.

The Major was fingering his little moustache thoughtfully.

"I'm only warning you, that's all," he said, "that there comes a point to every grafter when he's got to try something else, even if he only tries it once. Do you mind me speaking plainly?"

"You're not exactly wrapping up your words now," said Narth sarcastically. "You've called me a grafter and a crook! If you've anything plainer, let's have it!"

The Major pulled up a chair on the opposite side of the writing-table and sat down, folding his arms on the table.

"St Clay's going to try you out," he said, "and if you play up to him there's a million in it!"

Narth looked at him straightly.

"A million pounds is an easy phrase, but a lot of money," he said.

"More than a million," said Spedwell decisively. "This is the biggest thing you've ever been in, my friend."

Narth was irritated. A million—even a nebulous million—was a terrific sum, but was he not the heir to Joe Bray's fortune?

"I don't know that I'm so anxious," he said. "Joe Bray was not exactly a pauper."

For a second a little smile played on the saturnine face of the other.

"How much do you think you're going to get out of that estate?" he asked, and then, hastily: "Well, maybe you'll get a packet—but you'll make more out of St Clay if you play your cards right."

He left Stephen Narth a little uneasy, more than a little bewildered. For the first time since he had received the news of Joe Bray he began to wonder whether he was justified in his jubilation. Yet Joe had been a rich man, the owner of important concessions, a financier of governments, if all that the City said was true—the old fellow must have been enormously rich. It was a pleasant thought.

At a quarter to one Grahame St Clay arrived, a perfectly groomed man about town in his grey morning suit and shining silk hat. Narth had time now to take a closer observation of him. He was just a little overdressed, the diamond pin in his cravat just a little too large. He affected a heavy perfume, and when he took out his silk handkerchief the office became unbearable to a man who was used to a more wholesome atmosphere.

"You got my letter?" It was the tone of an employer speaking to a servant.

Mr Narth writhed. There was something patently offensive in the man's attitude. He glanced at the desk where Narth was sitting, coolly read the letter that he had been writing, and without invitation pulled up a chair and sat down.

"That girl is coming, is she?"

"Miss Bray is lunching with us, yes," said Narth, a little stiffly, and something in his voice must have warned St Clay, for he laughed.

"My dear man, you are suspicious of me! Come, come, this will never do! So early in our acquaintance too! You see, Narth, in my own country I am quite an important person, and I have acquired the habits of the overlord! You must make allowances."

There was a knock at the door. Perkins, the clerk, came in and looked mutely at Stephen.

"Who is it—Miss Bray?"

"Yes, sir," said Perkins. "Shall I tell her to wait—-"

"Ask her to come in."

For the first time in his life it struck Stephen Narth that Joan was a very pretty girl. Certainly she had never looked quite so lovely as she did that morning, a slim figure in a blue tailor-made suit and a little red hat that seemed as if it must have been specially designed to emphasize the milk and rose of her complexion and give to her blue eyes a new depth.

The effect she produced on the Chinaman was remarkable. He stood with his lips apart, staring at her until he saw the red come to her face. Then:

"This is Mr St Clay," said Narth.

Her hand was out to take the big paw extended, when the door leading to the office was flung open and a young man came in. He was a very well-dressed young man; that was the first impression Joan Bray had of the newcomer—a peculiarly feminine instinct that Sackville Street had made his clothes. He was young, but he was not a boy; there was a touch of grey at his temples, tiny lines about his eyes. In the folds of a toga he would have been a tribune of old Rome, with his handsome eagle face and his imperious mien.

He stood in the doorway looking from St Clay to Narth—not once did he look at the girl. For a moment Narth was dumbfounded at this unexpected irruption upon his privacy.

"What do you want?" he asked. "You've made a mistake, haven't you? This is a private office——"

"No mistake at all," said the stranger, and, hearing his voice, the girl turned and looked at him in amazement. "All the mistakes are on your side, Narth, and you never made a bigger mistake than when you had the audacity to ask my future wife to sit at the same table as this damned murdering Chink! Fing-Su!"

Mr St Clay, BA, covered his hands mechanically.

"Excellency!" he said in the Mandarin tongue.

Joan uttered a gasp of amazement. The best-looking man in China had not exaggerated his attraction—for the stranger in the doorway was Clifford Lynne!

CHAPTER TEN

Fing-Su's embarrassment was only of the shortest duration. The folded arms came apart, the shrinking figure gained a new and sudden poise, and Grahame St Clay was his European self again. Into the dark eyes came a malignant fire which made him of a sudden a figure of terror. Only for the fraction of a second did the beast in him raise his head. The light died; he was his old pedantic self.

"This intrusion is perfectly unwarrantable," he said in a^ queer, staccato tone which in any other circumstances would have been ludicrous.

Clifford Lynne's eyes were on the white table with its silver, glass and flowers, and then they slowly strayed to the girl, and he smiled. And this strange man had the most beautiful smile the girl had ever seen.

"If you can endure me through a meal," he said, "I should like to be your host."

Joan nodded.

She was frightened in a breathless, pleasant way, but immensely interested. She would not have been human had she been otherwise. These two men were enemies, bitter and remorseless, and now she understood, as clearly as though the story had been told to her, the significance of the snake which had wriggled from the box in the drawing-room at Sunningdale. St Clay had sent it. This suave Chinaman whom Clifford Lynne had called Fing-Su! And as this realization came to her, she turned pale, and moved unconsciously nearer to the intruder.

"Mr Narth!"

Fing-Su was speaking with difficulty. The rage in him was boiling up through the veneer which the university had given him, and his voice was tremulous, almost tearful.

"You have invited me—to lunch with this lady. You are not to allow this——" Here he choked.

Stephen Narth felt it was a moment when he might at least attempt to assert his personality.

"Joan, you will stay here," he commanded.

That was easy enough to say. What tone he must adopt to the man in the doorway was another and more difficult matter. If the odd-looking apparition

of Sunningdale had been difficult to deal with, this cool and debonair man-about-town was much more of a problem.

"Um—Mr Lynne——" he began, mildly enough. "This is extremely awkward. I have asked Joan to lunch with our friend——"

"Your friend," said Lynne quickly, "not mine! It might occur to you, Narth, that I should wish to be consulted before you issue invitations to my future wife, and ask her to lunch with a man who regards assassination as a remedy for most difficulties that come his way!"

He beckoned Joan to him with a slight jerk of his head, and meekly she went to him. Mr Narth had not even the courage to be angry.

Lynne stood aside for a moment to let the girl pass into the outer office, then he turned.

"Three of you people are playing with fire, and one of you is playing with hell," he said slowly. "Spedwell, you were once an officer in the British Army, and presumably you have the atrophied qualities of a gentleman somewhere in your composition. I am not going to appeal to that tattered remnant, but to your sense of self-preservation. There's a gallows ahead of you, my man—fifty seconds' walk from the condemned cell to eternal damnation!"

He ignored Narth, but his long finger stretched out, pointing to the Chinaman.

"Fing-Su," he said, "for the third time I warn you! The Joyous Hands will need a new chief, and that fine factory of yours will go up in smoke, and you with it!"

Turning, he walked out and slammed the door behind him.

The girl was waiting in the corridor outside the office. She was bewildered, excited, and running through the web of her emotions was a thread of faith in this strange man who had come so unexpectedly and so violently into her life. She turned as he closed the door and responded to his smile.

"Let's go to the Ritz," he said brusquely. "I am a very hungry man; I've been up since four."

He said no word as they went down in the lift to the ground floor, and not until the taxi he called was threading its way through the tangle of traffic at the Mansion House did she speak.

"Who is Fing-Su?" she asked.

He started as though she had aroused him from a reverie.

"Fing-Su?" he said carelessly. "Oh, he's just a Chink; the son of an old Chinese go-getter who wasn't a bad fellow. The old man was missionary-educated, and that, of course, spoilt him. No, I'm not knocking missionaries; they cannot perform miracles. It takes nine generations to make a black man think white, but ten thousand years couldn't change a Chinaman's mentality!"

"He talks like an educated man," she said wonderingly.

He nodded.

"He's a Bachelor of Arts of Oxford. Old Joe Bray sent him there." He smiled at her gasp of astonishment. "Joe did some queer, good-hearted, silly things," he said, "and sending Fing-Su to Oxford was one of them."

She could never remember exactly what happened at luncheon. She had a dim recollection that he talked most of the time, and only towards the end of the meal had she an opportunity of expressing her fears as to Mr Narth's attitude.

"Don't worry about him. He's got his troubles, and they're pretty bad ones," he said grimly.

But there was one matter upon which she must speak. He had ordered a car to be waiting, and insisted upon seeing her home to Sunningdale, and this gave her her opportunity.

"Mr Lynne——" She hesitated. "This absurd marriage——"

"No more absurd than other marriages," he said coolly, "and really not so absurd as it seemed when my whiskers were in full bloom. Do you want to get out of it?"

Joan was pardonably annoyed at the hopefulness in his tone.

"Of course I don't want to get out of it!" she said. "I've promised."

"Why?" he asked.

The colour came to her cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Why did you agree so readily? That rattles me rather," he said. "You're not the kind of girl to take the first man who came along. You're quite different

from the stout and sentimental Mabel and the highly-strung Letty. What pull has Narth?"

The question silenced her.

"He has a pull, hasn't he? He said to you: 'You've got to marry this queer bird or else I'll'——what?"

She shook her head, but he was insistent, and his keen grey eyes searched her face.

"I was ready to marry anything when I came along. But I didn't expect—you!"

"Why were you ready to accept anything?" she challenged, and a faint smile showed in his eyes.

"That's fair," he admitted; "and now I'll tell you. I loved old Joe; he saved my life twice. He was the dearest, most fantastical old romance-hound that ever lived, and was mad keen that I should marry one of his family. I didn't know this until he told me he was dying—I didn't believe him, but that crazy Dutch doctor from Canton confirmed the diagnosis. Joe said that he'd die happy if I'd carry on the line, as he called it, though God knows he has no particular representative of the line worth carrying on—with the exception of you," he added hastily.

"And you promised?" she asked.

He nodded.

"And I wasn't drunk when I promised! I've a horrible feeling that I'm sentimental too. He died in Canton—that's where the cable came from. How like Joe to die in Canton!" he said bitterly. "He couldn't even die normally on the Siang-kiang!"

She was shocked by his callousness.

"Then what do you expect me to do, now that I know you are only marrying me to keep a promise?" she asked.

"You can't take advantage of my frankness and sneak out," he said a little gruffly. "I saw old Joe's will after I'd arrived in England, when it was too late to alter it. Your marriage before the end of the year makes a million pounds' difference to Narth."

"As much as that?" she asked, in amazement.

For some reason he was astonished.

"I thought you were going to say 'Is that all?' It is really worth more than a million—or will be in time. The company is enormously rich."

There followed a period when both were too immersed in their own thoughts to speak, and then:

"You managed—things for him, didn't you, Mr Lynne?"

"My best friends call me Cliff," he said, "but if you find that embarrassing you may call me Clifford. Yes, I managed things."

He offered no further information, and the silence thereafter grew so oppressive that she was glad when the car stopped before the door of Sunni Lodge. Letty, who was on the lawn playing croquet, came across, mallet in hand, with uplifted eyebrows.

"I thought you were lunching in town, Joan?" she asked disapprovingly. "Really, it's awfully awkward. We've got the Vaseys coming this afternoon, and I know you don't like them."

And then she saw for the first time the good-looking stranger and lowered her eyes and faltered, for Letty's modesty and confusion in the presence of Man were notoriously part of her charm.

Joan made no attempt to introduce her companion. She said goodbye to her escort and watched the car glide down the drive.

"Really, Joan," said Letty petulantly, "you've got the manners of a pig! Why on earth didn't you introduce him?"

"I didn't think you wanted an introduction; you've been so awfully unpleasant about him since he was here last," said Joan, not without a little malice.

"But he's never been here before!" protested the girl. "And it's perfectly horrible of you to say that I've said anything unpleasant about anybody. Who is he?"

"Clifford Lynne," said Joan, and added: "My fiancé!"

She left Letty open-mouthed and dumbfounded, and went up to her room. The rest of the afternoon she spent in some apprehension as to what Mr Narth would say on his return. When eventually he did come—it was just before dinner—he was surprisingly affable, even paternal, but she detected

in his manner a nervousness that she had never noticed before, and wondered whether the cause was Clifford Lynne or the sinister Chinaman of whom she had such bad dreams that night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr Clifford Lynne had rented a small furnished house in one of those streets in Mayfair which had the advantage, from his point of view, of a back entrance. There was a small garage behind the house, which opened on to a long and very tidy mews made up of other garages, each capped by a tiny flat, wherein the chauffeurs attached to his respectable neighbours had their dwelling.

Something was puzzling Clifford Lynne—and it was not Fing-Su, or Joan or Mr Narth. A doubt in his mind had blossomed into a suspicion, and was in a fair way to being a conviction.

All that afternoon he spent reading the China newspapers which had arrived by the mail that day. Just before seven o'clock he saw a paragraph in the North China Herald which brought him to his feet with an oath. It was too late to make inquiries, for, simultaneous with his discovery, the visitor was announced.

Mr Ferdinand Leggat, that amiable and affable man, had arrived via the garage in a closed cab, and had been admitted by Lynne's chauffeur through the back door; there was excellent reason for this secrecy.

As he entered the little dining-room he half turned as though to shut the door behind him, but the butler who followed made this unnecessary. On Mr Leggat's face there was something that was not exactly fear, and yet might not be diagnosed as comfort. He was unhappy.

"I wish you could have made it a little later, Mr Lynne," he said, as his host motioned him to a seat.

"There's nothing as innocent as daylight," said Clifford quietly. "Besides, nobody suspects a taxi. You hailed it, I suppose, in the orthodox way? You mumbled a few instructions to the driver and he brought you here. If it had been a long, grey limousine that had picked you up in some dark street, you might have been under suspicion."

"These cabmen talk," said the other, fiddling with his knife and fork.

"Not this cabman; he is my own chauffeur, whom I have had for eight years. You'll find all you want to eat and drink on the sideboard—help yourself."

"Isn't your servant coming in?" asked the other nervously.

"If he was, I shouldn't ask you to help yourself," said Clifford. "I want a little talk with you before you go—that is why I asked you to come so early. What happened today?"

He went to the buffet, helped himself to a small piece of chicken and salad, and brought it back to the table.

"What happened?" he asked again.

Mr Leggat had evidently no appetite, for he carried back to the table a whisky bottle and a large siphon.

"St Clay is furious. You want to be careful of that fellow, Lynne; he's a dangerous man."

Clifford Lynne smiled.

"Have I brought you all the way from your South Kensington home to learn that?" he said sardonically. "Of course he's dangerous! What happened?"'

"I don't exactly know. I saw Spedwell for a few minutes, and he told me that St Clay——"

"Call him Fing-Su—that St Clay stuff gives me a headache."

"He said that Fing-Su raised hell at first, and then insisted that Narth should treat the matter as a joke. If I were you, I'd watch that girl of yours."

Clifford raised his eyes to the other.

"You mean Miss Bray—I'd rather you said 'Miss Bray.' 'That girl of yours' sounds just a little disrespectful," he sai'd coldly. "Do you mind?"

Leggat forced a smile.

"I didn't know you were so darned particular," he grunted.

"I am—a little," said the other. "Yes, Fing-Su is dangerous; I've no doubt about that. I wonder if you realize how deadly he is?"

"I?" asked Leggat, in surprise. "Why?"

The other looked at him strangely.

"I gather that you have joined his precious Joyful Hands and that you've taken some sort of mumbo-jumbo oath?"

Leggat moved uneasily in his chair.

"Oh, that! Well, I don't take much notice of that sort of thing," he said awkwardly. "Secret societies are all very well in their way, but they're a game—playing at mystery and all that sort of thing. Besides, Fing-Su has a fine business in London; he wouldn't try any monkey tricks. Why, he told me that in a year's time he will have almost the whole of the South China trade in his hands, and they say he has trading stations up as far as the Tibetan frontier! The man must be making thousands a year profit! That secret society of his is a trading dodge. Spedwell told me that there are lodges in almost every big town in China. Naturally that's good for business. He has made himself a small god amongst the natives. Look at the offices he is building at Tower Hill, and the factory out at Peckham."

"The factory at Peckham I intend looking at tonight," said Lynne, and the man's face fell.

"What's the sense of that?" he asked. "The place is swarming with Chinks. He's got over two hundred and fifty working there. The Peckham people made a fuss about it when there were only fifty. That's why he lodges them inside the factory. You couldn't get into the works for love or money."

Clifford Lynne smiled.

"I shall try neither," he said. "All I want from you is the pass-key to the lodge gates."

The big man went deathly white, and the hand that went to his lips trembled.

"You don't mean that?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Good God, man, you wouldn't go—I couldn't take you—isn't there another way? Couldn't you tell the police or the Foreign Office?"

"The police and the Foreign Office would give me the merry ha-ha," said Lynne. "I want to see for myself just what is happening inside the boundary wall of those three acres. I want to see just what Mr Grahame St Clay is doing with his warehouses and his ships and motor-barges; but mostly, I am anxious to see the Hall of the White Goat."

Leggat was trembling like a jelly. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came. At last:

"There's death there!" he blurted, and the steely eyes met his.

"For you, perhaps—but not for me!" said Clifford Lynne.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The activities of the Chinese Trading Federation would have excited no unusual interest had it not been for the labour trouble originating in the employment of yellow stevedores. It was known to be a company financed by wealthy Chinese, and it was not thought remarkable that the promoters of this trading concern should prefer to employ men of their own race; and when the labour difficulty was adjusted and the workers employed by the Federation were accepted as trade unionists, the mutterings against 'Chinese labour' died down, to be revived by the protests of the local inhabitants when a particularly unpleasant outrage was committed in the vicinity of the factory. It was the only one of its kind, happily, for the Federation had taken the drastic step of providing lodgings for its workmen within the factory itself. There was accommodation enough, since the grounds held many buildings of solid concrete. It had been one of the innumerable war factories that had sprung up during the war and which the Armistice had left tenantless, and the Federation had acquired the premises for a fraction of their cost.

The factory stood on the banks of the sluggish Surrey Canal, and had its own small dock and quay, where interminable strings of barges were unloaded and re-loaded from week to week. Only the barges were manned by white labour; the ships that carried the merchandise of the Federation to the African shore were both officered and manned by Chinamen.

The so-called Yellow Fleet consisted of four ships, purchased at the very ebb tide of shipping prosperity. The Federation obviously did a very good trade in rice, silk and the thousand and one products of the East. These were usually discharged at the Pool of London itself, and disposed of in the ordinary markets, the vessels reloading from lighters which came out from the Surrey Canal, bearing those exports for which the Federation found the readiest sale.

Rain was falling when Clifford Lynne's taxicab turned out of the Old Kent Road and passed swiftly towards Peckham. Short of the deserted Canal Bridge, the taxi stopped and Lynne descended. He gave a few words of instruction in a low voice to the driver, and went down to the canal bank. Save for the hooting of a distant steamer on its way down river, no sound broke the silence as he walked swiftly along the narrow bank by the waterside. Once he passed a barge moored to the bank, and heard the muffled voices of the bargeman and his wife in altercation.

After ten minutes' walk he slackened his pace. Ahead of him to the left were the dark buildings of the Federation factory. He passed the main gates; the

little wicket door was open, and squatting before it was a gigantic coolie, as he saw in the glow of the cigar the man was smoking. The custodian bade him a guttural "Goodnight," and he answered the salute.

The canal twisted in its course a little beyond the gate, and in a few seconds he was out of sight of the gatekeeper. Presently the wall turned at right angles, and he followed a narrow, unlighted passage-way which ran by its side. The rain had developed into a steady downpour and pattered upon the mackintosh dismally. From his pocket he had taken a small electric torch, and this helped him to avoid the succession of deep muddy holes which occurred at intervals in the unsavoury pathway, which was evidently not used to any extent.

Presently he found what he was looking for—a small door, deeply recessed into the wall. He stood for a few minutes listening, then, inserting the key, turned it, opened the door gently and passed in.

So far as he could see, to his left was the square outline of the main factory against the sky; to his right a squat concrete shed, so low that the roof was on a level with his eyes. During the war this place had been used as a bomb-filling factory, and evidently the shed had been the explosives store.

He felt his way forward gingerly, avoiding the use of light. From somewhere in the dark grounds came deep crooning chorus of song. The men's quarters, he thought, as he located the sound.

A fairly broad flight of stone steps led down to the door of the shed, which was below the level of the ground. Again he stopped and listened, put in his key and gently turned it in the lock. Flashing his lamp inside for a second, he saw the second flight of steps that led deeper into the earth. Here were two doors, but, unlike any other he had passed, these were gaily ornamented with finely carved figures, each painted in bright and vivid colours. Even if he had not been an expert in such matters, he would have recognized the art of China.

It took him some time to find the keyhole, but at last one of the doors was opened. As it swung open, there came to his nostrils the heavy nidor of incense, and a faint, acrid smell that he knew all too well. Despite his courage, his heart beat a little faster.

Closing the door carefully behind him, he sent the light of his torch along the wall, and after a second or two it rested upon a small switchboard. Without hesitation he pulled down a switch. Instantly two great glittering electroliers that were supported on columns of solid bronze gleamed into light.

The room was low-roofed, long and narrow; the concrete walls, which had served when this chamber had been the repository of high explosives, were entirely covered with long panels of scarlet silk on which were embroidered texts from the words of The Sage, and these hangings alternated with half-pillars that seemed to be of hammered gold. The stone floor had been overlaid with brightly coloured tiles, and round three sides of the room ran a broad strip of dark-blue carpet. But this he did not see for the moment. His attention was concentrated upon the long marble altar at the far end of the room. Behind this, on a stone pedestal, was the singular emblem of the secret society—two golden hands clasped together in friendship. They crossed a red lacquered post which was covered with inscriptions in gold.

He stood reading these for a while. These writings were also of admirable intent—exhortations to virtue and filial piety predominated. Beneath the hands was a golden chair on a small scarlet-covered dais. And then he saw, on the altar-top, as he came nearer, a flicker of light that shot out from the edge of the alter, and with a gasp he saw that its rim was set with diamonds!

"Well, I'll go to blazes!" he said in astonishment, and reached out his hand to touch the dazzling gems.

At that moment all the lights in the room went out, and he spun round, jerking a revolver from his hip pocket as he turned.

"Shah!" grunted a deep voice, and something whizzed past his cheek.

He heard the clang of the knife as it struck the wall, and dropped flat on the ground. Again a knife whizzed past, and then he fired twice towards the door. He heard a sob of pain and then, instantly, the sound ceased as though powerful hands had closed the sufferer's mouth.

The silence was complete. Not by so much as the shuffle of bare feet did his attackers betray their presence.

Clifford rolled over and sat up. In a trice he had pulled off his shoes and, knotting the laces together, slung them about his neck, an old schoolboy trick that recalled paddling in a forbidden pond. Rising noiselessly, he felt his way along the carpet, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound.

'Click!'

It was the touch of steel against the tessellated floor—they were searching for him with their swords. How many?

Less than a dozen, he guessed, by the fact that they had not turned on the lights. A bigger force would have risked his revolver. After a while, the chair line turned to the left. He was moving now to the door and there was greater need for caution.

He stopped and listened. Somebody was breathing deeply just in front of him: the guard on the door. There came to him an inspiration. The Chinaman has a peculiar whisper—a low hiss of sound no louder than the sighing of a night wind.

"Go to the Hands—all of you!" he breathed. He spoke in the dialect of Yun Nan, and he was rewarded. The breathing ceased and he moved stealthily toward the door, stopping at every other step to listen.

The carpet line ended abruptly: his fingers touched the silken curtains and then bare wall. In another instant he had passed through the open door and was mounting the stairs. Above him, clearly outlined against the night sky, he saw a figure standing at the outer entrance, bent as in a listening attitude.

Clifford stopped to draw breath, and then with two strides he was up the stairs.

"Move and you die!" he hissed, and pushed the muzzle of his gun into the padded coat.

The man flinched back, but recovered himself instantly. Clifford heard the laugh and knew it.

"Do not shoot, Mr Lynne! Sic itur ad astra! But I prefer another road to immortality!"

In the light of his torch Clifford saw the sentinel. He wore a long coat that fell almost to his heels, and on his head was the round cap of his kind.

It was Grahame St Clay, BA!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Clifford Heard the patter of bare feet on the stairs and whipped round, his pistol raised.

"Call off your dogs, Fing-Su!" he said.

The other hesitated for a second, and then hissed something in a fierce undertone. The rustling ceased but, looking down into the opening, Clifford Lynne saw the dull gleam of a naked sword and smiled.

"Now, friend," he said, and gripping the arm of Fing-Su, he led him towards the door in the wall.

"My dear Mr Lynne"—the Chinaman's voice was reproachful—"if you wish to see our little lodge room, why on earth didn't you write me a note? I should have been glad to have shown you round the premises. As it was, these poor fellows naturally imagined that a burglar had broken in—there is quite a lot of valuable property in the Hall of the Hands, as you may have observed. Really, I should never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to you."

The white man did not reply; all his senses were alert; his eyes roamed from left to right, for he knew that these grounds were full of armed men. Once let Fing-Su get away from him, and his life would be worth very little.

Apparently Fing-Su was thinking along the same lines.

"I never realized you were a nervous man before, Lynne," he said.

"Mr Lynne," said the other significantly, and his prisoner swallowed something in the darkness.

As they were walking towards the door in the wall, Clifford had taken out his flashlamp. The ground sloped gently towards the exit, and now for the first time he pushed the button controlling the light, with no other thought than to guide himself. The rays focused the door for a second, then wandered to the right. Here, built against the wall, was a long roof, about six feet from the ground, and in that second he saw what he thought, at first, was a line of wagons, in the shelter of the slate-covered shed that apparently ran the length of the wall. Just a glimpse he had of that vista of dark grey wheels, and then the lamp was struck from his hand.

"I'm sorry," said Fing-Su apologetically. "Please don't be alarmed; it was quite an accident."

He stooped and picked up the lamp.

"I would rather you didn't show a light here," he said. "In fact, I don't want my people to know that an intruder has witnessed the Hall of Mystery. They are, as you know, Mr Lynne, an excitable, foreigner-hating folk, and, what is more to the point, I am anxious to get you away from this place without injury, and your light gives them, shall I say, a target?"

To this Clifford Lynne did not reply.

They had reached the gate. Fing-Su stepped ahead, unlocked and threw it wide open, and Lynne stepped out backwards, his pistol arm stiff.

"I'll give you a word of warning," he said; "it may be useful to you. You've got more money than a Chinaman should have. Go back to your country; use your wealth to cultivate the land, and get that Emperor bug out of your mind."

He heard a quiet, confident laugh, and knew that his seed had fallen upon a very stony place indeed. As the gate closed softly on him, and the key was turned, he walked swiftly towards the canal bank, throwing his light ahead. The bank was deserted, and he turned back the way he had come, alert, expectant, never doubting that, if it suited Mr 'Grahame St Clay's' purpose, he would have to fight his way to safety. He was still in his stockinged feet, and as he paused a dozen yards from the big gate of the factory, he heard the faint squeak of a hinge. The gate was opening.

He knelt down and looked back along the bank, and saw a procession of stealthy figures moving out from the passageway. That he was in deadly peril he did not doubt. Without the slightest hesitation he slipped his pistol back into his pocket and, sitting on the timbered edge of the canal, he dropped into the water. Very silently, making no splash, he struck out for the opposite bank and for a barge that was moored by the side of a wharf. The water was foul and greasy, but that was a minor discomfort compared with what awaited him if he fell into the hands of the Federation.

Presently he reached and caught hold of a chain, and in silence drew himself to the grimy deck of a coal barge. A few steps brought him to the wharf. A dog growled savagely somewhere in the darkness; from the opposite bank he heard a twitter of excited comment. They had missed him, and had guessed which way he had gone.

Picking his way across the littered wharf, he came at last to a high wooden gate, surmounted by a rusty spike, as he discovered when he tried to climb.

Searching the gateway, he found the wicket, turned the handle, and, to his relief, the door yielded.

The danger was not yet past, he realized, as he ran through a labyrinth of narrow lanes and reached an untidy road, dimly lighted by street lamps. As he reached the road he saw the dim light of a car at the far end, and dropped behind a timber baulk. The machine was moving slowly, and somebody by the side of the driver was sending the rays of a powerful hand-lamp left and right. He heard the sibilant whisper that he knew so well and waited, his dripping pistol in his hand; but the car passed and, rising cautiously, he ran back the way he had come, reached the Canal Bridge without mishap and, most welcome sight of all, two policemen walking together. One flashed his lamp upon him as he passed.

"Hallo, guv'nor, been in the water?"

"Yes, I fell in," said Clifford, and did not stop to offer any further explanation.

At the end of the Glengall Road he found his taxi waiting, and half an hour later he was enjoying the luxury of a hot bath.

He had much to think about that night, principally about that long line of wheeled vehicles he had seen in the shelter of the shed; for he had recognized them as battery upon battery of quick-firing guns, and he wondered what plans Mr Fing-Su had for their employment.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mr Stephen Narth was not as a rule the most pleasant person at the breakfast table. In ordinary times Joan Bray rather dreaded that early meal, when the bacon was generally too salt, and the coffee too strong, and when Mr Narth was wont to recite the extraordinary expense of running his house.

Since the interrupted luncheon party Stephen Narth's manner had undergone a remarkable change, and he was never so pleasant to the girl as he was on the seventh morning after the arrival of the queer man from China.

"They tell me that your friend has got his house finished and furnished," he said, almost jovially. "I suppose we shall be putting up the banns for you, Joan? Where would you like to be married?"

She looked at him aghast.

She had not associated the repairs to the Slaters' Cottage with her own matrimonial adventure. In truth, she had not seen Clifford Lynne since that afternoon he brought her back from London. Joan had the uncomfortable feeling that she had been rather left in the air; she was suffering a little from the reaction of Clifford Lynne's violent proposal. The period of calm which had followed his eruption into her life was in the nature of an anti-climax; she remembered once a great politician who had come to the town where she had spent her childhood, and who had been welcomed with bands and banners; just as he was about to commence his speech expressing his thanks for the welcome, a fire had broken out in an adjacent street, and his audience had melted away, leaving him forlorn and wholly unimportant compared with the conflagration which had suddenly gripped the fickle interest of his admirers. She could sympathize with him.

"I haven't seen Mr Lynne," she said. "And as to marriage. I'm not so sure that he was serious."

Mr Narth's manner changed.

"Not serious? Rubbish!" he exploded. "Of course he's serious! The whole thing is arranged. I must talk to him and fix a date. You shall be married at Sunningdale Church, and Letty and Mabel shall be your bridesmaids. In fact, I think you girls had better go up to town and see about your clothes. It had better be a quiet wedding, with as few guests as possible. You never know what this fellow will do; he's such a wild harum-scarum that is likely as not he will come with an escort of niggers! You had a chat with him, didn't you, when you came back from the—er—office?"

This was the first allusion he had made for some days to the lunch.

"Didn't he tell you what was his salary?"

"No," said Joan.

"Really, father," said Mabel, spreading butter on her toast, "isn't his salary a matter rather dependent on you? Of course we shall have to keep him on: it would be a dirty trick to let Joan marry him and then throw him out; but I really think he should be spoken to—his manner is most disrespectful."

"And his language is appalling," said Letty. "Do you remember, father, what he said?"

"'Hell's bells,'" mused Mr Narth. "It is a new expression to me. I should imagine that he had a contract with poor Joe Bray, so the question of his salary may not arise for some time. Joe was a very generous man and he is certain to have given this fellow enough to live on, so you need have no qualms on the subject, my dear."

"I haven't," said Joan.

"Why he has repaired the Slaters' Cottage so extravagantly, I don't know," Stephen continued. "He surely doesn't expect that I shall allow him to stay here! A manager's place is—er—near the business he manages. Of course, I don't mind giving him a few months' leave—that is usual, I believe—but he will find it difficult to sell the cottage for anything like the cost of the repairs."

He glanced at his watch, rubbed his mouth vigorously with his serviette and got up from the table, and with his departure to town events at Sunni Lodge looked as though they would settle down to normal. But he had not been gone more than two hours when his car came up the drive and the chauffeur brought in a note to Joan, who was deep in her household accounts. Wonderingly she opened the letter.

Dear Joan,—Can you come up straight away? I want to see you. I shall be at Peking House.

"Where is Peking House, Jones?" asked the girl.

The man looked at her oddly.

"It's near the Tower, miss," he said, "not a quarter of a mile from Mr Narth's office."

Letty and her sister were in the village, and, putting on her hat, the girl entered the waiting car. At the far end of Eastcheap, and within sight of that grim old pile that William the Conqueror had built upon Saxon foundations, was a new and handsome stone-fronted building that differed from its neighbours in that it towered six stories above the tallest. A broad flight of marble steps led up to the handsome portico and the marble-lined hall. But its real difference, to the girl, was the character and nationality of its occupants. A stalwart Chinese janitor in a perfectly-fitting uniform ushered her into a lift that was worked by another Chinaman, and as the lift ascended she saw that the marble corridors were alive with little yellow men hurrying from room to room. When she got out of the lift she saw, through a door, a large room where, behind serried lines of desks, sat row upon row of spectacled young Chinamen busy with ink, brush and paper.

"Queer, isn't it?" The Cockney clerk who had been her companion in the lift grinned as they stepped out. "It's the only place in the City of London run entirely by Chinks! Peking Enterprise Corporation—heard of it?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," confessed the girl with a smile.

"There isn't a white clerk in the building," said the young man disgustedly; "and the girl typists—my God! you ought to see some of their faces!"

The lift man was waiting impatiently.

"Come along, miss," he said, almost peremptorily, she thought, and followed him down the corridor to the end, where he opened a door marked 'Private.' A yellow-faced girl rose from her typist's chair.

"You Mrs Bray?" she asked, with the awkwardness of one who was not versed in the language she was speaking, and, when Joan nodded, the girl opened a second door. "You go in," she said, in the same tone of command that Joan had noticed in the liftman.

The first impression the girl had as she entered the room was that she had strayed by mistake into a musical comedy palace. The luxury of marble and satin, of cut glass and mossy carpet, the evidence of vulgar wealth in gilded furniture and silken tapestry, struck her dumb. The high ceiling was crossed with scarlet rafters on which golden Chinese characters had been superimposed in relief. The variety of colours almost blinded her; the only tasteful thing in the room was a great stained-glass window facing her. Beneath this, at a table which seemed to have been carved from solid ebony, sat Fing-Su, who rose as she appeared and came mincingly across the room to greet her.

"Your uncle will be here in a few moments, my dear Miss Bray," he said. "Pray be seated."

He pushed forward something that was not quite as big as a settee, yet was more imposing than the average throne.

"I feel rather like the Queen of Sheba on a visit to Solomon," she said, amusement for the moment quietening her unease.

He bowed low. Evidently he took this as a compliment.

"You are indeed more beautiful than the Queen of Sheba, and more worthy of Sehlomon, the son of David. Had I the wealth of Sennacherib, the King of Ashkelon, I would give you the spoils of Azur and Bethdacon."

She was taken aback by the extravagance of his speech.

"Mr Narth is coming?" she asked.

He looked at her, biting his thin lower lip thoughtfully.

"No, he is not coming," he said. "The truth is, Miss Bray, that he thought it advisable that I should see you in reference to our friend Lynne. The last time we met, if you will remember, there was rather an awkward scene, not of my seeking. Mr Lynne has conceived an unkindly sentiment for me which is largely due to my race. I will not say 'unfortunate race,'" he went on, "because I do not regard ours as in any way inferior to yours. We are human; we have been for thousands of years on a higher intellectual level. And Mr Lynne has no reason to dislike us. My revered father"—he made an almost imperceptible genuflexion—"did much to found the fortune of the Yun Nan Syndicate—indeed, but for his help the concessions would never have been secured and certainly never worked."

She was not prepared to listen to the story of the Yun Nan Concession and its beginnings. She was in truth in a state bordering upon fear, and she rose from her voluminous chair.

"I hardly know Mr Lynne well enough to discuss him——" she began.

"And yet you are going to marry him?"

The flush which came to her cheeks was rather of annoyance than embarrassment.

"That is a matter which concerns me entirely, Mr Fing," she said, and he smiled.

"Fing-Su? Well, I prefer that name. St Clay is cumbersome and a little stupid."

He was regarding her absently.

"You are a clever girl. There is intelligence in your face; you are sensitive to impressions; you have indeed all the qualities which I desire in an assistant—and I have many assistants, yellow and white."

"I don't quite understand you," she said.

"Let me put it clearly to you. I have a reason for wishing the friendship—at least the non-antagonism—of Clifford Lynne. You are in a position to help me very considerably. Do you know anything about the Stock Exchange, Miss Bray?"

"The Stock Exchange?" she said in astonishment. "No, I know very little."

"You know this much—that there is a company called the Yun Nan Concessions?"

She nodded.

"Yes; Mr Narth was telling me yesterday morning that the shares stood at two and three-quarters."

"The ordinary shares," he corrected gently. "You have never seen the founders' shares in the market."

She smiled.

"I don't think I should recognize them if I saw them," she said frankly. "The Stock Exchange is a mystery to me."

"Yet there are forty-nine founders' shares." He spoke with great deliberation. "And I wish to buy one!"

She stared at him in astonishment.

"One?" she repeated.

He nodded.

"Just one. They have no market quotation. Originally they were worth one pound. Today for that one share I am prepared to pay a million!"

She could only shake her head helplessly.

"I'm afraid I can't help you—unless," as a thought struck her, "you would be able to buy one from Mr Narth."

He was amused.

"My dear young lady, Joseph Bray has left no founders' shares to Mr Narth; he has left ordinary shares. The only person from whom such a share is purchasable is your fiancé, Clifford Lynne. Get me that certificate and I will give you a million pounds! You shall have no reason to marry a man who has been forced upon you by your stupid relations. A million pounds! Think of that, Miss Bray—an enormous fortune which will make you as free as the air and independent of Narth and Lynne! Think this matter over! I would not like you to make a decision at this moment. And please remember that in doing this you would be pleasing my dearest friend and patron, now, alas! dead."

He walked to the door and opened it with a flourish. Evidently the interview was at an end.

"You will think of this? And will you be good enough to regard all I have said in this room as confidential? And please remember that, the day you hand me that share certificate, I will give you a cheque on the Bank of England for a million pounds. I will ask no questions——"

Her steady eyes met his.

"There will be no questions to ask," she said quietly, "for I shall never bring the share. If it is worth a million to you, it is surely worth a million to Mr Lynne."

He smiled his inscrutable smile.

"The cheque will be ready for you. This may mean a great deal for you. Miss Bray," he said.

Joan hastened to her relative's office, and with every turn of the car wheels her anger grew.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mr Stephen Narth was obviously uncomfortable.

"I hope you didn't mind, Joan?" he said, as he faced the indignant girl. "The truth is, I am rather under an obligation to the fellow, and he was so keen on seeing you about this business that I simply had to get the thing over. Why he wants to buy a founders' share in the company, heaven only knows. They're not worth a penny."

She was staggered by this intelligence.

"Not worth a penny——?" she began.

"Not worth a penny," said Narth. "Well, perhaps that is an exaggeration. They're entitled to a nominal dividend of 2½ per cent, which means that they're worth about eight shillings per share. They've never been on the market and never will be. I don't believe old Joe had many, either. But I'll make sure."

He rang a bell, and to the patient Perkins:

"Get me the Articles of Association of the Yun Nan Concessions Corporation," he said.

In a few minutes the clerk came back with a thick, blue-covered volume, which he laid on the desk. Mr Narth turned the dusty sheets and stopped at the first page with an exclamation.

"That's queer! I didn't know Lynne was a director." He frowned. "A sort of nominee, I expect," he said, as he turned page after page.

Five minutes' silence, broken only by the rustle of the leaves, and then:

"Well, I'm damned!" gasped Mr Narth. "Listen to this: 'The policy of the Company and the direction of its reserves shall be determined by a Board of Administration which shall be nominated by ballot. At the ballot only holders of the aforesaid founders' shares shall vote. Notwithstanding anything contained in these articles which may be construed otherwise, the Board of Directors shall be the nominees of such a majority——'"

He looked up, startled.

"That means that the ordinary shareholders have no voice at all in the management of the company," he said, "and that of forty-nine shares issued, Fing-Su has twenty-four—phew!"

He looked at the girl open-eyed.

"Somebody told me today that the Yun Nan Company had a reserve of eight millions!" he said. "Got it out of coal and a gold-field and the money they had sent them after the Russian revolution..."

He was a little incoherent.

"And the majority are held by Clifford Lynne," he said slowly, and for the first time he became conscious of the ruthless struggle that was in progress for the control of this great reserve.

His hand went up to his trembling lips.

"I wish to God I was out of it!" he said huskily, and something of his fear was communicated to the girl.

Driving back to Sunningdale, Mr Narth's car, in which she was travelling, overtook a very ordinary-looking taxicab, and it was only by accident that she glanced at its occupant. It was Clifford Lynne, and at his signal she stopped the car.

He got out of the cab, walked to the car and, without even asking permission, he opened the door of the car and stepped in.

"I'll travel with you as far as the end of my street," he said. "The fact is, my cab is rather uncomfortably loaded with grub! I'm taking possession of my new domain."

He was looking at her keenly.

"You have been to town. I won't presume to anticipate the rights of a loving husband and ask you why you are traveling in this splendour, but I presume that you have been visiting friend Narth?" And then, quickly: "You didn't see Fing-Su, did you?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I saw him," she said. "I had an interview with him this morning."

"The devil you did!"

If he was angry he did not betray his emotions.

"And what did that naïve and ingenious child of nature say to you?" he asked banteringly. "I'll bet it was something pretty crude! There never was a

Europeanized Chinaman who did not go through life under the delusion that he was a diplomat!"

Should she tell him? She had given no promise, and only had Fing-Su's request that the character of the interview should be secret.

He saw her hesitation, and with uncanny shrewdness leapt straight at the truth.

"He didn't want to buy a founders' share of the YNC, did he?"

And, when she went red, he slapped his knee and laughed long and riotously.

"Poor old Machiavelli!" he said at last drying his eyes. "I never dreamt he would be satisfied with his tenth!"

"His tenth?"

He nodded.

"Yes; Fing-Su owns a tenth of our property. That is news to you? Joe Bray held another tenth."

"But who has the remainder?" she asked in amazement.

"Your future lord, but I doubt master," he said. "Our Chinese friend is more than a millionaire, but isn't satisfied. In a moment of temporary aberration Joe parted with a block of founders' shares to Fing-Su's father, and on top of that he handed most of the remainder to Fing-Su himself! Honestly, I don't believe Joe was ever sane; and the maddest thing he ever did——" Here he checked himself. "Maybe he didn't do that
...but I have my suspicions, and I shall know for certain tonight."

She did not ask him what those suspicions were and he went on:

"There was no real company until I joined forces with Joe. He'd just scraped a little coal out of the land for which Fing-Su's sainted parent got the concession. But the silly old gentleman had made an agreement that his Chinese helper should have a tenth share of the profits. I didn't know this until I'd added a large tract of coal land to the property, and after that the legal difficulties of kicking out Fing-Su's papa were such that it wasn't worth while fighting. What I did, however, was to refloat the company with a larger capital—does this bore you?"

She shook her head.

"I only dimly understand," she said, "but I want to, badly!"

Again his quick, half-suspicious scrutiny.

"It was then that I put in the clause about the founders' shares to prevent dear old Joe from doing anything more altruistic. Your revered relative was not the most intelligent of men, though the truest heart that ever beat, and founders' shares meant nothing to him when he discovered there was no profit attached to them. Of the forty-nine shares issued, Fing-Su's father took nine (Joe was stout on this point), and Joe and I took twenty each."

"What do the reserves mean?" she asked.

For a second he looked at her, suspicion in his eyes.

"We have a large reserve," he said at last, "but a great deal of it really doesn't belong to us. You see, we had a very big business in Manchuria—we were bankers there amongst other things, and when the revolution came along, enormous sums were deposited with us and transferred to Shanghai. Many of the depositors, poor souls, are dead, and these include some of the biggest. In the present state of chaos it is impossible to trace their relatives. Their money is known as Reserve B: that is the reserve which Fing-Su is after!"

He saw that she was puzzled, and went on:

"It was not until a few months ago that I learnt that Joe had given away more than half his founders' shares to this sleek young scoundrel Fing-Su. He would have given him the lot, only five of the certificates—each share is separated—he couldn't find. Thank God I got them and had them transferred to me. Whilst I have the predominant holding, Fing-Su can do nothing with the reserves. Once he has that share, not all the courts of China can stop his playing the devil with other people's money. Oh, Joe! You've got a lot to answer for!"

This time she reproached him.

"Mr Lynne—Clifford, you want me to call you?—how can you say such unpleasant things about a man who was your friend and is now dead?"

He did not reply immediately, and when he did it was to ignore the question.

"This world is a pretty good place to live in," he said, "and I hate the thought of leaving it—but one of these days I'm going to kill Fing-Su!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Joan Bray had a large attic which had come to be the most comfortable room in the house. It was not intended to be such when this retreat was given to her; but Joan was popular with the servants at Sunni Lodge, and in some mysterious way odd and cosy pieces of furniture had found their way to the room under the roof with its big windows and outlook. It had a special value to her now, for from this vantage she could see the square chimney of the Slaters' Cottage, and this gave her an indefinable sense of communion with the strange man who had come over her horizon.

The girls were out when she arrived, and she went up to her attic apartment, locked the door and sat down on the ancient sofa and, with her head between her hands, tried to straighten out the confusion in her mind. That Clifford Lynne had been no salaried servant of her relative, she had suspected from the first. He was a rich man, richer even than Joe Bray—what effect would that have had upon Stephen Narth's attitude had he known from the first? Suppose, instead of the apparition with the wild beard and the untidy clothes, there had appeared at Sunni Lodge that fateful afternoon this good-looking, well-dressed man, not in his role of manager, but as co-partner of Joe Bray? She had no doubt at all as to what would have been the result.

Somehow—she could not exactly tell why—the knowledge of Clifford's wealth depressed her. For what appeared now to be a very inadequate reason, she had steeled her soul to an appalling marriage with an unknown man, and had grown used to the prospect of her sacrifice. She shook her head. She was cheating herself: it had never really seemed a sacrifice. The stranger had interested her from the first; was an individuality so far outside the range of her experience that his very novelty had overcome all her natural qualms.

Joan was beginning to see life from a new angle, to realize the tremendous difference this marriage would make, and Letty (or was it Mabel?) had been right. What did a girl know about the lover into whose hands she placed her future? Already she knew, and was more akin to, the nature of Clifford Lynne than had been half a dozen brides she could recall to the real character of the men they had wed.

Walking to the window, she stood looking at that visible portion of the Slaters' Cottage which showed through the trees. Smoke was coming from the chimney now, and she remembered the cab full of provisions and wondered if Clifford Lynne was as efficient as a cook as he seemed in other directions.

Woodmen were engaged in felling the trees about the cottage. Even as she looked she saw a high fir topple over slowly and heard the crash of its branches as it struck the ground. By tomorrow the cottage would be almost completely visible, she thought, and turned at that moment as a tap came upon the door.

"It's Letty," said a shrill voice, and, when she hastened to turn the key: "Why on earth do you lock yourself in, Joan?"

Letty had only made two visits to the room, and now she looked around with an air of surprise.

"Why, you're very comfortable here!" she said, and, had Joan been uncharitable, she would have read into the surprise a note of disappointment. "Father has been on the telephone; he won't be home tonight. He wants us to go up to dinner with him—you don't mind being left alone?"

It was an unusual question, considering that it was addressed to one who had spent many an evening alone and was glad of the privilege.

"We may be late because we're going on to a dance at the Savoy after the theatre."

She was turning to go, with another glance round the room,-when she remembered something.

"I've seen that man Lynne, Joan. He's awfully good looking! Why on earth did he come here in that ridiculous get-up?"

Here was the inevitable grievance which Joan had anticipated. Minds were evidently working along parallel lines at Sunni Lodge.

"Not that it would have made any difference to me," said Letty, with a lift of her chin. "A girl can't live on good looks."

There was an imp of mischief in Joan Bray's composition, and she was, moreover, intensely curious to know what would be the effect upon the girls if she passed on her information.

"Clifford Lynne is not a poor man: he is very rich," she said. "Mr Bray only held a one-tenth interest in the company. Clifford Lynne has a four-fifths holding."

Letty's jaw dropped.

"Who told you that?" she asked sharply.

"Clifford Lynne. And I know he was speaking the truth."

Letty opened her mouth to say something, changed her mind, and, slamming the door behind her, went downstairs. In five minutes the girl heard voices outside the door, and without knocking Mabel came in, followed by her sister.

"What is this that Letty tells me about Lynne?" she asked almost querulously. "It is rather curious that we haven't heard about it before?"

Joan was amused; she could have laughed aloud, but she managed to keep a straight face.

"You mean about Mr Lynne's wealth? He's a very rich man—that is all I know."

"Does Father know too?" asked Mabel, struggling to suppress her unreasonable anger.

Joan shook her head.

"I should imagine he doesn't."

The two sisters looked at one another.

"Of course, this alters everything," said Mabel emphatically. "In the first place, nobody wanted to marry a scarecrow, and in the second place, it was ridiculous to expect either of us girls to tie ourselves for life to a poverty-stricken servant, as it were, of uncle's."

"Preposterous!" agreed Letty.

"It was obviously Mr Bray's idea that he should marry one of us girls," said Mabel. "I don't suppose he'd ever heard of your existence, Joan."

"I'm pretty sure he hadn't," answered Joan, and Mabel smiled, as she seated herself in the most comfortable chair in the room.

"Then we've got to be just sensible about this," she said, in her most amiable tone. "If what you say is true—and of course I don't think for one moment that you've made it up—dear Uncle Joe's wishes should be——"

"Fulfilled," suggested Letty, when Mabel paused for a word.

"Yes, that's it—fulfilled. It is a little awkward for you, but practically you don't know the man, and I'm sure the idea of this marriage has worried you a great deal. As I was saying to Letty, if there is any sacrifice to be made, it is up to us to make it. We don't want to use you, so to speak, as a catspaw, but at the same time I feel that we haven't quite played the game with you, Joan. I told father only this morning that I had my doubts about the marriage, and that we ought to think the matter over more before we allowed you perhaps to let yourself in for a perfectly horrible life with a man you don't know——"

"And you don't know him quite so well," Joan was compelled to say.

"Still, we've larger experience of men," said Mabel, gravely reproachful. "And don't think for one moment, Joan, that the question of his wealth makes the slightest difference to us. Papa is rich enough to give me a good time whether I marry Clifford Lynne or not."

"Whether either of us marries Clifford Lynne or not," corrected Letty with some asperity, "and——"

There was a knock at the door. Letty, who was nearest, opened it. It was the butler.

"There's a gentleman called to see Miss Joan——" he began.

Letty took the card from his hand.

"Clifford Lynne," she said breathlessly, and Joan laughed.

"Here is an excellent opportunity of settling the matter, Mabel," she said, not without malice. "After all, he ought to be consulted!"

Letty went red and white.

"Don't you dare!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I will never forgive you, Joan, if you repeat one word!"

But the girl was already half way down the first flight of stairs.

Joan went alone to the drawing-room, oblivious to the whispered injunctions which followed her down. She had an almost overpowering inclination to laugh, and there flashed to her mind a homely parallel; only, if she were Cinderella, neither Letty nor the plump Mabel could by any stretch of imagination be described as the ugly sisters.

She found him standing at a window looking out over the-' lawn, and he turned quickly at the sound of the opening door. In his abrupt way and without preamble he asked:

"Could I see you tonight?"

"Why—yes," she said. And then, remembering: "I shall be alone. The girls are going to town."

He scratched his chin at this.

"Are they?" He frowned. "But that doesn't make a great deal of difference. I want to see you at the cottage. Would you come if I called for you?"

The proprieties were never a strong point with Joan; she was so sure of herself, so satisfied with the correctness of her own code, that other people's opinion of her did not matter. But his suggestion did not accord with her own theory of behaviour.

"Is that necessary?" she asked. "I will come if you wish me to, for I know you would not invite me unless you had a special reason."

"I have a very special reason," he insisted. "I want you to meet somebody. At least I think I do."

He ran his fingers through his hair irritably.

"A friend of mine—and not so much of a friend either."

She was astonished at his agitation and could only wonder I what was the extraordinary cause.

"I'll call for you about ten," he said. "And, Joan, I've been thinking matters over and I'm rather worried."

Instinctively she knew that the cause of his trouble was herself.

"Have you changed your mind?" she bantered.

He shook his head.

"About marrying you? No. I've never dared let myself see how this fool adventure would end. If I hadn't been doped with a drugging sense of duty—however, that has nothing to do with the case. We shall have to consider the position from a new angle tonight. I'd gone so far and suffered so much——"

"Suffered?"

He nodded vigorously.

"By a provision of nature," he said soberly, "you are spared the misery of growing a long and golden beard. It wasn't so bad when I was miles from everywhere in my little house in Siangtan, and on the voyage home; it was when I came into contact with civilization—can you imagine what it is to dress for dinner and to discover that when you fastened your collar you had imprisoned a large and painful hank of hair?...However, that's done with, and now"—he paused awkwardly—"I'm not sorry."

"About growing a beard?" she asked innocently.

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"You know jolly well I don't mean anything about the beard, and that I'm talking of you. I wish I had time to study you. You've probably got a fearful temper——"

"Vile," she admitted mendaciously.

"And possibly you're vain and empty-headed," he went on with great calmness. "All pretty girls are vain and empty-headed; that is one of the lessons I learnt at the knee of the maiden aunt who brought me up. But in spite of these drawbacks I kind of like you. That's queer, isn't it?"

"It would be queer if you didn't," she said, adopting his attitude, and he laughed. "Have you committed your murder?"

He started.

"Murder? Oh, you mean Fing-Su? No, I fear that tonight I shall be too busy. I'm certainly going to kill Fing-Su," he said, and though his tone was matter-of-fact, she shivered, for he conveyed to her the impression of a man in very great earnest. "I've got to kill him. But tonight?" He shook his head. "A lot of things have got to happen before then. When can you marry me?"

He was serious enough, and at the direct question she felt herself going red.

"Is that necessary?" she asked, a little desperately, for now, brought face to face with the logical consequence of her undertaking, she had a moment of panic. There was something very definite about his question, and that gave her a certain fearful twinge of happiness. But it was also too businesslike, too free from the atmosphere of tenderness which conventionally surrounds such a proposal, and she was just a little bit annoyed with him. It brought the proposition back to its original commercial setting, extinguished the

faint glitter of romance, a sickly flame at best, which the past few days had brought to life.

"I suppose you will suit your own convenience," she said coldly. "You realize, of course, Mr Lynne, that I do not love you, any more than you love me?"

"That goes without saying," he said brusquely. "But I will tell you something: I've never been in love; I've had my dreams and my ideals, as every man and every woman has, and you are the nearest approach to the mystery woman of my dreams that I shall ever hope to meet. When I tell you I like you, I mean it. I'm not in that ecstatic state of mind when I am prepared to kiss the ground on which you walk, but that is a form of delirium which may come later."

All the time he was speaking there was that kind and friendly smile in his eyes which made it impossible for her to arouse her resentment to any high pitch. She was exasperated with him, and yet could admire his honesty, and had no piqued inclination to offer the obvious retort that her heart was at least as free as his.

"Today is Monday," he said. "We will be married on Friday by special licence. Friday will be an unlucky day—for somebody."

"You really mean Friday?" she asked, with a pang of dismay.

"It's rather sudden, I know; but then, things are moving more quickly than I anticipated," he said.

He took up his hat from the table where he had placed it when he came in.

"I shall call for you at ten. Do you mind?"

She shook her head.

"And you're not afraid?" he bantered, and hurriedly added: "There's really no reason for fear—not yet."

"Tell me when I must begin fearing you," she said, as she walked with him to the door.

"You need never fear me," he said quietly. "I was thinking of somebody else."

"Fing-Su?"

He looked round at her quickly.

"A thought-reader too, are you?" He put his hand about her arm and squeezed it gently. It was a very friendly, brotherly gesture, and it left her, for some reason, very near to tears.

The two girls, who appeared from nowhere as the door closed on Clifford, followed her back to the drawing-room.

"You didn't tell him anything, did you?" asked Mabel rapidly. "You wouldn't do anything so mean and underhand as that, Joan?"

Joan looked at her in surprise.

"What were we talking about?" she asked, and she was honest in her bewilderment, for she had forgotten the conversation in her room.

"Letty had an awful feeling you'd tell him what we'd been discussing, but I said, 'Letty, Joan would never, never do anything so despicable.'"

"About your marrying him?" asked Joan, suddenly understanding. "Oh, no, I had forgotten that—we were so busy fixing the date—Mr Lynne and I are to be married on Friday."

"Good God!" said Mabel.

Her profanity was pardonable, for in a moment of great self-sacrifice she had decided to be Mrs Clifford Lynne.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sisters went to town at six o'clock, and Joan from her window was heartily glad to see the limousine pass out of sight along the Egham road. She ate her dinner in solitude and waited impatiently for the coming of Clifford Lynne. She was a little baffled by his attitude. The marriage was still in the category of business arrangement; with the exception of that half-caress he had shown neither tenderness nor that sentimental regard for her charms which is to be expected even in the most self-possessed of men; and yet there was little that was austere or cold in his composition, she was sure. None the less, between them was a barrier which must be broken down, a gulf which only mutual affection could bridge. For one brief moment the prospect of this cold-blooded marriage terrified her.

She was standing before the half-open front door of the house when she heard his quick step on the gravel, and, assuring herself that she had the key in her bag, she closed the door gently behind her and went to meet him.

Suddenly she found herself in a circle of light.

"Sorry!" said Clifford's voice. "I was pretty certain it was you, but I had to take one peep."

"Who else might it be?" she asked as she fell in by his side.

"I don't know," was the unsatisfactory reply.

Her arm slipped into his in the most natural way.

"I am by nature cautious and even suspicious, and there's something about the English countryside that is more sinister than the bad lands of Honan would be to a traveller with a camel-load of 'Mex' dollars! You see, there, you know where you are—you are either at peace or at war with your neighbours; but in England you may be at war all the time and never know it. Do you mind walking in the middle of the road—that doesn't scare you, does it?" he asked quickly, and she laughed.

"I've an infinite faith in the police," she said demurely.

She heard him chuckle.

"The police? Yes, they're quite all right in most cases, especially when they are dealing with known criminals, and the printed categories of crime. But Fing-Su isn't a known criminal; he's a highly respectable person. How he has escaped the OBE I can't understand. We turn right here."

There was no need for him to tell her that, for her eyes, accustomed to the darkness, saw the dark opening that led to the Slaters' Cottage. What had once been a rough wagon track was now a smoothly gravelled road. A few yards down the drive she saw the tall column of a light standard.

"Yes, we're putting in all modern improvements," he said when she called his attention to this innovation. "Only the evil love the dark. I, who am of a virtuous disposition, use this thousand-candle-power arc to advertise my rectitude!"

Suddenly he stopped, and she perforce must halt too.

"I said the other day that Narth had a pull with you, and you didn't deny it," he said. "I discovered the pull a few days ago. Your brother was accidentally killed whilst leaving the country with money taken from Narth's office."

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

"That was it, eh?"

She heard his sigh of relief. What else could he have imagined? she wondered.

"I get it now," he went on as they resumed their walk. "It was that 'after all I've done for you' stuff? Otherwise, I should have been completely rejected. I'm glad."

He said this so simply and sincerely that she felt the colour coming to her face.

"Has your friend arrived?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered shortly: "he came an hour ago, the——" He smothered an imprecation.

"One would think——" she began, when suddenly he gripped her arm.

"Don't speak," he whispered.

Joan saw that he was looking back the way they had come, his head bent in a listening attitude, and her heart began to thump painfully. Then, without warning, he led her to the side of the road and to the cover of a great fir tree and pushed her behind it.

"Stay there," he said in the same low tone.

Almost immediately he disappeared, making his way noiselessly over a carpet of pine needles from tree to tree. She stared back after him; all she could see was the pale evening sky behind a belt of tall firs, and the sky's reflection of a puddle which had gathered at the side of the drive. She was not usually nervous, but now she felt her knees trembling under her, and her breath came shallowly. After a while she saw him emerge from the gloom near at hand.

"It was nothing," he said, but she noticed that he still kept his voice down. "I thought I heard somebody following us. I'll have these trees down tomorrow; they make too good cover——"

Something came past them with the sound of a hissing whip. There was a thud, and silence. He said something in a strange language, and then he stepped back and, reaching up, pulled something from the trunk of a fir.

"A throwing knife," he whispered. "I tell you, these Yun Nan murderers are wonderful shots, and the devils can see in the dark! Where's the nearest policeman?"

In spite of herself she was shivering.

"The patrol won't be near here for another hour," she faltered. "Did somebody throw a knife?"

"Not for another hour, eh?" he said, almost brightly. "Providence is on my side!"

He took a thing from his pocket—in the half light it looked to be a fat silver cylinder; she saw he was fitting it to the end of a long, black pistol.

"Mustn't alarm the neighbours," he said, and slipping from her side, again vanished into the darkness.

She waited, her heart in her mouth, and suddenly:

'Plop!'

The squawk that followed came from somewhere surprisingly near. She heard on the gravel drive a patter of feet that grew fainter and fainter. When it had ceased, Clifford rejoined her, and he was unfixing the silver box.

"Got him, but not seriously," he said. "I'm glad I didn't kill him. I should either have had to bury him in the wood and risk a scandal, or take him before a magistrate and make a newspaper sensation."

"Did you shoot him?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I shot him all right," he said carelessly. "I think he was alone."

Again he took her by the arm and led her along the drive, and they walked swiftly towards the Slaters' Cottage. There was no sign of life: the shuttered windows were dead, and even the sound of the muffled explosion had not roused the interest or curiosity of Clifford Lynne's guest.

He waited for almost a minute on the step of the cottage, listening.

"I think there was only one man," he said with a little sigh of relief, "and probably a watcher, who reckoned he'd improve the shining hour by a little target practice. You're not frightened?"

"Yes, I am," she said; "I'm horribly frightened!"

"So am I," he said. "I hate myself for taking this risk with you, but I had no idea there was any danger—yet."

He put a key in the lock and opened the door. They were in a narrow passageway, from which, she saw as he switched on the light, two doors led left and right.

"Here we are." He walked before her, turned the handle of the left-hand door and threw it open.

The room was newly and well furnished. Two large bulkhead lights fixed to the ceiling threw a diffused light through opalescent globes upon the apartment and its contents.

Sitting before the wood fire was a big man. She judged him to be sixty, and he was curiously attired. He wore, over a pair of neatly creased trousers, a huge red dressing-gown, behind which a stiff shirt shone whitely. He had on neither collar nor tie, and an immaculate morning coat hung over the back of a chair. As the door opened he looked up, took out the short clay pipe he had been smoking, and stared soberly at the visitor.

"Meet Miss Joan Bray," said Lynne curtly.

The big stranger got heavily to his feet, and the girl noticed that on his many-chinned face was the cowed look of a schoolboy detected in an unlawful act.

"Now, Joan," said Lynne grimly, "I want you to know a relative of yours. Let me introduce you to the late Joe Bray, who was dead in China and is alive in England!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Joan Could only stare, speechless, at her relative. Joe Bray! If she had indeed seen a ghost she could not have been more staggered.

He turned a sheepish face to Clifford.

"Have a heart, Cliff!" he pleaded feebly. "Have a heart!"

"I have a heart and I have a head too, and that's where I've the advantage, you foolish old conspirator!"

Joe blinked from Clifford to the girl.

"It's like this——" he began loudly.

"Sit down." Clifford pointed to the chair. "I've had your version six times; I don't think I can stand it again. Joan," he said, "this is the veritable Joseph Bray, of the Yun Nan Concession. Any mourning which you may have ordered for him you can cancel."

"It's like this——" began Joe again.

"It isn't a bit like that," interrupted Lynne.

There was a twinkle in his eye which she had seen once before.

"This Joe Bray is romantic." He pointed an accusing finger at the humbled man. "He has just brains enough to dream. And one of his crazy dreams was that I should marry into his family. And in order to drive me to this desperate step he invented a fake story about his being on the point of death. To support which—he has confessed this now—he procured the assistance of a doping, boozing doctor from Canton, who would certify a man insane for the price of a double whisky."

"It's like this——" attempted Joe, louder still.

"The moment he got me out of the way," continued the other remorselessly, "he sneaked down to Canton with his pal the doctor and followed me home on the next boat, leaving instructions that the death wire was to be sent as soon as he reached England."

Here Joe asserted himself violently.

"You never would have married nobody if I hadn't done it!" he roared. "You've got a hard heart, Cliff! Dying wishes don't mean no more to you than

a beer-stain on a policeman's boot. I had to die! I thought I'd come along to the wedding and give you all a surprise——"

"You're indecent, Joe," said Clifford gravely. "You're the kind of man who can't stay put."

He turned to Joan, his lips twitching.

"I had my suspicions when I saw no reference to his death in the English newspapers," he said. "Joe isn't particularly important in relation to the rest of the world, but he has a pretty big name in China, and the least I expected was a couple of lines of regret from our special correspondent in Canton. And then when I saw in the North China Herald an announcement that Mr Joe Bray had booked a suite on the Kara Maru——"

"In the name of Miller," murmured Joe.

"I don't know what name you used, but one of the reporters saw your baggage going aboard and recognized you on the street, so the camouflage wasn't as blinding as you thought."

Joe sighed. From time to time his eyes had been straying towards the girl, in a furtive, shamefaced way, but now he had the resolution to look at her straightly.

"I must say"—he waggled his huge head ecstatically—"I must say, Cliff, that you've got the pick of the bunch! She's rather like my sister Eliza, who's dead and gone now twenty-eight years. On the other hand, she's got my brother George's nose——"

"You're not going to sidetrack me with your personalities," said Clifford. "You're a wicked old man!"

"Artful," murmured Joe, "not wicked. It's like this——"

He stopped, evidently expecting an interruption, and, when it did not come, was at some loss to proceed.

"I've had a lot of disappointments in my life, young lady," he began oracularly. "Take Fing-Su! What I've done for that boy nobody knows except me and him. And when Cliff told me what sort of a feller he was, you could have knocked me down with a feather! I've been kind and generous to that pup, I admit it..."

As he rambled on, the girl's brain grew more active. Joe Bray alive, meant the end of all Stephen Narth's plans—how would it affect her, she wondered.

She recognized with a feeling of dismay that the reason for the marriage had disappeared, and was painfully startled to discover that there was any cause for unhappiness in this development.

Her eyes met Clifford Lynne's and fell; for it was as though in that brief glance he had read her thoughts.

"...When I realized what I'd done I said to him, 'Cliff, I'm sorry.' Did I or did I not, Cliff? I said, 'If I'd known what I know now, I'd never have parted with them shares.' Did I or did I not, Cliff? To think that that dog—I might even call him worse if you wasn't here, young lady—should get these silly and wicked ideas into his head!"

Joan was beginning to understand now. "A romance-hound," Clifford had called the old man, and she saw now the ponderous diplomacy which had produced this present condition of affairs. Joe had invented his own death in order to ensure the alliance of the man he loved with a member of his family, and it was a little pathetic to think that even 'the family' was largely a figment of his imagination. He had known Stephen Narth as a name and had been his almoner. He must have heard of Stephen's daughters, but of Joan's existence it was fairly certain he had been completely ignorant.

"Does Mr Narth know you're——" She hesitated to say 'alive' and substituted "back in England?"

Joe shook his head, and it was Clifford who answered.

"No, Narth mustn't know. I'm keeping Joe down here for a day or two until things develop. And most of all, Joan, Fing-Su mustn't know. That credulous native has accepted the news of Joe's death without question. For the moment he is concentrating his efforts upon securing the one founders' share which will give him control of the company."

"Would it actually give him that control?" she asked, in surprise.

He nodded.

"It sounds absurd but it is a fact," he said gravely. "If Fing-Su could get that share, he would be able to kick me out, take complete control of the company, and although, of course, he would be liable at law to deal fairly with the ordinary shareholders, in fact he could divert a sum of ten million pounds to his own purpose."

She shook her head helplessly.

"But surely it is impossible for him to buy that extra share—isn't it, Clifford?"

He nodded.

"There is only one method by which Fing-Su could get control," he said slowly, "and I'm hoping that he doesn't realize what that is."

He offered no further explanation. Soon after, he disappeared into the kitchen to brew coffee, and the girl was left alone with the big man—an experience which promised considerable embarrassment, for Joe got up and closed the door carefully behind his partner.

"How do you like him?" he asked in a hoarse whisper as he settled himself again in his chair.

It was an awkward question to answer.

"He's very nice," she said—ineffectively, she thought.

"Ye-es." Joe Bray scratched his chin. "He's a good scout, Cliff. A bit hard on other people, but a good fellow." He beamed at her. "So you're one of us—that's fine! You're the kind of girl I'd have picked. What's the others like?"

She was spared the embarrassment of an answer, for he continued:

"Yes, Cliff's hard! A little drop of gin never did nobody any harm, you take it from me, miss. It's good for the kidneys, for one thing. But Cliff's pussyfoot—well, not exactly pussyfoot, you understand, but he doesn't like seeing bottles around."

She gathered that such a sight was not altogether objectionable to Joe Bray.

"Yes, I'm glad he picked you—-"

"To be exact, Mr Bray, I picked him," she said, half laughing, and he opened his pale eyes wider.

"Did you? Did you? Well, he's not a bad fellow. Too quick with his gun, but that's youth, always wanting to be killin' somethin'. You'll have a lot of children, I've no doubt, miss?"

At this moment came a very welcome Clifford Lynne, carrying a brand-new silver tray laden with brand-new silver coffee-pot and cups. He put the tray upon the table, and he had hardly taken his hand away when there was a faint click. The sound was so close upon the noise made by the setting tray

that Joan scarcely noticed it. She saw Cliff look towards the shuttered windows and put up his finger, signalling silence.

"What's that, Cliff?" The old man looked up quickly with a startled expression.

Clifford drew back the curtain, and for the first time the girl saw the steel-shuttered windows, each of which had as ornament a long oval boss.

"Don't talk!" he whispered, and reaching out his hand switched off the light.

The room was now in complete darkness, but suddenly she saw, in the place where one of the bosses had been, a narrow opening, as Clifford Lynne took the cover from the loophole.

The moon had risen, and through the slit he could survey the bare space before the house. Nobody was in sight, and with his eyes glued to the loophole he waited. Presently his patience was rewarded. A dark figure was moving in the cover of the trees and making a circuit towards the house. Presently he saw another, and then a third, and even as he looked a head rose within a few inches of him. Evidently the man had been crouching under the window. In the light of the moon the watcher saw the round, almost shaven head, the broad nose and high cheekbones of a Chinese coolie. In one hand he carried a small package fastened by string to his wrist; the other held a sickle-shaped hook.

He reached up with this, caught the iron guttering and, with an extraordinary exhibition of strength which at other times would have excited Lynne's admiration, drew himself up to the roof. Clifford waited till the dangling feet had disappeared from view, and passed silently to the rear of the cottage and out into the open. As he did so, he saw a glint of steel in the moonlight that shone upon the belt of firs. Here, the tree-fellers had been busy all day, and the stumps of pines showed whitely in the moonlight. But the trees still grew thickly some fifty yards from the cottage.

The cottage was surrounded; nevertheless, he did not hesitate, but, keeping in the cover of the outhouse, he reached a point where the roof line was visible. He had hardly reached his post when he saw a head come up over the roof-tree and presently, clear in the moonlight he saw the Chinaman walking swiftly towards the square-shaped chimney.

He had again fitted his silencer to the nozzle of his pistol.

Plop!

The man on the roof staggered, swayed a little, and then came slipping and sliding down the close-set slates and fell with a groan almost at his feet. He heard a twitter of excitement from the concealed watchers in the trees; saw somebody come running out of cover, and fired. Instantly there was a scamper to safety. Clifford Lynne's prowess as a shot was no secret to these men.

Still he waited, expecting an attack to develop. And then, from the far end of the drive, he heard the splutter of a motor-lorry being started, the grind of gears and the whine of the machine as it moved off. It was the shrill jabber of some belated passenger who had jumped aboard as the trolley was moving which satisfied Clifford that the attackers had been called off, and he turned his attention to the motionless figure that lay on the ground.

Going inside, he called Joe, and the two men carried the wounded man into the kitchen.

"Fing-Su brought them down in a motor-lorry," he said. (He afterwards discovered that the vehicle was a motor-bus which was used at the Peckham factory to convey workers into the country.)

"Is he dead?" asked Joe.

Clifford shook his head.

"No; the bullet hit him just above the knee, that is the only injury," he said as he wrapped a towel about the wound. "The fall from the roof knocked him out. O man!" he called in the dialect as the coolie opened his eyes and began to glare from one to the other.

"I am killed!" gasped the man, his face puckering fearfully as he recognized Lynne.

"Who brought you here?"

"None! I came of my own wish," said the native, and Clifford grinned unpleasantly.

"Soon," he said, "I will take you into the wood and I will light a little fire on your face and you will talk, my friend. But for a while you will stay here with Shi-su-ling."

He gave the native name of the helpless Joe Bray, and it was not a particularly flattering one.

Going back to the girl, he expected to find her in a state of agitation and was agreeably disappointed. But she knew that something was wrong and guessed that that something was a natural sequel to the knife-throwing incident earlier in the evening.

"Yes," nodded Cliff, "it was a Chinaman who wanted to get even with me. I think I'd better cut out the coffee and take you home. They have gone now," he added incautiously.

"They? How many were there?" she asked.

There was nothing to be gained by deceiving her. Rather, he thought, she had better know the full extent of the peril.

"Probably more than a dozen were in the attack, and what they expected to get I don't know."

"You," she said significantly, and he nodded.

"I rather fancy I was the booty," he said. "The important fact is that they are gone and there is nothing more to fear."

He was examining her face, and she had the sensation that he was making a final appraisement of her character.

"But first I will say something that is certain to alarm you," he said. "There is nothing to be gained by beating about the bush. Fing-Su will stop at nothing, as I know. If he gets the idea into his thick head that I am fond of you—as I am—he may shift his attentions to you. Does that frighten you?"

She shook her head.

"Probably because I'm deficient in imagination," she said, "but I'm not frightened."

He opened a steel cupboard in one corner of the sitting-room and took out a round black object, the size of a large plum.

"I want you to keep to your house and not go out after dark," he said. "Also, I wish you to put this ball somewhere in your bedroom where you can reach it easily. If there is trouble of any kind, throw it out of the window—it isn't very heavy."

She smiled.

"Is it a bomb?"

"In the ordinary sense, no. It would do you a bit of damage if it burst close to you, and I'm not suggesting you should keep it under your pillow. In the daytime lock it away in a drawer; at night keep it where it can be reached. You're scared," he accused.

"No, I'm not," she protested indignantly. "But you'll admit you are doing your best to frighten me!"

He patted her on the shoulder.

"Will anything happen tonight?" she asked, as she took the object in her hand and put it very carefully into her bag.

He hesitated.

"I don't think so. Fing-Su is neither a quick nor a thorough worker."

She looked round for Joe Bray as he escorted her to the door.

"I wanted to say goodnight——"

"Joe is busy," he said. "You'll see enough of the old devil—too much. Don't forget this, though: Joe doesn't know the meaning of fear. He's a moral coward and he's foolish, but I've seen him tackle five hundred howling fanatics with a broken rifle and a clasp-knife."

They walked swiftly down the drive, Clifford sweeping the gravel with his hand-lamp, and presently saw the heavy tracks of the motor-lorry that led to the road and turned in the direction of London. When they were within sight of Sunni Lodge he stopped.

"Just show me the room where you sleep. Is it visible from here?"

She pointed.

"On the top floor, eh?" he said, relieved. "What is the next room—the one with the white curtains?"

"That's the kitchen-maid's room," she explained. "At least, it is the room where the kitchen-maid sleeps when we have one. At present we're two servants short at the Lodge."

He made a swift survey of the house and was less satisfied. It was easy, he saw, to reach even the top floor, for Sunni Lodge was one of those queer dwellings which artistic architects love to design. There was a small stone

balcony here, a turret there, and crowning danger of all, a long iron rain-pipe that ran from roof to ground.

He waited until the door was closed and went hurriedly back to the cottage. Joe was sitting in the kitchen smoking his pipe and exchanging bitter words in Chinese with the wounded man.

"You won't get this bird to talk," said Joe disgustedly, "but I know him, his name's Ku-t'chan. He used to be a worker in the Fu-Weng store. I recognized him at once. It's a curious thing about me, Cliff," he said complacently, "that I never forget a face. I've got a memory like one of them cash registers you see in stores. The minute I see this feller, I said 'I know you, my lad; you're Ku-t'chan,' and he didn't deny it. It's no good questioning him, Cliff, he's as mum as a dead fish."

"You can go back to your book, Joe," said Clifford curtly and shut the kitchen door upon his partner, taking his place in the chair.

"Now, Ku-t'chan, or whatever your name is, speak and speak quickly, because in four hours there will be light," he said. "And it is not good that anyone should see me burying a Chinaman in the wood. And buried you will be."

"Master," said the frightened man, "why should you kill me?"

"Because," said Clifford carefully, "if I let you live and you tell the magistrate that I laid fire on you, it would put me to shame."

In a quarter of an hour Ku-t'chan told all he knew, which was not a great deal, but was more than enough for Clifford Lynne's peace of mind.

He made the man comfortable for the night, well assured that after his betrayal he would not attempt to escape, and went in to Joe. The fat man looked up as he entered.

"Going out?" he asked, aggrieved. "What's the idea, Cliff? I got a lot to talk about."

"Keep your eye on that man. It is unlikely that he'll give you any trouble," said Clifford rapidly. "I don't know when I'll be back, but probably before daylight. You know how to turn that couch into a bed if you want to sleep?"

"The point is——" began the justly incensed Joe.

Before he could deliver his point, Clifford Lynne was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Stephen Narth and the girls would not be back before three. The first inclination Joan had was to await their return before going to bed, but she realized that, whatever romance the night held, whatever bizarre adventures might come to her between Sunni Lodge and the Slaters' Cottage, and however tremendous the revelations of the night had been, she was responsible for the smooth running of Stephen Narth's household, and although she did not expect to sleep, she went upstairs to bed.

There were three servants sleeping at the back of the house. The butler had part of the suite over the garage which was intended for the chauffeur, and was practically cut off from the house. Although he was middle-aged and lethargic, she was glad to know that he was on hand, for in spite of her protestations she was a little fearful.

She left the light in the hall, and for once did not extinguish the lamp on either of the landings. Her window curtains were drawn, her bed made ready, and she was suddenly and desperately tired; yet she sat for half an hour on the bed without undressing, until she rose, impatient with herself, and began slowly to disrobe. She turned out the light and for half an hour lay vainly endeavouring to subdue her thoughts to a level which made sleep possible. The house was full of strange noises. It seemed to her imagination that she could hear an excited whispering of voices on the landing above. Once a floorboard creaked and she sat up in a fright.

It was then that she remembered the black, plum-shaped ball that Clifford had given her, and, rising, she turned on the light and, taking it from her bag, put it on the table by the side of her bed. The knowledge that somewhere at hand was that strong, quiet man, brought ease to her mind, and presently she found herself sinking into the languor of sleep...

There was somebody in the next room; she found herself sitting up in bed with this conviction, her face damp with fear. There it was again—the soft swish of a body brushing against the thin wall, and a faint grinding sound as though the intruder had moved a table. She knew the table; it was near the bed, a little rickety, bamboo-covered piece of furniture which, with a cheap wardrobe and a lumpy bed, constituted the furniture of the servant's room.

Stealing out of bed, she turned on the light and tiptoed to the door, listening. There was no sound; it must have been the disordered fancies of a dream.

There was only one possible thing for her to do. She must satisfy herself that the room was empty. Turning the key, she pulled open the door and shrank back with a scream.

Standing square in the doorway was a big, uncouth shape, bare to the waist, his huge arms dangling. She stared for a second into the black slant eyes, and then with a scream reeled back. Before she could understand what had happened, he had leapt at her, one brawny arm encircling her, the other covering her mouth. Struggling frantically she saw over his shoulder another and yet a third man appear. And then, too late, she remembered the bomb. It was impossible to wrench herself free from that steel grip that held her. One of the men whipped off a blanket from the bed, spread it roughly on the floor; the man who held her muttered something, and the third of the Chinamen wound a thick silk handkerchief round and round her mouth. And then the arm about her suddenly relaxed.

She was staring up at the evil face, and saw his mouth open in a queer, hideous grimace, and huge hands wave, as though to shut out some horrible vision. She turned her head in the direction he was staring.

Clifford Lynne was standing in the doorway, hands on hips, and each hand held death.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It seemed to Joan Bray that she had slipped out of the world in fear, and was returning painfully oppressed with a great apprehension. She was in bed, she discovered...Then it was all a terrible dream. But the light was still burning, and a man was standing at the foot of her bed, surveying her gravely. She raised herself on her elbow, her head swimming, and frowned at him.

"Good morning," said Clifford Lynne lightly. "Your terpsichorean relations are slow travellers."

The faint glow of dawn whitened the windows, she saw as she turned. Her face was wet; a glass half filled with water stood on the table by the bed.

"Mr Lynne!" She was trying to think. "Where—where——?" She stared round the room.

"I'm afraid I woke you up, didn't I?" he asked, ignoring the question. "I'm a clumsy burglar, though it was the easiest thing in the world to get into the room next door. Did you hear me?"

She nodded slowly.

"It was you, then?" she asked jerkily.

He was biting his lower lip thoughtfully, still looking at her.

"I'm hopelessly compromised, I trust you realize that?" he said. "I've climbed into your house in the dead of night, I've put you to bed, and here are you and I, in the grey dawn! I shudder to think of what Stephen will say or the stoutish Mabel will imagine. As for Letty"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I cannot hope she will extend her well-known charity to me."

She struggled up into a sitting position, her throbbing head between her hands.

"Do you always make a jest of everything?" she asked, and shuddered as the memory of the night crowded in upon her. "Where are those awful men?"

"They're not quite so awful as they look," he said. "Anyway, they've gone. They went out of the window, and none of them is seriously hurt—I am glad to say. I already have a sick and stupid coolie on my hands, and I have no desire to turn the Slaters' Cottage into a convalescent home for the criminal classes of China."

He drooped his head, listening; his sharp ears had detected the distant whine of a motor-car.

"That sounds like Stephen and the two graces," he said.

At this she looked up.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, in consternation. "You mustn't stay here."

He chuckled softly.

"How like a woman in this crisis to study the proprieties!"

And then most unexpectedly he walked up to her and, laying his hand upon her throbbing head, rumpled her hair.

"Watch me time my effort," he said, and in an instant was gone.

She could hear the car now, and, getting out of bed, walked to the window, the curtain of which had been pulled aside. Two bright headlamps came into view; they turned into the drive. As they did so, she heard the thud of the front door close and saw Clifford Lynne dart across the drive to the cover of a clump of rhododendrons. Almost before he was out of sight, the car was at the door and Stephen Narth had alighted.

From where she stood she could see the little group: Stephen, his white dress-shirt shining palely, the two girls in their over-rich evening wraps. She could not see his face, but there was something in his attitude which struck the girl as curious; a certain nervous hesitancy in his movements. He did not seem anxious to go into the house. He walked twice round the car, spoke to the chauffeur, and not until she heard the girls' feet on the stairs did he reluctantly enter the hall.

Letty and Mabel slept on the floor below. She heard Letty's shrill voice raised in anger and the deeper tone of her elder sister. And then Mr Narth came into the conversation.

"...of course she's all right," said Letty, in high-pitched tones. "Don't be ridiculous, father."

Joan walked across the room and opened the door.

"Why shouldn't she be all right?" demanded Mabel. "Stuff and nonsense, father! You'll only wake her up...how ridiculous!"

Stephen's heavy feet were on the stairs and Joan closed the door wonderingly. Presently there was a knock at the door, and she opened it.

"Hallo!" said Narth huskily. "All right?"

His face was ghastly white, his lower lip was tremulous, and he had pushed his hands into his pockets that she should not see them shaking.

"Everything all right?" he croaked again.

"Yes, Mr Narth," she said.

"Nothing wrong, eh?" He thrust his head forward in a strange, bird-like gesture, peering at her. "Everything all right, Joan?"

His voice was so thick, his manner so strange, that she could only imagine he had been drinking. Yet there was no other evidence of indulgence.

"Nobody disturbed you? That's good...girls woke you up, I suppose? Goodnight, Joan."

He stumbled unsteadily down the stairs and she closed the door, wondering.

She had further cause for wonder when she came down to a solitary breakfast later in the morning, and learnt for the first time that the butler had been out at dinner on the previous night. Mr Narth had telephoned him, asking him to bring a book to town. Why Mr Narth should want a book, when the evening had been fully occupied in the chaperonage of his daughters, only he could have explained, and then to nobody's satisfaction.

He came down to breakfast at eleven, a yellow, nervous, irritable man, who looked as if he had not slept.

"Girls not up, eh?" He had a quick, staccato method of talking on such occasions as these, and usually he rounded off a bad night with an exhibition of bad temper; but although she quite expected a display of irritation, he was singularly inoffensive.

"We shall have to get you married, Joan," he said, as he sat down with a grimace before an unappealing breakfast. "That man Clifford is probably a good fellow. It's rather awkward, finding that he's the senior partner, and I'm glad I didn't say the things I was tempted to say when we met——"

"I am getting married on Friday," said Joan quietly, and he gaped up at her with a frightened expression.

"On Friday?" he squeaked. "Impossible—impossible! It's—it's indelicate! Why, you don't know the man!"

He sprang up from his chair in a weak rage.

"I will not have it! The thing must be done as I wish! Does Mabel know?"

It was surprising that Mabel had not told him, thought Joan. She learnt afterwards that Mr Narth's elder daughter was reserving this tit-bit for the privacy of a family council.

"Decency, decency!" quavered Mr Narth, so unlike his sual self that the girl could only look at him. "There's a lot to happen before—before you're married. You owe me something, Joan. You haven't forgotten your brother——"

"You have not given me much chance of forgetting, Mr Narth," she said, with rising anger. "It was because of all you did for my brother that I agreed to marry Mr Lynne at all. Clifford Lynne wishes the marriage to take place on Friday—and I have agreed."

"Have I nothing to do with this?" he stormed. "Am I not to be consulted?"

"Consult him by all means," said the girl coldly.

"Wait, wait!" he called after her as she was leaving the room. "Don't let us lose our tempers, Joan. I have an especial eason for asking you to postpone this marriage till a later date——What is it?" he snapped irritably at the newly-returned butler who appeared in the doorway, still in his street attire.

"Will you see Mr Lynne?" asked the man.

"Does he want to see me?" Stephen demanded. "You're sure he doesn't mean Miss Joan?"

"He particularly asked for you, sir."

Narth's trembling hand went up to his mouth.

"Put him in the library," he said ungraciously, and steeled himself to an interview which instinct told him would be unpleasant; and in this case instinct did not lie, for Clifford had come to ask a few very uncomfortable questions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He was pacing the library floor when Mr Narth went in ("as though it were his own," complained Stephen bitterly to his daughter) and turned abruptly to face the senior partner of Narth brothers.

"Shut that door, will you?"

It was a command rather than a request, and it was strange how instantly Stephen obeyed.

"You came back here at four o'clock this morning," he began. "You had supper at Giro's, which closed at one. What did you and your daughters do between one and four?"

Narth could not believe his ears.

"May I ask——" he began.

"Ask nothing. If you were going to ask me what authority I have for putting these questions to you, you can save yourself the trouble," said Clifford briefly. "I want to know what you were doing between one and four."

"And I absolutely refuse to satisfy your curiosity," said the other angrily. "Things have come to a pretty pass when——"

"At three o'clock this morning," the man from China broke in brusquely, "an attempt was made to carry off Joan Bray from this house. That is news to you?"

The man nodded dumbly.

"You think the attempt has not been made, but you expected it. I was in the bushes listening to you when you were talking to the chauffeur. You asked him to come into the house after he had put the car away; you told him you were nervous, that there had been burglaries in the neighbourhood recently. You were astonished to find that Joan Bray was in her room and unharmed."

White to the lips, Stephen Narth was incapable of replying.

"You had to fill in the hours between one and four; how did you do it?" The keen eyes were searching his very soul. "You wouldn't have gone to Fing-Su's place, and rightly, because you would not wish your daughters to be brought into contact with this man. Shall I tell you what you did?"

Narth made no answer.

"You sneaked out whilst the dance was on and locked the gears of your car. You made that an excuse to take your girls to one of those queer all-night clubs in Fitzroy Square. And then, providentially, at the right moment you discovered the key in your pocket."

Now Mr Narth found his voice.

"You're a bit of a detective, Lynne," he answered. "And, strangely enough, you're right, except that I did not lock the gears. My chauffeur did that and lost the key. I happened to discover a duplicate in my pocket."

"You didn't want to get back until the dirty wor^ was finished, eh?" Clifford's eyes were glowing like live fires. "You swine!" He spoke the word in a voice that was little above a whisper. "I'm going to tell you something, Narth. If any harm comes to that girl whilst she is in your house and under your care, you'll never live to enjoy the competence which Joe Bray is supposed to have left you. I'm going to kill your friend—he knows that, doesn't he? If he doesn't, just tell him so from me! There's an old saying that one may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a goat. I don't know which of the two you are. Listen carefully, Narth—it isn't an angry man talking to you—threats of killing come pretty glibly to people who couldn't see a rooster's neck wrung without fainting. But I've killed men, yellow and white, and I'm not going to shiver when I send you down to hell. Get that into your mind and let it walk around! Joan won't be with you very long, but during that time she's got to be safe."

And now Stephen Narth found his voice.

"It's a lie, a lie!" he screamed. "Why didn't Joan tell me? I knew nothing about it! Do you think I would allow Fing-Su to take her away——"

"I didn't say it was Singili," said the other quickly. "How did you know?"

"Well, Chinamen——"

"I didn't even say Chinamen. You've convicted yourself, Mr Stephen Narth! I've warned you before, and I'm warning you again. Fing-Su has bought you for fifty thousand pounds, but you could twist out of that, because you're naturally a twister. But he's going to hold you in a tighter bond than monetary obligation. He nearly did it last night. He'll do it before the week's out—how or where or when, I do not know." He paused. "That's all I have to say to you," he said, and strode past the paralysed man into the hall.

He was walking down the drive when he heard Stephen's voice calling him, and, turning, he saw the white-faced man gesticulating wildly, in a mad abandonment of rage. He was pouring forth a torrent of wild, incoherent abuse:

"...you won't marry Joan...do you hear that? I don't care a damn if all Joe Bray's fortune goes to you! I'll see her dead first ..."

Clifford let him rave on, and when from sheer exhaustion he stopped:

"Then you did see Fing-Su last night? What offer did he make to you?"

Stephen glowered at him, and then, as though he feared that his secret thoughts could be read by those piercing eyes, he turned and ran back to the house like a man possessed.

* * * * *

"There's going to be trouble, Joe, and as you've caused most of it I hope you'll get your share."

Joe Bray, dozing before an unnecessary fire, for the day was warm, his hands clasped before his stomach, woke with a start.

"Eh?...I wish you wouldn't pop in and out like a—a—what d'you call 'em, Cliff. What did you say?"

"'Trouble' was the word," said the other laconically. "Your spoon-fed Chink plus your disreputable relation have a Plan."

Joe grunted, selected a cigar from the box on the table and gnawed off the end savagely.

"Wish I'd never come to this bloomin' country," he said plaintively. "Wish I'd never left Siangtan. You're a good fellow, Cliff, but too vi'lent—much too vi'lent. I wish Fing-Su had been a sensible boy. Well educated and everything, Cliff...it does seem a pity, don't it? Here's me, with just enough education to read and write, rich as Creasers in a manner of speaking——"

Cliff's nose wrinkled.

"Crœsus would have spent your income on cigarettes," he said contemptuously.

"In a manner of speaking—did I say that or didn't I?" demanded Joe reproachfully. "Here's me as rich as Creasers and white, and there's him, a

poor suffering Chink, who can speak Latin and Algebra and French and all them foreign languages as easily as I speak Mandarin!"

He sighed and shook his head.

"Life's comic," he said vaguely.

Clifford was changing his shoes and growled:

"If you were the only man I'd ever met in the world I should say life was comic. As it is, it's darned serious, and a lot of people whose only job in life is to keep living are going to find it pretty hard to hold down their sinecure. Have you seen the papers?"

Joe nodded and reached out lazily for a heap of newspapers that lay on a table at his elbow.

"Yes, I was reading about the murder of those missionaries up in Honan. But there's always trouble in Honan. Too many soldiers loafin' around hungry. If there wasn't soldiers there wouldn't be any brigands."

"That's the ninth missionary murder in a month," said Clifford tersely; "and the soldiers in Honan are the best disciplined in China—which isn't saying much, I admit. But the soldiers were in this and had banners inscribed 'We welcome the Son of Heaven,' which means that there is a new pretender to the throne."

Joe shook his head.

"I never did hold with Chinamen being trusted with rifles," he said. "It demoralizes 'em, Cliff. You don't think we shall have any trouble on the Concession, do you?" he asked anxiously. "Because, if you do, I ought to be getting back."

"You'll stay here," said Cliff ominously. "I don't think we shall have trouble in that part of China—we are paying the Governor too much for him to risk. But there are seventeen separate points in open rebellion in China." He opened a drawer, took out a map and unfolded it, and Joe saw that the chart was covered with little red crosses. "They call it 'unrest' in the newspapers," said Clifford quietly. "They give as the reason the failure of the rice crops and an earthquake hundreds of miles from any centre of trouble!"

Old Joe struggled up to an erect position.

"What's the idea?" he asked, looking at the other through narrowed lids. "First time I knew you took any interest in Chinese wars. You talk as if you knew all the risin's. What's the big idea? They can't effect us?"

Lynne folded the map.

"A big change of government would affect everything," he said. "Honan doesn't worry me, because it is a brigands' province; but there has been trouble in Yun Nan, and when Yun Nan starts hooting the trouble is far advanced. Somebody is working hard for a new dynasty—and all the flags are decorated with the symbol of the Joyful Hands."

Old Joe's jaw dropped.

"But that is a little affair," he said jerkily; "just a little fool society——"

"Eight provinces are strong for the Hands," interrupted Clifford. "And Fing-Su has a headquarters in each. He has double-crossed us from the start—using the money he has taken from the concessions to finance a trading company in opposition to us."

"He never has!" Joe's voice was hollow with amazement.

"Go up to the Tower and take a peek at Peking House—the London office of the trading company, and the Emperor Fing-Su's general headquarters!"

Old Joe Bray could only shake his head.

"Emperor...um! Same as Napoleon...gosh!"

Lynne allowed that idea to soak.

"In three months' time he will be wanting money—big money. At present he is financing divers generals, but he cannot go on indefinitely. His scheme is to form a national army under Spedwell, who knows China, and when he has done that and established himself on the throne, it will be easy to deal with the three big generals who are in his pay at the moment. How this Emperor bug got into his brain, heaven knows!"

Mr Bray stirred uneasily; something in his attitude arrested his partner's attention.

"It was you! Oh, you wicked old man!" he breathed, in wonder.

"I certainly gave him ideas," admitted Joe, who was thoroughly uncomfortable. "I sort of made up yarns to stimmerlate his ambition—that's

the word, ain't it? I've got a wonderful imagination, Cliff. I'd have written novels if I could have only spelt."

"And I suppose," said Clifford, "you drew a picture of what China would be like under one head?"

"Something like that." Joe Bray dared not meet his partner's eyes. "But it was to stimmerlate his ambition, if you understand, Cliff. Just sort of push him on."

Clifford was laughing softly, and he very seldom laughed. "Maybe he didn't want any 'stimmerlating'," he said. "Fing-Su is the one in a million that is bound to turn up at odd intervals through the ages. Napoleon was one, Rhodes was one, Lincoln was one—there aren't such a lot of 'em."

"What about George Washington?" asked Mr Bray, only too anxious to switch the conversation into historical channels.

"Whoever is responsible, the mischief is done." Cliff looked at his watch. "Did you ever go bird's-nesting, Joe?"

"As a boy," said Joe complacently, "there was few that could beat me."

"We'll go along tonight and inspect a floating nest of the domestic yellowbill," said Cliff.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mr Narth went up to town by train, his car for the moment being in the grip of one of those mysterious ailments to which cars are addicted. On the station platform he bought a newspaper, though he was not attracted thereto by a contents bill: 'Joyful Hands' Behind Chinese Trouble. What the 'Joyful Hands' meant Mr Narth did not trouble to think. The name seemed a little incongruous.

He was quite ignorant on the subject of China, except that fabulous sums had been made in that country by one who had conveniently died and passed on his fortune to Mr Narth.

It was his pride and boast that he was a business man, which meant that he was proud of his ignorance on all subjects apart from his business. Outside interests he had none; he played a passable game of golf—it was that accomplishment which had lured him to Sunningdale—he was an indifferent devotee of bridge, and his adventurous period of life was represented by the indiscreet maintenance of a Bloomsbury flat in the late 'nineties.

Frankly, he was dishonest; he admitted as much to himself. He had a passionate desire for easy money, and when he had inherited his father's business it had seemed that he was in a fair way to the realization of his ideals. He had then discovered that money only flowed into even the oldest-established businesses if the passages and chutes were kept clear of rubbish. You had either to butter them with advertising, or polish them with that homely commodity which is known as elbow-grease. If you were content to sit in an office chair and wait for money, it had an uncomfortable knack of losing its way and dropping into the coffers of your competitors. He had so far acquainted himself with the incidence of commercial machinery that he had found many short cuts to wealth. The discovery that most of these enticing by-ways led into all sorts of morasses and muddy footholes came later. Greatest of all his misfortunes, as it proved, he was, in spite of his frequent stringencies, on the best of terms with the heads of great financial houses, for his judgment, apart from his own operations, was wellnigh faultless.

From Waterloo Station he drove to the hotel where he usually stayed when he was in town, and the hotel valet took charge of his dress suit in preparation for the ceremony of the following night. Fing-Su had rather amused him by his insistence upon his matter of costume.

"A tail coat and a white tie, the grand habit," he said. "The initiation will interest you—it combines some of the more modern ceremonies with one as ancient as life."

He ordered tea to be sent to his room, and it had hardly been served before Major Spedwell appeared. He greeted his new associate with the question:

"What happened last night?"

Stephen Narth shook his head with a show of irritation.

"I don't know. It was a monstrous scheme of Fing-Su's. I—I nearly chucked the whole thing."

"Did you?" The Major sank into the only armchair in the room. "Well, I shouldn't take that too seriously if I were you. No harm was intended to the girl. Fing-Su was very considerate; she was being taken to a place where she would have had white women to look after her, everything that heart could desire."

"Then why on earth——?" began Narth.

Spedwell made a gesture of impatience.

"He has a reason. He wanted to put a lever under Mr Clifford Lynne."

He got up from his chair, walked to the fireplace and knocked off the ash of his cigar.

"There's money for you in this, Narth," he said, "and only one thing required of you—and that's loyalty. Fing-Su thinks you're a man who will be very useful to him." He looked at the other oddly. "You might even take Leggat's place," he said.

Stephen Narth looked up quickly.

"Leggat? I thought he was a great friend of yours."

"He is and he isn't," said Spedwell carefully. "Fing-Su thinks—well, there have been leakages. Things had got out, and unfortunately got into the wrong quarters." And then, abruptly: "Lynne is in town. I suppose you know that?"

"I'm not interested in his movements," said Mr Narth with some acerbity.

"I thought you might be," said the other carelessly.

He could have added that he himself was more interested in Clifford Lynne's plans than that erratic man could be possibly aware. And there was a reason for his interest: Fing-Su had found a new plan—one so ingeniously arranged that only one man could save Joan Bray, and that was the quick-shooting man from Siangtan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Clifford came to his Mayfair dwelling in time for a hasty lunch, and he came alone. He had left strict injunctions with Joe Bray to keep himself hidden, a very necessary precaution, for Joe was essentially an open-air man who chafed at confinement. His first act on arrival was to call a Mayfair number.

"Mr Leggat is not in," was the reply, and Clifford cursed the affable traitor who had promised to be available from one o'clock onwards.

He had further reason for annoyance when at two o'clock Mr Leggat called openly at the house. Ferdinand Leggat was a lover of good things, but as a rule he reserved his conviviality for the hours which followed dinner. Cliff took one glance at the man as he swaggered into the dining-room and rightly interpreted the red face and the fatuous smile.

"You're a madman, Leggat," he said quietly, as he walked to the door and closed it. "Why do you come here in daylight?"

Leggat had reached the point of exhilaration when he alone stood out clearly from a blurred world.

"Because I prefer daylight," he said a little thickly. "Why should I, a man of my qualities, sneak around in the dark? That for Fing-Su and all his myrmidons!" He snapped his finger contemptuously and broke into a guffaw of laughters but Clifford Lynne was not amused.

"You're a fool," he said again. "I asked you to be on hand so that I might telephone you. Don't underrate Fing-Su, my friend."

"Bah!" said the other as he walked, uninvited, to the buffet and helped himself liberally from the tantalus. "There was never a giddy Oriental who could scare me! You seem to forget that I've lived in China, Lynne. And as to the secret society——" He threw back his head and laughed again. "My dear old man," he said as he walked unsteadily back to the table, a large tumblerful of amber liquor in his hand, "if there is a fool here, it's you! I've given you enough information to hang Fing-Su. You're a rich man, you can afford to hand the thing over to the police, and sit down comfortably and await developments."

Clifford did not explain that he had already been in touch with the Colonial and Foreign Offices, and had been met with a polite sceptism which had at once irritated and silenced him. The Foreign Office knew that the Peckham factory stored field guns. They had been bought in the open market, he was blandly told, and there was no mystery about them at all. They could not be

exported without a licence, and there was no reason in the world why a Chinese trading company should not have the same privileges as a white. To all this and more he had listened with growing impatience.

"I'm through with Fing-Su," said Leggat. "He is not only a Chink but a mean Chink. And after all I've done for him! Did you arrange for the Umgeni to be searched, as I suggested?"

Clifford nodded. He had succeeded so far that he had induced the Port of London Authority to take action, and the Umgeni had been searched systematically, her cargo had been hauled from the hold and broached, but nothing had been found save the conventional articles of commerce, cases of spades, reapers, cooking pots and the usual stock of the trader.

"Humph!" Leggat was surprised. "I know they've been loading her for weeks——"

"She sails tonight," said Clifford, "and not even Fing-Su can unload her cargo and replace it."

His guest gulped down the contents of the tumbler and exhaled a deep breath.

"I'm through with him," he repeated. "I thought he was the original duck that laid golden eggs ad infinitum."

"In other words, you've exploited him as far as you can, eh?" asked Clifford, with a faint smile. "And now you're ready to sell the carcass! What part is Spedwell playing?"

Leggat shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I never liked Spedwell very much," he said. "These military Johnnies get my goat. He's Fing-Su's chief of staff—spends all his time with maps and plans and drill-books. He and Fing-Su have just finished writing a Chinese manual."

"A rifle manual?" asked Clifford quickly.

"Something like that," said the other with a shrug.

Clifford raised his hand in warning as there came a gentle knock at the door and his servant entered.

"I forgot to tell you, sir," he said, "the Post Office workmen came this morning to fix your telephone."

"Fix—what do you mean, fix?" asked Lynne, a frown gathering on his forehead.

"They said there had been some complaints about the instrument—the exchange couldn't hear you very distinctly."

Lynne was silent and thoughtful for a second.

"Were you here whilst the repairs were being done?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir," smiled the man. "They had a Post Office card of authority, but I'm too old a bird to take a risk—I was with them all the time whilst they fixed the amplifier."

"Oh!" said Clifford blankly. And then: "Where did they put this 'amplifier'?"

One wall of the dining-room was hidden by a large bookshelf, and it was beneath this that the telephone flex ran. The butler stooped and pointed: in the shallow space beneath the last shelf was a black wooden box about ten inches long and four inches in height. In its face were two round apertures, and attached to these was a thin wire which ran up the end wall and vanished through a newly-drilled hole in the window-sill.

"What is it?" asked Leggat, suddenly sobered.

"A microphone," replied Clifford curtly. "Somebody's been listening to every word of our conversation!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Clifford Lynne opened the window and looked out. The wire had been roughly tacked along the wall which divided his from the next courtyard, and vanished over the roof of the garage into the mews.

"All right, Simmons," he said, and without a word went from the room and out through the mews into the garage. For a time he could not see the fine wire, but after a search he discovered it running along the wall, and he traced its course almost to the end of the mews, where it turned up through the open window of what was obviously a chauffeur's flat.

One glance at the window told him that the apartment was not in regular occupation. The panes were grimy; one was broken; and he remembered that farther along the street in which he lived was an empty house; the garage was evidently an appendage to this.

There was a gate which led to the car store and a small door obviously giving to the upstairs flat, and this was ajar. Without hesitation he pushed it open and mounted the steep, untidy stairs to the apartments above. There were two rooms, empty save for the debris which the last occupant had left behind him. The back room was used as a sleeping apartment; an old iron bedstead, innocent of bedding, remained. He turned into the front room, and here he found what he had expected: a replica of the small black box beneath the bookshelf, and a telephone, which was, he discovered, in working order when he called exchange.

The room had no occupant, and for a very good reason. The man who had been listening-in through this microphone, and who had been transmitting the conversation he had overheard to Fing-Su, had had ample warning. He had, in fact, left the mews almost at the identical moment that Clifford had come into it.

"A dark, military-looking man with a bad-tempered face." A chauffeur who had seen him was responsible for a description which identified Major Spedwell.

Clifford Lynne went back to his dining-room and found a greatly troubled Leggat splashing whisky into a glass with an unsteady hand.

"What's the trouble? What is it all about?" asked the stout man fearfully.

Although it seemed to be a waste of time attempting to make this boaster realize his peril, Lynne told him what he had discovered.

"And you need to be very careful, Leggat!" he said. "If Fing-Su knows you have betrayed him I wouldn't give a string of native beads for your life. The only chance is that the listener failed to recognize your voice."

It was not until later that he discovered who was the eavesdropper, and then it was clear that the chance of Major Spedwell being ignorant of Leggat's identity was a very remote one.

"Fing-Su—bah!"

There was, however, a note of uneasiness in the deep laughter of Ferdinand Leggat. He had been in unpleasant situations and had been threatened before, facing frenzied shareholders who had clamoured for his blood. Yet—the Chinaman was different somehow.

"My dear good fellow, you're theatrical! Let Fing-Su start something, that's all!"

"When are you seeing him again?" asked Lynne.

"Tomorrow night," was the reply. "There is a meeting of the Lodge—damn' tomfoolery, I call it! But I suppose one ought to turn up, if it is' only to humour the silly devil!"

Lynne was regarding him with unusual gravity. He, of all men, understood the mentality of the Chinaman, and could see all the potentialities for mischief that vast wealth had given to him.

"If you take my advice, Leggat, you'll be among the missing tomorrow night," he said. "Get out of England until I've broken up this gang. Take a trip to Canada; there's a boat leaving tomorrow, and if you hurry you can get your ticket and passport fixed."

Leggat set down his glass on the table with a bang.

"J'y suis, j'y reste" he said valiantly. "There never was a coolie that could run me out of England, and don't you forget it, Lynne! I can handle this bird ...!"

Clifford Lynne listened without listening, his mind too occupied with the possible consequences which would follow his discovery of the spy-wire to pay much attention to the boastings of his companion. With a final warning he dismissed Leggat, sending him back through the garage by his private taxi. It was then that he went out into the mews, to make a few inquiries, and, discovering that the listener was undoubtedly Major Spedwell, he made an effort to get in touch with Leggat, but without success.

The man's danger was a very real one; how far would Fing-Su go? A long way, to judge by what had already happened. He drew entirely different conclusions from those which Leggat had drawn from the Joyful Hands. The Lodge meetings might, from the European standpoint, be ridiculous, but they had a deadly significance too.

That afternoon Clifford interviewed a high authority at Scotland Yard, and he went to that most austere of public departments with a letter of introduction from the Foreign Secretary. The interview had been a longer one than he had anticipated, but its first result was to relieve him of his greatest worry. He drove straight from the Yard to Sunningdale, and if he had any perturbation at all it was on account of Mr Ferdinand Leggat. The cottage door was locked and he found Joe curled up on the sofa asleep, and Mr Bray awoke in a spirit of revolt. When Joe Bray began to protest in advance against the folly of shutting himself up like a prisoner, Clifford had a shrewd idea that he was justifying in advance a departure from the strict letter of his instructions.

"It's bad for me health and it gets on me mind," said Joe loudly, keeping a guilty eye fixed upon the partner of whom he stood in no little awe.

"You've been out!" accused Clifford.

There was really not much harm done if he had been. Nobody in Sunningdale knew Joe and, with the exception of Fing-Su, it was doubtful if there was a person in England who would recognize him.

"I went out to pick a few flowers," explained Joe. "There is something about flowers, Cliff, that brings a lump into my throat. You can sniff! You're naturally hard. But to see all them bluebells——"

"It's too late for bluebells; you probably mean dandelions," said Cliff coldly, "or more likely turnips!"

"Bluebells," insisted Mr Bray with a vigorous nodding of his head. "And nestling under, as it were, the trees. And, Cliff"—he coughed—"I met the dandiest young lady you've ever seen!"

Clifford looked at him aghast. Mr Joseph Bray was blushing violently. Was this the iron-souled prospector, the man who had won through from poverty to affluence by a grim disregard of most of the laws that govern Chinese lands and customs? He could only wonder and remain speechless.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't have met her," said Joe defiantly. "I'm not old—not much more than fifty." He flung the challenge at Cliff's head, but it was not taken up. "There's a lot of people that don't believe I am fifty."

"You're a hundred in sin and ten in wisdom," said Clifford, smiling good-humouredly. "Who was she, Joe?"

"I don't know. A well-made, nice-looking girl. A bit redheaded, but that shows spirit. What a girl!" He waggled his head ecstatically.

"Well-made—do you mean fat?" asked Clifford brutally.

"Well-made," evaded the other, "and young. She couldn't be more than twenty-five. And a wonderful complexion, Cliff. Roses!"

"Rather red?" asked his unromantic companion, and chuckled. "Did you ask her her name?"

"No, I didn't!" Joe Bray was on his mettle. "It is not good manners askin' people their name——"

"If you had, she would have answered 'Mabel Narth.'"

The older man's jaw dropped.

"Mabel Narth?" he asked in a hollow whisper. "What, my own niece!"

"She is no more your niece than I am your uncle," said Clifford. "The tables of consanguinity do not apply. She's your twenty-third cousin nineteen times removed. She is such a distant cousin that you'll find it difficult to see her relationship through an ordinary telescope. But, Joe, at your time of life!"

"Fifty," murmured Joe. "Men of my age are more steady than you young ones."

"I presume you did not tell her who you were?"

"No; I merely hinted that I'd got a bit of stuff put by!"

"That you were rich, in fact? Did her eyes light up?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Joe, on the defensive.

"You're a queer devil," said Clifford. "How is that coolie boy?"

"Almost well. He has been praying all day to be let out, but I didn't want to let him go before you came."

"He can skip tonight—he makes me feel homesick for a bamboo rod and the floor of the Yamen! I suppose you know his job was to stifle us? This morning I found the bag of sulphur he was trying to put down the chimney."

Clifford strolled out to the locked scullery to interview the crestfallen warrior. He did not look very warlike as he sat there with an old blanket round his shoulders. Lynne examined his wound and in a few words dismissed him, and to his surprise the man showed every evidence of relief.

"Let me go before the sun goes down," he begged, "for I am a stranger in this country, and it is hard for such a man as I to find my way to the great town."

Something in his manner aroused Clifford's suspicion, and he remembered Joe's words.

"Man, you are anxious to leave my house," he said. "Tell me why."

The man dropped his eyes sullenly.

"You are afraid."

Still the native did not look up.

"You are afraid of death—tonight!"

This time his shaft got home, and the Chinaman jerked up his head, blinking at his interrogator with frightened eyes.

"They say of you that you are a devil and read the hearts of men. Now what you say"—there was a certain desperation in his tone—"is very true, for I fear death if I stay in this house tonight."

Clifford whistled softly.

"At what hour would you die, man?"

"At the second hour after moonrise," replied the coolie without hesitation, and Clifford nodded.

"I think you can go," he said, and gave him directions as to how he could travel to London.

Returning to Joe, he repeated the gist of the conversation.

"The grand attack comes tonight. Now what are we to do? 'Phone into Aldershot for half a battalion, cover ourselves with ignominy, notify the local police and be responsible for the death of these respectable, middle-aged men; or shall we stand the racket ourselves and have a nice, quiet fight?"

The humour of it overcame him, and he sat down laughing silently, his face red, tears in his eyes, and when Clifford Lynne laughed that way there was trouble coming for somebody.

The Slaters' Cottage and Sunni Lodge were a mile out of Sunningdale and remarkably isolated, though they were a few hundred yards from the Portsmouth Road, which was never wholly deserted. Mr Narth's nearest neighbour was the Earl of Knowesly, who, however, was only in residence for a little over a month in the year, for he was a northerner who loved Lancashire and was happiest amongst his own people.

Beyond the Slaters' Cottage in the other direction was the undeveloped property of a land company which was exploiting a new golf course and a residential estate.

"I have an idea they're going to take a leaf out of my book. Joe. It will be a fight with silencers if Spedwell is in command, and I know now that he is the chief of military staff."

The evening had turned close and oppressive, and the sun set behind towering masses of cloud. Clifford Lynne employed the last hours of light in paying a visit to Sunni Lodge. He did not go to the house; in the circumstances he thought that Stephen Narth would not be particularly anxious to see him. Instead, he made an unauthorized circuit of the pleasure ground, having caught a glimpse of the girl walking at the far end of the tennis lawn.

Briefly he told her the arrangements he had made for her protection.

"The crisis will be over in a week, I think. I have mildly interested the Foreign Office, and thank heaven I have got Scotland Yard thoroughly worked up!"

She shook her head helplessly.

"I only understand dimly what is the cause of all this trouble," she said. "It is about the share which Fing-Su wants, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Why is that so very important? Mr Narth tried to explain but I am as dense as ever."

They were pacing through a thin belt of pines that fringed the western boundary of Mr Narth's little demesne, and were free from the possibility of observation from the house. In a few words he told her of the forty-nine shares.

"I had always realized the possibility of Joe's doing something eccentric with his money, and the founders' shares, as we call them—though in reality it would be better to call them the management shares—were issued to keep the control of the business, whatever happened. The original plan was that I was to have twenty-five and Joe was to take twenty-four, and an agreement was drawn up by which it was mutually agreed that the survivor should inherit the shares of the other partner. I had to go to Peking on business; whilst I was there I got a wire from Joe asking if I minded the old man Fing-Su having a few shares. Unfortunately, before I left Siantan I had given Joe a general power of attorney, and I returned to discover that this wicked old man had not only given the chief nine, but he had divided the other forty equally."

She nodded, at last understanding.

"But sorely, Mr—Clifford, that trouble is over? You have the majority of the shares and you need not sell or give away the one which makes all the difference?"

Clifford smiled wryly.

"Joe, with the greatest ingenuity, maintained the clause which provided that if either of us died his shares should go to the survivor," he said significantly. "Fing-Su has a double chance. He may induce me, by methods which I have anticipated, to part with the share which gives him control of the company; or he may——" He did not conclude the sentence.

"He may bring about your death," she said simply, and he nodded.

"He has reached the point now," he went on, "where he cannot succeed, because, if I were to be killed this night, Fing-Su would be automatically arrested tomorrow. But, clever as he is, he is a Chinaman and reasons like a Chinaman. That is why he will fall down. He has great visions toned with a sense of infallibility—he cannot imagine failure."

They paced in silence for fully a minute, and then she asked:

"If he managed to get me...in his power—that sounds awfully melodramatic, doesn't it?—what difference would that make—really?"

"I should pay," he said quietly, "and he knows I should pay."

She felt the blood come into her cheeks and tried to appear unconcerned.

"You are under no obligation to me, Mr Lynne," she said, in a low voice. "I had already decided to tell you...now that Mr Bray is alive ... that I do not wish to marry you. I promised Mr Narth because—well, it was necessary for him that I should be married."

It required a great effort for her to say this, a greater effort than she had ever dreamt. The discovery struck her with a sense of dismay. To rehearse such a speech in the privacy of her room was an easy matter, but now as she spoke, it was as if every word cut away from her the newly built foundations of life. She looked up at him; he was searching her face.

"And there is no need—for you to marry, either."

She shook her head in anticipation of his answer.

"'To carry on the line'—no," he said, and her heart sank. "To satisfy the curious mind of Joseph Bray, Esquire—no! Not one of the arguments remains which brought me on this mad trip to England and turned me from a decent member of society into a bearded hobo! You're right there. But there is yet a very excellent reason why I should marry you."

He put his arm round her gently, and drew her towards him, and yet he did not kiss her. His grave eyes were looking into hers, and she read the words he did not say, the thought he did not utter, and found she was trembling from head to foot. A deep rumble of thunder came from the distance and that broke the spell. With a sigh he stepped back, dropped his hands on her shoulders and held her at arms' length.

"There will be a marriage in this family on Friday," he said briefly, and only then did he stoop and kiss her.

The first ghostly gleam of lightning paled the pine tops as he came whistling down the drive to the Slaters' Cottage.

"A night of storm, Joseph?" he said cheerfully, as he came into the sitting-room. "Have you turned loose the hired assassin?"

Joe hastily concealed the paper he had been writing.

"Making a new will?"

Mr Bray coughed, and a horrible suspicion came to his partner; a suspicion that amounted to a certainty.

Once, many years before, Joe, with great humming and hawing, had confessed a gentle weakness and had even offered for his criticism an exercise-book stained with his fancy.

"You're not writing poetry, are you, Joe?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"No, I'm not," said Joe loudly. "Gosh! That was a good one!"

The crash of thunder overhead set the little cottage shivering, and even as he spoke the blue flicker of lightning hit the woods.

"The very heavens are aflame," said Joe poetically.

"It is your turn to fry the sausages," retorted his more practical friend, and they adjourned to the little kitchen together to prepare the evening meal.

The storm lasted an hour, but it was evident that what they had experienced was merely the forerunner. By nine o'clock it was black as a winter night, and every horizon was lit with distant lightning. Clifford had fastened the shutters, and four sporting rifles were at hand on the sofa.

"Reminds me of one of them storms you get up there on the lake," said Joe, "and the worst I was ever in was up in Harbin in '86—before any of you birds had poked your nose outside the reservations."

He looked at the writing table where he had been engaged in his literary labours and sighed heavily.

"As far as I can make out, she is a third cousin," said Joe. "Her father's sister married my aunt's son."

"What the devil are you talking about?" asked Clifford in astonishment.

"Her," said Mr Bray briefly.

It was evident that Mabel had made a very deep impression upon this susceptible heart.

"I hope this storm won't frighten her—girls get scared with storms..."

"For my part, I would rather have it tonight than tomorrow," said Clifford as he made for the kitchen. "If we are to be drowned, I would rather be drowned by moonlight!"

Joe Bray came after him to the kitchen.

"What's this stuff about getting drowned?" he asked nervously. "Where are we going?"

"Down to the sea in a ship," said Clifford as he speared a sausage from the pantry slab.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Miss Mabel Narth was not the kind of girl to be frightened by a thunderstorm. Whilst her more sensitive sister cowered in the coal-cellar, Mabel knitted furiously in the drawing-room, confiding to her companion the curious adventure of the morning.

"Some people would say he was old, but I would call him a fine figure of a man, and he is enormously rich, my dear."

Mabel professed to be twenty-five. She was plump, and not especially popular with the bright young men who danced with her, played tennis with her, sometimes dined with her, but studiously refrained from asking her the all-important question. In her life she had had two proposals: one from an impossible young gentleman to whom she had been introduced at a dance, and who subsequently proved to be an actor who played very small parts in very important West End musical comedies, and the other from a business associate of her father's who was still in mourning for his second wife when he made a timid bid for a third.

"I like men who have sown their wild oats, Joan," said Mabel firmly, blinking rapidly as a vivid flash of lightning momentarily blinded her. "Will you pull the curtains, my dear?"

Joan had never known her so affable, and was curious to discover the identity of the stranger who had made so deep an impression.

"Young men you can never trust; they're so thoughtless. But a mature man ...and fearfully rich! He told me he tried to buy up Lord Knowesley's estate. He is negotiating for a house in Park Lane, and he has three Rolls cars, my dear—just think of it, three!"

"But who is he Mabel?"

Here Mabel was at a loss, for in her maidenly modesty she had not pried too closely into the identity of her pleasant acquaintance.

"He is living somewhere in the neighbourhood. I think he must have rented a house at Sunningdale."

"How old is he?"

Mabel considered.

"About fifty," she said, unconsciously giving support to Mr Bray's miscalculation. "Bless this storm!" She did not mean 'bless'! "Do, please, run down into the cellar, Joan, and see if that foolish child is all right."

Joan found the 'foolish child' sitting in a basket chair with a newspaper over her head, and Letty refused either to be sensible or to change her habitation.

When she got back to the drawing-room Mabel greeted her with a staggering question.

"Has that awful boy of yours got a visitor?"

For a second Joan did not understand her. She had never thought of Clifford Lynne in these terms.

"'Boy'? You mean Mr Lynne?"

And then she gasped. Mabel had been talking about Joe Bray! She was too startled to laugh, and could only look open-mouthed at the plump girl. Happily, the eldest daughter of Stephen Narth, intent on her knitting, did not observe the sensation she had caused.

"I wondered, because he walked off in the direction of the Slaters' Cottage. It struck me afterwards that it was quite possible he was staying with this Lynne man, who is rich, I suppose, and must have a lot of rich friends."

Joan did not venture an answer. She could not tell the girl who was her newly-discovered interest without betraying Clifford, but she wondered what would be Mabel's attitude if she knew the truth.

It was nearly ten o'clock and Mr Narth had not yet returned from town, when they heard a gentle tap at the door. The storm had subsided, though the thunder was still growling, and Joan went out, to find a rain-spotted envelope in the wire letter-box. It was addressed to 'Miss Mabel,' and she carried her find back to the girl. Mabel seized the letter, tore open the envelope and extracted a large and considerably blotted sheet of paper. She read and her eyes sparkled.

"Poetry, Joan!" she said breathlessly.

"How strange is life! We come and go,
And the nicest people we do not know,
Until they dorn like the beautiful sun,
An experience which comes to everyone.
Even to a man of fifty-one."

There was no signature. Mabel's eyes were gleaming.

"How perfectly terribly romantic!" she exclaimed. "He must have dropped it in the letterbox with his own hand."

She sprang up from her chair, went into the hall and opened the door. It was very dark, but she thought she saw a figure moving down the drive. The rain had ceased. Should she run after him? Would it be a ladylike action, she wondered? Would it not indeed come within the category of 'chasing,' literally and figuratively? The excuse was ready made for an excursion down the drive, for at this hour Joan usually went out with the letters—there was a postal box just outside the gate.

Hesitating no more, she walked quickly down the path, her heart beating pleasurably. Turning the elbow of the little road, she stopped. Nobody was in sight; she must have been mistaken.

And then there came to her an eerie sensation of fear that made her flesh go cold. She turned to run, and had taken two steps when a fusty blanket was suddenly thrown over her head, a big hand stifled her screams, and she fainted...

Joan waited in the drawing-room until the slamming of the door brought her into the hall. The wind had blown the door close, and she opened it wide and peered out into the storm.

Two successive flashes of lightning showed her that the drive was empty.

"Mabel!"

She called the girl at the top of her voice, but no answer came.

Joan's heart sank.

She ran back to the drawing-room and rang the bell for the butler; he was a slow-moving man, and as she waited patiently for his coming she remembered the black 'plum' that Clifford had given to her. It was a weapon of some kind, and she flew up the stairs and was back by the time the servant had arrived.

"Miss Mabel gone out? She'll come back, miss."

He glanced nervously at the open door. The lightning came in fluttering spasms.

"No, miss, I'm sorry—I don't like lightning."

"Come with me," commanded the girl, and ran out of the house; but she went alone. The butler went as far as the front door, and felt that he was not called upon by the laws which govern butlers to go any farther.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lynne was sitting in the doorway of the cottage, a rifle across his knees, when Joe came back, the rays of his lamp advertising his presence long before he himself was in sight.

"Where the dickens have you been?" asked Clifford in astonishment. "I thought you were asleep!"

"Just went for a stroll," said Joe airily. "I slipped out at the back door...there's nobody about."

"Well, you can slip in at the front door," said Clifford severely. "In all probability the wood is full of Chinese cutthroats."

"Ridic'lous!" murmured Joe as he passed.

"It may be ridic'lous," Clifford called over his shoulder, "but anything more ridiculous than you lying in a Sunningdale wood with your aged throat cut, I can't imagine."

"Fifty-one!" exploded Joe from the passage. "Everybody knows that!"

It was not a moment when Clifford Lynne felt he could debate the question of Mr Bray's age with any great profit. In the course of the evening he had made several excursions into the wood and had found nothing of a suspicious character. The cottage could be approached from the south by way of a new road that had been cut through the estate company's property, and to guard against surprise from this direction he had suspended, on a blackened string, a number of little bells that he had bought in London that day, though the never-ending grumble and crack of the thunder made it extremely doubtful whether this warning would reach him. The lightning played vividly in the sky as he sat on the doorstep, alert and waiting. Once Joe began to sing, and he silenced him with an angry growl.

Eleven o'clock was striking when he heard a firm step on the gravel, coming from the direction of the road, and stood up,

There was nothing furtive in the stranger's approach. He walked boldly down the centre of the road, and Clifford heard the tap of a stick. Whoever the newcomer was, he needed no light to show him the way, and after a while the watcher saw his shape distinctly. He turned from the road and came straight to the cottage, and now Lynne challenged him.

"Have no fear. I am alone!"

It was Fing-Su.

"Stand where you are!" said Clifford harshly, "And since when have I been afraid of Chinese traders?"

The newcomer had halted and Clifford heard him laugh. He smelt something, a penetrating aroma, pungent but not unpleasant.

"Pardon me," said Fing-Su politely. "I put that rather awkwardly, I am afraid. What I meant to convey was that I had called for a friendly talk. I understand that some of my hot-headed young men, quite without my knowledge, paid you a little attention last night. I have chastized them. Nobody knows better than you, Mr Lynne, that they are the veriest children. They thought I had been insulted——"

"Who is that?" It was Joe Bray's voice, speaking from the living-room.

Clifford turned savagely and silenced him. Had Fing-Su heard? And if he had, did he recognize the voice? Apparently he did not.

"You have a friend staying with you? I think that is wise," he said in the same courteous tone. "As I was remarking——"

"Listen! I'm not going to waste my time with that monkey stuff. Fing-Su, you're getting to the end of your rope."

"It is a long rope," said Fing-Su, "and it covers a wide area. You are a fool, Lynne, not to throw in your lot with me. In five years I shall be the most powerful man in China."

"You'll conquer China, will you?" asked the other sardonically. "And Europe, too, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Fing-Su. "You have no vision, my friend. Do you not see that with our preponderant man-strength all the wars of the future will be decided by our race? A professional yellow army will decide the fate of Europe. A great mercenary army—think of it, Lynne—to be bargained for and sold to the highest bidder. An army that sits everlastingly on the threshold of Europe!"

"What do you want now?" asked Clifford brusquely.

Fing-Su had a trick of conveying reproach by his very intonation, and now he replied in a hurt tone:

"Is it necessary that we should be enemies, Mr Lynne? I have no feeling against you. All I wish is to buy from you at a reasonable price a founders' share in the company—-"

The coolness of the request momentarily struck Clifford dumb. It aroused in him also a sudden feeling of apprehension. Fing-Su would not dare advance such an iniquitous request unless he had the wherewithal to bargain.

"And what do you propose giving me in exchange?" he asked slowly, and heard the quick intake of the other's breath.

"A thing very precious to you, Mr Lynne." He spoke deliberately. "You have a friend in your house and evidently he can hear, and I am not prepared to make a statement before a witness. Will you come a little way up the road with me?"

"Walk ahead," said Clifford curtly, and, turning, Fing-Su went before him.

Within a few yards of the main road the Chinaman stopped and turned.

"There is a lady——" he began.

Lynne's hand shot out and gripped him by his coat. Something hard pressed against the Chinaman's waistcoat.

"You've got Joan Bray, have you?" demanded Cliff through his teeth. "You've got her! Is that what you're trying to say?"

"There is no need for heroics——" began Fing-Su.

"Tell me where she is."

"I am sorry you take this view," said Fing-Su, regret in his voice, "and as you threaten me I have no course to follow but——"

He took off his hat as though to cool his heated head and looked into its interior.

Suddenly from its crown, with a fierce hiss, came a thick spray of liquid that drenched Clifford's face.

Pure ammonia, stifling, blinding ...!

In his agony his pistol fell with a clatter to the ground, and the Chinaman, with a quick thrust of his head, sent him sprawling. Kneeling by his side, Fing-Su thrust his hand into the inside of Clifford's waistcoat. He felt a crackle—a paper was sewn there.

And then came a diversion; the sound of footsteps, flying down the road—a woman, he saw, with his keen eyes that could penetrate the blackest gloom of night. Instinct saved Joan Bray. As she turned into the lane she stopped suddenly, conscious of the huddled figure on the ground.

"Who is that?" she asked.

At the sound of her voice Fing-Su leapt to his feet with a squeal of rage.

"Miss Bray!"

She recognized him, and for a moment was petrified with fright, then, as he leapt at her, she raised her hand in the desperation of terror and flung the thing she had been carrying. The black ball dropped short of Fing-Su, but fell on the ground at his feet.

There was a dull explosion, and instantly the road, the wood, the very Slaters' Cottage, were illuminated by the light of the magnesium bomb. In a panic the Chinaman turned and plunged into the wood and a second later was lost to sight. On and on he ran blindly, until he came to a low hedge which separated him from the road. Near at hand a motor-car was drawn up by the side of the road, its lights dimmed. He stopped only long enough to lift out a stout and swooning girl and bundle her on to the roadside, and then the car sped furiously towards Egham.

A quarter of an hour later a search party went out to look for Mabel Narth, and it was Joe Bray who had the fortune to find her. And to comfort her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Fing-Su sat cross-legged on a divan in his over-furnished and over-scented office. The hour was four, and the roofs and steeples of East London showed black against the dawn.

At such an hour do the great men of China grant their audiences, and Fing-Su, in his flowered silk robe, his silken trousers and white felt boots, wore upon his head the insignia of a rank to which he had no title.

Between his lips was a long, thick-stemmed pipe with a microscopic bowl, but it was tobacco that he was smoking.

A heavy-eyed little Chinese girl-woman sat on her heels in a corner of the room, watching him and ready to replenish the pipe or tea cup which stood at his elbow. Squatting at his feet was an unhealthy-looking Chinaman in European dress, his big derby hat deposited on the floor by his side.

Fing-Su lifted the handleless tea cup from the low table by his side and drank noisily.

"Of all men in this evil country I have sought out you, Li Fu," he said, setting down the cup. "I shall pay you well and there will be a great cumskaw in addition. Your name has been spoken to me because of your boldness and because you know this town so much better than I, who have spent all my years at college."

He used the phrase which literally means 'Forest of Pencils.'

If Li Fu felt any uneasiness, the inscrutable, pock-marked face did not show it.

"There is a law in this country which is very hard on foreigners," he said. "By such a law I may be taken and put upon a ship and sent to China. Already I have spent three months in a prison where no man can speak to another. And, Fing-Su, in China I am a dead man, as you know, for Tuchun of Lanchow has sworn to hang my head in a basket over the gate of the city."

Fing-Su smoked delicately, drawing at the tasteless tobacco and sending forth big blue rings of smoke to the scarlet-raftered ceiling.

"All China is not Lanchow," he said, "and there will be changes. Who knows that you may not be Tuchun yourself some day? My friends will be well rewarded. There will be 'squeeze' for you, not 'cash' or copper or mex dollar, but gold. I know a place where there is a statue made of gold..."

He spoke of Urga, that Mongolian Mecca, where shrines are of solid gold and there is a great golden figure of Buddha, and in the cellars of the living Buddha a treasure beyond computation.

Li Fu listened apparently unmoved, his mind vacillating between the ungilded gates of Pentonville Prison and the reward he was offered. He was not a poor man as Chinamen went, but his compatriot had offered him an immediate fortune.

"You have the felicity of owning a white wife," Fing-Su went on in his thin voice. "It would be a simple matter and none would know."

Li Fu looked up.

"Why do you come to me? For I am not a member of your tong. And you have hundreds of men who are like slaves to you!"

Fing-Su tapped the ashes from his pipe, declined with a gesture its replenishment, and sat back in the silken cushions behind him.

"The Sage has said, 'The slave must be ordered and the master will be served,'" he quoted. "I cannot stand behind each man and say 'Do this.' If I said, 'Li Fu has offended me, let him die,' you would be dead, because it is easy to take life. But in this other man I require wisdom and cunning or nothing will save my face."

Li Fu considered the matter, twiddling his thumbs, his nimble mind busy. This was something more profitable than the smuggling of cocaine, his staple industry, a quicker way to fortune than the rake-off of coppers from a forbidden game of fantan. His wife, who was not exactly white but white enough, was very competent to play the part which his employer had assigned, had indeed already rented the premises which he had intended should mask a more nefarious trade than millinery.

Fing-Su knew of that projected showroom in Fitzroy Square; he knew of Li Fu's connection, for the secrets of the little Chinese underworld came to him in the shape of gossip.

"You will pay first," said Li Fu, and there followed a gentle but conventional wrangle, for no two Chinamen have ever struck a bargain on the first price offered.

At the end Li Fu was dismissed.

The man who entered from the little ante-room was not unused to being kept waiting by his employer, but the interview had lasted longer than he expected, and Major Spedwell was tired and not in the best of tempers.

"Well, have you settled things?" he asked shortly.

Fing-Su surveyed him through half-closed eyes.

"Yes; it was inevitable," he said.

"You think you will get the girl without fuss? I don't." Spedwell sank down into a chair and lit a cigar. "You're monkeying with a big thing, and I'm not so sure that even now we're going to get through the next twelve hours without trouble," he said. "Lynne has pulled in Scotland Yard——"

"Scotland Yard!" murmured the other with a derisive smile.

"There's nothing to grin about," snapped Spedwell. "These birds, when they move at all, move quickly. I've been shadowed all day."

Fing-Su sat up suddenly.

"You?"

Spedwell nodded.

"I thought that would interest you. And I'll tell you something else. Miss Bray is pretty certain to be shadowed. Leggat has spilt more than we know—what are you going to do about him?" he asked abruptly.

Fing-Su shrugged his silken shoulders.

"Let him slide," he said indifferently.

Spedwell chewed at the cigar, his eyes upon the whitening windows.

"The Yard are up and doing," he said significantly. "That fellow Lynne captured—do you think he talked?"

"Possibly." Impatience and weariness were in Fing-Su's voice. "At any rate, I have decided to deal with him in the manner you know. This country stifles me!" He rose and began walking up and down the room. "So many things would be simple—in China! Lynne—where would he be? A headless body carried out and left in the Gobi Desert—or, wearing a soldier's uniform, in some old moat. This woman interests me."

He stopped and pulled at his thin lip.

"Miss Bray?"

"Yes...She is pretty, I suppose? Yes, pretty." He nodded. "I should like to see her in the dress of our women. And that would be terrible for Lynne. To know that somewhere in China—in an inaccessible place, with my armies between him and her——"

Spedwell rose slowly to his, feet, an ugly look on his face.

"You can cut that little dream out of your repertoire, Fing-Su," he said coldly. "No harm must come to that girl—not that kind of harm."

Fing-Su was smiling.

"My dear Spedwell, how amusing! What queer values you English-speaking folk place on your women that you would jeopardize an immense fortune—I was joking. She is nothing to me. I would surrender all the women in the world rather than lose your help and friendship."

But Spedwell's uneasiness was not so readily dispelled. He knew just when and why his services would be dispensed with, for the hour was near at hand when Fing-Su would make a clean cut of many of those trammelling influences which surrounded and hampered him. And, knowing, he was prepared.

"How are things shaping in China?" he asked.

"The hour is near," said the Chinaman in a low voice. "The two armies have come to an agreement. Wei-pa-fu will move down from Harbin, Chi-sa-lo has concentrated within striking distance of Peking. It is purely a question of money. The guns have been landed—but I need not have sent them. Shells and equipment is all that Wei-pa-fu requires. If I could get control of the concession reserve it would be easy. But the generals want their 'squeeze'—four millions would make me Emperor of China."

Spedwell stroked his little black moustache thoughtfully.

"And how much would keep you Emperor?" he asked, but Fing-Su was unconcerned.

"Once there, I shall be difficult to move," he said. "The granting of concessions to the Powers will identify them with my reign..."

Spedwell listened and wondered at the calm confidence of this merchant's son who planned to buy a place on the throne which the Mings and the Manchus had won by their valour. And all the time he was speaking the

world grew lighter and the grim outlines of the Conqueror's Tower, wherein so much ambition had died, rose into shape with the broadening of the day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Mr Stephen Narth had been detained in town all night, and for once his daughter did an unselfish thing.

"There is no sense in worrying father," she told her hysterical sister. "And Mr Joseph says that no harm was intended me—these wretched people mistook me for Joan."

"'Joseph'—is he Jewish?" asked Letty, curiosity overcoming alarm.

"He doesn't look it," was the non-committal reply.

It happened that Clifford did not see the girl either on her rescue or during the following morning. Only too well he knew that Mabel had been mistaken for her distant cousin, and he grew more and more uneasy. His first call on his arrival in town was at Scotland Yard, and here he received the gratifying intelligence that a number of officers had been detailed to watch Sunni Lodge.

"You'll be wanting somebody to look after you!" said the officer with a smile when Clifford told him of the ammonia attack. "That ammonia spray in the hat is an old trick, by the way."

Clifford nodded.

"I'm not proud of myself," he said.

"As far as Miss Bray is concerned," said the superintendent, "I have already sent a man to Sunningdale with orders to follow her wherever she goes. He has just 'phoned me to say that the Narths' car is out of order and he will have no difficulty in keeping her under observation."

"Thank the Lord for that!" said Cliff fervently, and went back to his house to arrange the details of the search he was making that night.

At five o'clock that afternoon he telephoned through to the Slaters' Cottage. Joe Bray's voice answered him.

"I've just been having a talk on the 'phone with Joan," said Joe. "Mark this, that girl's got brains! I asked her how old she thought I was, and what do you think she said——"

"Don't tell me," begged Clifford. "I'd hate to think she was insincere. Now listen: you're to be here at eleven o'clock. You'll have a visit from two or three men round about nine. They are Scotland Yard detectives and their job

is to keep an eye on Sunni Lodge. As soon as they arrive, you skip—you understand?"

"She said to me," continued Joe, a tremor of sentiment in his voice, "'Mabel seems to like you'—those were her very words—'she seems to like you.'"

"She'll have no rival," said Clifford unpleasantly. "Did you hear what I said, you crazy old hen?"

"I heard you," said Joe quite unruffled. "Listen, Cliff: she said—Joan, I mean—'I've never known Mabel to be so interested in anybody——'"

"At eleven o'clock," persisted Clifford.

"At all times—that's what Joan said——"

"And don't call up Joan Bray any more. One of the servants, or Narth, or, worse still, one of the daughters may discover who you are," said Clifford, "and then it will be a case of 'Goodbye, Mabel.'"

"I'm not likely to call her up: she's gone to town. And listen, Cliff, she said——"

"Gone to town?"

The news startled the younger man, but before he could question his partner, Bray went on:

"She's gone up to buy some dresses. That Narth ain't so bad, Cliff. Told her she could spend up to the limit. He's not a bad scout, old Stephen."

Clifford hung up the receiver thoughtfully. Generosity and Stephen Narth were such complete strangers that his suspicions were aroused.

When Joan Bray was ushered into her relative's private office she also was a little doubtful as to what condition might be attached to Stephen's largess. It was natural in her that she should wish to go to this strange husband that had been chosen for her with some material equipment. Even the beggar maid would not come empty-handed to Cophetua, but would spend her days gathering a poor and decent wardrobe to replace her rags. And Joan was singularly deficient in the matter of clothing. Mr Narth was not an extravagant man, and she had subsisted for three years on two evening frocks. A fine character should be superior to the mundane considerations of clothing, but when a fine mind has as its host a shapely body, it may be excused the lapse of a desire for suitable covering.

Mr Stephen Narth was sitting at his desk with his head in his long hands, and he looked up with a start and stared at her as she entered the room. In a week an extraordinary change had come over him, she thought. He had grown haggard, nervous, ready to start at the slightest sound. He was a man who at the best of times was easily irritated, but now, as the click of the door announced her presence, she thought he had some difficulty in suppressing an exclamation of fear.

"Oh! You! It is you, is it, Joan?" he said breathlessly. "Sit down, won't you?"

He unlocked a drawer of his desk after two attempts—his hand shook so that he could not fit the key—and took out a black cash-box.

"We've got to do this thing in style, Joan." His voice was shrill; the man was on edge, she saw. "Must get you married in the way old Joe would like, eh? You didn't tell the girls what I wanted you for?"

She shook her head.

"That's right. They would have wanted to come up and buy things as well, and I can't afford it."

From the box he took a pad of notes and, without counting, laid them before her.

"Get everything you want, my dear—nothing but the best. There's only one favour I would like to ask you." He stared out of the window, not meeting her eyes. "You know, Joan, I have interests in—queer sorts of ventures. I finance this and that and the other in a little way, and I have more fingers in more pies than people imagine." He passed his hand nervously across his chin, his eyes still on the window, and she wondered what was coming next. "I've put a whole lot of money into a dressmaking business—Madame Ferroni, 704, Fitzroy Square." His voice had grown suddenly husky. "It's not a very pretentious place; in fact, it's a suite on the third floor; but I'd like you to buy some of your gowns from Madame."

"Why, surely, Mr Narth," she said, a little amused.

"Go there first," said Stephen, still looking past her. "If she hasn't got what you want you needn't buy it. I've half promised I'd send you there, and it will be good for me too, though the business is a flourishing one."

He wrote the address on a card and pushed it across the table to her.

"Don't think because it's a poor-looking place that she hasn't got the dresses you want," he continued. "And Joan, I'm rather fussy about little things.

Don't keep cabs waiting, my dear; they eat up money, and dressmakers keep you a long time. Always pay off the cabman when you go into a dressmaker's, Joan; you can generally get another without any trouble. No, no, don't count the money, it doesn't matter. If you want more you must ask and I will let you have it. Goodbye."

His face was as white as death, his eyes held an apprehension which almost terrified her. She took the cold, clammy hand and shook it, but he stopped her thanks brusquely.

"Go to Madame Ferroni's first, won't you? I promised her you would."

The door closed on her and he gave her time to get out of the building, and then he walked to the door and locked it. As he did so, the second door which led to the boardroom opened slowly and Fing-Su came in. Stephen Narth turned, a glare of hate in his eyes.

"Well, I've done it," he jerked. "If any harm comes to that girl, Fing-Su——"

Fing-Su smiled broadly and flicked a speck of invisible dust from his well-fitting morning coat.

"No harm will come to her, my dear man," he said in his soft, suave way. "It is merely a move in the great game. A tactical point gained, that the strategical plan may be brought to complete success."

Narth was fingering the telephone.

"I've a good mind to stop her," he said huskily. "I could call Lynne and he would get there first."

Fing-Su smiled again, and his eye did not leave the telephone and the nervous hand that played with the receiver.

"That would be a catastrophe for you, Mr Narth," he said. "You owe us fifty thousand pounds which you can never repay."

"Never repay?" snarled the other. "You seem to forget that I'm the heir of Joe Bray."

The Chinaman showed his white teeth in a humorous grin.

"An heirship is not of very much value until the testator dies," he said.

"But Joe Bray is dead!" gasped the other.

"Joe Bray," said Fing-Su coolly, as he tapped a cigarette upon a golden box he had taken from his waistcoat pocket, "is very much alive. In fact, I heard him with my own ears last night!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

With no other thought save one of perplexity at Stephen Narth's changed appearance, Joan went forth on a mission which would have been dear to any woman but was especially pleasing to her in the circumstances. She counted the money as she sat in the taxi: there was £320—an enormous sum to one who had never owned more than ten pounds in her life.

Madame Ferroni's address she had given to the driver, and for the next ten minutes she was interested in the skill with which he threaded his way through the traffic, worked round the blocks at every busy street crossing, till he reached the comparative freedom of the Euston Road.

Fitzroy Square has a peculiar character of its own; its proximity to the West End trading centres has saved it from the indignity which has befallen so many of the obscure squares of London and has converted fine old Queen Anne houses into tenements. It boasted a restaurant of some reputation, a dancing club or two, and numerous business offices.

The doorpost of No. 704 was almost entirely covered with brass plates announcing the variegated professions and trades which were carried on behind its open doorway. Painted at the top were the words: "Madame Ferroni, Modiste, 3rd floor back." The paint, she noticed, was still wet.

She had dismissed the cabman to satisfy the frugal views of her relation, and mounting the stairs she came at last, a little out of breath but elated with the exhilarating character of her visit, to a door on which, also newly painted, was the dressmaker's name. She knocked, and was immediately admitted. The woman who opened the door to her was dark-faced and forbidding. She was dressed in black, and this emphasized her sallow complexion. Hers was a complexion distinct from the normal darkness of European races; there were faint, livid shadows under her eyes; her lips were thick, her nose a little squat. She was unquestionably a half caste. The slant eyes, the yellow tinge to her skin, marked her unmistakably to a student of ethnology—but Joan was not such a student.

This would not have alarmed the girl but for the fact that the room into which she was ushered was almost empty and the door that closed upon her was immediately locked. There was an inner door of baize, and this also the woman fastened.

Joan looked round a room bare except for a big wardrobe, a settee and a tea table which had been laid, and the kettle on which was steaming. Of dresses there was none, unless they were in the wardrobe, which, she saw, was a fixture.

"Please do not be alarmed, Miss Bray," said the sallow woman, with an effort at amiability which made her plain face even more unprepossessing. "I do not keep my dresses here; this is where I interview my clients."

"Why did you fasten the door?" asked the girl, and although she summoned her reserves of courage to her aid, she felt the colour leaving her face.

Madame Ferroni cringed double in her anxiety to preserve the confidence of her visitor.

"I do not wish to be interrupted while I have a very important client, Miss Bray," she said. "You see, miss, your uncle, Mr Narth, put all his money into this business and I wish to please him. It is natural! I have the dresses at my shop in Savoy Street, and we will go there at once and you shall choose what you wish. But first I wanted to have a little talk with you—to obtain ideas of your requirements."

She spoke with a certain precision, almost as though she were reciting passages which she had committed to memory.

"You must join me in a cup of tea," she went on. "This tea habit is one which I have acquired since I came to this country."

Joan was not especially interested in habits, except the habit of locked doors that remained fastened.

"Madame Ferroni—I am afraid I cannot stay now. I will come back later."

Joan pulled open the green baize, but the key had been taken from the lock of the outer door.

"Certainly, if you wish," Madame Ferroni had a trick of shrugging one shoulder. "But you realize that if I do not please you I may lose my job?"

She had the awkwardness of a foreigner making tea, and now poured forth the strong dark-brown liquid, treated it over-generously with milk, and handed the cup to the girl. She had need of stimulant, but would have welcomed a glass of water, for her mouth had gone dry with fear, and she found an increasing difficulty in speaking.

One thought was at the back of her mind—she must not let the woman know she was afraid, or that she suspected there was anything unusual in this method of receiving a possible client. She stirred the tea and drank eagerly, as Madame took the key from the table and, walking slowly to the door, slipped it in the lock and turned it. She turned it twice, once to open and once to close it again, but of this fact Joan was unaware.

"Now I will put on my hat and we will go," said Madame Ferroni, accompanying her words by lifting down a huge black hat from a peg on the wall. "I do not like Fitzroy Square; it is so dull. And as I told Mr Narth, clients will not climb three flights of stairs to try on pretty dresses..."

The cup dropped from Joan's fingers and smashed to splinters. With the litheness of a tiger, Madame leapt suddenly across the room and, catching the dazed girl as she swayed, lowered her gently to the floor.

As she did so there came a thunderous knock at the outer door, and Madame Ferroni's face went green.

"Anybody here?"

There was authority in the tone, and the woman stood trembling, her hand on the key.

Again came the summons.

"Open the door; I can see the key on the inside," said the voice.

Turning swiftly, Madame opened the wall-wardrobe and lifted out the loose bottom. There were eight inches of space between the floor of the room and the baseboard of the cupboard, and, lifting the limp figure of Joan, she laid her in the dusty cavity. Replacing the loose bottom, she closed and locked the wardrobe, took the girl's tea cup and saucer, and, pushing open the window, flung them out into the little backyard. A swift glance round, and, walking to the door, she turned the key and flung it open.

A man was standing on the landing. Madame's knowledge of the police was more than academical, and that this was a Scotland Yard man she knew. She had a tawny husband who had been snatched from her by such a man as this. She half recognized the caller but did not remember his name.

"Hallo!" he asked. "Where is Miss Bray?"

"Miss——?" The woman frowned as though she had not heard the name aright.

"Miss Bray. She came in here five minutes ago."

Madame Ferroni smiled and shook her head.

"You are mistaken," she said. "Nobody has been here but me."

The detective walked into the room and looked around. He saw the table and the solitary cup.

"What is in that cupboard?"

"Nothing—would you like to see it?" asked Madame sarcastically, and added: "May I ask who you are?"

"I am Detective-Sergeant Long of Scotland Yard," said the other. "You know who I am—I raided your house two years ago and pinched your Chinese husband for peddling dope. Open that cupboard."

With her one-shouldered shrug 'Madame Ferroni' threw open the doors. The floorboard was in place; not for an instant did it occur to the detective to wonder what occupied the space between that and the floor.

"Has she been and gone?" he asked. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"I don't know of whom you speak."

From his pocket he took a small card, bearing the address written in Stephen Narth's hand—he had followed the taxi to Fitzroy Square, had intercepted the driver and taken the card from him.

"You call yourself Madame Ferroni now, don't you?"

She nodded. And then came an inspiration.

"There is another Madame Ferroni, on the top floor," she said. "It is very awkward having two names similar in the same building. That is why I am not staying."

The detective looked at her sharply and hesitated.

"I'll try the next floor," he said. "You wait here. If I find nothing upstairs, you'll go a little walk with me."

She closed the door behind him. There was a small house telephone in a corner of the room. She lifted this, pushed the button and began speaking in a low, earnest tone. In the meantime the detective had reached the head of the stairs. He saw only one room, that immediately facing him, and he rapped at the door.

A man's shrill voice said "Come in," and, unsuspecting, he pushed open the door and walked into the apartment.

The thick derby hat he was wearing saved his life, for the heavy club that came down on his head would have killed him. He staggered under the blow; somebody hit him sideways with a bottle, and he went down to the floor like a log.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Joan Bray came to consciousness with a sensation that something was hammering at regular and too frequent intervals on the crown of her head, and with every blow she winced. It was a long time before she realized that she was alone, and that the hammering came from within...

There was a sort of earthenware sink in a corner of the room. No windows, but a skylight in the roof, through which she saw the dull light of a rainy day. Mostly she concentrated her mind upon the sink and the tarnished brass tap, from which ran a steady trickle of water.

Dragging herself to her feet, she swayed and could hardly have maintained her balance but for the support of the wall; and now, with great labour and with her head throbbing at every step she took, she reached the tap, turned it and, first cupping her hands to catch the stream, she slaked her appalling thirst. Then she did what most women would have hesitated to do—she put her head under the cold stream, thankful that, in a moment of modernism, she had allowed herself to be shingled. Wringing the water from her hair, she stood upright. The pains in her head had diminished, and her immediate and prosaic requirement was a towel. She found one hanging on a roller, clean and new, and had a dim idea that it must have been put there specially for her use. By the time she had roughly dried herself, her mind was nearer normality. This room had been got ready specially for her. Near the old camp-bed on which she had been lying was a stool, on which was balanced a covered tray, a coffee-pot and a roll.

What time was it? She looked at the watch on her wrist; the hands pointed to half-past four. It had been three o'clock when she went into Madame Ferroni's fateful room. In an hour and a half she had moved to—where?

She sat down on the bed and tried to create, from her confused thoughts, some clear conspectus of her situation. There was a piece of soiled green sacking beneath the bed. From where she sat she could see three letters—'Maj ...' She pulled out the sacking. Major Spedwell, S & M Poona, was the faded inscription. Who was Major Spedwell? she wondered. She had met him somewhere...Of course, he was the third man present at the projected luncheon which Clifford Lynne had so rudely interrupted. Was she still in Fitzroy Square? And if she was not, how had they got her...wherever she was? The skylight was of frosted glass, but she could see the rain running down in little streams and could hear the sough of the wind outside.

She had no illusions whatever as to into whose charge she had fallen, for she could associate the dark face of Madame Ferroni with the coloured man

whose startled face she had seen in the light of the magnesium flare. She was somewhere under the vigilant eye of Fing-Su! She winced at the thought. And Stephen Narth had sent her to this dreadful place...That recollection hurt her; for although she did not like Stephen, she had never in her most uncharitable moments conceived him capable of such infamy.

She got up quickly as the door opened, and instantly recognized the man who came in and closed the door behind him.

"You are Major Spedwell?" she said, and it was surprising how hoarse her voice was.

He was taken aback for the moment.

"I am Major Spedwell, yes," he said. "You have a good memory, young lady."

"Where am I?" she asked.

"In a safe place. And you needn't be scared; no harm is coming to you. I have been guilty of a good many things"—he hesitated—"from manslaughter to forgery, but I haven't got so far down in the mud that I'd allow Fing-Su to hurt you. You're here as a hostage."

"To what?" she demanded.

"To fortune." His quick smile held no humour in it. "You know all about it, young lady—Fing-Su wants a certain share from Clifford Lynne. I think he has already discussed the matter with you. You see, that share certificate is rather an important matter to us."

"And you think that Mr Lynne will give it to you in exchange for—me?"

"That's about the size of it," said Spedwell, with a curious glance at the girl's wet hair. "We're doing a little banditti work: you're held for ransom."

Her lips curled.

"Your friend has evidently a very high opinion of Mr Lynne's chivalry," she said.

"Or his love," was Spedwell's quiet reply. "Fing-Su thinks that Clifford Lynne is crazy about you, and will part without a squeal."

"Then I'm happy to think that Fing-Su will have a shock," she said. "Mr Lynne and I do not love each other; and as to marriage, there is no longer any need for——"

On the point of betraying the return of Joe Bray, she stopped herself.

"No need for the marriage now that old Joe's alive, eh? Oh, yes, I know," he said. He had a smile that came and went with incredible rapidity. "In fact, we all know. But Clifford Lynne is fond of you; I agree with Fing-Su."

It was useless to pursue this topic. She asked where she was.

"In Peckham. I don't see why you shouldn't know. If you managed to away from here any policeman would tell you. This is one of the change rooms that the girl explosive workers used in the war. It isn't very cosy, but it is the best we could do," he said. "Believe me, Miss Bray, there is nothing to fear. I'm the only person with a key to this building, and you are as safe as though you were in your own room at Sunni Lodge."

"You're not going to leave me here, Major?" She purposely used the title, but he was not made uncomfortable by this s reminder of a more honourable past. Rather, he divined her intention.

"I hope you're going to be sensible, young lady," he said.. "If you are going to appeal to my manhood and all that sort of stuff, and the fact that I've held the King's commission, you can save yourself the effort. My skin is pretty thick—I was kicked out of the Army for forgery, and I've got to the point where I can't be ashamed of myself."

"That is a long way, Major," she said quietly.

"Rather a long way," he admitted. "The only thing I can promise you is that no harm will come to you—while I am alive," he added, and somehow she believed him.

He closed the door, locked it, and went out at the back of the building to where his car was waiting. Fing-Su was in his office on Tower Hill when Spedwell arrived, an impatient, worried man, for so far he had not heard that the girl had been safely conveyed to the factory, a somewhat difficult undertaking in broad daylight.

"Yes, she's there all right," said Spedwell moodily, and took a cigar from an open box on the table, bit off the end and lit it. "How long do you expect to keep her?"

Fing-Su spread out his long, thin palms.

"How long will Mr Clifford Lynne keep me waiting?" he asked. And then: "How is the detective?"

"Nearly dead," was the laconic reply. "But I think he'll recover. There was nearly a hanging for you and me in that alone, Fing-Su."

The Chinaman's face had gone grey.

"Dead?" he said huskily. "I told them to——"

"You told them to knock him out. They pretty well knocked him out of life," said the other in his brief, direct way. "A detective-sergeant isn't a very important person, but killing him would be one of those little errors which upset big enterprises. There will be hell to pay as soon as this man is reported missing, because they will naturally turn to you and to me for information."

"What was he doing?" demanded the other.

"Shadowing Miss Bray—as I warned you. The only thing we could do is to put him on the ship. Unfortunately we dare not move him. Perhaps we could take him later—you could hold him in one of your towns until the affair blew over."

He picked up a paperweight from the table and his attention seemed to be concentrated upon the many-sided crystal.

"You'll have no other passengers, will you?"

"I may go," said the other carelessly. "And of course you will go also."

"Aren't you waiting for Clifford Lynne's share?"

Fing-Su shrugged his shoulders.

"That will be in the hands of my agent tomorrow," he said onfidently. "Naturally I shall not appear in the transaction. If am on the high seas they cannot connect me."

Major Spedwell laughed harshly.

"Won't Miss Bray connect you? Won't Stephen Narth?"

Fing-Su shook his head.

"Not after tonight," he said in a low voice, and the dark-faced man bit his lip thoughtfully.

"After tonight?" What would be his own status—after tonight? He knew the man he was dealing with. Fing-Su was a good paymaster, but that was

where his virtues ended. And he had had several unintentional hints that he had ceased to find favour in the eyes of his employer—certain intonations of voice, a look he had intercepted between Fing-Su and his yellow assistants. Major Spedwell was a shrewd, discerning man, keenly sensitive to atmosphere.

"And Leggat?" he asked.

"Leggat can go to the devil; I am finished with him. I always knew the man was untrustworthy. We have taken a lot of trouble to prove the obvious."

"Are you asking him to attend Lodge tonight?" demanded Spedwell.

"No," was the short reply.

Then, as if he realized that his brusqueness might arouse the other's suspicion:

"Leggat is no longer useful; he is a drunkard, and therefore dangerous. You, my dear Major, are indispensable. I do not know what I should do without you. Have you finished your little land mine?"

He was trying to be pleasant, and the Major was not deceived.

"Ah! what a conception!" said Fing-Su, rolling his dark eyes in a transport of admiration. "You are a genius! I could not dispense with such a lieutenant."

Spedwell knew well enough that there was nothing especially ingenious about his land mine—which was a time-bomb on a large scale and detonated when one acid ate through a leaden partition and mingled with another. It was an instrument of warfare familiar enough to military engineers. But Fing-Su's flattery set his mind working.

Major Spedwell had a little flat in Bloomsbury. He was by education an engineer, by choice an artillerist. But none of his attainments approached his natural gift of instinct. His mind was waving red flags; he knew that a tremendous change in his fortunes was imminent, and he was satisfied that that change was for the worse.

In the few hours he had at his disposal before he must dress and meet Stephen Narth he took a pencil and paper and systematically and thoroughly set down all the possibilities, and sought for a remedy. And there was gradually evolved in his kinky mind something which, if not a remedy, was an escape for one person at least; possibly—here he naturally included himself—for two.

He burnt the paper in the grate, went into the little room that he used as a workshop, and for an hour laboured at top speed. At half past six he carried out to the street an oblong box and a heavy kitbag, put them tenderly in the car well and drove to Ratcliffe Highway. Threading the narrow lanes that lead to the river, he came to the water's edge and was fortunate to find a boatman, who, for a consideration, rowed him out to one of two black steamers lying at anchor in the Pool. A Chinaman with an inscrutable face hailed him from the gangway, and would have carried the bag on board for him, only the Major declined.

The ship carried a black captain and purser, the latter a good-humoured man whose life Spedwell had once saved. It was a lucky day for many people when the Major had stood between Fing-Su's wrath and this Negro officer, for the Kroo folk have a peculiar loyalty of their own. He sent for the purser as soon as he reached the deck.

"You needn't tell Fing-Su I've been aboard," he said. "I've got something I want to take out with me to the coast."

"Are you coming too, Major?" asked the purser.

"I may come; I don't know. The point is, I don't want anybody to know I've got these things on board."

The purser took him to a large cabin on the well deck.

"How long have you been using this for passenger accommodation?" asked the Major with a frown.

"Never used it before," said the man, "but Fing-Su has given orders that it has to be got ready for a passenger."

"Not for him—he has the captain's cabin. Who is going this trip?"

But here the purser could not help him. He could, however, indicate a place of storage for the thing which Spedwell carried. It was a small black chest with two hasps and padlocks, and very carefully the visitor deposited his treasure on the deck.

"I'll go along and get the padlocks for you, Major," said the officer, and disappeared.

This absence was very necessary to Major Spedwell, for he had certain delicate adjustments to make before the purser returned with the locks and keys. The little box had to be packed about with square brown cakes, which he took from his bag. He found some difficulty in fitting them in the space,

but he had finished his work and had closed down the lid before the black officer returned with the locks in his hand.

Spedwell straightened himself up and dusted his knees.

"Now listen, Haki—who works your wireless?"

"Either me or one of my Chink boys. I've got the instrument in my cabin. Why?"

Spedwell handed him the key of the chest.

"Put that in your pocket and never let it leave you. If you get a radio from me which says 'All well,' take the stuff out of the box and chuck it overboard. You'll probably get the message before you leave the Channel. You'll remember?"

Haki nodded, his eyes round with wonder.

"I don't get the idea," he said, "but I'll do what you tell me, Major. Are you smuggling something?"

But Spedwell had no further information to give. He did not tell the man that in certain eventualities another radio would reach him; there was time enough when the crisis arose.

"But suppose you make this trip with us?" persisted the Negro.

"In that case," said Spedwell, with a twisted smile, "I'll be able to whisper the message in your ear—if I'm travelling alive!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Joe Bray arrived in Clarges Street shortly after ten, for rainclouds had hastened the hour of darkness and had made possible an earlier move from Sunningdale. He was charged with suppressed excitement, for the night promised an adventure, and adventure was the breath of old Joe Bray's nostrils.

"Great idea of yours, Cliff, coming in the back way through the garage so that nobody could see me," he said.

"I could have saved you the trouble," said Clifford. "Fing-Su knows you're alive."

Joe Bray's face fell. The news robbed him of half his mystery.

"I have a man in Narth's office, a fellow named Perkins," explained Clifford. "It took me more time than money to suborn him, because he's one of the loyal kind. Did the detectives arrive?"

Joe nodded.

"A bit disappointing they was, Cliff," he complained; "just ordinary people like you and me. You'd never think they was detectives."

"That seems an asset," said Clifford, and after a moment's thought: "Did you get into touch with Joan?"

Old Joe shook his head.

"You told me not to," he said virtuously.

"You don't even know whether she's come back?" He sighed. "I'm not very much worried about her, because Scotland Yard has put a man to shadow her. He'll probably report later."

"How did you get Scotland Yard into this, Cliff?" asked the big man curiously. "And if they're in, why don't they pinch Fing-Su?"

"Because they haven't sufficient evidence to pinch anybody," said Clifford shortly.

He was beginning to feel the strain of this battle with the invisible forces of the Chinaman.

"You'll be able to satisfy your curiosity about Scotland Yard. It's quite an unromantic place. Superintendent Willing is calling tonight and is going with us down-river. Can you swim, Joe?"

"Anything that's manly I can do," said Joe emphatically. "Get out of your head, Cliff, that I'm a back number. There's I nothing that ever walked in trousers that could get me hollering for mother. A man of fifty is in the prime of life, as I've often said."

Superintendent Willing arrived soon after—a thin, cadaverous man with a mordant sense of humour and a low opinion of humanity. In some respects he was nearer to the typical idea of Joe Bray's imagination than the three men he had met earlier in the evening, for the superintendent spoke little and conveyed an impression of infallibility.

"You know we searched the Umgeni this morning? She's due out tonight."

Clifford nodded.

"There was nothing in the shape of contraband. Perhaps they're going to send it by the Umveli—that's the sister ship. They're lying side by side in the Pool. But she's not due to sail for a month, and she goes to Newcastle first. Have you seen anything of my man, Long—the fellow I put to trail Miss Bray?" And when Clifford shook his head: "I thought he might have reported to you. He's probably gone back to Sunningdale with her. Now, Mr Lynne, what is the business end of this Chink's operations?"

"Fing-Su? So far as I can gather, his idea is to create a new dynasty in China! Before he can bring that into being he would in the ordinary course of events have to fight the various mercenary generals who have sliced up the country between them, but I rather imagine he has found the easier way. Every general in China has his price—always remember that the Chinese have no patriotism; are unconscious of any sentiment for the soil that produced them. Their politics are immediate and local. Most of them aren't aware that Mongolia has become a Russian province. The generals are bandits on the grand scale, and battles are decided by the timely desertions of armies. Strategy in China means getting the best price for treachery and keeping your plans dark until the last minute."

"And Narth—he's rather a puzzle to me," said Willing. "I can't see what value he can be to Fing-Su and his crowd. The man is no genius, and certainly no fighter."

"Narth is very useful; make no mistake about that. Although he is practically bankrupt, he knows the City intimately—by which I mean that

when it comes to a question of negotiating dollars against lives, there won't be a better man in the City of London than Stephen Narth. He is personally acquainted with the great financial groups; he has the very knowledge which Fing-Su lacks. If Fing-Su succeeds there will be some valuable concessions to be had—Narth is to be the broker! At present he is a doubtful proposition, and Fing knows it. The money he has borrowed from our Chinese friend doesn't give Fing-Su the grip on him that he imagines. Stephen has got to be clamped to the Joyful Hands with bonds of steel. Perhaps the mumbory-jumbory of the initiation service might hold him—but I doubt it."

He looked at his watch.

"It's time we made a move," he said. "I have arranged for an electric launch to meet us at Wapping. Have you a gun?"

"Don't want it," rsaid the superintendent cheerfully. "I've a walking-cane that's got a kick in it and makes no noise. But I think the evening is going to be wasted. I've searched the Umgeni——"

"I'm not going to look at the Umgeni," interrupted Cliff grimly. "Her sister ship's lying alongside——"

"But she doesn't sail for a month."

"On the contrary," said Cliff, "she sails tonight."

The superintendent laughed.

"You know very little about ships," he said. "She'll be held up at the mouth of the river and her papers searched, and unless they are in order she'll not leave the Thames River."

"They will be in order," said Clifford cryptically.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

To the artist the Pool of London has a peculiar beauty of its own. Here lie the great ocean-going steamers, and along this watery highway passes the traffic of half a world. It is a place of soft tones, on a fine evening; a nocturne of greys and blues and russet reds. It is a veritable pool of romance even in the drab days of winter, when the stained hulls and the grime-coated funnels come slowly out of sunny seas to rest on these mud-coloured waters.

On a dark and rainy summer evening, with an unaccountable northerner to chill the bones of those adventurers who set forth upon the surface of the river, the Pool has little attraction. Clifford found his big electric launch waiting at the greasy flight of stairs, and slipping under the stern of a Norwegian timber ship, he steered to the middle of the river. A police skiff came out of the darkness, challenged them and was satisfied, and followed in their wake. The tide was running in and was favourable to their enterprise, for they could afford to go half-speed.

Clifford's scheme was to find a hiding-place on board the ship, and if they were undetected to go down-river with the ship to Gravesend, where the ship would be held up to take on a pilot and for the examination of papers, before being allowed to proceed on her voyage. If they were discovered, Willing had the necessary authority to account for their presence and to conduct an eleventh-hour search for forbidden exports.

There were ships to left and right of them, some silent and dark, save for their riding lamps, others ablaze with lights and noisy with the rattle and whine of donkey engines as they unloaded into lighters with the aid of great branch lamps swung over the side. A belated pleasure craft passed them, a glittering palace of a thing, from which came the strains of a wheezy band.

The four men who occupied the launch wore oilskins and sou'westers, and the need for this protection was emphasized before they had reached the middle of the river, for the drizzle became a downpour.

"Give me China, where the sun is always shining!" murmured Joe Bray, squatting on the floorboards, but nobody answered him.

After a quarter of an hour Superintendent Willing said in a low voice:

"There are the boats, right ahead on the Surrey side."

The Umgeni and the Umveli were, as he had said, sister ships, and were more twin-like than most sister ships are. Their black hulls and funnels were familiar objects to the riverside loafer; they had the same curiously

advanced navigation bridge, the same long superstructure running forward. Both had a single mast, and both sported a gilt and unnecessary figurehead of Neptune.

There was no need to ask which was the Umgeni. Her decks were brilliantly illuminated, and as they came in sight of her a fussy little tug was drawing away three empty lighters from her side. A little more than a ship's length from her the Umveli swung at her moorings, a dark and lifeless shape.

"You didn't search the Umveli?"

"No, it hardly seemed necessary. She's only been in the river a little more than a week, and she's been unloading all that time."

"By night," was Clifford's significant comment. "The ship which apears to be unloading by night might very easily be loading by night."

The brilliance of the Umgeni illuminated the starboard side of her sister ship, and Lynne set the nose of the launch towards the shore, setting a course that would bring him in the shadow of the vessel.

"Rather low down in the water for an empty ship, isn't she?" he asked, and the superintendent agreed.

"She's going round to Newcastle in ballast to undergo repairs," he said. "At least, that is my information."

There was little chance of confusing the two vessels. The word Umgeni in letters a yard long sprawled over the hull of that busy craft in great raised characters. As they came upon the dark side of the Umveli, Lynne looked up. They were passing under the stern, and he saw something which interested him.

"Look at that," he whispered, pointing.

The letters 'vel' had been removed from the stern of the ship.

"What's the idea?"

"They are changing names, that's all," said Clifford laconically. "In two hours the Umveli will go down the Thames with the Umgeni's papers, and in the morning the Umgeni, newly christened, will steam out to sea ostensibly on its way to Newcastle." They were moving silently, and the dark-covered launch would not be visible to ordinary eyes; nevertheless, when they came abreast of the companion ladder a screeching voice hailed them.

"What boat that?"

"Passing," shouted Lynne gruffly.

He focused a pair of night-glasses on the ship and presently he saw another look-out standing on the forecastle; and, more important, three shadowy shapes were on the bridge and smoke was coming up from the funnel.

"They keep a pretty good watch for an empty ship," he said, expecting to be hailed again by the man on the forecastle, but evidently this watcher was not so vigilant as his fellow. Clifford saw him turn and walk slowly towards the ladder that led to the well of the deck, and instantly sent the launch about so that it came under the clipper bow..

Reaching up, he caught hold of the chains with a rubber-covered boathook and steadied the launch, and in another instant had drawn himself up hand over hand till his arm encircled the bowsprit. As he peeped cautiously along the forecastle he heard somebody in a far-away voice call a name, and the forecastle watcher descended out of sight. In an instant he conveyed the intelligence, and first Willing and then Joe Bray, who displayed remarkable agility, followed him through the deserted ship. After seeing them safely on board, the launch drew off in accordance with instructions.

"We'll get down into the well," whispered Lynne, and, hurrying ahead, he ran down the ladder, expecting every moment to be challenged.

But the well was deserted. From an open doorway in the forecastle he heard the sound of a mouth-organ being played, whilst from ahead of him came the clop-clop of a hammer against wedges where the hatch was being finally closed. A narrow alleyway led from the well beneath the main deck, and if the party could reach this without attracting the attention of the men on the bridge, there was a possibility of finding a hiding-place.

Keeping in the shadow of the bulwarks, Cliff Lynne crept along, Joe in his wake, and they reached the alleyway without incident. Here a hiding-place was revealed. Immediately under the bridge (and exactly two decks lower) was a large cabin which, to judge from the scratches and discolorations on the bulkhead, had been used for carrying cargo. Two dimly burning bulkhead lights showed that the place had been converted to carry passengers. There was a table, two or three chairs, a package bearing the label of a well-known bookseller, and on the floor, a brand-new carpet, its creases rising in rectangular ridges.

Though the room ran the width of the ship it was not more than six feet in depth. In the after steel wall were two narrow bulkhead doors; one was

padlocked and bolted, but the other stood ajar, and, pushing it open, Clifford stepped in, turning on his pocket-lamp.

It was a tiny cupboard of a place, without windows, air being admitted through a deck ventilator, he guessed, for the atmosphere was pure and there was a gentle current of air. In a corner was a small brass bedstead, which had been clamped to the deck; in the farther corner was a recessed wash-place with a newly-fixed shower-bath and an earthenware basin. This and an incongruously ornate wardrobe, much too big for so small an apartment, completed the furniture.

Hearing the sound of feet on the deck outside, Clifford beckoned his two companions into the small room. Through a crack in the door he saw a Chinese sailor enter and look round. Presently he went back to the door and shouted something, and another sailor joined him and they talked together in a dialect with which neither Joe Bray nor Clifford was acquainted. They were obviously Southern Chinese, and whatever was the subject of their discourse amused them for they punctuated their speech with raucous squeaks of laughter.

And then, to Clifford's horror, before he could realize what was happening, one of the men put out his hand, gripped the door of the cubby house and slammed it tight. Clifford heard the grind of the bolt slipping into its place, and the slam of the outer door. They were trapped!

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It had been for Mr Stephen Narth a day of unrelieved misery. What remained of a conscience largely atrophied by self-interest was surprisingly sensitive to the knowledge of the evil he had done to an innocent girl. Again and again he had repeated Fing-Su's assurance that no harm would come to her, and again and again his reason rejected this futile act of self-deception. And then, on top of the other causes for misery, the news had come like a thunderbolt that Joe Bray was alive and that the treasure his fingers were reaching to touch was phantom gold!

Joe Bray was alive!

He had perpetrated an elaborate jest upon his heir. The easy way out was no longer a way at all, easy or difficult. His one surviving hope was vested in the integrity of Fing-Su.

Stephen Narth was too intelligent a man to believe that the native would keep any promise he had ever made. And yet £50,000 was at stake. Would even the most fantastic of Chinamen lose his hold upon that enormous sum, as undoubtedly he would if Stephen Narth decided to break loose from his association. Bankruptcy? What was bankruptcy but an unpleasant incident which might come to any man, and had come to many better and more highly placed than Stephen Narth? And with bankruptcy the ambitious Chinaman might whistle for his money.

This was the only comforting thought that the afternoon brought to him. The prospect of his initiation only filled him with a mild nausea that he should lower himself to the level of this 'mountebank Chink.'

He was a member of two societies which might be described as 'secret', and his general knowledge of such matters was broad enough to acquaint him with most of the formula: of initiation. He looked forward to the evening as a tiresome and uncomfortable waste of time. A journey to South London would have been a wretched experience at any hour or season, but the prospect of making his visit in the middle of the night, and of spending two hours, as he supposed, in the company of Chinese coolies, revolted him.

Spedwell dined with him at his hotel, and did his best to gloss over the coming ordeal. This thin-faced man with his shifty dark eyes was glib enough, but he could not wholly assuage the sensation of disgust which the thought of the ceremony aroused in Stephen Narth's mind. His was not a delicate gorge by any means, but he had behind him an ancestry with high traditions; and the more he thought of his position, when he allowed himself

to think at all, the more he hated the thought of the work of that day and the night which was to follow.

"There's nothing to be squeamish about," said Spedwell at last, as he lit a long black cheroot. "If anybody has a kick, it's me. You seem to forget, Narth, that I have commanded native infantry, and Indian infantry at that. Men of caste and refinement, men with European standards. You don't imagine that I like associating with the refuse of Asia, do you?"

"You're different," snapped Stephen. "You're a soldier of fortune and you can adapt yourself to circumstances. What have they done with Joan?" he asked fretfully.

"She's all right; she's being well taken care of. You needn't worry about her," said Spedwell easily. "I wouldn't allow anything to happen to the girl, you can be sure."

They were dining in Stephen's private suite, and the hour that followed passed all too quickly for the troubled man. It was near midnight when they went out into Piccadilly together. Spedwell's car was waiting and reluctantly Stephen entered. All the way to South London he was plying the other with questions. What was Fing-Su's plan? Why were they anxious to enlist him? What would he be expected to do? ...

Spedwell answered him with great patience, but was obviously relieved when the car turned into a side thoroughfare near the canal bridge in the Old Kent Road.

"Here we are," he said, and they got down.

They had to walk for five minutes before they came to the narrow opening of a lane which ran by the side of a high brick wall. The only light they had came from a street lamp planted squarely in the entrance of the lane. The lamp served the double purpose of preventing the ingress of wheeled traffic and forming an inadequate illumination for the long and muddy thoroughfare. The rain was pelting down, and Stephen Narth pulled up the collar of his coat with a grunt.

"What is this place?" he asked querulously.

"Our factory—at least, our warehouse," replied Spedwell.

He stopped before a door and, stooping, inserted a key and opened it.

Narth was full of trivial complaints.

"Was it necessary I should come in evening dress?" he asked.

"Very necessary," said the other. "Let me take your arm."

So far as the initiate could see by the light which came from his conductor's lamp, he was being taken to a small shed built against the wall. It proved to be a bare apartment equipped with two old Windsor chairs.

"It's dry, at any rate," said Spedwell as he switched on the light. "I shall have to leave you here; I must go along and tell Fing-Su you've come."

Left alone, Narth occupied himself by pacing up and down the tiny chamber. He wondered if Leggat would be there, and whether the initiation would prove too grotesque for him to go through with. Presently he heard the key in the lock and Spedwell came in.

"You can leave your coat here," he said. "There's only a little distance to walk."

Mr Narth had arrayed himself, according to instructions, in a long-tailed evening coat and white tie, and now, at Spedwell's request, he took from his pocket a pair of white kid gloves and pulled them on.

"Now!" said Spedwell, put out the light and led the way from the hut.

They were on a gravelled path which ended with a flight of stairs which seemed to lead down into the ground. At the top of these stood two statuesque figures, and as they came near one challenged in a tongue which was unfamiliar to the novitiate.

Spedwell lowered his voice and hissed something. With the other's hand on his arm, Narth descended the stairs and came to a second door, and again was challenged in the same language. Again Spedwell answered, and somebody rapped on a door. It was opened cautiously, there was a whispered interrogation, and then Spedwell's hand gripped the other's arm and he was led into a long, fantastically decorated hall. Was it imagination on his part, or did Spedwell's hand tremble?

He stood looking down a long vista, and for a second he was inclined to laugh hysterically. Squatting on either side of this oblong apartment were line after line of Chinamen, and each man was in a shabby, ill-fitting evening dress. The white shirts were the veriest shams; he saw the end of one shirt-front sticking out, and round its edge he saw the curve of a brown body. On each shirt-front were two blazing stones. He had no need to be associated with the theatrical profession to realize that they were 'property'

diamonds. Solemnly, awfully, they stared at him, these quaint apparitions in their shoddy social livery.

He gazed open-mouthed from one side to the other. They all wore white bows, comically tied. Each man had white cotton gloves which rested on his knees. He had seen something like it before...that was the first impression Stephen Narth received. And then he recalled...a coloured minstrel troupe sitting solemnly in exactly that attitude...white gloves on knees. Only these men were yellow.

In four great blue vases joss-sticks were burning. The room was blue with their fumes.

And now he let his eyes stray along the centre aisle to the white altar, and, behind it, enthroned, Fing-Su himself. Over his evening dress—and no doubt his diamonds were real—he wore a robe of red silk. On his head was an immense gold crown which sparkled with precious stones. One white-gloved hand held a golden rod, the other a glittering orb that flashed in the light of the shaded candelabra. Suddenly his voice broke the silence:

"Who is this who comes to speak with the Joyful Hands?"

Narth became conscious of the golden hands suspended above Fing-Su's head, but before he could take them in, Spedwell replied:

"O Son of Heaven, live for ever! This is one, thy meanest slave, who comes to worship at thy throne!"

Instantly at these words, as though they were watching some invisible choirmaster who led their chorus, the yellow men chanted something in chorus.

They stopped as abruptly as they had begun.

"Let him come near," said Fing-Su.

Spedwell had disappeared; probably he was behind him. Narth did not dare turn his head to look. Two of these slovenly fellows in evening dress conducted him slowly along the hall. In a dim way he realized that the man on his right was wearing a pair of trousers that were three inches too short for him. But there was nothing comical in this. He was too oppressed with a sense of terror, a premonition of a horror yet unimagined, to find food for laughter in any of the incongruities which met his eyes on either side.

And then he saw the altar with its glittering edge, and the shrouded figure of a man lying upon it, covered by a white sheet. He looked at it numbly; saw a

great red heart pinned to the sheet...He was trying hard to think sanely, his wide-staring eyes fixed upon the shape and the red heart...On the hem of the shroud was a sprawling Chinese character in scarlet.

"It's symbolical...only a wax figure," hissed a voice in his ear.

So Spedwell was there. He received an accession of courage from this knowledge.

"Say after me"—Fing-Su's deep, solemn voice filled the room with sounds—"I will be faithful to the Joyful Hands..."

Like a man in a dream, Narth repeated the words.

"I will strike to the heart all its enemies."

He repeated the words. Where was Leggat? He expected to find Leggat here. His eyes roved round the visible arc, but there was no sign of that stout, jovial man.

"By this sign"—Fing-Su was speaking—"do I give proof of my loyalty, my faith and my brotherhood..."

Somebody slipped a thing into his hand. It was a long, straight knife, razor-keen.

"Hold it above the figure," said a voice in his ear, and mechanically Stephen Narth obeyed as he repeated, without realizing what the words meant, the oath that the man on the dais prescribed.

"So let all the enemies of the Emperor die!" said Fing-Su.

"Strike at the heart!" whispered Spedwell's voice, and with all his strength Stephen Narth struck down.

Something yielded under the knife; he felt a quiver. And then the white sheet went suddenly red. With a scream he clawed at the cloth where the head was and drew it back...

"Oh, my God!" he shrieked.

He was looking into the dead face of Ferdinand Leggat!

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

He had killed Leggat! With his hands he, who would not have slain a rabbit, had struck this man to his death! The red on the cloth was widening; his hands were dabbled with the horrible fluid, and he turned with an insane yell to grapple with the devil who had whispered the words in his ear.

Spedwell, his face distorted with horror, put out his hand to save himself, but the bloody hands gripped his throat and flung him down. And then something struck Narth and he tumbled over, first to his knees and then upon the tessellated pavement, a demented, screaming madman...

The serried ranks of yellow men sat watching without movement, their shoddy diamonds glittering in their shirt-fronts, their white hands on their knees.

An hour later Major Spedwell came into the apartment which was reserved for Fing-Su on his infrequent visits to the factory, and the Chinaman looked up over his book and flicked the ash of his cigarette into a silver tray.

"Well?" he asked. "How is our squeamish friend?"

Spedwell shook his head. He himself looked ten years older. His linen still bore the impress of a red hand.

"Mad," he said laconically. "I think he's lost his reason."

Fing-Su leaned back in his padded chair with a tut-tut of impatience.

"That I did not bargain for," he said, in tones of gentle annoyance. "Who would have imagined that a full-grown man could have made such an exhibition of himself? Why, the fellow is a rank coward and outsider!"

Spedwell did not reply. Perhaps he was wondering whether there would come a day when, for motives of expediency, he might himself lie drugged upon the marble altar whilst some initiate thrust down the fatal knife.

"The idea was ingenious and should have had a better ending," said Fing-Su. "Leggat was a coward and a traitor, and deserved his death. Possibly our friend Narth will take a different view when he recovers, and realizes that he has so committed himself."

Spedwell was eyeing him steadily.

"You told me that the sacrifice was to be a Yun Nan man—the fellow who fell into the hands of Lynne. I hated the idea, but like a brute I agreed. God! When I saw Leggat's face!"

He wiped his streaming brow; his breath came more quickly.

Fing-Su said nothing, but waited.

"How did you get Leggat?" asked Spedwell at last.

"He just came. We gave him a drink—he knew nothing," said Fing-Su casually. "He had betrayed us—you know that. He's dead and there's an end of him. As to Narth, his life is in our hands.".

Spedwell, who had dropped into a chair, looked up.

"He will have to be really mad to believe that," he said. "As I told you before, Fing-Su, our lives are in his hands, not his in ours."

Fing-Su carefully scooped out the end of his cigarette, inserted another in the ebony holder and lit it before he answered.

"Where have you put him?"

"In the stone hut. He won't shout any more; I've given him a shot of morphia. There's only one thing to do, Fing-Su, and that is to get this man out of the country as quickly as you can. The Umveli leaves tonight; put him on board——"

"With the girl?"

Spedwell's eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean, 'with the girl'?" he asked. "You're keeping her in London until Cliff Lynne gives you the share you want."

The Chinaman puffed thoughtfully, his low forehead creased in thought.

"That was the original idea," he admitted. "But so many things have happened in the past few hours...I am inclined to change my plans. We could get her to the Chinese coast and up one of the rivers without attracting any attention." He sent a cloud of smoke to the ceiling and watched it dissolve. "She's rather delicious," he said.

Major Spedwell rose, walked deliberately to the table and stood, his palms resting on its surface.

"She'll stay in England, Fing-Su," he said, slowly and emphatically, and for a second their eyes met, and then the Chinaman smiled.

"My dear Major Spedwell," he said, "there can only be one master in any such organization as this, and that master, I beg to emphasize, is myself. If it is my wish that she should stay in England, she stays; if I desire that she should go to the coast, she goes, Is that understood?"

So quickly did Spedwell's hand move, that Fing-Su saw nothing but a blur of moving pink. In that fraction of a second something had appeared in Spedwell's hand. It lay flat on the table, its black muzzle pointing to Fing-Su's white waistcoat.

"She stays," said Spedwell tensely.

The Chinaman's face was creased and puckered for a moment with a fear which the white man had never seen before. Presently he recovered himself and forced a smile.

"As you wish, she may stay. There is nothing to be gained by quarrelling," he said. "Where is she now? In the factory? Go and get her."

Spedwell stared at this unexpected request.

"I though you didn't want her to know you had a hand in this," he said.

"It is a matter of indifference to me," said the other. "Go bring her, please."

Spedwell had reached the door when he heard the soft swish of a drawer opening, and turned in a flash. A bullet seared his face and splintered the panel of the door. As his gun jerked up, he saw Fing-Su drop to the floor. For a second he hesitated, then, turning, fled into the big room from which the private office of 'the Emperor' led.

It was a storehouse, piled high with bales of goods, with three narrow alleyways leading to the big doors at the end. He had only one chance. At the far end of the warehouse was the fuse-board which protected the lights in this wing of the factory. As, in response to the sound of shooting, the end door burst open, and a crowd of coolies flocked into the warehouse, he raised his automatic and fired twice. There was a splinter of marble and glass, and all the lights in the place went out.

Leaping up, he pulled himself to the top of a bale and ran lightly along, springing from bale to packing-case, until he came within a few feet of the open door, around which a few undecided coolies were grouped. With one leap he was amongst them, his pistol blazing. They had not recovered from

their astonishment when he had dived through them, sped across the dark yard and reached the top of the wall by way of the shed that Clifford Lynne had seen the night he made his unauthorized visit. Before his pursuers could reach him, he had dropped over the wall into the muddy alley and was flying for his life along the canal bank.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

"There's another door here," said Willing suddenly.

He was examining the wall of the inner cabin with the aid of his lamp. He pointed to an oblong aperture which apparently was fastened on the other side.

"It is pretty useless to us," said Clifford Lynne after a brief inspection. "We shall have to wait until somebody comes in to make the bed. If what I believe is correct, the Umveli will be dropping down the river in an hour or two. I noticed just now that all the lights are out on the other ship. Just about now they will be ringing the changes."

"What are they waiting for?" grumbled Joe. "Always thought they wanted a high tide to float out, and she's running high now. And with this rain, it is dark enough to hide a Dreadnought!"

In the door behind which they were imprisoned were a number of small air-holes, and this gave Lynne an opportunity of observing the bigger room. The men had left the bulkhead lights burning, and dimly through the small porthole which faced him he could get a view of a blurred light moving and disappearing on the well deck. From beneath their feet there came the hum and whirr of the dynamo, and whilst they were listening they heard a dull roar from over the ship's side.

"She's got a full head of steam," said Willing. "This looks as if your theory may be right, Lynne, and we are going to see something!"

There were other evidences of activity. Above their heads they heard an insistent patter of feet, and a wailing chorus while a boat was hauled up and swung inboard.

It was a quarter to three when they heard the clank of the anchor capstan, and almost immediately a well-known voice came to Lynne. The door of the outer cabin was flung open, and Fing-Su, in a long, fur-lined overcoat, stalked majestically into the apartment.

"Here is your room, my young lady, and here you will stay. If you make a noise or give me any trouble or scream, I will find you a better furnished cabin!"

It required all Clifford Lynne's presence of mind to check the cry that came to his lips, for there had followed Fing-Su into the cabin, a pale-faced girl. She was hatless, drenched with the rain, yet her little chin was held up and

there was no fear in her eyes. He groaned in his soul as he recognized Joan Bray.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

She had been awakened from an uneasy sleep by the smashing in of her door, and had submitted, with a resolution, and a calm which were inexplicable to the watching Fing-Su, to be carried to the waiting car. The night was favourable to such a move; the streets were deserted, and nobody saw, in the two closed cars that moved swiftly towards Rotherhithe, anything of an unusual nature. It was not till she alighted on a deserted wharf, before she walked down the rickety stairs to the waiting boat, that she observed she had a companion in misfortune—somebody whose head was enveloped in a blanket, through which moans and whimperings were audible. She could never recall that journey from the shore to the ship. She had a vague recollection that somebody had carried her up a steep ladder and had deposited her on a wet and slippery deck, from which she rose with an effort. And then, through the rain, she had seen Fing-Su's peering face, and found herself pushed through the door of a poorly furnished cabin.

The Chinaman went to the door and called a name which she thought sounded like 'Mammy!' and presently a fat Chinese woman came waddling in, wiping her hands upon a soiled apron.

"This is your bedroom, young miss," said Fing-Su.

He spun over the handle and the door moved slightly.

"Attend, Amah!" He addressed the woman in the Honan dialect. "You will stay by this girl, and you will not let her out of your sight. If she screams you are to stop her, and if you don't——-" He raised the walking-stick he carried threateningly, and the old woman shrank back.

The ship was moving now; the roar of its siren broke into the night. The girl standing by the table, heard the tinkle of the telegraph and the sudden throb throb of a slowly revolving propeller. It was a nightmare; it could not be real. Yet it was true; she was on a ship moving down Thames River towards the sea and—— She shivered.

What lay at the end of this voyage?

And then she recalled the Major's words, and knew that he had kept faith. The fact that they had had to break down the door proved that he had no hand in this outrage. Where was he? she wondered, and then it flashed upon her that this whimpering thing, with its head hidden in a blanket, might be he. Only for a second did the thought remain; somehow she could not imagine that hard-faced man whimpering or snivelling for mercy.

"You stay here, missie"—it was the fat Amah, still quaking with the terror which Fing-Su had inspired, and she spoke in lisping English—"I go make your bed."

She opened the door wider and stepped inside, and Joan thought she heard a strange shuffling of feet, but took no notice of it until:

"Can you put out the light?"

She nearly swooned. It was Clifford Lynne's voice!

It took her a minute before she could locate the switch which controlled the light but after a while she found it near the edge of the door, and for a long time she could not control her trembling fingers sufficiently to turn the little knob. The moment the lights were extinguished somebody came swiftly to her side, a strong arm went round her shoulders, and she found herself sobbing hysterically on his breast. There was a long deep silence, broken only by her weeping, and then, anxiously:

"I'm her only relation, Cliff," said Joe Bray's voice. "It's natural an' proper for a young gel——"

"Shut up!" hissed Lynne, and the humour of this exchange between one who was anxious to take Clifford's place as comforter was almost too much for the girl.

There came the sound of tapping on the portlight.

"Why have you put the light out?" demanded Fing-Su's voice.

"The young woman is undressing," said Cliff, speaking in the dialect and giving a fair imitation of the stout woman from Honan.

He heard the man's grumbling voice:

"Why didn't she undress in the bedroom?" But evidently Fing-Su was satisfied, and he moved off.

Through the window Clifford could see that the ship was in the middle of the river heading downstream and going at half speed. He was puzzled as to why Fing-Su had left the girl here, in so exposed a part of the vessel, which was certain to be boarded at Gravesend not only by representatives of the Port of London, but by the pilot who was to take her out to sea. Moreover, it would be growing light in an hour, and that would make the danger of discovery all the more pressing. He heard men working outside, and after a while one of

the portlights was obscured, and he guessed that they were piling deck cargo round the door.

Their position was a precarious one, as the superintendent pointed out.

"We should have held up Fing-Su when he opened the door," he said, but Clifford shook his head.

"That sounds simple, but somehow I don't think that he will come into the cabin until the ship is well out to sea," he said seriously. "We're going to have trouble. Is there any chance of forcing the door?"

Willing tried the door and shook his head.

"It would be easy to smash the portlights," he suggested.

Clifford smiled in spite of himself.

"But even you couldn't get through the portlights, superintendent!" he said dryly.

"We could draw attention——"

"Two unarmed officials would be of very little use to us. Before they could bring help, even supposing Fing-Su let them off, we should be dead. No, the only thing to do is to wait. Sooner or later they must open the door, and the moment we get Fing-Su in this cabin there will be no more trouble—except for Fing-Su!"

Dawn was breaking, but they saw little of the blessed light of day, for bale after bale had been piled up before the deckhouse until its portholes were completely darkened. It so interfered with the ventilation that the air grew foul and breathing was difficult, a possibility which Fing-Su had probably overlooked, and they were compelled to retreat to the inner room, where the air was fresh, and here they sat as hour followed hour, listening. They heard the ship's engines stop, and the Umveli remained stationary for the greater part of an hour; then, with a sinking of heart, they heard again the throb throb of engines, and presently the ship began to roll slightly as it came to sea.

Evidently the bales had been placed before the portholes and door for the purpose which Clifford had guessed, for hardly had they struck the open sea when daylight appeared, and through the ventilators placed on a level with the floor came a current of sweet air.

Food must be brought in soon, and they waited for the door to open. The old Amah had given up weeping and bemoaning her fate, and squatted now, a sullen, fatalistic figure, in one corner of the tiny cabin. The passage of time did not reconcile her to captivity. Her teeth continued to chatter, and it was she who brought about the undoing of their plan. Clifford Lynne learnt afterwards that the cook whose duty it was to bring the breakfast was her son, and it was fear for his life that made her utter a piercing scream when the key came into the lock. Before they could restrain her she had rushed out of the cabin, uttering yell after yell. Old Joe Bray darted after her, caught her round her ample waist, and covered her face with his hands. But it was too late: someone was glaring round the porthole. It was Fing-Su, and Cliff saw that he in turn had been recognized. He pulled his gun and fired twice. The glass of the porthole was shattered to splinters.

"That's done it!" said the detective with a growl.

They heard a shrill whistle blow, and, glancing sideways through one of the portholes, Clifford saw armed coolies swarming out of the forecastle, buckling their revolver belts as they came. As he looked, he leapt back in time. A shot went through the second of the portholes, and a splinter of glass cut his cheek. The third port went the same way, and almost immediately three rifle barrels were thrust through. They dropped to cover under the protecting steel wall of the deckhouse, and as the guns exploded Cliff gripped the barrel nearest to him and jerked it inside. With his free hand he grabbed the girl and drew her to him.

"Lie very quiet," he said. "You'll be perfectly safe——"

At this moment the door was flung wide, and with a scream the old Amah fled through, to everybody's relief. A second later a black object appeared at the edge of the doorway, and even as Clifford Lynne pulled the trigger he realized that it was only a mophead.

"Steady your arm, Cliff," warned Joe Bray. He had a gun in each hand, but as yet he had not wasted a shot. "They're drawing our fire. We've got no other ammunition than what's in the gun, have we?"

Clifford shook his head. Outside they could hear Fing-Su jabbering orders, and a lower but more authoritative voice which, Clifford guessed, was that of the captain of the ship—another Negro, Clifford was to learn, and the only other member of the ship's company beside the purser who was not Chinese.

The rifles were suddenly withdrawn from the broken portholes and they heard something being dragged along the deck, and the alleyway door was slammed tight.

"Get in the inner room," shouted Willing, and pushing the girl before him, Clifford reached sanctuary as the brass nozzle of a great hose was thrust through one of the broken portholes.

Instantly the room hissed with the furious rush of water, and Clifford made a hasty reconnaissance. There was no outlet to the water; the ventilators would hardly drain off a gallon a minute. A second nozzle had appeared and the water was already ankle-deep. Soon it swelled over the ledge of the inner door; and by this time two more hoses were at work.

Clifford made a rough calculation and grinned. Long before the water reached the level of the portholes something would happen. He remembered enough of his school mathematics to know that the factor of metacentric height would come into operation.

Higher and higher the water came. Some little escaped through the ventilators and the crevices between door and doorway, but the inrush was so heavy and continuous that it was only a question of time now before Fing-Su had the fright of his life.

"Lynne!" It was Fing-Su who was shouting. "Throw out your arms and you'll be treated fairly. I'll put you all ashore."

Clifford Lynne did not answer. He wanted one glimpse of that face, only for the fraction of a second. Suddenly, caught in the trough of a sea, the Umveligave a great lurch to starboard and the water splashed and gurgled up to the neck of Joe Bray, who was standing by the starboard bulkhead. For a long time the vessel lay over on her side and only very slowly righted herself. The moving weight of sixty tons of water was making itself felt.

They heard excited voices outside, and one by one the hoses were pulled back and the flow of water ceased. There came a hammering at the door; under the weight of the water it burst open with a report like a gun, and the water poured out in a solid stream.

"Too much weight on deck has made her unwieldy," said Lynne under his breath. "The skipper's scared of it—I thought this would happen!"

Presumably his view was accurate, for the hoses did not come back. Again Fing-Su's voice:

"Let Mr Bray come out; I'll talk with him," he said. "But he must come without arms."

There was a brief consultation, and Joe surrendered his pistols to his partner and stepped out upon that wet deck.

Fing-Su was standing in the cover of a big bale of Manchester goods, a revolver in his hand.

"Put your gun down, you five-cash Chink!" snarled Joe. "And stop theatre playin' for once in your life, you poor heathen!"

Fing-Su slipped the pistol into the holster at his side.

"Mr Bray," he began, "there is no need for recriminations——"

"Cut out all that college talk, you dam' coolie thief!" said the old man. "Put this ship about and save your skinny neck from the rope!"

Fing-Su smiled.

"Unfortunately, that is impossible," he said. "We have dropped the pilot, figuratively and literally——"

"Quit talking like a Rhodes scholar!" roared Joe, and suddenly broke into voluble Chinese, which is a language peculiarly designed for one who desires to be offensive. Fing-Su listened unmoved to the torrent of abuse, and, when Joe had talked himself out of breath:

"We are wasting time, Mr Bray. Persuade your friends to give up their weapons, and no harm shall come to them. Otherwise, I can starve you out. I have no desire to hurt Joan——"

"Miss Bray," snapped Joe, his face crimson with fury. Chinese came naturally to Joe, who had lived most of his life in the country, and the coolies grouped around Fing-Su who understood the language shuddered as they listened. But he might have been passing the most delicate compliments for all the notice the Chinaman took.

He was wearing semi-nautical attire: white duck trousers, a blue reefer coat with innumerable gold rings about the cuffs, and a large officer's cap around which ran a broad band of gold braid.

"You are a very foolish and vulgar man," he said calmly. "But it is not for me to reproach you with your lack of breeding. Go back to your friends and deliver my messages."

For a second it looked as though Joe Bray had a personal message of his own to deliver with his great shoulder-of-mutton fist, but Fing-Su's revolver covered him, and with a final flow of vituperation he made his way back to his companions in distress.

"He's got a dozen armed men with him," he reported, "and he's going to starve us out. Cliff, when I think of how easy I could have smothered that kid when he was a baby, I almost give up talkin' to myself!"

"Is Fing-Su in charge of the ship?"

"There's a captain," said Joe. "A coon—he's got up like the Darktown Band, with gold lace an' everything. But he's nobody. The big noise is Fing-Su."

"Mr Bray, who was the man that was brought to the ship at the same time as I?" asked Joan, and they learnt for the first time that there was yet another prisoner on the Umveli.

Clifford agreed that it was hardly likely to be Spedwell. He had his own suspicions, but as it happened they were wrong, for Ferdinand Leggat lay in a deep pit that had been dug under the factory wall by lantern light.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Whilst they held a council of war, Fing-Su went up to his cabin, and on his instructions they brought the pitiable wreck of a man from the dark hold where he had been stowed. Stephen Narth, in the ruined finery of the night before, collarless, grimy of face, unshaven, might well have passed unrecognized by his nearest friend. A shuddering night had had its effect upon him. But he was sane enough, though, as the Chinaman saw, on the verge of a breakdown.

"Why did you bring me on this ship?" he asked hollowly. "That's not playing the game, Fing-Su. Where is that swine Spedwell?"

Fing-Su would have given a lot to have been able to answer.

Spedwell had escaped, but self-interest would keep him silent. He had always hated Spedwell, with his air of mastership and his superior smile; hated him worse than the drunken Leggat. Spedwell had been a useful teacher; from him the Chinaman had imbibed certain vital knowledge. He was a very receptive man, gifted by nature with a rapid acquisition of learning; though in his collegiate days he had not touched military studies, he had learnt much from Spedwell in the year of their acquaintance.

"I haven't the slightest idea where he is," he said, "and I shall never forgive him for the death of poor Leggat."

Narth stared at him.

"Then it was his idea?"

"Entirely," said Fing-Su gravely. He was a glib and plausible liar, and Narth was in a state of mind when he was prepared to accept any version of the horror that exculpated himself.

In a few sentences Fing-Su gave an account of the initiation which brought a moderate comfort to the conscience-stricken man. And then the Chinaman broke his important news.

"Here? On board? Joan?" gasped Narth. "But how did she come here? And what is Lynne doing on board this ship?"

"That is what I want to know," said Fing-Su rapidly. "Go down and talk to them. Point out the folly of resistance; promise them on my word that no harm shall come to them, and that I will give them the best accommodation on the ship and land them at Bordeaux, if they will agree to give me no further trouble."

He elaborated this message at length, and five minutes later Clifford Lynne, from his observation post, saw a dilapidated figure stagger into the cabin and recognized him. So this was the moaning stranger! What had happened to Leggat? he wondered.

He listened in silence to Stephen's proposal, then shook his head.

"I'd sooner take my chance with a life-sized shark," he said. "Go back to Fing-Su and tell him that he'll neither drown us out nor starve us out, and that the day we touch land, and I am free, he will be a prisoner waiting his trial for murder."

"What's the use of quarrelling with him?" wailed Narth.

His nerve had gone. Never a strong man, he was a pitiable snadow of the man Clifford had known.

"Is Leggat on board?" asked Clifford, as he remembered.

Narth shook his hanging head and began to whisper something that only the South African's keen ears caught.

"Dead?" he said incredulously. "Did Fing-Su kill him?"

But before he had ended the question, Stephen Narth had run out of the room like a man demented.

Their position was a perilous one. Already the land was slipping out of view, and unless a miracle interposed there was no alternative between starvation and surrender—and what surrender would mean to Joan Bray, Clifford could guess.

Immediately after Stephen Narth's departure the door to the alleyway had been closed and locked and, at Willing's suggestion, the heavy deadlights which covered the portholes were dropped and screwed into their places. This deprived them of a view of the forepart of the ship and curtailed the air supply, but the cabin was bearable, especially now they had got rid of the yellow Amah.

At this moment of supreme danger Clifford could only wonder at the calm and serenity of the girl. She was, it seemed, the most cheerful of the party, and although the pangs of hunger were beginning to make themselves felt, she neither complained nor, by so much as a look or gesture, added to the unhappiness of the party.

The prospect of any prolonged stay in this confined space was an appalling one. Then he thought of the girl. Happily they would not be short of fresh water, for that in the little shower which had been fixed in the washing-place was fresh, if a little brackish. Clifford tried the inner bulkhead door, but it was unyielding.

"It probably leads to the officers' quarters," said Willing.

Joe Bray looked at the door thoughtfully.

"We can't get out, but they can get in," he said. "We'd better put up a barricade, or they'll be taking us in the rear, Cliff. When I think of that poor girl——" he said, and choked.

"Which poor girl?" asked Clifford.

For the moment he had forgotten the existence of Mabel.

They left Joan to the occupation of her little bedroom, and gathered about the table in the larger cabin. The search they had made for food had produced not so much as a ship's biscuit, though Willing had thought that a large black box in the girl's sleeping-room might contain emergency rations. Their efforts to open or move the chest, however, were unavailing.

Then Joe had discovered in his coat pocket a cake of chocolate, and half of this had gone to the girl.

"Usually," said Joe plaintively, "I've half a dozen cakes, because naturally I've a sweet tooth. What I'd like now is a boiled fowl with dumplings——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, shut up!" growled Willing.

They tried to play games to pass the time, but this effort at cheerfulness was a dismal failure.

Six o'clock—seven o'clock came and went. The girl had been sleeping when Clifford looked in. He had closed the door so that their voices should not disturb her. Suddenly it was pulled open and Joan appeared in the doorway with a startled expression on her white face.

"What is it?" asked Clifford, springing towards her.

She lowered her voice.

"Somebody is tapping on that door," she said. She pointed to the bulkhead door, and Lynne kept close and listened.

Tap, tap, tap!

It was repeated again. Then he heard the soft grind of a bolt being drawn, and waited, pistol in hand.

"It's all right," whispered a voice. "Don't shout or they'll hear you."

The door opened another inch, and then wide enough to show a black face surmounted by the soiled cap of one of the ship's officers.

"I'm Haki, the purser," he whispered, and his hand came round holding a small canvas bag. "If Fing-Su knows this I'm finished," he added urgently, and immediately closed the door and pushed home the bolt.

In that brief moment of time Clifford saw that the detective's theory had been an accurate one. He looked down a dirty alleyway from which doors opened, and he had a glimpse of an untidy cabin that opened from the passage. Carrying the bag to the outer cabin, he shook out its contents: a dozen rolls, nearly new, a large chunk of cheese, and a piece of salted beef fell on the table. Clifford broke a roll suspiciously and examined it under the light.

"We've got to take the risk," he said. "I'll eat some first, and in half an hour, if nothing happens to me, we'll have a dinner that will beat the Ritz."

He cut a slice of the meat, tasted the cheese and the bread, and felt a brute as he saw the famished eyes of his companions fixed on him. The half hour passed, and then he brought the girl from the cabin and with their penknives they carved a meal for her.

"We've one friend on board, anyway," grunted Willing. "What nationality was that chap?"

Clifford had spent two years of his youth on the African coast.

"Kroo. They're not bad fellows, though they're constitutional thieves," he said.

They put aside a portion of the meal for the morning, and at his earnest solicitation Joan lay down again and fell into a troubled sleep. She did not hear the stealthy tap at the bulkhead, but Clifford, seated near the half-closed door of her cabin, detected the signal and crept in without waking her. Again the door opened.

"Everybody on the ship's drunk," said the black-faced officer, in a matter-of-fact tone, as though he were describing a very ordinary part of the ship's

routine. "The skipper's scared of them finding this door. They may try to rush you later; you've got to be prepared for that. If they don't, I'll be here at six bells, and you be ready to skip, mister."

"What's the idea?" asked Clifford.

The man looked back down the alleyway before he answered.

"Gun-running's nothing, but murder's big trouble," he said. "The skipper thinks so too."

"Who has been murdered?"

The man did not reply at once, but closed the door hurriedly, and it was nearly half an hour before he returned.

"I heard the officer of the watch coming down," he said, in the same conversational tone. "These Chinks often do that—leave the bridge in the middle of the Channel, eh? He's the limit! It seems to me about time we quit this business. It was that mad fellow that was killed. He came aboard with the young lady last night."

"Narth?" whispered Clifford in horror.

The man nodded.

"Sure. He got fresh with Fing-Su, and the Chink handed him one with a bottle. They chucked him overboard just after I brought you your eats."

He looked round again and then gave them a piece of vital information.

"The skipper and two of the hands are getting the lifeboat down round about six bells," he whispered. "You'll have to slide down a rope for it. Can the young lady make it?"

"She'll make it all right," said Clifford and the door closed.

What was happening, he could guess. Ever since that mad dream of empire had come to Fing-Su he had had the advantage of expert advice. Leggat in his way was clever; Spedwell in his own particular line was brilliant; both were cautious men, for whose judgment the Chinese millionaire had respect. But now Fing-Su had no master but his own whims; his judgment was governed only by his muddled philosophy.

The hours of waiting seemed interminable. They sat around in the little cabin, not daring to speak for fear they should miss the signal, or be caught

by the 'rush' which the purser had predicted. So slowly did the hands of his watch move that Clifford once or twice thought it had stopped.

Three o'clock passed; the clang of the timing bell came faintly through the protected portholes, and then there was a tap at the door and it was swung open on its hinge. The purser, in heavy sea-boots, a revolver belt about his waist, was waiting, and he beckoned them. Clifford followed, holding the girl's hand in his, Joe Bray bringing up the rear, a gun in each hand and a partiality for violence in his heart.

They had to pass a lighted galley, and their guide put his finger on his lips to enjoin quietness. Joan had a glimpse of the broad back of the Chinese cook stooping over a steaming pot, and came safely and unobserved to the after well deck.

Two steel doors in the ship's side had been opened. Over the edge of the deck was a taut rope, and looking down, Clifford saw that the rope was attached to a large whale-boat in which three muffled men were sitting. He turned to the girl, his lips to her ear.

"Will you dare go down that rope hand over hand?"

As the purser passed a slender line about the girl's waist and knotted it, he said in a low voice:

"Don't waste time...I had a radio in the night." He did not explain what this had to do with the escape, but addressed the girl. "You'll have to go down hand-over-hand miss," he whispered, and she nodded, and whilst they held the safety line she slid slowly down the rough rope that cut and scorched her fingers.

The whale-boat held to the ship's side seemed to be racing along at an incredible speed, though it was going no faster than the steamer. Somebody reached up and caught her unceremoniously by the waist and dragged her into the boat. Joe Bray followed, and justified his claim to youth by the agility with which he went down hand-over-hand in the dark. The purser was the last to leave the ship, and scrambled over the bow of the whale-boat with incredible ease.

"Stand by!" said a thick voice.

The purser groped in the bottom of the boat, found an axe, and with one blow severed the rope. In an instant they were in the maelstrom of the ship's wake, rocking and tossing from side to side, and only by the narrowest margin did they avoid capsizing, for the iron side of the Umveli grazed the

rudder-post. And then, as the whale-boat rocked free, they heard a yell, a light flashed from the bridge; clear above the gurgle of the water and the thud of the retreating screw they heard a whistle blow, and the Umveli swung round in a circle.

"They've seen us," said Clifford between his teeth.

The purser, grinning with fear, glared back at the circling vessel and grunted. Turning, he ran to the middle of the boat and assisted one of the black sailors to step the mast. The Negro captain, a grotesque figure in his gold-bound cap and gaudy badges of rank, was pulling desperately at the sail. A fresh north-easter was blowing, and in another second the whale-boat lay over and was running into the wind. But what hope had they of escaping from a fifteen-knots steamer?

A thunderous blast from the ship's siren directed their attention to their monstrous pursuer. From the bridge came the flicker of a signal lamp, and the captain spelt it out.

"Yeller nigger!" was his only comment; he, for his part, was the blackest man that Clifford had ever met.

The whale-boat tacked about. Obviously he was more hopeful than one of the watchers. Clifford sank down on his knees by the side of the girl, who lay covered with a tarpaulin in the bottom of the boat.

"Not scared, are you, honey?" he asked.

She looked up with a smile, and that was all the answer he needed.

The captain's English was the English of the coast, but it was both expressive and illuminating.

"Elephant no catchum flea," he said. "Big ship she no catchum little boat! S'pose they lower dem cutter onetimes dem cutter she no catchum sail-boat."

"There is danger enough, captain."

The broad-faced man shook his head in assent.

"Presently they done bring them ha-ha guns," he said, "but by and by we see anudder ship."

That was their hope. They were still in the English Channel, which is the main street of Northern Europe. Here the traffic is usually thick. But for the moment there was no sign of smoke or sail.

Clifford turned to the purser.

"Whether we escape or not, I owe you something, my friend," he said, and Haki smiled broadly.

"We ought to have got away before," he said, "but the captain was scared. But the radio made him skip!"

"The radio?"

The purser put his hand in his pocket and took out a soiled scrap of paper.

"I got this last night," he said, and Clifford read the scribbled words with difficulty:

Get away from ship before seven o'clock. Take with you anybody who value lives. If Miss Bray aboard take her with you. Admiralty sending destroyer Sunbright to overhaul you.

Soldier.

"That's the Major—we called him 'Soldier,'" explained the purser. "But the Sunbright mightn't catch us—and if they did, Fing-Su wouldn't leave anybody alive who could tell on him."

Clifford had been puzzled as to what the captain meant by 'ha-ha gun,' but very soon came an unpleasant explanation.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

They had brought a maxim-gun into action. The bullets threw up a cloud of spray a little ahead of them, and the skipper pushed over the helm and went about on another tack. They were less than five hundred yards from the ship's side, Cliff realized, which meant that it would be a comparatively simple matter, once the light grew stronger—and it was improving every second—to riddle the boat with shots. Fing-Su would leave no trace of the men in whose hands was his very life.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

This time the aim was high; the bullets smacked through the canvas of the sail. One sent a splinter of wood flying from the mast.

"Keep down!" yelled the purser, waving frantically.

For the third time since they escaped he looked at his big silver watch.

The Umveli had increased speed and was now running abreast and bearing in upon them. Again the Negro captain tacked and came round in a circle, running back on his own course. Individual marksmen were now firing, and the bullets were coming uncomfortably close. And above the 'click-clock' of rifles came the boom of a heavier weapon.

"Seven-pounder," said Joe Bray laconically, and even as he spoke something smacked against the mast.

There was a crackling and tearing sound, and mast and sail went limply over the side.

"Now we're finished, I think," said the purser, and with great sang-froid took his revolver from the holster at his waist and turned the cylinder.

They were lowering boats now from the Umveli. Three, one after the other, struck the water. She had reduced speed and was going astern. But the captain was by no means beaten. With the aid of one of his sailors he had flung mast and sail overboard, and in another instant the oars rattled into rowlocks.

"All mans pull!" he roared, and Clifford obeyed the injunction.

But the whale-boat was big and cumbersome compared with the light cutters that were pursuing them.

"We want a miracle," said Cliff, and as he spoke the miracle happened.

Two boats were already pushing off from the ship; the third was filling with sailors, when from the lower deck came a brilliant flame and the deafening crash of an explosion; it was followed almost instantly by a second and louder explosion.

For a second there was silence, and then a pandemonium of whistles sounded. The two boats which had already pulled off turned and headed for the ship. Smoke poured along the decks so dense that it obscured a view of her funnel in the early morning light.

"She blow up what for?" asked the black skipper huskily, and then: "Pull, you mans!"

And the oars rose and fell. Then, of a sudden:

"She's sinking," gasped Joe Bray, and he spoke the truth.

Half a hundredweight of the most powerful explosive, which the ingenious Major Spedwell had timed to explode twenty-four hours after the ship had sailed, had not only blown a hole through the deck, but had ignited the munitions stored in the hold. The Umveli lay over on her side like something grown suddenly weary. Dense masses of smoke poured out of the exposed hatches; they saw the gleam of flames, and then a wild scramble for the boats. In their amazement they rested on their oars, watching the strange sight, until the purser's voice uttered a warning.

"We'd better get as far away from the ship as we can," he cried.

A few seconds after he spoke there was a third explosion, and the Umveli broke in half and went jaggedly out of sight in a wild confusion of foaming waters.

There were four boats afloat, and they were heading in their direction.

"Row!" yelled the skipper, and again they gripped the oars.

But their effort was not to be sustained. Turning his head, Clifford Lynne saw a black billow of smoke on the right side of the horizon, and could just distinguish in the dawn light a long grey shape...

They reached His Britannic Majesty's destroyer Sunbright twenty-five minutes before the remnant of a fear-maddened crew came to the destroyer's side, throwing their rifles in the water, offering everything for safety.

Fing-Su was not amongst the party, and when Clifford interviewed one of the shivering officers he learnt of the Emperor's fate in a few pungent words.

"Fing-Su...I saw his head...and his body...a little piece here, a little piece there."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Eight months later, Mr Joe Bray brought a bride to his quaint house on the hills above Siangtan. In the marriage register he had been described as 'Joseph Henry Bray, bachelor,

"And I might tell you," said Clifford ominously, "that men have got penal servitude in this country for making false statements on their marriage certificates."

"Me being so young makes him look old," he suggested; and Mabel was in complete agreement, for she had spent that particular morning in the Rue de la Paix and had gathered to herself many wonderful possessions that only a millionaire can bestow upon his wife.

"The difference," said Joe complacently, as he drew through a straw the luscious drink with which a waiter (privately instructed) had provided him—"the difference between our marriage and his is this, Mabel: ours is a love match, and his is, so to speak—well——"

"He would never have married Joan but you told him to," said Mabel scornfully. "I hope Joan will be happy. I have my doubts, but I hope she will be."

Mabel went to Siangtan, and had a reception from the European inhabitants of that noble town that was due to one who bore a family relationship with the Concession. And, curiously enough, she liked Siangtan, for it is better to be a great person in a small place than a nobody in Sunningdale.

One day there came to them a letter from Joan which suggested that the unhappiness of marriage was an experience to be indefinitely postponed. Mabel read the letter and sniffed, not uncharitably.

"'Carrying on the line'? What does she mean by that?" she asked, having her suspicions.

Joe coughed and explained.

"That was my idea too," he said modestly.

THE END