



THE BOY
FORTUNE
HUNTERS
IN CHINA

FLOYD AKERS



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Boy Fortune Hunters in China**

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FORTUNE HUNTERS IN CHINA ***



The Boy Fortune Hunters in China

By
FLOYD AKERS

Author of
"The Boy Fortune Hunters in Alaska,"
"The Boy Fortune Hunters in Panama,"
"The Boy Fortune Hunters in Egypt"



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The Boy Fortune Hunters in Alaska

The Boy Fortune Hunters in Panama
The Boy Fortune Hunters in Egypt

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FOREWORD

Those readers who have penetrated far into the Chinese Empire, as has the author, will be quick to discover that he has substituted for the name of the Thibetan Province one that will not be recognized.

The reasons for this are evident. Ancestor worship is still the prevailing creed of the most numerous class of Chinese, and a violation of the sanctity of any ancestral chih, or underground tomb, would naturally be resented if it disgraced a family so important as that of a royal prince of the realm.

The Chinese characters presented in the story are drawn from life. Prince Kai Lun Pu is a well-known type of the liberal-minded, educated young men who are the best guarantee of the future expansion of the Celestial Empire. The rule of the Chief Eunuch still dominates every palace in China, and even the efforts of the late Dowager Empress could not restrain the encroaching powers of these masterful creatures.

The manners and customs herein described will serve to acquaint those who have not visited China with some of the most curious traditions of that ancient race, while the adventures related, startling as they are, are fully within the bounds of possibility.

The Boy Fortune Hunters in China

CHAPTER I.

A SEA TRAGEDY.

The sinking of the first-class passenger steamship *Karamata Maru* in the neighborhood of Hawaii on June 17, 1908, has been the subject of so much newspaper comment that doubtless the reader imagines he knows all the circumstances connected with the fatal affair. But I have carefully read these newspaper reports and am astonished to find them quite perverted and unreliable, the result of carelessness or ignorance on the part of correspondents, the desire of officials to shield themselves from blame and the tendency of editors to amplify scant material into three-column articles with numerous “scare heads.”

I may well speak with authority in this connection, because it was our ship, the *Seagull*, which first arrived at the scene of the disaster and rescued the passengers and crew of the ill-fated *Karamata Maru* from their imminent peril. So I shall tell you the story in my own way, as it has an important bearing on the extraordinary events that afterward took place—events which have led me to write this book, and place on record a series of adventures so remarkable as to have been seldom if ever equalled.

To begin with, I beg to introduce myself as Sam Steele, of Chelsea, Massachusetts, eighteen, years of age and filling the responsible position of purser and assistant supercargo on the trim little merchantman yacht, the *Seagull*. Indeed, I am one of the three owners of our ship, the others being my father, Captain Richard Steele, and my uncle, Naboth Perkins. My father is a seasoned and experienced seaman, who has sailed in nearly every navigable part of the world. My uncle is an

expert trader and an honest man—a combination that accounts for his great success in his profession.

Circumstances placed me on shipboard at an early age, and in the course of several long and eventful voyages I have encountered many adventures and queer happenings that have made me richer in experience than most young fellows.

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One may remain modest and unassuming, I think, and still bear witness to the truth of adventures in which he has participated. It is not because I love to speak of myself that I am telling my own story, but because I have full knowledge of those events in which I bore a personal part, and so am qualified to relate them. And you will discover, when I have finished the tale, that I have not posed as a hero, but merely as a subordinate actor in the drama—what, I believe, is called a “walking gentleman” or “general utility man” in theatrical parlance. The theatre being, at its best, a reflection of real life, the illustration is permissible.

It will be necessary to tell you something about the company assembled aboard the *Seagull* when she began her voyage from San Francisco early in May to carry a cargo of mixed merchandise to Canton, China.

The *Seagull* has no regular itinerary, but sails a free lance in any sea and to any country where it may be profitable for her to go. Both my father and Uncle Naboth have adventurous natures, and prefer to let fate direct their future rather than attempt to plan a succession of tedious and uninteresting voyages which might mean surer gain but would afford less excitement. This has resulted, however, in a neat fortune for each of the *Seagull's* three owners, and our success has encouraged us to persist in our eccentric methods. In the merchant service our beautiful ship is dubbed a “tramp,” and I and my chums are called “the Boy Fortune Hunters,” Uncle Naboth “the Yankee Trader” and Captain Steele “crazy old Peg-leg,”—because poor father has really a wooden leg,

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which in no way, however, renders him less able as a skipper. But we laugh at this harmless raillery and, well knowing that we are envied by many who thus banter us, pursue our own way with unconcern.

So it happened that after a prosperous voyage around the Horn, to deliver a valuable cargo of tin-plate to the great canning factories of Oregon and Washington, we had barely anchored in the bay at San Francisco before we received a commission to sail to Canton with a cargo of merchandise. This suited us all; but none better than me, for I had long desired to visit China, Japan and the Philippines. Also it suited Joe Herring, our cabin boy and my particular friend; and it suited Archie Ackley, a well-to-do young fellow who had sailed with us on a former voyage and passed as my chum. Archie was a reckless, adventurous sort of chap, and had made the trip around the Horn on the *Seagull* to give a broken leg time to knit perfectly, the said leg having been damaged in a foolish wrestling bout.

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I am sure you would shake your head dubiously if I were to recount all of the characteristics of this youth which had endeared him to our little ship's company. I should be obliged to say, for instance, that Archie was stubborn as a mule, conceited as a peacock, reckless of all conventionalities, and inclined to quarrel and fight on the slightest provocation. But I should hasten to add that he was brave as a lion and tender as a woman to those he loved. His loyalty had been fully proven on the occasion of that former voyage to which I have referred, when he accompanied us to Egypt and won our hearts completely.

Archie was about my age; but Joe, our cabin boy, was a little younger, and as staunch a friend and queer a character in his way as you will ever be able to find on this astonishing earth.

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Joe is rich. He could purchase a mate to the *Seagull* and never feel the expenditure. He could sail on our craft, if he chose, as an honored guest; but he prefers to remain a cabin-boy. Yet, in truth, there is little caste among us, and if Joe prefers to have duties to occupy him during a voyage, and fulfils those duties admirably, no one admires him less for that reason. Captain Steele slaps him on the shoulder as fondly and familiarly as he does Archie or me, and fat little Uncle Naboth locks arms with Joe and promenades the deck with him for hours.

A slight, stooping lad, is Joe, with great dark eyes, steady and true, and a faint smile always curling his lips. His face is sensitive and expressive, and in his slender frame lurk strength and agility that are positively amazing when they are called into action. Yet he is a silent fellow, though by no means unsociable, and when he speaks you are inclined to pay attention, for you know that Joe has something to say. We three boys were inseparable comrades at the time of which I am writing, although perhaps Joe and I were a little closer to each other than we were to Archie.

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The ship's crew were staunch and able-bodied seamen, carefully selected by my father, and our engineers were picked men of proven ability. But I must not forget to introduce to you two important characters in the persons of our chef and steward. The former was a South Sea Islander named Bryonia, and the latter another South Sea Islander named Nux. I say "named" advisedly, for Uncle Naboth named them in this queer way when he rescued the poor natives from an open boat years ago and restored them to life by liberal doses of nux and bryonia—the only medicines that happened to be in his possession at the time. They were, of course, unable to speak English, at first; but they learned rapidly and were devoted to Uncle Naboth, and afterward to me. Indeed, I had come to regard both Nux and Bry as my own personal followers, and well had they proven their claim

to this title. They were nearly as dark as Africans, but very intelligent and faithful in every emergency. In addition to these qualities Bry was a capital cook, while as a steward Nux was unsurpassed, and looked after our comforts in a way so solicitous that he really spoiled us.

We were about ten days out of the Golden Gate and had left Honolulu well on our starboard quarter, when one evening we ran into a dense fog that could almost be felt. It set the deck hands all coughing and wetted them to the skin; so we all shut ourselves up aft in the cabin and Captain Steele slowed the *Seagull* down to half speed and kept the fog-horn blowing every half-minute. We believed there was little danger in this part of the broad Pacific, although every sailor dreads a fog as he does a ghost and is uneasy until it lifts.

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Uncle Naboth and Archie played checkers on one end of the cabin table while Joe and I had a quiet game of cribbage together. Father smoked his pipe and darned stockings under the light of the swinging lamp, for Ned Britton, the first mate, was in charge of the deck, and no better sailor than Ned, or one more careful, ever was born.

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So we passed the evening of the 16th of June pleasantly enough, in spite of the drenching fog outside, and when the watch changed all of us save Captain Steele turned into our bunks and fell asleep without minding the weird wail of the fog-horn in the least. It is the kind of noise you forget to listen to when you get used to it.

I was roused from my slumbers by the agitated shuffling of feet on the deck overhead, the violent ringing of the engine bells for the ship to go astern and a medley of shouts and orders through which my father's clarion voice could be distinctly heard.

Before I was fully awake I found myself standing on the floor and fumbling with my clothes, instinct guiding me rather

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than knowledge of what was impending. Danger there was, I realized, and I noticed that my cabin was dimly lighted, as though by the break of day. A moment later I rushed on deck, to find all crowding at the starboard bulwarks and peering out into the mist.

Suddenly—scarce a boat's length away, it seemed—there came a terrific crash and a grinding of timbers, followed by shrieks and cries so heartrending that I found myself shuddering with horror. Yet not a man of us moved. We stood as if turned to stone. For it was not the *Seagull* that had struck; but behind the impenetrable curtain of the fog a tragedy of the sea was being enacted that was terrible enough to curdle the blood in our veins; for we realized that Death was claiming his victims from the men and women of some unknown vessel.

Then, by one of those marvelous transformations wrought by Nature, the fog instantly lifted and dissipated, and there before us was a sight that wrung moans, curses or shouts from our very hearts, so awful was it.

A big liner—the *Karamata Maru*, we afterward learned—had driven her bow straight into the broad side of a great freighter, a derelict known as the *Admiral Swain*, which had been abandoned in a storm a month earlier.

The *Karamata Maru* had crushed through the sides of the derelict and then her bow had lifted and slid high and dry across it, plunging the stern of the liner deep into the sea. In this terrible position the great liner trembled a moment and then broke in two. Her steel plates buckled and crumbled like tin, and the crash that followed as she splintered and tore asunder was greater than that when she struck. Again we heard the screams and terrified cries of the poor victims and as the sea rushed madly into the gaping compartments and the escaping steam hissed from the open seams, scores of men

and women threw themselves into the water in an effort to escape what seemed a more horrible fate than drowning.

We saw and heard all this, for the *Seagull* had lost headway and floated gently a short distance from the scene of the tragedy. But the next moment we awoke to action. Every life preserver and rope's end we could muster flew overboard and our boats were manned and lowered in a twinkling. Big Ned Britton, the mate, was the first to put off in the cutter, and was picking the struggling forms from the sea long before the whaler was on the scene and assisting in the work of rescue. I took the gig myself and at once found my task so arduous that I had little time to mark what the other boats were doing. I only know that we all accomplished wonders, and every man, woman and child that managed to float until we reached them was rescued. Fortunately the sea was calm, and the light breeze that had dissipated the fog merely rippled the waves.

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At last, as I looked around for more survivors, someone hailed me from the wreck of the *Karamata Maru* and I bade my men row swiftly to her side. Already the great liner rode so low that the little group awaiting me was almost on a level with my head, and I realized that I was in a dangerous position in case she sank. The freighter also was filling rapidly.

First those on the *Karamata Maru* lowered an injured man into the gig, and two attendants—one the ship's doctor, I afterward learned—came with him.

“Hurry, gentlemen,” I called to the others; but they shook their heads and retreated from the side.

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“It's no use, sir,” growled the doctor. “They're ship's officers and won't leave their charge. Cast off, for God's sake, or we'll follow her to the bottom when she sinks!”

I obeyed, seized with a sudden panic at the warning words, and my men rowed lustily from the dangerous neighborhood of the wreck.

We reached the side of the *Seagull* just as Ned had assisted the last of his rescued passengers up the ladder, and I made haste to get my own aboard. The injured man had fainted. I noticed that he was a Chinaman, although dressed in European costume, and that he was an object of great solicitude on the part of his attendant and the doctor. We put him in a sling and hoisted him up the side, and after the others had followed and I was preparing to mount the ladder myself a mighty shout from our deck arrested my attention. I turned quickly, just in time to see the awful climax to this disaster. The derelict and the liner sank together, and the sea gave a great gasp and closed over them, whirling and seething about the spot as if a thousand sea-monsters were disporting themselves there. The suction was so great that had we not already caught the davit falls the gig would have assuredly been drawn into the whirlpool, while the ship to which I clung trembled in every beam, as if with horror at the sight she had witnessed.

CHAPTER II.

PRINCE KAI LUN PU.

When I gained the deck of the *Seagull* an affecting sight met my eyes. It was crowded thick with despairing and agitated men and women, for all had lost their possessions and many their friends and relatives within the preceding half hour. Bry had brewed huge pots of coffee, for the morning air was still chilly and the rescued ones had nearly all been pulled from the water; so, our hearts full of pity for the poor wretches, we tried to comfort and cheer them as well as lay within our power.

The collision happened at twenty minutes after five in the morning; by six o'clock all the rescued were on the deck of the *Seagull*. We found we picked up two hundred and eighteen out of the three hundred and twenty-seven who had constituted the passengers and crew of the ill-fated *Karamata Maru*. One hundred and nine, including the Japanese officers, who deliberately went down with their ship, had perished.

It was nine o'clock before the steamship *Nagasaki Maru* hove in sight, and eleven when she came alongside us. I make this positive statement despite the inaccurate newspaper reports to the effect that the *Nagasaki Maru* was at the scene of the collision and assisted the *Seagull* to rescue the survivors.

Of course the *Nagasaki Maru*, belonging to the same line as the lost *Karamata Maru*, promptly transferred all the rescued ones to her own decks; and that was just as well, because our ship was too small to carry them all in comfort, and we were really under no obligations to do more than we

had already done. The *Karamata Maru* had been bound for Japan, so the *Nagasaki Maru*, being on her way to San Francisco, undertook to leave the passengers and crew of her sister ship at Honolulu until they could be picked up by some other west-bound ship.

As they steamed away from us the poor survivors who swarmed upon her decks saluted us with a hearty cheer of gratitude for our services, and this appreciation fully repaid us.

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As I stood leaning over the rail and watching the fast receding *Nagasaki Maru*, Joe touched my elbow.

“Lunch is ready, Sam.”

Then I remembered that I had eaten nothing except a cup of Bryonia’s coffee since early morning, and I quickly went below. Already we had steamed away upon our course and the midday sun was shining brightly overhead.

I found all our ship’s officers assembled in the saloon except the second mate, old Eli Trent, who had the deck watch, and during the meal we naturally discoursed at length upon the exciting events of the morning.

I had nearly finished luncheon when our steward, Nux, whispered over my shoulder:

“Chinaman wants to see you, Marse Sam.”

“What Chinaman, Nux?” I asked in surprise.

“Hurt man, Marse Sam. He in front stateroom.”

I looked inquiringly at my father.

“We’ve took a passenger, Sam,” said the Captain, calmly buttering his toast. “The ‘Chink’ you took off’n the wreck is a

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high mandarin, a prince, or suthin', and wanted to get home to China as soon as possible, fer he's hurt bad."

"We don't usually accept passengers," I remarked thoughtfully, "but if this poor fellow is injured and homesick, it's our duty to do what we can for him."

"And that isn't much," added a gruff voice behind me, and the ship's doctor from the *Karamata Maru* dropped into a seat at the table and began to eat. We watched him a moment in silence. Then I asked:

"Is your patient very bad, Doctor——"

"Gaylord; my name's Gaylord. I'm an Englishman, although I sailed on that blasted Jap ship. And my patient, Prince Kai, is dying. He'll never see China again."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, really distressed, and the others echoed my sympathy.

"He got jammed between the timbers," explained Dr. Gaylord, as he continued his luncheon, "and although three of his attendants threw themselves around him and met their own death in trying to shield him, the Prince was badly smashed and can't possibly live more than a day or two. It's a shame," he added, shaking his grizzled head, "for Kai Lun Pu has just been made one of the five Viceroy's of the Empire, and he's a fine young fellow who had a promising future. The redemption of China, gentlemen, must come through these young scions of the nobility who are being educated at the colleges of England and America. They'll imbibe modern, progressive ideas, and in time upset the old prejudices of the Flowery Kingdom altogether."

He turned and cast at me a scrutinizing gaze.

“You’re the young man who brought us off the wreck, I think?”

I nodded.

“The Prince has asked for you twice. Perhaps you’d better go to him now. I’ve given him a hypodermic and he feels easier.”

“Why does he wish to see me?” I asked curiously.

“Some fool notion of gratitude, I suppose. These educated Chinese are very courteous and punctilious fellows. It’s likely he wouldn’t die comfortably if he had neglected to thank you for your slight services.”

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“Shall I go in alone?” I asked hesitatingly.

“Yes; walk right in. The Death’s-Head is with him,” added the doctor with a snort of contempt that I did not understand.

So I softly turned the handle of the stateroom door and walked in. It was not a pleasant errand to visit a dying man, and I wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

The state cabin of the *Seagull* was a roomy—almost spacious—apartment, and we had fitted it up carefully for the use of any important guest we might have aboard. It had never been used but once before, and as I glanced around it I felt a pang that it was now to be the scene of a death, and that a miserable Chinaman should put this blemish upon it.

Seated upon a stool beside the curtained bunk was the Chinese attendant I had brought aboard with the Prince and the doctor. Immediately I understood Dr. Gaylord’s expression, “the Death’s-Head,” for this Chinaman typified that mythical horror in feature and expression. Perhaps I should say lack of expression, for his face was as immobile as

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Death itself, of a pallid gray-green color, and the skin was drawn tight as parchment over his high cheek-bones and across his thin lips. The eyes were dark and bright, but conveyed no more animation or intelligence than would glass eyes. He was dressed rather primly in a suit of black broadcloth, cut in London fashion.

As I entered, this attendant rose like an automaton and drew the curtains of the bunk, muttering a brief sentence in Chinese.

CHAPTER III.

SMILING AT DEATH.

I advanced with a respectful bow and found myself looking squarely into the eyes of the injured man. Then I gave a start of surprise, for a young man—almost a boy, he seemed—was smiling at me from the pillows as cheerily as if greeting an old friend who had come to take part in a jubilation.

In my recollections of him I have never thought of Prince Kai Lun Pu as a Chinaman. His features bore certain characteristics of his race, assuredly; but he was so thoroughly Europeanized, so cultured, frank and agreeable in demeanor, that no one could possibly think of him otherwise than as a royal good fellow whom it was a privilege to know. With his poor maimed body covered by the counterpane, the pleasant—almost merry—expression of his boyish face made one doubt that he had been injured at all, and I thought he looked as little like a dying man as anyone could.

“You are young Mr. Steele,” said he in perfect English, “and I am well pleased to see you, sir; for you have rendered me a rare service and have earned my lasting gratitude.”

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“It was a simple duty,” I responded, with an answering smile; “but I am glad I was able to serve so important a personage, Prince.”

“Important?” said he, arching his eyebrows; “ah, perhaps you might find me so, were we together in my own province of Kwang-Kai-Nong.” A shadow passed over his face, and he sighed; but next moment, with renewed cheerfulness, he added, “but we are not in China, Mr. Steele, and aboard your

noble ship the humble passenger must defer to your own more powerful individuality.” He cast an amused glance at the Death’s-Head and said:

“Defer, Mai Lo, to the noble American; defer for us both, since I am helpless!”

The attendant, outwardly unmoved and unresponsive, prostrated himself before me, and then resumed his former position. I could not resist a light laugh at the ridiculousness of the performance, and the Prince joined in the merriment. Then, suddenly recollecting myself, I became grave and asked:

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“Are you suffering, Prince? Do you think you are badly hurt?”

The bright eyes regarded me intently for an instant, after which he turned to the Death’s-Head.

“Leave me, Mai Lo; I would converse with my host,” said he.

The attendant again prostrated himself, this time to his Prince, and retired without a word of protest. But almost immediately the Doctor came hurrying in, and there was protest in both his words and demeanor.

“Look you, Prince Kai,” he said, “this is no time for reckless folly. I gave you morphine to quiet your pain and enable you to sleep, and you positively must not excite yourself and neutralize the effect of the medicine.”

The young man gave him a look half whimsical, half sympathetic.

“My dear Gaylord,” said he, “you have, in your wisdom, numbered the hours remaining to me, and I accept the decree

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as final. But why should I sleep during those brief hours, when rest eternal will soon be mine?"

The Doctor flushed and cast down his eyes. He was a good-hearted man, and not yet calloused in the presence of death. The Prince smiled upon him in kindly fashion and asked:

"Is there an ample supply of morphine?"

"There is ample, my Prince."

"Then listen to my wish. I do not care to sleep, nor do I want to suffer in the brief time you have allotted me. Let me secure all the pleasure I am able to until the Earth Dragon completes his vengeance upon me. That will be kind, dear Doctor, and your reward shall be provided for."

The old surgeon took the Chinaman's hand and pressed it warmly.

"Never mind the reward, my Prince," said he. "I'm out of a job just now, and am glad to experiment upon you, so I shan't get rusty. Your wish shall be respected."

"Then leave me with Mr. Steele awhile," was the reply, "and see that Mai Lo doesn't disturb us."

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The Doctor bowed with deference and withdrew.

"Prince," said I, "they call me Sam aboard this ship, and I'll be glad to have you do the same. I'm not much used to a handle to my name, and if we're to be friends——"

"We're to be friends, Sam," he rejoined, quickly; "so just squat upon that stool and let us have a good chat together."

I was really charmed with my new acquaintance, he was so animated, so frank in admitting me to his friendship and so evidently grateful to me for the slight service I had rendered

him. His brightness made me forget the pitiful fact that he had but a short time to live, until he himself reminded me of it.

I can imagine no more delightful a companion than Prince Kai Lun Pu must have been before his terrible accident. He began by telling me much of his history, in a whimsical, half facetious way that deprived the relation of any affectation or egotism.

A prince of the royal blood and related to the reigning Manchu family, Kai had been early singled out for an important position in the empire and sent to England to be educated. He had graduated from Oxford a year before, and after a brief visit to his own country, where he held a long consultation with the Emperor and that terrible old woman, Tsi An, the Dowager Empress, he had toured Europe, Egypt and India, and afterward visited the principal cities of the United States. This had enabled him to study other nations and to note their manners and customs, and he was returning to China as a Viceroy and a member of the Imperial Cabinet, to which post he had already been appointed, when he met with the terrible accident which was to cut short his brilliant career.

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So much this royal prince confided to me in our first interview; but he cared less to talk of himself than to be amused, and soon he began to question me as to my own history and adventures.

Being willing to amuse the poor fellow, and having no duties that required my attention, I passed the afternoon in relating the adventures of my brief life. These seemed to astonish him greatly, and he questioned me closely in regard to Alaska and Panama, where I had voyaged with my father and Uncle Naboth, but which he had never visited. I also told him some queer adventures of mine in Egypt, but he was more familiar with that country.

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I feared to weary the young Prince with my long stories, but he would not let me go. Twice during the afternoon Dr. Gaylord came in and administered to his patient hypodermic injections of morphine, and these must have kept him free from pain, for he made no complaints and retained his bright cheerfulness until I finally insisted on leaving him.

Outside his door was the unemotional Mai Lo, standing as stiffly as a statue. The attendant saluted me with great respect and immediately entered his master's room.

Dr. Gaylord was in the saloon smoking a cigar, and he nodded as I approached and said;

“Queer fellow, Prince Kai, isn't he?”

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“A very charming fellow, I think, Doctor.”

“Yes; and richer than Rothschild—or your Rockefeller,” he added. “You should have seen him arrayed in his native costume on board the *Karamata Maru*, and surrounded by his four devoted followers. He was a picture, I assure you, and dignified and gracious enough to warrant his royal blood. Everyone liked him, heathen though he is.”

“Heathen!” I echoed, surprised.

“Of course he's a heathen. But I admit he makes you forget that, for in London and at Oxford he acquired the polish of an English gentleman. It was only when I noted the rascals surrounding him that I realized he was a Chinaman.”

“But they were faithful,” I suggested.

“To the death,” said he, with a slight shudder. “They even tried to oppose their frail bodies between him and the ship's splintering timbers. Sir, it would have made you cringe to see

their mangled remains—as I did. But the sacrifice did no good at all.”

“You are sure he will die?” I asked.

40

“I am positive. Surgical skill can do nothing to save him. If only old Death’s-Head had perished with him,” he added, with a glance toward the state cabin, “I should feel more reconciled. But Mai Lo happened to be in a safe place, and escaped.”

“Is he old?” I asked musingly.

“You never can tell a Chinaman’s age from his looks,” said the Doctor. “Yet I would wager that Mai Lo is sixty, if he’s a day. I’m told that at home he’s the governor of Prince Kai’s native province, and a person of consequence.”

“I don’t like him,” said I, frankly.

“No one likes him, not even his young master,” returned the Doctor. “By the way, how old should you judge Kai Lun Pu to be?”

“Perhaps the Prince is eighteen—or nineteen,” I hazarded.

“He is seven-and-twenty. These Chinese seem to age very slowly, unless they’re addicted to opium, like the coolies. Have a cigar, sir?”

I shook my head and went on deck, where Archie and Joe at once collared me with a demand to know what “His Royal Muchness, the Chink” had been talking about all the afternoon. I was quite full of the subject and told them as much as I knew about our injured passenger, adding that I was sincerely sorry the poor fellow must die.

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CHAPTER IV.

A STARTLING PROPOSITION.

Next morning after breakfast I was again summoned to attend Prince Kai Lun Pu. I may as well remark in this place that with the Chinese the surname comes first, and Kai was my new friend's family name, as mine is Steele. "Pu" with him stood in the place of "Sam" with me, and Lun was his middle name. But as the Chinese name always means something, a free translation of Kai Lun Pu into English would be "blossom of the tree," Kai being a tree, or in some connections the root of a tree. So the Prince's name was a very pretty and appropriate one, although it sounds so queer to our uncomprehending ears.

My new friend greeted me as cheerily as on the previous day, although I noted the fact that dark circles had settled around his eyes and his cheeks were a bit more hollow. The doctor was with him when I came in, and I asked if his patient had slept.

43

"Not a wink," he replied. "Our Prince does not intend to lose a moment of life, and so I sat up with him until after midnight myself. Then he talked to Mai Lo until daylight."

"And that was time wasted," added the Prince, with a queer glance at his attendant, "for Mai Lo has a limited vocabulary, although he is so wise and experienced. I think he spoke six words to me in return for all my chatter. So now I will excuse him from my presence until I require his services."

Mai Lo heard and prostrated himself humbly before his Prince, retiring with the stealthy glide of a ghost. The doctor

was preparing his hypodermic syringe, and the sick man watched him thoughtfully.

“Do you see much change in my condition?” he presently asked.

“A little,” answered the doctor. “Your vitality is wonderful. An ordinary man would have succumbed long ago.”

“Am I sure of today?” enquired the Prince.

44

The surgeon administered the hypodermic before replying. Then he said, slowly:

“While your heart retains its action you will live; but a clot may interfere with the action at any time. I cannot promise you even today, yet you may see the light tomorrow—or of several tomorrows.”

“But not many of them?”

“Not many, Prince.”

“Ah, the Earth Dragon is relentless. I cannot reach China?”

“No, indeed. To Shanghai or Hong Kong is two weeks. And there is another thing that I must speak to you about. I have no means of embalming or preserving your body.”

For a moment the Prince looked grave. Then he laughed again, lightly, but I thought with little or no mirth. In spite of his Occidental education Kai Lun Pu retained the prejudices of his forefathers and longed to have his body carried to China and laid to rest in his ancestral halls.

“What a fuss old Mai Lo will make when I am cast into the sea!” he remarked. “You’ll have to put him in irons, Sam, or he’ll run amuck among you and cause mischief.”

45

“If he does he shall go after you,” I promised. “That is, unless you wish him preserved to carry out your bequests at home and convey your messages to your friends.”

The Prince made a face so ridiculous that both Gaylord and I smiled at him.

“I will confide to you a secret,” said he; “my servant is fully as repulsive to me as he is to you. But he is a man of high birth, a mandarin and the hereditary governor of my own province; so I had to carry the fellow with me on my travels.”

“He looks like a dummy,” I suggested.

“And his looks are very deceptive,” retorted the Prince. “Mai Lo is remarkably subtle and observing, and as intelligent as he is proud and ambitious. Really, until my accident occurred, I feared the fellow, although I knew he would sacrifice his life for me if necessary. It will be his duty after my death to return to his home, propitiate the Earth Dragon, and then commit suicide; but the chances are Mai Lo will find a way to avoid that. There will be too much to feed his ambition.”

“Will he inherit your estates?” inquired the doctor.

46

“By no means. Mai Lo is noble, but not of the blood royal. My estates will go to the Emperor, because I have no heir; my ancestral halls will be sealed up and abandoned, and—I shall soon be forgotten.”

“Why so?” I asked.

“Because I shall never become an ancestor myself,” he responded, laughing genuinely this time. “An absurd statement, isn’t it, Sam? But my countrymen are devoted Shintoists, or ancestor worshippers, and while I have gained

honor and respect in life through my powerful ancestry, in death I lose all and am speedily forgotten.”

While I thoughtfully pondered this statement the doctor withdrew and left us alone together.

“Do you believe in this queer religion of ancestor worship, Prince?” I inquired.

“Of course not, Sam. I’m a mighty poor Chinaman, as far as our orthodox traditions and religious observances are concerned. In fact my people are not really religious at all, for they vilify and even thrash their bronze and wooden gods if they do not behave properly, and the whole ceremonial worship of China is a farce. I do not mind telling you that even before I went to Europe my heart refused to acknowledge those decayed ancestors of mine as more important than the dust to which they have returned in the course of nature. But I kept the secret of my apostasy to myself, and in order to secure ample funds to enjoy the pleasures of Europe I even robbed my ancestral halls of a portion of their treasure.”

47

“Oh!” I said. “Is there treasure, then, in your ancestral halls?”

He smiled.

“More than half the wealth of China—the accumulated wealth of centuries—is tied up forever in this absurd manner,” he replied. “My family was old at the time of the Tartar invasion, and it has always been wealthy. In my ancestral halls, in my province of Kwang-Kai-Nong, lies a mass of treasure that would startle the world if it were to be unearthed and publicly displayed. Yet no one has ever seen it in my generation but myself.”

“I do not quite understand this system,” I said, much interested in these statements.

48

“It is our immemorial custom,” explained the Prince, “to bury with each head of a family one-half the wealth he possesses, to be used by him when his resurrection occurs at the end of the world. The remaining half is inherited by his eldest son, his successor. A daughter never inherits, you know. When the son dies, one-half his wealth is laid with his body in the tombs of the ancestral halls, and so this accumulation goes on from century to century, and half the wealth of the nation is continually abstracted from its resources.”

“But suppose there is no son,” said I. “What happens then?”

“Then the line ends. In the case of a noble family, such as ours, the confidential servant secretly seals up the ancestral halls and then commits suicide, so that no one may ever discover where they are located. If he hesitates to kill himself by the ninth day the other servants promptly kill him; so his fate is really sealed in case his lord dies without an heir.”

“And is Mai Lo your confidential servant in this case?” I asked curiously.

49

“You have guessed it,” replied the Prince, smiling. “If I were sure he would do his duty it would deprive death of half its sting; but I suspect, Sam, that Mai Lo has as little respect for ancestor worship as I myself, and it is my impression that he will rob the tombs of my forefathers very freely before he seals them up forever.”

“But won’t his fellow-servants kill him if he fails to commit suicide?” I asked.

“I could answer that question more positively if I knew the mind of Mai Lo better,” returned the Prince, more gravely

than was his wont. Then he brightened and said:

“I am much interested in your friends Archie and Joe, who were so loyal and brave in your Egyptian adventures, which you related to me yesterday. Did you not say they were still your comrades?”

“Yes, indeed, Prince. Both are now aboard the *Seagull*.”

“May I see them? Will you bring them here to see me?” he asked, eagerly.

50

“They will be greatly pleased,” I replied. “When?”

“At once. You remember the doctor’s warning.”

“I’ll get them,” said I, rising.

“Send Mai Lo,” suggested the Prince. I did so, asking the attendant, who stood stiffly outside the door, to summon my friends to an audience with Kai Lun Pu.

In a few minutes Joe and Archie arrived, as eager as I knew they would be to make the acquaintance of our interesting passenger.

The Prince conversed with them upon various subjects for fully an hour, pressing them for details of our former adventures and shrewdly drawing out the characteristics of both the boys without their suspecting it in the least. I felt quite proud of my friends, for although each in his own way was odd to the verge of eccentricity, two more manly, truer hearted fellows did not exist—or at least that was my opinion of them.

The Prince seemed to approve of them, too, and with their quaint answers and ways they certainly amused him—Archie bluff and outspoken and Joe modest and retiring as a girl.

51

Presently, as he lay back upon his pillows, Kai Lun Pu began to laugh. He laughed again, seemingly much amused; and still again, with evident enjoyment of some thought that had occurred to him. Archie and Joe stared at him rather uneasily, and I own I had myself a fleeting suspicion that his maimed body was finally affecting his mind. But the next moment the Prince said, in his ordinary tones:

“By all the big and little gods, I’ll do it!”

“Do what, Prince?” I asked, curiously.

“Give you a new adventure to undertake,” he replied, almost gleefully. “You three boys are not tired of adventures, are you?”

“Not much,” returned Archie, stoutly.

“And although you’ve found some small treasure already, you wouldn’t object to finding more, would you?” he continued, eyeing us closely.

Our eager faces must have answered him; but I said, as calmly as I could:

“What is the proposition, your Highness?”

52

“The proposition is simply this, Sam; I’m going to show you how to rob my ancestral halls!”

53

CHAPTER V.

THE HALLS OF HIS ANCESTORS.

I'm afraid we looked rather foolish at this suggestion. Archie was open-mouthed and wide-eyed; Joe's sensitive face took on a frown, and I felt myself flushing red.

"You see, Prince," I said at last, shifting uneasily in my seat, "we've been adventurers, but not buccaneers, and to *rob* _____"

"Nonsense!" cried Kai, laughing at us again; "the word 'rob' does not mean to steal, even in your bungling English. And I used it figuratively. To rob my ancestral halls would not be a sin, for you would deprive no living person of what is his at present or might be his in the future. As for the dead, my opinion is that my ancestors are very dead; and, in case their bodies resurrect at the end of the world, they won't mind whether they are wealthy or not. I tell you, Sam, I can imagine no more foolish idea than to bury treasure with the dead, and had I lived to return to China it was my firm intention to rob the ancestral halls myself. In that case no one would ever know it, and there would be no danger. Why, as I said before, I abstracted certain jewels from the tombs years ago, and spent the proceeds in high living. So, if I was willing to rob the ancestral halls myself, and approve of your robbing them in my place, now that I am prevented, you need have no scruples on the plea of morality. Listen, friends: I present to you three—to Sam and Joe and Archie—all of the treasure contained in my ancestral halls. It is yours—I give it freely—but you must go and secure it, and that will be a dangerous expedition."

“Why so?” asked Archie.

“Because you won’t have me to assist you,” he replied. “Because you must oppose the ancestral devotion, amounting to a religion, of the entire Chinese nation. Because my own followers and servants would cut you down in an instant if your errand were discovered, and——”

He hesitated.

“Any more interesting reasons?” I asked.

55

“The strongest of all,” said he. “Because I am convinced that Mai Lo means to get the treasure himself.”

Joe gave a low whistle, and Archie looked especially thoughtful.

“Is it worth while, then, for us to undertake the adventure?” I questioned.

“For centuries past one-half of the wealth of one of the richest families in China has been placed in the vaults which I call my ancestral halls,” he returned. “This wealth consists of jade, precious stones—especially rubies—pearls and stores of gold and silver. There is enough to ransom a kingdom, and as I cannot use it myself I should like you to get it—if you can. Your task would be difficult in any event, for to rob any ancestral hall is a great crime in China. Even the graves of the poor, which are stone or mud vaults with roofs of bamboo and palm leaves, are respected by all. Yet your greatest danger is from Mai Lo. If he cannot rob my ancestral halls himself he will try to prevent anyone else from doing so.”

“Well, then,” said Archie; “let’s toss him overboard, while we have the chance. He’s only a Chinaman.” The next instant, seeing the amused smile on the Prince’s face, he realized what

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he had said and began to apologize. "It's so hard, sir," he added, "to think of you except as one of ourselves."

Perhaps the naive compliment pleased the Prince, for he laughed and said:

"It might be a *wise* thing to cast Mai Lo into the sea. But I do not think you will undertake murder, even to secure my treasure. So I will do what I can to enable you to outwit the mandarin. Can you find me a piece of paper and a small brush?"

Joe got them from his cabin in a few moments, and while he was absent we all sat in silence.

I spread the piece of paper upon the coverlet in front of the Prince, and dipped the brush in ink for him. His left arm was broken and useless, but fortunately he could use his right arm and hand, though with difficulty. At once he began writing in Chinese characters upon the paper, and presently he finished and held out the brush for me to take.

"You cannot read my signature, Sam," said he, "but it is there, and will be recognized. It is an order to all my dependents to recognize you and your companions as my guests for one year, and to serve you as faithfully as they would myself. I have added that my spirit will watch to see if I am obeyed and to take vengeance if I am not. That is, of course, nonsense to us; but it ought to be effective with my people. Take the paper, Sam, and guard it carefully. Stay! call in Mai Lo for a moment."

57

I did so, and the Prince said to his attendant in an easy tone:

"Witness this order, Mai Lo."

The mandarin glanced at the document, but though I watched him carefully I could detect no sign of emotion in his

glassy eyes, or even surprise or interest upon his putty-like features. He took the brush from my hand and obediently added his signature to that of the Prince. Then, at his master's command, he again retired.

I took the paper, folded it carefully, and placed it in my wallet.

58

“Then you are decided to undertake the adventure?” asked the Prince, in a pleased voice.

I looked at Archie and Joe, and they both nodded. So I answered:

“We will seek for the treasure, your Highness.”

“Good!” said he. “Now take the signet ring from my finger.”

I obeyed. It was a heavy gold band, curiously engraved and set with a huge ruby. The stone had an upper flat surface, on which were cut three strange characters.

“Do not display this ring except in case of necessity,” warned Kai Lun Pu. “When you do, it will command obedience of every man in my province. It will even be powerful with the Emperor. So keep it safely.”

I thanked him and stowed the ring in my pocket.

“And now,” said the Prince, “there is but one more thing I can do for you, but that ought to prove of great assistance in your venture. Listen carefully, all of you, for the secret I am about to confide to your ears may not be written down in any way, and the memory alone must guard it. Heretofore it has been handed down in my family from generation to generation by confiding the knowledge to the eldest son, who alone inherits. My ancestors would have died sooner than

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allow a stranger or an alien to know this family secret; but I—I am different. In me the shackles of tradition and foolish custom have been broken by a liberal education and a knowledge of the great world whose existence many of my countrymen do not even suspect.”

He paused a moment, as if in thought, and then continued as follows, speaking slowly and distinctly but in a lowered voice:

“It will be easy for you to locate the ancestral halls of the family of Kai. It is near to my own palace, and you will first see a quaint but beautiful house of polished bamboo, with an entrance on each of its four sides. Each entrance is guarded by a god, and it will be wise for you to pretend to propitiate these gods by offerings. Burn prayers for my spirit’s welfare before them. You must not enter this house, for it is sacred; but I will describe it to you.

“In the center is a stone walled pit, with steps leading downward. In the center of the pit is a bronze tablet, which, when lifted, discloses a passageway. This passage forms a long tunnel slanting into the earth, and if you could follow it, it would lead you to the underground vault, or *chih*, where my noble ancestors lie buried. This vault is cut from the solid rock, and is a big domed chamber ornamented with the best art of the ages that have elapsed since its construction. The tapestries are said to be the best and most valuable in the whole Empire. Around the sides of this chamber are the niches where repose the burial caskets of my respected ancestors, and beside each casket are placed the chests, urns and taborets containing one-half the wealth this ancestor died possessed of. Do you understand this description?”

60

“I can picture it perfectly,” said I.

“That is well. But now for the secret.” Again he lowered his voice, with an uneasy glance toward the door, behind which

61

he knew Mai Lo was stationed. Then he continued:

“There is a second, or secret, entrance to the burial chamber, which no one outside of the heir of our house has ever suspected. It was built seven centuries ago by Kai Tai, a pious man who wished to worship in secret at the tombs of his ancestors without the formal ceremony required when entering the ancestral hall publicly. This private entrance is also a tunnel, and leads from my palace itself. Now, my friends, pay strict attention. There is, in the palace, a set of rooms called the Suite of the Horned Fish, from its mode of decoration. These are the apartments always occupied by the royal prince of our line, and so they will be vacant when you arrive at the palace. The main doorway to the Suite of the Horned Fish will doubtless be guarded night and day, and it will not be wise for you to try to force an entrance therein. But in the bend of the passageway just beyond the entrance is a tapestry representing the Earth Dragon embracing a woman, and behind this tapestry you will find a small ball or knob of bronze. Pull this ball toward you, outward, and a private door will open leading directly into my sleeping chamber. Once there, you are not liable to interruption.

“In one corner of this chamber is a great statue of the first Kai in armor. It is a dreadful thing, and used to frighten me when a boy; but in its carving the statue shows great artistic skill. By pushing the left foot sideways—it will require a strong pressure—a panel in the wall back of the statue will be released. It is the entrance to the secret passage and once you have found it the rest is easy. It leads to one of the niches in the vault of my ancestors, the tapestries cleverly concealing the doorway. By means of this passage you may convey all or a part of the treasure to my chamber in the palace, and from there I must leave you to your own ingenious devices to transport it safely to Shanghai or aboard your ship. Have I made this quite plain to you, my friends?”

“Quite plain,” we all answered, pleased to have the adventure so easily arranged for us; and I added:

“How can we thank you, Prince Kai?”

63

He smiled.

“I am well repaid in believing you will outwit old Mai Lo, and secure the treasure he means to steal,” was his reply. “If I possess spirit I shall try to watch you and enjoy the fun.”

“Oh, don’t do that!” exclaimed Archie with a shudder.

“But you won’t know it, and I haven’t much faith in a spiritual existence,” he replied.

“What have you faith in?” I asked, shocked to hear him speak so lightly on his death-bed.

“We Shintoists believe in our ancestors,” said the Prince mockingly, I thought; “and that has always made us more sensible than our Buddhist neighbors. Also I have studied Christianity, Mohammedanism and Theosophy, and they have led me to admire Confucius more. So I get back to Shintoism in the end. I shall die in the faith of my ancestors, but not hampered by their narrow prejudices, I hope.”

He sighed with this, and I thought his cheeks looked more sunken and his skin more pallid than I had yet noticed them. So I said:

“This has been a trying interview, your Highness, and you need rest. Shall we retire?”

64

He hesitated, and then nodded with a return of his old brightness:

“Send in the doctor,” said he, “it’s time for more morphine.”

CHAPTER VI.

“OLD DEATH’S-HEAD.”

When we arrived on deck again the wind had freshened and the pleasant spell of weather we had lately experienced seemed likely to leave us. But our gallant *Seagull* headed the waves merrily, with scarcely any heaving of her swanlike body, and we knew her staunchness so well that we did not dread any weather that might overtake us.

Finding a sheltered position in the waist, we three boys eagerly discussed our important interview with the Prince and the chances of success in the adventure offered us.

“He’s made everything so blamed easy for us that it’s like taking candy from a babe,” said Archie, gleefully.

“He has certainly proved himself a generous friend,” I assented. “It’s a pity he must die. I’d rather have him alive and my friend, than to get the treasure. Eh, Joe?”

66

“Exactly,” answered Joe, in his quiet voice.

“I like the chap, too,” said Archie, “but our sentiment won’t alter the facts in the case, will it? Here’s a treasure—and a whopper, too, I imagine—calling to us to come and take it, and——”

“And here’s Mai Lo, who wants it himself,” added Joe.

“Oh, him!” cried Archie, scornfully.

“Joe’s right,” said I, thoughtfully; “Mai Lo is a power to be reckoned with. Even the Prince fears him.”

“I don’t,” declared Archie, “the man’s a dummy. Anyone that’ll kow-tow and get on his knees the way this fellow does, is a coward and a sneak.”

“The doctor,” said Joe, softly, “calls him ‘Old Death’s-Head.’”

“Well, what of it?”

“I’m afraid of Death.”

We both started at this; but Archie, recovering courage, asked:

“What can one miserable Chinaman do, opposed to three Americans?”

67

“Very little, in America,” replied Joe. “But we’re going to his own country, to China, where old Death’s-Head is a high mandarin, and the governor of a province. He won’t kow-tow there, for the Prince is his only superior, and the Prince will be deep under the ocean soon.”

We thought this over. There was usually something to think over when Joe made a long speech.

“Do you mean, then, that you’re scared out; that you won’t undertake this thing?” demanded Archie, finally.

“No,” said Joe, “I’m going to China. That is, if you fellows are game to go with me.”

“That’s the way to talk!”

“But we’re putting our heads in the jaws of a trap, and the least little thing is likely to spring it,” added Joe.

Archie looked puzzled.

“I can’t understand why you take that view of it,” he protested. “It seems to me the thing’s easy enough. We’ve got the Prince’s letter to his people, and the ring, and the secret of the private way into his ancestral hall. If we bungle such a job as that, we ought to be hanged.”

“And will be, or worse. So we mustn’t bungle it,” said Joe. “Where is this province of Kwang-Kai-Nong, Sam?”

“I forgot to ask,” I replied, wondering at my oversight.

“China’s a big country,” suggested Joe.

“I know. I’ll inquire about the location, and how to get to it, the next time I see the Prince.”

“Do,” said Archie, “that’ll help a lot.”

But I didn’t see the Prince again. At the lunch table we found the doctor, eating with apparent gusto but with an intent look on his face.

“How’s your patient, Doc?” Uncle Naboth was asking as I entered.

“Why, I’m out of a job again,” replied Doctor Gaylord, gravely.

“Great Goodness! The man ain’t dead, is he?” demanded my uncle.

“He is, sir.”

I do not know why I had such a sudden sinking of the heart as I heard this. Perhaps the noble young Chinaman had won from me more admiration and affection than I had suspected, during the brief time I had known him.

I glanced at Joe and Archie, and they were looking mighty solemn.

“Wasn’t it rather sudden, Doc?” inquired Uncle Naboth, after a pause, during which he stirred his tea energetically.

“Yes, he might have lived another four-and-twenty hours. But he wore out the morphine and began to suffer terribly. So I killed him.”

“What!”

“Gave him an overdose of morphine, at his own request, and he went to his long sleep with a smile of gratitude upon his face.”

There was another pause.

“Ahem!” said Capt. Steele, clearing his throat, “was that—er—er—strictly professional, Dr. Gaylord?”

“It was strictly humane, Captain. The man was crushed and mangled from the waist down, and according to all the laws of science and common-sense has been as good as dead ever since the accident. He couldn’t have lived until now without the morphine. When that failed to soothe him the end was bound to creep nearer by slow degrees, allowing him to suffer horrible torments. I couldn’t stand that, and he couldn’t. So he begged me to end it for him, and I did.”

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“You’re a good man, Gaylord,” remarked Uncle Naboth, mopping his bald head with his red bandanna. “I’m glad you had the courage to do it.”

“This Prince of China,” said the doctor, leaning back in his chair and thrusting his hands in his pockets, “was a royal good fellow. I had observed him on shipboard, and was attracted by his cheerful, intelligent face. When the *Karamata Maru* broke

up I left everyone else to attend to Kai Lun Pu, until I discovered he was fatally injured. Unfortunately all my surgical tools and requirements were out of reach, and in the pockets of the clothes which I grabbed up before I rushed on deck were only a small medicine case and my hypodermic outfit. I assisted Mai Lo, the only one of the Prince's attendants who survived, to get Kai off the wreck and safe aboard this ship, and at his urgent request I remained with him, since the doctor of the *Nagasaki Maru* could look after the few survivors of the *Karamata Maru* who were injured. I am well paid for doing this, but I want to state that the money did not influence me in the least."

To look at the doctor was evidence of the truth of this statement; so we merely nodded assent.

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"As soon as I had him settled in your cabin yonder," he continued, "I told him that he was dying. Kai accepted the decree like a philosopher and asked me how long I could keep him alive without suffering. It was then that we made our bargain, and I promised he should die comfortably. It seems he had certain family affairs to arrange with Mai Lo, who represents him in his province, and afterward he had several long talks with Sam and the other boys here."

He paused to look from one to the other of us curiously, and the shrewd glance from beneath his prominent gray eyebrows was rather disconcerting.

"By good luck," he went on, "the Prince finished his arrangements, whatever they were, before the effect of the morphine wore out. When I went to him a while ago I saw the time had come to fulfil my promise. I asked him if he was ready and he said he was. So, in the parlance of the Chinese, he sleeps with his ancestors."

72

In the silence that followed we were all busy with our own thoughts. Finally my father asked:

“Where is Mai Lo?”

“Burning prayers before the body. He’s going to make trouble for us, pretty soon.”

“How’s that?” asked the Captain.

“These Chinese believe it’s a lasting disgrace to allow their bodies to be buried anywhere but at home. Mai Lo has already asked me when I would embalm the body; but I’ve been making inquiries and find there’s no material aboard the *Seagull* that will enable me to preserve the corpse of Kai Lun Pu until we can get him to China. He himself understood this, and was willing to be cast overboard; but old Death’s-Head has different ideas, and when he learns what we are going to do he will make trouble, as I said.”

“What can he do?” asked Uncle Naboth.

73

“These Chinese have a disagreeable way of running amuck and slicing a few people into mincemeat before they can be overcome. I won’t say Mai Lo will do that, but he will do something—anything in his power to prevent us lowering his master’s body into the sea.”

“He won’t run amuck,” said I, positively; “nor will he do anything that will endanger his own life.”

“Why not, Sam?” asked my father. “Mai Lo’s a queer chap. I can’t make him out at all. Seems to me he’s likely to do anything.”

“Except endanger himself,” I added. “The Prince knew Mai Lo better than anyone, and from what he told me I believe Mai’s more clever than you suppose, and too ambitious to sacrifice his life for a mere whim.”

74

“It isn’t a mere whim,” said the doctor. “The Shintoists are ancestor worshippers, and the sacredness of a dead body is part of their religion. Mai Lo, if he’s a good Shintoist, believes he himself will be condemned by the spirits of his own ancestors if he allows his master to be cast into the sea, whence it is impossible he can be resurrected when the end of the world comes.”

“But *is* Mai Lo a good Shintoist?” I asked.

“Mm—I don’t know. He claims to be; but the fellow puzzles me. Many of the Chinese wear a mask of expressionless reserve; but Mai Lo is the most incomprehensible being I have ever met. If he weren’t clever he wouldn’t be a high mandarin, so we can’t judge him by his terracotta face and beady eyes.”

“Oh, well,” remarked my father, “we can’t endanger our own health by keeping a decaying body on board, so whenever you’re ready for the ceremony, Doctor, we will give the Prince as decent a sea-burial as possible. And that in spite of the old mandarin. By the way, Sam, see if Mai Lo wants anything to eat.”

I arose and knocked softly upon the door of the state cabin. Presently it was opened a mere crack and I caught a glimpse of Mai Lo’s expressionless face behind it. But when he saw me he closed the door again quickly, before I had time to speak; and I heard the key click in the lock.

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“Let the beast starve,” I growled, turning away to go on deck; and the others seemed to approve the sentiment, for they followed me without protest.

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CHAPTER VII.

WE BECOME CONSPIRATORS.

“You’ll find my first suggestion was good,” said Archie, as we stood in the shelter of the wheel-house, for the wind was half a gale by this time. “The proper thing to do is to chuck old Death’s-Head overboard.”

“It would certainly simplify matters,” I agreed; “but unfortunately it can’t be done.”

“Then we ought to cultivate his friendship,” said Joe.

“How can we?”

“I don’t know; but it’s a great mistake to allow him to think he’s our enemy.”

“Why so, Joe?”

“We’ve got to go into his province to get the treasure. He’s powerful there, and we need his good will. He might make it pretty hot for us otherwise.”

“True enough,” said Archie, gloomily. “But you can’t cultivate the friendship of a dummy. He won’t respond worth a cent.”

“He must have *some* sentiment,” suggested Joe; “his faithfulness to his Prince proves that. Let’s study him and try to discover how to reach his gratitude, or self-esteem, or——”

“Or what?”

“How to further his ambition.”

“If the Prince is buried at sea,” I said, reflectively, “Mai Lo will be disgraced at home. If we can save him from this disgrace he ought to be grateful, for it will give him a chance to carry out his ambitious plans.”

“I thought he was obliged to commit suicide,” said Archie.

“So he is; but not immediately. First he must settle his master’s affairs, and that business ought to provide pretty fair pickings for an unscrupulous man. Then he will be obliged to seal up the ancestral hall and destroy all traces of any entrance to it, or even its existence. All this takes time, and will give him a chance to complete his plans for running away with his plunder, most of which will be stolen from the tombs of the Prince’s ancestors.”

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“Will he dare do that?” asked Archie.

“Mai Lo has seen a good deal of the world outside of China,” said I, “and such experience is bound to destroy many of the doctrines of his religious belief. Contact with our western civilization made the Prince an unbeliever in Shintoism, and perhaps did the same for Mai Lo.”

“Then why is he so set on lugging the body of the Prince to China? He must know that this ancestor worship is a humbug.”

“He does. Also he knows that his people at home are still firm believers in it. It is to save himself from disgrace that he will insist on taking the body home.”

“I see,” responded Archie. “But he can’t do that, you know. There’s no way to embalm the Prince properly, and Captain Steele has already decided to drop the body overboard.”

Looking aft I saw the doctor pacing the quarter-deck with his pipe in his mouth, and suddenly the sight inspired me with an idea.

“Boys,” I said, “we’ve got to have some help in this affair. We can’t carry out the adventure all alone. Suppose we ask the doctor to join us?”

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“Old Gaylord?”

“Yes. He has good stuff in him, to my notion; and he says he’s out of a job.”

“A good idea,” said Joe.

“Won’t he ask for too big a slice of the pie?” inquired Archie.

“According to the Prince there’s more treasure in his ancestral halls than we could cart away in a year. If Dr. Gaylord will help us we won’t lose anything by giving him his share.”

“I don’t see how he can help us a bit,” declared Archie. “For my part I’d rather have Ned Britton or Mr. Perkins. They’re true blue and game to fight to the last.”

“This isn’t a matter that depends on fighting, Archie,” I reminded him. “Our whole ship’s crew wouldn’t make a showing against the thousands of Chinamen if it came to open warfare. It’s a question of ready wit, courage and audacity.”

“Then I can’t make out why you want the doctor,” returned Archie, with a puzzled look.

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“I know,” said Joe, in his quiet voice. “I think I’ve caught Sam’s idea, and it’s a good one.”

“What is it, then?” asked Archie.

“With the doctor’s help we can fool Mai Lo and save him from disgrace. And that will win his gratitude. Eh, Sam?”

“Quite right, Joe. Shall I call the doctor over?”

They nodded, and at my summons Dr. Gaylord willingly joined our little group.

“Doctor,” said I, “there’s a conspiracy afloat. Do you want to join it?”

He gave me a shrewd glance.

“I knew there was something up,” he said, “and I’ve been trying to study out what secret Prince Kai confided to you. It has worried me almost as much as it has Mai Lo.”

“Oh!” said I, with a gasp. “Does *he* suspect anything?”

“Mai Lo is no fool, and you were closeted with Prince Kai a long time. Also, he witnessed an important paper, and I heard him ask the Prince what had become of his ring.”

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“What was the reply?” I inquired.

“Prince Kai told him he had given it to Sam Steele for an important purpose, and that he had appointed you to carry out his secret wishes. Also he exacted a promise from Mai Lo to obey you and render you any assistance you might demand.”

“Good!” I exclaimed.

“Good as far as it goes,” said the doctor, drily; “but it won’t go far with Mai Lo. He’s likely to cut your throat some night if you leave your door unlocked.”

“Then you distrust him?” I asked, uneasily.

“More than that, Sam. I’m afraid of him. But let me have your story and your proposal, and I’ll tell you in a jiffy whether I’ll join your conspiracy or not.”

So I began by relating in full my various interviews with Prince Kai, in the last of which Archie and Joe had been participants. I added that I believed the Prince’s idea of our robbing his ancestors arose from my relation of our former adventures in search of a treasure, which I had told him with a view to amusing him. Once the mischievous notion had seized him, he began to plan ways to assist us, and I think he derived a certain pleasure during his last hours in imagining our difficulties and trying to overcome them. Another thing that doubtless influenced him was the desire to outwit Mai Lo, whom he suspected, probably with good reason, of a desire to rob the tombs himself.

82

Dr. Gaylord listened to all the story without interruption, and I could see that he was intensely interested. When I finished he smoked for a time in silence, while we watched him rather anxiously. Finally he knocked the ashes from his pipe and said, with decision:

“It looks too pretty to miss, my lads, and if you see where an old fellow like me can be of use to you, I’ll stand by to the last. But I want to warn you that we are taking big chances in this adventure, and if any one of us escapes with a whole skin he’ll be lucky. On the other hand, I know something of the enormous wealth of these ancestral halls, and if we succeed in our undertaking our fortunes will be made. That won’t mean much to you youngsters, of course; but it will enable me to buy a snug farm in England and settle down to end my days in peace. So I’m with you, lads, and you can count on my venturing as much as any of you.”

83

“Do you know in what part of China the province of Kwang-Kai-Nong is, doctor?” I inquired.

“Surely. It’s away up in the northwest, in the foothills of the Himalayas—a most retired and out-of-the-way place; and that’s what’s going to make our task doubly hard.”

“How can we get there?” asked Archie.

“By starting at Shanghai, traveling up the Yang-tse-Kiang a thousand miles or so to Ichang, and then cutting across country by elephant-train to the edge of the world, which is the province of Kwang-Kai-Nong. That’s not very definite, is it? But the road to Kai-Nong, the capital, is probably well known.”

“Mai Lo will show us the way,” I said.

The doctor looked at me blankly.

“We shall be obliged to take my father and Uncle Naboth into our confidence soon,” I continued, “for the *Seagull* must make straight for Woosung anchorage, so that we may escort the body of Prince Kai to Shanghai, and up the Yang-tse, while our ship goes to Canton to unload. Then they can pick us up when we return.”

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“Look here,” said Dr. Gaylord, testily, “have you gone crazy?”

“I hope not, sir.”

“Then what’s this nonsense about escorting Prince Kai’s body——”

“To Kai-Nong, so he may rest with his ancestors,” I interrupted. “That will save Mai Lo from disgrace, and will enable him to return home in triumph. To do this, he will gladly show us the way.”

The doctor’s stare turned to a grin.

“I begin to understand,” said he. “So that is why you wanted me to join your party.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “We can’t get along without you.”

“And the spoils of war?”

“There shall be an equal division.”

“Very good!” said the doctor. “Very good indeed. The conspiracy is an established fact, and the conspirators are bound to win.”

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With a smile I glanced over his shoulder to where a motionless form stood by the rail gazing steadfastly into the sea. The man was too far away to have overheard us, but the sight of him froze my smile in an instant.

It was Mai Lo.

“Come,” I said abruptly; “let’s go below and talk it over. It’s getting chilly here.”

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CHAPTER VIII.

DR. GAYLORD'S PROPOSAL.

The doctor and I had an important interview with Mai Lo that very evening. The man was evidently on guard before the door of his dead master's room; for, the moment one of us approached the state cabin, there was Mai Lo confronting him, although the mandarin had been seen at quite another part of the ship a short time before. At such times the expressionless face and unfathomable beady eyes were turned toward us like those of a basilisk, and they impressed me with an uneasy sensation in spite of the fact that I felt that he alone was helpless to oppose us in anything we might decide to do.

But it was not our cue at present to antagonize Mai Lo, but to win his confidence. My father had already loudly declared in the Manchu's hearing that the body of Prince Kai must be buried at sea, and considering Mai Lo's prejudices it was not unreasonable to suppose that he looked upon us as his enemies.

Our first act in the comedy we were playing was to send Uncle Naboth to explain to the attendant that Captain Steele regretted the necessity of disposing of the body of his master at sea; but because the *Seagull's* medicine chest contained no drugs or chemicals with which to embalm or preserve the body, there was no way to avoid this sea-burial if we wished to preserve the health of all on board.

Mai listened in apparent apathy to this explanation, which he had doubtless understood before, and the doctor and I waited a couple of hours to give him time to think it over before we sought him out and with mysterious gestures

beckoned him to follow us to my own cabin. This he did, but would not close the door and sat in a position where he could keep an eye upon the locked door of the state cabin.

“Mai Lo,” said I, “you know that Prince Kai and I became friends before he died, and that he wished me to go to his palace at Kai-Nong and there perform for him certain services, the details of which are secret and must not be confided to anyone—even to you, his most faithful servant.”

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He listened to me calmly, and then nodded his head.

“The Prince well knew his body would be lowered into the waters of the sea,” I continued, “and he was resigned to the necessity. We Americans do not care very much what becomes of our bodies when we are dead, but I know you Chinese feel differently about it, and it has made me unhappy to think I could not take the body of my friend Kai to China and place it in the burial-halls of his ancestors. Dr. Gaylord and I were conversing upon this subject, a short time ago, when he informed me that his science had taught him a way to preserve a body for a long period without the use of the usual drugs; but it is a method that requires great skill and labor, and constant watching, and is, moreover, very expensive.”

By this time Mai Lo was intensely interested; there was no doubt of that. His gaze was fixed steadfastly upon my face and I thought there was a faint gleam of curiosity in his eyes.

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He was silent at first; but I intended he should speak, and after a long pause he did so.

“The expense,” said he, in a harsh, guttural voice, but fair English, “is not to be considered. The estates of Prince Kai are ample to meet any demand.”

“Just so,” I replied easily. “Were it not so, my own fortune would willingly be devoted to the honor of my friend. The

question is not one of money, but whether we can prevail upon Doctor Gaylord to give us his time and services. He says the task is a difficult one; and, if he undertakes to preserve the body of my friend and your master, he must watch over it constantly and escort it in person to the halls of Prince Kai's ancestors. I have promised to go with him and to take two of my own friends to assist him and guard him; but the doctor knows something of China and fears he will be molested and perhaps lose his life during the long journey to the province of Kwang-Kai-Nong and back again to Shanghai. It is this that makes him refuse the undertaking, so I have decided to ask you if you cannot help us, and relieve Doctor Gaylord of his fears."

I spoke slowly, so that each word might be fully understood by the Chinaman, and it was not long before he answered me.

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"China is a safe country at all times," said Mai Lo, and I noticed that his raspy, guttural tones were as expressionless as his face. "But on this mission, when one is in the service of Mai Lo, and favoring the powerful family of Kai, the person of Doctor Gaylord would be sacred from harm."

There were several things about this brief assertion that I did not like. The mandarin, so humble and subservient to his Prince that I had come to regard him as a mere valet, now assumed that we would be "in the service of Mai Lo" during our journey into the interior. Then, again, our return trip was not assured; it would only be of interest to Mai Lo to see that we arrived safely at the capital of Kai-Nong with the body.

This struck the doctor, too; for he said, in his positive way:

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"If I go in safety I must return in safety. It won't do, Mai Lo, to give me empty promises. Either you must show me, without the shadow of a doubt, how I am to return to Shanghai with my American escort, or I don't stir a step and the body of Prince Kai goes overboard."

Mai Lo took a silver box from inside his richly embroidered robe and abstracted some betel-nut and lime leaves, which he placed in his mouth.

“What assurance do you demand?” he asked.

“This,” said the doctor. “You will yourself remain on board the *Seagull* as an hostage, until we return from Kai-Nong.”

Mai Lo remained silent a long time, while we watched him anxiously. At last he spoke, as deliberately as before.

“You imperil your own safety by this request,” said he. “Without me to protect you, your party might be attacked and slain.”

“I thought you said China was perfectly safe!” I exclaimed, contemptuously.

“It is perfectly safe wherever I go,” he answered.

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We were both greatly disappointed at this position of Mai Lo, for we had thought that by leaving him on board the ship we could carry out our plans safely. China might be a dangerous country to travel in, but we feared this incomprehensible mandarin more than anything else.

“Oh, well,” said the doctor, carelessly, “let us abandon the idea altogether. I don’t want the job, to be frank with you both, and I won’t run my head into danger if I can help it. So we’ll say no more about it.”

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CHAPTER IX.

WE OUTWIT MAI LO.

“There are other ways to assure your safety,” said Mai Lo, as the doctor rose as if to go.

Then he turned his face toward me and asked:

“Cannot the friend of Prince Kai trust the promises of his friend’s servant?”

“No,” I replied. “The Prince himself told me to trust no one.”

“You have his letter of authority and his ring.”

“He is dead,” I answered, with a shrug. “I am not sure the commands of the dead Prince are as powerful as those of his living servant. I am told you are all-powerful in Kai-Nong, Mai Lo.”

“We who worship our ancestors obey the commands of the dead without question, even if it costs us our lives,” said the mandarin.

This might be true, but I had little faith in Mai Lo being influenced by the traditions of his people. Prince Kai had distrusted the man and warned me to look out for any treachery from him. But it was not my purpose to antagonize the mandarin at this juncture.

“Satisfy the doctor, and you satisfy me,” I declared, with assumed indifference.

“I will write an agreement,” said Mai Lo, “in which I promise you safe conduct to Kai-Nong and back to Shanghai. This you will deposit with the American Consul at Shanghai. If I fail in my agreement he will send the paper to the Emperor, who will at once order me beheaded.”

“Very good,” said the doctor, somewhat to my surprise. “That will satisfy us amply. Write the agreement and I will at once begin work upon the body of Prince Kai. If I am to succeed no time must be lost.”

“And the price?” asked the mandarin.

“Ten thousand taels, and all expenses of the journey.”

“It is agreed.”

Mai Lo composedly arose and went to the state cabin, which he entered.

“It’s just as well to accept his terms,” said the doctor to me, in a low voice. “What we want is to impress him with the fact that we rely upon his protection. Then we’ll watch him for evidences of treachery and be upon our guard.”

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“Would the Emperor behead him if he played false?” I asked, thoughtfully.

“Assuredly. Tsi An doesn’t want any trouble with foreign countries just now, and when we speak of the Emperor we really mean the old dowager, Tsi An.”

Presently the Chinaman returned and handed the doctor a paper closely written upon in Chinese characters. I looked at the document rather suspiciously, being unable to read it; but the doctor promptly folded it and put it in his pocket-book. Then he said in a brisk and business-like tone:

“Take me to the Prince, Mai Lo. I must get to work.”

Work he did, and to all appearances very energetically. While he made his preliminary arrangements I had a long talk with father and Uncle Naboth, and after explaining to them the details of the entire adventure I obtained their permission to carry it out. Uncle Naboth wanted to go with us to “see the country,” he said; but I pointed out that it was a long and tedious journey which my respected relative might not enjoy, being quite stout and rather short of breath. Moreover, the cargo of merchandise we were carrying needed his attention; and, if we boys failed to secure the treasure we were to hunt for, it would be as well to make the trip a profitable one in a more legitimate way. Finally it was arranged that only Archie, Joe and I should proceed to Kwang-Kai-Nong in the doctor’s company, with the two black South Sea Islanders, Nux and Bryonia, for body-servants. Numbers would not count for much in the expedition, while courage, wit and caution would accomplish more than an army.

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It would only delay the *Seagull* a few days to stop at Woosung anchorage before proceeding to Hong Kong on the way to Canton to unload cargo, and the prospect of rich returns for this delay fully warranted it.

These matters being arranged, and my father and Uncle Naboth being acquainted with the doctor’s secret plans, we proceeded quietly to complete our arrangements.

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Dr. Gaylord employed only the services of Mai Lo to prepare the body of his Prince for the process of preservation, and it must be admitted that the mandarin worked faithfully and willingly—almost I had said cheerfully, except that such a word could never be applied to the unemotional Mai Lo.

These preparations being completed at midnight, Dr. Gaylord drove the attendant away, claiming that his “secret process” would not allow the presence of any one. And then

the doctor, as he afterward told me, rolled himself up in a blanket and behind the locked door slept peacefully in the presence of the corpse until morning.

Nor was Mai Lo again admitted to the state cabin, although he maintained his position as guard outside the door, both day and night.

As soon as breakfast was over I went to the carpenter and had him make a pine box for a coffin. This we covered with black cloth and clamped with heavy bands of iron. The cover was hinged and fastened down with three Yale locks, in addition to a row of stout screws.

This funeral strong-box was completed about the middle of the afternoon, and Archie, Joe and I lugged it down to the saloon and deposited it before the door of the state cabin.

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Very soon the doctor came out with his sleeves rolled up and looking very business-like, although he had been reading a novel all day. He, also, approved the chest; so we solemnly carried it into the state cabin and deposited it upon the floor. Mai Lo was ordered to remain at the door, but he kept it open and watched us intently from his position there. The body lay upon the bunk swathed from head to foot in bandages, which were thoroughly dampened, and gave out an odor which I knew to be rum, as I had conveyed several bottles of this liquor to the room, concealed in a gunny sack to puzzle Mai Lo.

The lid of the Coffin being laid back, we gently lifted the body of the Prince in our arms and deposited it in the box, wrappings and all. Then the doctor sprinkled the corpse with more rum from a jar, and closed the lid and locked it, placing the keys in his pocket.

“Everything is all right, so far,” he remarked to Mai Lo, as he put on his coat and prepared to leave the room. “It will be

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necessary for me to sprinkle the body with my secret preparation every few hours, especially during the next week or ten days. In this work I shall require the services of Sam Steele only. You will keep out of this room, my man, and prevent any one from entering it without my orders, as the fumes of the drugs might cause another death aboard.”

Mai Lo nodded and locked the door behind us, and I was greatly pleased that the doctor had succeeded so far in his imposition.

At seven o'clock the doctor and I again entered the state cabin and remained there for half an hour, leaning out of the port-hole, which was extra large in this cabin, and conversing together in low tones. Then we emerged and passed the evening as usual, everyone on board seeming to take little interest in the fact that we had a dead man in the state cabin.

The sailors, always a superstitious and suspicious lot, had asked some questions of Archie and Joe, but when told that the doctor had preserved the body, which was to be taken to Shanghai, they seemed satisfied with the situation, although I knew every man Jack would have been relieved to see the corpse lowered into the sea.

The doctor rapped on my door at midnight, although I was not asleep and had been eagerly awaiting the summons.

Together we entered the state cabin, the door of which was unlocked by Mai Lo, who seemed perpetually sleepless and alert. We first bolted the door to prevent intrusion, and then lighted a lamp and began preparations for the most important act in our comedy.

My heart was beating strongly as I assisted the doctor to unlock the lid of the box and silently lay it back. Then we lifted out the corpse and the doctor swiftly and skillfully

removed the bandages, disclosing the still smiling face of the dead Prince.

We had smuggled in at various times several heavy pieces of iron, and these were now congregated in a gunny sack. We attached this sack to the feet of the body, carried it to the port-hole and slid it out into the water. It disappeared into the night almost without a sound, although I thought I heard a faint splash at the stern.

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But now our task was only half accomplished. Bolsters and blankets were bound together in such shape that they resembled in outline the form of the Prince. Then the doctor carefully bandaged it, and when the dummy was put in the coffin to replace the corpse it was difficult to realize the substitution. With a sigh of relief we moistened the bandages anew with rum, and then closed and locked the lid.

Mai Lo was at his post when we left the state cabin.

“Everything is progressing finely,” remarked the doctor; but the stolid attendant made no reply and we passed on to our own cabins.

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CHAPTER X.

AN UNHEEDED WARNING.

The voyage of the *Seagull* across the Pacific was safely accomplished and with excellent speed. We crossed the Yellow Sea without incident and in due time anchored at Woosung, which is at the mouth of the Yang-tse-Kiang. This river is navigable for small steamers for several hundred miles, but the yellow mud that it washes down from the foothills of the interior mountain ranges forms a huge bar across the mouth, which ocean steamships cannot cross. So passengers are obliged to disembark at Woosung and take either the railway or a small steamer for the twenty-five mile run up to Shanghai.

Mai Lo decided upon the steamer. As soon as we anchored we went ashore and made arrangements, and on the following morning our little party prepared to follow him, and start at once upon our strange adventure.

The Chinese Health Inspector for the port was curious and exacting. He made us unlock the coffin of Prince Kai and when the swathed figure was exposed he prodded it cautiously with his bamboo wand. Mai Lo was indignant at this outrage, and protested so vigorously that the official refrained from further investigation. He countersigned the doctor's certificate of death from accidental injury, and allowed us to proceed.

Until this time we had been uneasy lest Mai Lo should suspect the imposture we had practiced. He had remained so stolid and indifferent that, although we had allowed him at various times to see us saturating the bandaged form with our

rum, we could not feel really assured that he believed the corpse of Prince Kai was still in our keeping. But the mandarin's genuine anger at the meddling official—if voluble and brusque phrases in Chinese may be construed as anger—fully restored our confidence.

The chest was solemnly rowed to the quay, just beneath one of the mud forts, and placed aboard a smart little river steamer that was puffing a cloud of black smoke from its funnel. Uncle Naboth came off with us in another boat, for he was to accompany us as far as Shanghai and see us started upon our real journey up the Yang-tse. We carried light baggage, but concealed about our persons a plentiful supply of arms and ammunition.

Less than half a day's ride upon the winding yellow waters of the river brought us to the important city of Shanghai—the most important in all the Province of Chili.

The doctor and I insisted upon conveying the important casket to the Astor House, where we were to stop, and the proprietor gave us a private room for it in an outbuilding and appointed several Chinese servants to guard the supposed corpse of the Prince.

Here, during the next few days, came several Chinese relatives of the dead man to burn prayers for his peaceful repose before the little image of a god and the wooden ancestral tablets which Mai Lo had set up at the head of the casket. These prayers were printed in Chinese characters upon rice paper, and when burned before the god were considered very efficacious.

At times the doctor and I continued to treat the bandages with rum, for although Mai Lo was not often present upon these occasions we feared he might have spies set to watch us, and so dared not neglect our functions.

The mandarin lived, during these days of our stay in Shanghai, in the native city, and said he was busy perfecting arrangements for our long trip to the Province of Kwang-Kai-Nong.

Shanghai consists of a native city and an European city, besides four conceded districts occupied by Americans, French, English and Germans. These grants or concessions have their own judicial courts and are guarded by their national marines, so that we found our surroundings wholly American, and plenty of American faces greeted us in our country's section of the city.

This was at first quite reassuring; but one had only to walk into the European section, patrolled by the handsome and gigantic Indian Sikhs, or into the dirty native city, to realize that we were indeed upon foreign territory.

One of our first errands after our arrival was to visit the American Consul, who received us very courteously. We told him of our contract to escort the body of Prince Kai Lun Pu to the province of Kwang-Kai-Nong, and that our agreement with Mai Lo provided for our safe return to Shanghai. He shook his head dubiously and asked to see the contract. This we produced, and waited patiently while the consul's interpreter translated it in writing. When reduced to English the paper read as follows:

“Listen to the obligation which Mai Lo, High Mandarin and Governor of the province of Kwang-Kai-Nong, in His Imperial Chinese Majesty's Domain, hereby voluntarily agrees to perform:

“Mai Lo will escort in honor and safety the person of the renowned physician Gregory Gaylord, a subject of the Kingdom of England, from the City of Shanghai, in the Province of Chili, to the City of Kai-Nong in the

Province of Kwang-Kai-Nong, and with him shall go the Americans known as Sam Steele, Archie Ackley, and Joe Herring, with their attendants, all in equal honor and safety.

“And if Doctor Gregory Gaylord shall conduct the corpse of His Royal Highness the Revered Prince Kai Lun Pu, well preserved and cared for, upon this journey to the City of Kai-Nong, then will Mai Lo pay to this Doctor Gregory Gaylord the sum of ten thousand taels in genuine money of the Empire of China.

“And if the Englishman and the Americans and their attendants before mentioned do conduct themselves with honesty and faith, neither stealing nor murdering upon the journey or while within the City of Kai-Nong, then shall Mai Lo escort them each and every one in honor and safety back again to the City of Shanghai and deliver them to the American Consul in that city, unharmed.

“And this Mai Lo shall do as soon as the foreign guests shall together or separately make request to return to Shanghai, and all of the expenses of guards and of food and of transportation shall be defrayed from the private purse of Mai Lo, as a part of his contract and obligations.

“So Mai Lo, promising to be faithful in the names of his greatly worshipped ancestors, agrees to do and will do, or forfeit his life, his rank and his fortune. And that all men may know his intentions he has here signed his name in witness.

“MAI LO.”

The doctor and I each read this translation in silence, but afterward glanced at one another with grim forebodings. But

the consul, who was studying another copy, said to us thoughtfully:

“This agreement is more frank and favorable than I feared it would prove. Usually these unscrupulous mandarins insert such clauses in their contracts that their subtle meanings may be construed in various ways, thus giving them opportunities to violate the real meaning of their promises. But here is a paper of a different sort, direct and concise and with no subterfuges. I think you may trust yourselves to Mai Lo, especially as he knows this document is in my possession; and I will inquire carefully into the matter should any harm befall you. Without the good-will of this powerful governor, however, I would advise you not to undertake the dangerous journey into the far-away province of Kwang-Kai-Nong. Indeed, I warn you that the City of Kai-Nong has considerable evil repute, and is seldom visited by Americans or Europeans. But Mai Lo is able to protect you even in that remote capital.”

“We shall go,” replied the doctor, briefly. “But if we do not return by the first of September you must make inquiries concerning us; and if——”

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“If?” said the consul, with an amused glance.

“If you find we’ve disappeared, or anything has happened to us, please see that Mai Lo is punished,” concluded the doctor.

“I will do all in my power,” responded the consul. “The Chinese character is complex, and crafty beyond measure. But I am sure Mai Lo would not have executed this document unless he meant fairly by you. I shall lock the original up in my safe, and you may keep the translation to refer to in case of necessity.”

We thanked him and went our way, rather more gloomy than the consul suspected. For we could not tell the American

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representative that our errand to Kai-Nong was to carry away the treasure from Prince Kai's ancestral halls, and that if we were caught doing this, Mai Lo might easily construe our act as one of theft, and have us put to death. It did not matter that we were acting according to the Prince's expressed wishes.

"Mai Lo must have suspected why we wanted to go to Kai-Nong, and so have put in that dangerous clause," I said to the doctor.

"True; the fellow has entrapped us very cleverly," replied Doctor Gaylord. "Yet he may be innocent of any intent to do so."

"I'm not going to bank on that," said I. "The consul knows the Chinese, and he says they are crafty. Mai Lo seems to have no more intelligence than a lump of putty, but for that reason he's doubly dangerous. You can't tell how much he knows, or what he thinks."

"If we object to that clause in the agreement, we shall acknowledge evil intentions on our part," remarked the doctor; "and, if we say nothing, he may find a way to use that same clause to excuse himself for our murder."

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"Well," said I, grimly, "I've gone into this thing, and I'm going to stay in—to the finish."

"So am I," replied Doctor Gaylord; but I did not like the way he said it.

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CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED DESERTION.

No one can gain any adequate idea of the magnitude of the Empire of China until he has journeyed up that great waterway, the Yang-tse-Kiang, and observed the millions upon millions of natives that throng both the river and its banks. For the first four hundred miles of its twisting, serpentine course, the Yang-tse seems to wind through one successive village, back of which the skilfully cultivated gardens and fields are visible. The people as a rule seem peaceful and plodding; but we soon discovered a deep-rooted antipathy for foreigners in their character which induced them to regard us with scowling countenances or mischievous jeers. Whenever we tied up at the river-bank they crowded around to mock us and make faces at us like a pack of unruly schoolboys, and we began to realize that we would be far from safe if we ventured among them unprotected.

Our steamer was a wheezy little flat-bottomed affair, which in spite of its awkward appearance breasted the stream energetically and made fairly good time. It had been chartered especially for our party by Mai Lo, and was to carry us as far as Ichang, where we were to take mules and elephants to Kai-Nong.

Mai Lo was now a vastly different personage from the humble and groveling attendant of Prince Kai whom we had first known. He boarded the steamer at Shanghai clothed in gorgeous Chinese raiment of embroidered silks and accompanied by a band of servitors from his own province, whom he had picked up in the city. He was as silent and undemonstrative as ever, but had assumed a new dignity of

demeanor. His commands were obeyed by all around him as readily as if he had been an autocrat, or the Emperor himself, and whenever he spoke to any of our party, which was but seldom, there was a suspicion of a sneer in his harsh tones that was very annoying, although his words were so courteous that we could not well find fault with them.

It mattered very little to Archie, Joe or myself that Mai Lo assumed these airs, but the doctor was uneasy and discontented, and more than once expressed regrets that we had been foolish enough to undertake such a risky adventure. Yet he continued to perform the duties he had undertaken in a brisk, businesslike manner. At least three or four times in every twenty-four hours the doctor and I entered the little room where the supposed body of the Prince had been placed in state, surrounded by flags and decorations, and moistened the bandages with the rum. We had brought with us three large demijohns of the liquor, which Doctor Gaylord had labelled "poison," so that we might continue the farce until the end of our journey.

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Mai Lo, however, no longer guarded the corpse of his Prince in the same jealous manner as he had on board the *Seagull*. This might easily be accounted for by the fact that now there was no danger that could menace the dead. The Chinese have an intense reverence for a corpse, and would not molest one under any circumstances.

"All the same," said the doctor, gloomily, "I wish Mai Lo would take a little more interest in the remains of Prince Kai. His indifference makes me suspect that the crafty mandarin knows more than we give him credit for."

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Our little party was accorded excellent treatment on this voyage, and we had little to complain of. Our South Sea Islanders had nothing to do, and received almost as much deference as ourselves from the Chinese aboard the steamboat, who looked upon Nux and Bryonia with unfeigned

curiosity. Our blacks were as grave and dignified as judges, and conducted themselves in their customary admirable manner. I believe they had themselves been princes, or at least nobles, in the half-civilized island from whence they had come, and certainly their conduct under trying circumstances had always been such as to win my confidence.

We were eight days getting to Ichang, for the boat tied up at the bank the greater part of each night, and resumed its journey at daybreak. The Chinese boatmen have a horror of traveling by night, except those of the pirate junks, who prefer the dark to cloak their movements. Sometimes, of course, it is necessary to travel at night, and in consequence every Chinese boat has an eye painted on each side of the bow so that the boat can see where it is going in the dark and avoid running aground or into the rocks.

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Ichang we found to be another important and densely populated city, and to my surprise there were several European travelers there. A regular line of steamers runs between Ichang and Shanghai.

Doctor Gaylord met an old friend, a retired English officer, and seemed overjoyed to see him, for they held a long and animated conversation together that evening.

Mai Lo put us up at the best hotel, but the proprietor objected to receiving the “remains” of Prince Kai, and so the casket was left on board the steamer until we were ready to start—the next morning but one after our arrival. This made it necessary for the doctor and me to make trips to the boat from the hotel, since we dared not neglect any of the useless but impressive duties we had assumed in caring for the dummy corpse.

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On the first of these excursions we were nearly mobbed by the natives; but fortunately our entire band was together and

Nux and Bryonia cleared the way, using freely some stout lengths of bamboo.

So the rabble did not press us too closely, and on our following trips to the boat they were careful not to interfere with us, although they jeered and mocked “the foreign pigs.”

The attitude of the natives seemed to make the doctor very nervous; but the others of us did not mind their silly actions, as it was evident that we were feared as much as we were hated.

It appeared that Mai Lo had arranged for his caravan in advance—probably by the Chinese Imperial Telegraph—so we were delayed only two days in Ichang. The evening before we started Doctor Gaylord was again engaged in earnest conversation with his tourist acquaintance, and when we left him to go to bed—for we were to start at daybreak next morning—they were still talking together.

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Joe aroused me next morning while it was still dark, and told me that I had barely time to dress and get my breakfast.

When the meal was finished—and Chinese breakfasts do not consume much time—we all marched down to the river, from the banks of which the caravan was to start.

There were three elephants and some twenty spindle-legged mules in the convoy, and our escort consisted of Chinese warriors carefully selected by Mai Lo.

The casket of Prince Kai was to ride in state upon one of the elephants, and to be accompanied by the doctor and myself, as his assistant. The doctor was late and had not yet arrived, so I personally directed the removal of the casket from the cabin of the steamer and saw that it was carefully loaded upon the elephant and secured just in front of the howdah. The beast was profusely decorated with flags and

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streamers of gay colors. The Chinese do not use black as mourning, and this was their way of honoring the memory of the late Prince. Some of the flags were embroidered with the regulation Earth Dragon, but others bore the figure of the Sacred Ape, which was the especial emblem of the House of Kai.

The doctor had not yet arrived by the time the elephant was loaded, and we began to be impatient. Mai Lo came to me to inquire why the noble physician was delayed, but I could not tell him. Messengers were sent back to the hotel, and in the meantime I watched two of the puffing, flat-bottomed little river steamers leave the bank a few rods away and begin a race down the river toward Shanghai. They had disappeared around the bend of the river a full half hour when a native touched my shoulder and stealthily handed me a soiled bit of crumpled paper.

I found it was a note from the doctor, and to my astonishment it read as follows:

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“I have thrown up the job and gone back to Shanghai. Too dangerous to tackle. I advise you to follow my example. Life is worth more than you can possibly gain.

“GAYLORD.”

“So,” said a harsh voice beside me; “the noble physician has run away.”

I turned with a start to face Mai Lo, who had insolently read the note over my shoulder.

“So it seems,” I answered, blankly.

“Run away!” exclaimed Joe and Archie, who were unable to comprehend this desertion.

“Gone back to Shanghai,” I answered, handing them the paper.

“Will you follow his example?” asked Mai Lo, calmly. “I must know at once, as we are ready to start.”

We three boys, confronted by this trying emergency, glanced into one another’s eyes; but after exchanging this look I was prepared to answer Mai Lo.

“We are going to Kai-Nong,” I said, with an air of unconcern. “Whenever you are ready, we will begin the journey.”

CHAPTER XII.

MAI LO MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Mai Lo looked at me a long time in silence. Then he said:

“The noble physician is old and wise.”

“And that means that we boys are young and foolish,” I retorted. “But listen to me, Mai Lo. We have traveled in many lands, young as we are. We have had adventures, and faced dangers. Some who decided to oppose us are lying buried in Alaska, Panama, and Egypt—and we are here to travel in your company to Kai-Nong.”

I am not given to boasting, but here was an occasion when a little bombast might count in our favor; so I looked Mai Lo squarely in the eye and took a step nearer to him as I spoke, that he might understand that I was not afraid. Moreover, the mandarin was assuming airs of superiority that I resented. It would never do to let him believe that we were in his power.

But no one could have told by Mai Lo’s expression whether my speech had impressed him or not. His eyes were like beads of glass, and I had begun to believe that there were no muscles in his face at all.

“What is your object in traveling to Kai-Nong?” he asked, after one of his irritating pauses.

“As a matter of fact, that does not concern you, my man,” I replied. “A higher authority than your own has given me a mission to perform, and if I have any trouble with you I shall

use the letter and ring of Prince Kai to provide a separate escort to Kai-Nong.”

“I am your servant,” said Mai Lo, in his rasping voice.

“Please do not forget it,” I rejoined, curtly.

“I will put some of my own people on the elephant to guard the body of my illustrious master,” said he.

“No; I will ride there myself, and perform the doctor’s duties in preserving the body. I have assisted him so long that I understand the process perfectly, and I have a duplicate set of the keys in my pocket.”

Again the mandarin stared at me silently before he ventured to speak. Then he said:

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“It is not necessary to continue that farce longer.”

It was my turn to stare now; and I heard Archie cough softly and Joe give vent to a low whistle.

“Farce!” I exclaimed indignantly.

“Yes. The body of the mighty and magnificent Prince Kai is by this time sufficiently preserved. Save yourself any further trouble concerning it.”

“Oh, I intend to carry out the contract,” I declared, hardly knowing how else to reply to this astounding statement.

“Do you intend to demand the ten thousand taels?” he asked.

“Certainly. We have earned it already.”

“You shall have it,” said Mai Lo, calmly. “This matter is between you and me, and I will pay you the money in Kai-

Nong. But let the casket alone, hereafter, and save yourself trouble. Give me the keys.”

“In Kai-Nong, when I have the ten thousand taels.”

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“Very well,” was the ready reply.

My easy victory assured me I was still master of the situation. For some reason Mai Lo, finding he could not bulldoze me, was afraid to oppose me openly.

I ordered Nux and Bryonia to ride upon the elephant bearing the casket of Prince Kai, and the mandarin made no objection to the arrangement. In their native language, which I understood to some extent, I told the blacks to keep their eyes open and their weapons handy, and at a signal from us to hasten to our assistance. Then Archie, Joe and I mounted the second elephant, while Mai Lo climbed the third one, followed by a little withered Chinaman in yellow dress, whom I had never seen before.

The escort mounted the mules, several of which bore our light baggage, and then the word was given to start.

Our mahout, or elephant driver, was a small Chinaman with an enormous head but a merry and even jovial face that formed a sharp contrast to that of the impassive Mai Lo. As we started I asked him a question, to determine if he understood English, and he replied with a flood of sing-song Chinese that formed a sentence a mile long.

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We were well out of the city gates before the speech ended, and when our driver found we had ceased to pay any attention to him he threw back his head and laughed as heartily as a schoolboy.

Knowing that we could talk freely together in our howdah, we three began to discuss earnestly the desertion of Doctor

Gaylord and its bearing upon our fortunes.

“I’d like to know what scared him out,” said Archie. “Doc wanted the money and the treasure as badly as any of us, and his ten thousand taels was a sure thing.”

“He was all right until he met that English friend at Ichang,” I said. “I believe he must have heard something from him about Mai Lo or the country between here and Kai-Nong that took away his courage.”

“Perhaps,” remarked Joe, thoughtfully, “Mai Lo himself has been talking to Doctor Gaylord, and warned him not to go farther. You see, Mai Lo knew all along about the imposture we practiced in regard to the body of the Prince, and it may be that when the doctor found that his trick was discovered he thought it time to dig out.”

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“It’s a mystery,” I said, soberly, “and I’m rather sorry to lose the doctor. He had a pretty level head usually, and would have been a great help to us when we got to Kai-Nong.”

“Shall we get there, do you think?” asked Archie.

“Of course.”

“I thought the jig was up when Mai Lo discovered there was a dummy in the casket, instead of the body of Prince Kai,” he continued.

“Why so?”

“Because Mai Lo was so dead set against our tossing the body overboard while we were at sea. He would have defended it with his life, then. Why does he take the discovery so quietly now?”

“The explanation is very simple,” I answered. “Chinese customs are peculiar; and especially those that relate to ancestor worship. Should Mai Lo return to Kai-Nong without the body of his dead prince he would be eternally disgraced, and unless he at once committed suicide he would be killed by the other servants of the Prince. So it was a matter of life or death to him whether we tossed the body overboard or preserved it and brought it to China.”

“But we really did toss it overboard; and Mai Lo knows it now,” objected Archie.

“But no one else knows it,” I explained. “It was brought to Woosung and passed by the inspector as the mortal remains of Prince Kai. The Shanghai papers reported the arrival of the body of the Prince, in the care of his faithful servant, the noble governor, Mai Lo, and also gave an account of the accident that caused his death. So now all China knows that Mai Lo did his duty, and is escorting the remains of his master to the ancestral halls at Kai-Nong.”

“I see,” said Joe, nodding. “The secret is between Mai Lo and ourselves. That is why he frightened the doctor away, and tried to prevent us from continuing the journey to Kai-Nong.”

“Exactly,” I returned. “Mai Lo has been saved—for a time, anyhow—from committing suicide, by the very trick we played to deceive him. Perhaps he saw through our game from the beginning; I do not know. But we played into his hands, and so he let us go on. Now there is no further danger, for he knows we dare not betray the imposture and it will be easy for him to place the supposed body in the ancestral halls without its being examined by anyone. Yet he preferred not to have us with him when he should reach Prince Kai’s palace.”

“Naturally,” said Archie.

“But this knowledge is a protection to us, anyhow,” observed Joe. “Mai Lo is sharp enough to know that if he plays us any tricks we will explode the whole deception.”

“That idea is doubtless influencing him, even now,” I said. “What we have to fear is not open warfare, but trickery and secret assassination. I don’t know how powerful the letter and ring of Prince Kai will be in his own province, of which Mai Lo is governor; but the Prince seemed to think they would command obedience. Time will have to determine that.”

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“What did you mean by saying that Mai Lo would be saved from suicide for a time?” asked Archie.

“Why, according to the rules and regulations of ancestor worship, he’s got to commit suicide in a short time, and there’s no way of getting out of it—except to disappear from China forever. The Prince was the last of his royal line, and left no heir; so the rules oblige his chief representative to seal up his ancestral halls and destroy all traces of them, so that they will never be disturbed until the resurrection. Before doing this, Mai Lo must convert one-half the fortune of Prince Kai into gold, silver and jewels, and deposit the treasure beside his coffin. When all this is accomplished—and it will require a little time, although it must be done speedily—Mai Lo must commit suicide, in order that the secret of the entrance to the ancestral vaults shall perish from the knowledge of men. If he fails to kill himself, the other servants will kill him.”

“Suppose,” said Joe, slowly, “it was discovered that we shared the knowledge of the entrance to Prince Kai’s ancestral halls; what would happen then?”

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“They would surely kill us,” I answered. “But the secret entrance of which the Prince informed me is unknown to any of his people—even to Mai Lo. I do not fear discovery.”

“What *do* you fear?” asked Archie.

“I fear for our personal safety while we remain in Kai-Nong, and I am not sure that we can find a way to remove the treasure to Shanghai, once we have secured it,” I answered. “But we have known all along that there would be risks to run, and there’s no need crossing these bridges until we come to them. Prince Kai said it would be a question of wit and courage; but he predicted that we would win.”

“So we shall!” declared Archie.

“Of course,” remarked Joe, easily. “Prince Kai ought to have known what he was talking about.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ELEPHANT TRAIN.

That overland journey of more than eight hundred miles by elephant train is well worth describing, yet it has so little real bearing upon this story that I shall pass it over as briefly as possible.

In spite of our fears, Mai Lo treated us with great respect during this journey, and the escort showed us the same consideration that they did the mandarin.

Elephant riding isn't at all disagreeable when you get used to the swaying motion, and as we were sailors we quickly accustomed ourselves to the amble of the big beasts. But to ride day after day is decidedly tedious, and we were glad whenever a halt was called and we could stretch our legs.

During the first stage of our journey, which was through a densely settled country, we made little more than thirty miles a day. But when we reached Min-Kwa, which is on a shallow tributary of the Yang-tse, we exchanged our elephants for horses—fine, spirited beasts—which enabled us to make much better time.

We now headed directly northwest, on a beeline from the Himalayas, and I noticed that as we proceeded not only the character of the country but that of the people changed. The placid, indifferent countenances of the peasants were replaced by darker, fiercer features; for here were the descendants of the Tartar horde that once over-ran and conquered the Chinese. Also the women, instead of being small and insignificant in appearance, and mild and docile in character,

were handsome, powerful creatures whose every action displayed energy and grace. I could not help admiring them, although their glances denoted bitter hatred of the foreigners—a feeling common throughout the Empire.

The broad, smooth road—a magnificent thoroughfare, that would shame the best of our American boulevards—sometimes lay through dense forests of splendid trees, and again twined its way amid groves of bamboo; but usually we passed through fields that were under cultivation. It surprised me to observe the perfection of utility that pervaded the country on every hand, until I remembered that here was the most ancient civilization in the world. There were no waste places; the numerous population demanded that every acre be cultivated. Stately walls of excellent construction are used to divide the land, instead of the frail fences we set up, and the bridges over dry streams or gullies would excite the envy and admiration of our modern engineers. All the land required irrigation, and Mai Lo informed me during one of our conversations that the system of irrigation now employed dated back more than two thousand years, and was still so satisfactory that it could not be improved upon.

“When America adopts our plan,” said the mandarin, “irrigation will be a success there; but not before. I have seen your methods, and they are very imperfect.”

Chinese fruits were plentiful and cheap. Six big, delicious pears could be purchased for one cash—about one-tenth of a cent; and bunches of finger-shaped grapes as big as one’s head we bought for two cash. Mai Lo kept us well supplied with fruit, and indeed we fared luxuriously throughout the entire journey. Always at night the mandarin selected a native house and turned the inhabitants out that we might use it for our own accommodation. I suppose his authority as a governor allowed him to do such arbitrary things, for even the fierce Tartars humbly submitted to his will. Sometimes we

passed the night at villages, where there may be always found comfortable inns; but wherever we slept Nux and Bryonia by turns guarded the slumbers of us three Americans, while the withered little imp of a Chinaman who rode with Mai Lo upon his elephant performed the duty of guarding the mandarin. Mai Lo seemed to trust us as little as we trusted him, yet we all realized it would be folly to come to open warfare at this time.

If anything happened to us, it would not be until we were at Kai-Nong; we were quite sure of that. So, for the present we slept as placidly as if on board our own beautiful *Seagull*.

Only one disagreeable incident occurred in this portion of our journey. Sometimes, when we camped early, our native escort amused themselves with games; perhaps to restore their circulation after long periods of riding. The most popular of these games was one called "shipsu." In playing it two men had to grasp tightly a short bamboo rod with both hands and then try to throw one another without releasing hold of the bamboo. Any trick was allowable in this novel wrestling-match except taking the hands from the bamboo, and it was therefore a rough-and-tumble in which strength and skill were required. Usually our men played shipsu among themselves, but one evening in an inn yard where we were all watching the game, surrounded by a throng of villagers, a sturdy Manchu offered to cope with one of Mai Lo's men and the challenge was accepted.

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The struggle was long and interesting, and the combatants jostled the bystanders by abrupt turns and side leaps. Finally the Manchu hurled his antagonist to the ground, causing him to release his hold of the rod. With a shout of victory the Manchu whirled the rod above his head and then, happening to find himself near Bryonia, our tall South Sea Islander, who had been silently looking on, the fellow struck him a deliberate blow upon his head. Bry's fist shot out and the

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Manchu went sprawling upon the ground, while a roar of rage went up from the bystanders. Knives glistened all around us and our Chinese escort promptly surrounded our little party and faced the natives expectantly. But Mai Lo waived his hand, and to my astonishment the escort melted away and left our black to face his enraged enemies alone.

“Why did you do that, Mai Lo?” I demanded, angrily, while the natives, perhaps suspecting some trick, hesitated to attack Bry.

“Your man has committed a crime; he must die, and perhaps the other black will die with him,” replied the governor, calmly.

While I stood dumfounded at this assertion I heard Joe say:

“Be careful, Mai Lo. Archie is behind you with his revolver pointed at your head. If anyone lays hands upon our black it will be the signal for your own death.”

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Mai Lo did not look around. He did not shrink or pale or display fear. But he promptly waved his hand again and the escort once more closed around us.

Then the governor addressed the crowd in Chinese, and talked volubly for a long time. In a language where it requires two hundred syllables to say “good morning” it is probable that Mai Lo’s address was brief and to the point; anyhow, the sullen crowd melted away and left us alone, and soon after we entered the inn and went to bed.

The incident was not referred to again on either side, but it proved to us how readily the governor was prepared to sacrifice any members of our party, and so weaken our numbers, and it warned us to be constantly upon our guard. I did not doubt but that Mai Lo had some plan in mind to

circumvent us when we got to Kai-Nong, and doubtless he was confident of success; but we refused to be panic-stricken.

“It looks as if we were in the dragon’s jaws,” remarked Archie, one day, with a yawn.

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“I don’t mind that,” replied Joe, “if we can keep the dragon from biting.”

“Nor I. But sometimes it looks dubious to me. We’re about fifteen hundred miles in the enemy’s country, and the world has lost all track of us. Perhaps——”

“Perhaps, what?” I asked, impatiently.

“Perhaps the noble physician was wise, after all.”

“Look here, Archie. What’s the use of crying before you’re hurt?”

“It’s my only chance,” said he, with a grin. “If Mai Lo gets his work in, I shan’t be able to howl.”

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHIEF EUNUCH.

About the middle of the seventeenth day we passed through a dark and gloomy teak forest and came to a place where two stone towers stood, one on either side of our road. Just behind these towers some fifty tents were pitched, and a herd of elephants and horses were browsing near them. The tents bore streamers with the Sacred Ape of Kai embroidered upon them, and a throng of natives in gay costumes stood in a group awaiting us.

“What’s up?” I called to Mai Lo, whose elephant was ambling close behind our own.

“These pillars,” said he, “mark the boundary of Kwang-Kai-Nong. When we pass them I shall be in my own territory.”

“Oh, and are these your people?” I inquired.

“Yes. I have sent messengers ahead to warn them of my coming. So they are here to receive the body of their prince.”

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As we continued to advance the group stood motionless, and I had leisure to examine them. They were finely formed fellows, tall and athletic, and many of them wore beards, some jet black, some gray, some snow white. It was easy to see that this reception committee was composed of the best element of the Kaitos, probably most of them nobles and holding important offices in the principality.

The mahout in charge of the elephant which bore the casket of the Prince now urged his beast slightly in advance of our party, and, as it passed the gateway marked by the towering pillars, the members of the group prostrated themselves and with loud wails and groans grabbed up the dust from the road and scattered it over their bowed heads and bodies, until they were a sight to behold. Then they raised themselves to their knees, extended their arms skyward, and howled in concert like so many coyotes. The din was ear-splitting, and while it continued Mai Lo descended from his elephant and groveled with the others in the dust before the casket of Prince Kai.

Then two aged Kaitos advanced and raised the governor, and escorted him to a tent. The others continued their cries until the casket had been lifted from the elephant and conveyed into another tent—the largest and most decorated one of the encampment.

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During this time we had remained unnoted observers of the scene; but when the casket disappeared behind the walls of the tent the people, having risen and dusted themselves, began to look upon us with curiosity. Nux and Bryonia, who had dismounted with the casket and stood like ebony statues beside the elephant, attracted most of the scrutiny, but bore the ordeal with much dignity.

I was pleased to observe in these people a lack of that ferocious hatred that had marked the countenances of most of the Chinese we had encountered. These men seemed more curious than antagonistic. When we boys dismounted and stood among them they all inclined their bodies in more or less lowly obeisance.

Probably the messengers sent forward by Mai Lo had described us to these people as the friends of the late Prince, for they seemed not surprised to find us with the governor's party.

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The tent in which lay the casket of the Prince was at once surrounded by a cordon of guards, armed with scimitars shaped like those of the ancient Saracens. But no one entered the tent itself.

The principal members of the reception party followed Mai Lo into his tent, while others ushered us into still another tent, in which we found couches spread, and low tables before them bearing refreshments of tea and cakes. Here we remained all the afternoon. Nux and Bryonia stood guard outside the entrance, stolidly bearing the gaze of the natives.

When the sun went down there was another period of wailing throughout the camp; but the noise soon ceased. Shortly afterward one of our escort, who understood a few words of English, came to us with an invitation to join “the noble governor and the great Wi-to” at the evening banquet.

I inquired who the “great Wi-to” might be, and was told that he was the Chief Eunuch and Supreme Ruler of the palace of Prince Kai, and the most important personage, in short, in Kwang-Kai-Nong after the illustrious governor.

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When we entered the banquet tent we found about twenty of the most important Kaitos assembled. A circle of low wicker tables stood in the center of the tent, with rugs spread before them. At one side, in the center of a small group, stood Mai Lo, arrayed in splendid costume, and beside him stood a slender, stooping individual with a smooth shaven face, whose magnificent robes caused even those of the governor to appear plain. Around his neck was a chain of superb rubies. When Mai Lo, in a pompous and somewhat haughty tone, presented us to Wi-to, the Chief Eunuch gave us a whimsical look and raised a pair of bright, intelligent eyes to meet our own.

“The strangers are welcome,” he said in a low, soft tone—the first speech I had heard from a Chinaman that was not

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harsh and rasping since my conversation with Prince Kai. His English was not so perfect as that of the Prince, but much smoother than Mai Lo's, and it gave me a sense of relief to find another English-speaking personage in this far-off country.

My notion of eunuchs had been that they were fierce creatures of powerful build, usually Ethiopians, and greatly to be feared. I had heard tales of their absolute power in the palaces of the nobles, and that even the mighty Empress Tsi An had failed to curb the influence of her palace eunuchs. So it pleased me to find Wi-to more agreeable in manner and speech than the imperturbable governor, and I answered him as pleasantly as I could, saying:

“We have come on a sad mission, your Highness; to escort the remains of your master and our beloved friend to his old home. Had the Prince not requested us to come here, we should not have ventured to intrude upon you at this unhappy moment.”

I did not know whether it was proper to address the Chief Eunuch as “your Highness” or not; but perhaps the compliment pleased him, for he smiled, then screwed up his face into a semblance of grief, then smiled again.

“We are deeply grieved and inconsolable,” said he, cheerfully. “The illustrious and royal Prince Kai, whose memory I serve as faithfully as I did his person, has lived at Kai-Nong but little since he was a boy, and we had hoped that upon his return he would command the affairs of his province and become a mighty Viceroy of the Celestial and August Emperor. But he has passed on to a greater Empire.”

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Mai Lo now summoned us to the feast in a voice that I thought a trifle impatient; but the eunuch paid no attention. He was examining Archie as he had me, and asked him how he liked China.

“I don’t want to be impolite,” said the bluff Archie, “and perhaps this country is all right for the people who live here; but for my part I prefer America.”

“That is natural,” returned Wi, laughing; “and curiously enough, Prince Kai had the same idea, or rather he preferred any part of Europe to his old home. Did my duties permit, I too would travel.”

Mai Lo called again, and the eunuch turned and nodded. Then he said to Joe:

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“I hope the journey has not tired the friend of my Prince?”

“I’m as fresh as a daisy,” said Joe. “But I can hardly call the Prince my friend, although I knew and liked him. Sam, here, was the especial friend of Prince Kai.”

That was what the shrewd eunuch had wanted to find out. He turned good-naturedly toward the governor and asked his pardon for the delay, in English.

When we seated ourselves upon the rugs, I found that I was at the right hand of the Chief Eunuch and Joe at his left. Archie sat next me, and far away on the other side squatted Mai Lo, with dignified Kaitos on either side of him.

The meal was excellently prepared and served, though I had no idea of what the dishes consisted. Wi-to plied me with questions concerning the death of the Prince and the details of his accident. I gave him the story as clearly as I could, and our conversation, held in low tones, did not interrupt the chatter in Chinese going on around us. I asked Wi-to where he learned to speak English, and he said that Prince Kai had taught him.

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“It is an excellent language to converse in, and easier than our own,” said he, “for it is much more simple. And when my Prince and I talked together no listeners could understand

what he said. That is a great convenience in palace life, I assure you.”

Two things of importance impressed themselves upon me during this interview. One was the fact that the Chief Eunuch was not afraid of Mai Lo, and was rather inclined to snub the governor, and the other that Wi-to seemed disposed to be friendly toward us.

Joe observed another fact that escaped me, and that was the evident disfavor with which all the nobles present regarded the eunuch. They treated him with great respect, but shunned his society, and Joe declared that we had forfeited the general regard by hobnobbing with him.

This was disconcerting, at first, but when I came to think it over I decided that it was best for us to be on a friendly footing with Wi-to, whatever the others might think of us. For he was in command of the palace, and the palace was to be the scene of our adventures. Mai Lo we knew to be opposed to us, and therefore a friend such as the Chief Eunuch was not to be despised.

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After the feast, which lasted far into the night, we all went out and joined the throng which had congregated before the tent where the supposed body of Prince Kai lay in state. There an interesting ceremony was performed. First there was much wailing, grief being expressed in childish “boo-hoos” accompanied by the clang of cymbals and gongs. The uproar was deafening for a time, but gradually subsided. Then the people advanced one by one to the entrance of the tent and there burned papers cut into queer shapes. These papers represented the things Prince Kai might need while his spirit was wandering in the land of the Genii, and consisted of chairs, tables, chests, wearing apparel, jewelry, nuts, fruit and the like. Many sheets of gold and silver tinsel were likewise burned, the idea being to supply the Prince with wealth to

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purchase whatever he might need in the mysterious country to which he had gone.

The ceremony was interesting, as I said; but it grew tedious, and we were glad when it was over and we were permitted to retire to our tent for the night.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ROYAL HOUSE OF KAI.

Early next morning the procession was formed for the journey to Kai-Nong, the capital city of the province.

The casket of the Prince was loaded upon a magnificent elephant, which was caparisoned from head to foot with silken streamers and bunting of gorgeous colors. No one now rode beside the casket, but a guard of three score warriors, each with the emblem of the Sacred Ape embroidered upon the breast of his tunic, formed a cordon around the elephant and marched solemnly beside it.

Following the royal elephant came that of the governor, Mai Lo, and then five elephants bearing the most important nobles. After these came our own elephant, and behind it that of Wi-to, the Chief Eunuch. A troop of horsemen, good riders and martial looking fellows, followed in our wake, and in the rear were our former escort and the baggage animals.

Before the royal elephant and its guards was a motley crowd of natives beating gongs, clashing cymbals and wailing their nerve-racking "boo-hoos." As we proceeded, men left their fields and gardens and the wayside houses and joined these mourners, so that by noon there was a black mob ahead of us for a quarter of a mile, all wailing and making as much noise as they could—which I assure you was considerable.

I was glad to be in the rear and as far away from the mourners as possible, and it was with great relief that I saw before us, as we mounted a slight eminence, the white walls of a great city. Behind it towered the nearest peaks of the

Himalayas, still many miles distant, and the scene was picturesque and impressive.

Another hour's riding brought us to the gates of the city, and here the mob halted and redoubled its clamor while we all passed through.

But now we found fresh crowds of the citizens awaiting us with tom-toms, cymbals and gongs, and these caught up the wails of those outside and made more noise than ever. The streets through which we passed were broad and smooth, and lined with substantial dwellings of stone. On either side of the streets, as we passed, were rows of prostrate forms scattering dust upon their heads as evidence of grief for the death of their prince. The bazaars were closed and the entire city of Kai-Nong seemed in mourning. We afterward learned that the capital contains three hundred thousand inhabitants, and is one of the most prosperous cities of northwestern China.

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We had ridden fully a half hour through the streets, our ears saluted every instant with the deafening and discordant notes of grief, when at last we reached a vast garden surrounded by a high wall.

Here we halted, being confronted by a group of officials headed by the Fuh-yin, or mayor of the city. He evidently delivered an oration of much power, judging from its length and the groans from our party which interspersed it. At its conclusion Mai Lo made a brief reply from his seat on the elephant. At the end of this the Fuh-yin and his officials prostrated themselves while the royal elephant bore the casket through a huge ornamental gateway into the gardens.

And now, to my surprise, the elephant of the Chief Eunuch pressed forward and that officer took the position of honor in the procession—immediately following the casket. The guards, too, fell away and remained outside the walls, while

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only the elephant of Mai Lo and our own were permitted to pass the gateway.

But once inside the gardens we saw that a new escort had been provided for the royal remains. Sixty gorgeously appareled men, armed with scimitars and broad axes, formed a circle around the elephant that bore the casket and prepared to guard it. They were stalwart, erect fellows, of proud bearing but evil and ferocious countenances, and each wore a yellow turban coiled upon his head, with a golden clasp, in effigy of the Sacred Ape, fastening the folds just above the forehead.

These were the eunuchs, the palace guards, or servants and attendants of the harem. For now we were within the palace grounds, and Wi-to had assumed command of the procession.

The wailing and clamor died away to a faint murmur behind us as we wound in and out by intricate paths between stately trees and beside beds of brilliant flowers; but from afar at moments we still heard the sounds of grief, which were continued in the city until midnight.

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The gardens were of astonishing extent and were artistically planned and carefully tended. The trees and shrubbery were thick in places. We emerged from their shade to find beautiful gardens of flowers surrounding us. Once in a while I caught glimpses of the buildings, which seemed very ornate and constructed mainly of teak, mahogany and dressed stone, all with tiled roofs, curved and serrated.

At last we deployed into a broad space at the foot of a green mound, upon which stood the palace and outbuildings, rambling structures so numerous and extensive that they presented almost the appearance of a village.

The main building was a splendid one. Polished stone formed the walls, and blue tiles the many gabled, turreted and

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curved intricacies of the roof. Carved teakwood covered the face of the stone in many places. At the great portico of the entrance the carving was elaborate almost beyond relief.

From the mound to the broad space where we had halted were terraces with many steps leading up to the palace, and at intervals on these steps were urns of graceful design, statues of wood and bronze and lamps of artistic ironwork.

We all dismounted here, and the mahouts led away the elephants. Some of the eunuchs bore the casket of the Prince up the broad steps of the terrace, while Wi-to bowed low, first to the Governor and then to us, and welcomed us to the Royal House of Kai.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GOVERNOR SHOWS HIS TEETH.

Followed by Nux and Bryonia, who never relaxed their vigilance over us, we three boys attended the governor and the Chief Eunuch to the entrance of the palace—the first foreigners to step foot in this retired stronghold of an ancient race.

At the carved portico Mai Lo turned and regarded us intently, and then began a long lingo in Chinese to which the eunuch listened carefully.

The casket had disappeared through the entrance; the army of eunuchs had melted away and disappeared; we seemed quite alone with these two natives, one of whom we knew distrusted and hated us.

The result of the conversation was that we were shown into a broad, lofty hall just within the entrance and asked to seat ourselves until rooms could be prepared for our accommodation.

The Chief Eunuch, who made this request, looked at us shrewdly and with an expression more grave and reserved than he had yet shown us, and then turned and entered a side room in company with the governor.

We were much annoyed at this discourteous treatment. It was now the middle of the afternoon, and we had eaten nothing since breakfast, at daybreak. Wi-to certainly should have given us some food before leaving us to sit in the hall awaiting his convenience. The pretence of preparing rooms

for us was absurd. With such an army of servants the palace should have been, and doubtless was, perfectly appointed. But here we were, seated upon stiff carved sofas in the great hall of the palace, and here we must remain until it suited Mai Lo and the eunuch to relieve us.

The magnificence of the palace aroused our admiration in spite of our annoyance. The floor was tiled and covered here and there with costly rugs; the woodwork everywhere was elaborately carved, and every nook and corner was crowded with rare ornaments and bric-à-brac, art treasures which would have filled the soul of a collector with envy. On one face of the wall was a display of ancient armor and weapons inlaid with gold and silver and set with precious gems. At either side of the entrance stood a huge bronze figure of the Sacred Ape, its grinning jaws filled with ivory teeth and its eyes set with immense rubies.

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We had ample leisure to look around us, for no one came to our relief during the next hour. Also we had time to discuss our situation.

“What do you think it all means, boys?” I asked.

“Looks as if they had allowed us to come this far so that they might murder us,” answered Archie, frowning.

“Mai Lo must have said something to the Chief Eunuch that turned him against us,” remarked Joe.

“That’s my idea,” I said; “but if I get a chance I intend to put a spoke in Mai Lo’s wheel. We’ve got to win the good will of the eunuch or we’re done for. He seems to have unlimited power in the palace.”

“Do you think Mai Lo has said anything about the—the body?” whispered Archie, glancing suspiciously around.

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“Speak low, fellows; we don’t know how many ears may be listening behind that carving.”

“I’m quite sure Mai Lo won’t betray his own secret,” said I. “He has probably warned the eunuch not to trust us, as we might steal the whole palace.”

Joe had started to reply when a door opened and Mai Lo entered the hall and approached us.

“Why are we kept here waiting?” I demanded, trying to control my temper. “I won’t stand such treatment, Mai Lo, I assure you. We must be treated with proper respect or something unpleasant is going to happen.”

He looked at me steadily.

“Brave words,” said he.

“But we have deeds to back them,” retorted Joe.

“You’ll force us to ruin if you’re not careful, Gov’nor,” added Archie, savagely.

“Yes,” said I, as if the idea had just occurred to me; “if you think to play us false, Mai Lo, it will cost you your life.”

He turned his glassy eyes from one to the other of us, and when I had finished he asked, quietly:

“Will you make a compact with me?”

“We have one already,” I replied, “deposited at the American consul’s office, at Shanghai.”

“But that is so far away,” he said significantly.

“What then?” I demanded.

“Will you promise not to talk about what has occurred?”

“What will you promise in return?”

“To send you safely back to Shanghai at once—tomorrow.”

“We intend to remain here some time.”

“You cannot remain here alive.”

“Indeed!” I exclaimed. “If that is your game I will expose you now—to the Chief Eunuch.”

“You will not see him again,” said Mai Lo, slowly, “unless you promise to return at once to Shanghai.”

“We are the guests of your Prince for a full year, if we care to remain. Dare you oppose your Prince’s orders?” I inquired.

“I am now the supreme power in this principality,” he replied.

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I turned to my comrades.

“What do you say, boys?” I asked.

“Don’t give in,” said Archie.

“Let’s fight it out,” observed Joe, promptly.

“Then your lives shall be the forfeit,” announced Mai Lo, and before we could stop him he blew a shrill blast upon a little silver whistle that hung around his neck.

But I saw the action and motioned to Nux and Bry. Instantly my blacks had pounced upon the governor and drawn him behind us, holding him secure, while from a dozen nooks about the hall sprang eunuchs with drawn scimitars, who ran swiftly toward us.

As the foremost approached I stepped forward and cried out:

“Stop!”

They knew no English, but they comprehended the action, and paused irresolutely.

“Order them away, Mai Lo,” growled Archie. “Quick, you yellow monkey, or I’ll put a bullet through your head!”

“Hold on, Archie,” I called, still facing the eunuchs. Then I showed them the ring of Prince Kai and said sternly:

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“Wi-to!”

They understood at a glance, and lowering their weapons, bowed humbly before me. Then one of them ran up the hall and disappeared, while we stood motionless in our places. Mai Lo was held fast by the blacks, Archie and Joe stood behind me with drawn revolvers and I faced the band of eunuchs.

Wi-to suddenly entered and came hastily toward us.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked, taking in the scene at a glance.

“Mai Lo has been hasty and summoned your men by mistake,” I answered. “He wishes you to send them away.”

Wi looked at the captive governor, who stood motionless with Archie’s revolver pointed directly at his left ear, and then the eunuch smiled as if amused.

“Is this true, most noble Governor?” he inquired.

“It is true,” answered Mai Lo, calmly.

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Then Wi laughed outright and clapped his hands. The men disappeared as if by magic.

At a signal from me the blacks released Mai Lo, who deliberately rearranged his clothing.

“I want a personal conversation with you, Wi-to,” I said; “but first of all we want something to eat, and proper entertainment.”

“Are you not the slaves of Mai Lo?” he asked.

“No; we are his masters.”

Again I showed the ring of Prince Kai, and the effect was to send the Chief Eunuch to his knees before me.

“We are the friends and representatives of your dead master,” I continued, “and are here to carry out his orders. Mai Lo knows this perfectly well, for Prince Kai ordered him to obey me as he would his royal master, and he himself witnessed with his signature the authority I bear. But he does not seem inclined to respect this order for some reason of his own; so I appeal to you to protect and assist us.”

The eunuch rose and bowed gravely.

“Your orders shall be obeyed,” he said.

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“Not so,” interrupted a harsh voice from the governor. “The ring was stolen from me on the journey here.”

“I can disprove that statement,” said I, easily, “and I am surprised that Mai Lo, who is so soon to commit suicide, would dare to speak falsely. Give us some food, Wi-to, and then we can talk further of this matter. But I won’t have the governor present at the interview.”

The eunuch nodded and turned away.

“Follow me, if you please,” said he.

CHAPTER XVII.

WI-TO PROVES FAITHFUL.

After being profusely fed we were ready for an important interview with Wi-to; an interview that was to determine our standing in the Royal House of Kai.

The governor had left us in the hall and we had not seen him since; but as it was now to be open warfare between us we did not care what his future intentions might be.

The Chief Eunuch had forbore to question us while we ate, and appeared unusually thoughtful; but when we rose he ushered us into a little room on the main floor which seemed to be his private office. It was luxuriously furnished and we were given comfortable chairs.

Nux and Bryonia accompanied us here, as they did everywhere; but Wi-to seemed to disregard the precaution of having any of his own men present at the interview.

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He offered us cigars, and when we refused he lighted one himself and leaned back in his chair.

“What proof have you that the ring of Prince Kai was not stolen?” he asked.

For answer I took the Prince’s letter of authority from my pocketbook and handed it to him to read.

He perused it carefully and with a grave countenance; then folded the paper, pressed it to his forehead and returned it to me.

“The Prince is my master, whether he is here in the flesh or wandering in the land of the Genii,” said the eunuch. “He has given to you, Sam Steele, the power to command his servants, and I, as one of the most faithful of these, will obey you, even for the term of one year. But much has happened since my noble master died, and Mai Lo has told me strange things about you, which, if true, would annul even the authority of the great Prince Kai. Let us talk together; tell me all that I do not know.”

“You have heard how the Prince was injured, and how we brought him to our ship and cared for him until he died,” said I.

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“Now, before Prince Kai died, there were certain matters he wished to attend to. At his palace in Kai-Nong were some possessions he wanted taken to England and America and given to friends in those countries, that they might cherish his memory. There were some papers in his yamen here that he wished to destroy, that no eyes might read them. There were some of his servants here that he wished to reward for faithful service. All this he asked me and my two friends to do for him, in his name and by his authority; and we promised Prince Kai Lun Pu it should be done.”

The eunuch had listened carefully, and I had tried to be as direct in speech as I could, realizing that to make any blunder at this time would prove fatal to our plans.

“Why did not the Prince ask his governor to do all this? Has not Mai Lo been a faithful servant and followed his master to the ends of the earth?” asked Wi-to.

“The Prince was very wise,” I said.

“He was very wise,” repeated Wi-to, nodding.

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“He had traveled far and learned many things.”

“It is true.”

“Also he had learned how to read men’s hearts, and he saw that the heart of Mai Lo had changed since he had mixed with foreign people, and become acquainted with foreign ways. Therefore the Prince no longer trusted Mai Lo.”

“Yet Mai Lo has been faithful and brought the body of his master many thousand li, that it may rest in peace in the halls of his ancestors,” remarked Wi.

“True,” I acknowledged.

“Had the governor wished to be faithless he could have remained in foreign lands and so preserved his life. By returning here he is forced, as soon as his affairs and those of his Prince are arranged, to kill himself—or be killed,” said the eunuch, thoughtfully.

“He has done all this,” I replied, “and Prince Kai, who distrusted him, expected him to act in this way. For the governor is very crafty and full of tricks. To remain abroad would make him a poor man. Mai Lo wants to be rich, and to pass his life in Europe, with many slaves and all the luxuries of the Western civilization. So Prince Kai said to me that the governor would come back to Kai-Nong, to get much treasure and with it flee from this empire to Europe.”

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Wi-to seemed genuinely astonished.

“Where could Mai Lo get such treasure?” he asked.

“His duty is to convert all the fortune of Prince Kai into cash and deposit it in the ancestral chih, or tombs.”

The eunuch laughed.

“Prince Kai has squandered all his fortune,” said he. “Outside of what his palace contains there is little or nothing to convert into cash.”

I own I was astonished at this statement, but I tried not to show it, and continued:

“Among other duties, Mai Lo is to seal up the ancestral chih, and destroy all traces of its existence. Listen now, Wi-to, for this is the important thing that was in the mind of Prince Kai; he declared to me that Mai Lo would rob his ancestral halls of the great treasures deposited there during the past ages.”

“Impossible!” gasped the eunuch, staring at me in amazement.

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“Mai Lo is no Shintoist,” I explained. “His travels have made him a renegade and taught him to despise the religion of his ancestors. He has no intention of committing suicide, according to the traditions of your people. Nor will he allow the vast treasures of the House of Kai to remain sealed up in the burial halls when he has the power to enrich himself with them. His power as governor of this province will enable him to make secret arrangements to fly to Shanghai or Hong-Kong, and from there to leave China forever and carry his stolen wealth with him.”

The eunuch arose and paced the floor thoughtfully. He was much agitated at what I had said and was pondering my words carefully.

“You have no faith in Mai Lo, yourself,” I suggested, watching him closely. “You know in your heart he is treacherous and false, just as the noble Prince knew it.”

Suddenly he sat down and his brow cleared.

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“You must be right,” he said.

“That is why Prince Kai employed comparative strangers to do his bidding,” I went on. “We had not known him long, but he believed he could trust us, and so he gave me his letter of authority and his ring, that we might receive the support of his faithful servants in the tasks we have undertaken.”

“And you think I will side with you against the powerful governor?” asked the Chief Eunuch.

“I am sure you will; and the Prince was sure,” I answered, confidently.

“But I can destroy you foreigners with a word, and sweep you from my path. Then I can make an alliance with Mai Lo and together we could rob the ancestral halls and escape to some other country to enjoy the wealth. Yes, yes! It is a pretty plan, and we could do it easily.”

“But you will not,” said Joe, while I stared aghast at the eunuch.

“Why not?” he asked, turning to the boy with a curious expression upon his face.

“In the first place,” replied Joe, “you are a faithful and true servant, or Prince Kai, who knew men’s hearts, would not have made you his Chief Eunuch. From what I have seen of your followers I believe you are the only gentleman of the whole lot.”

“I also am a eunuch,” said Wi. “I am of lowly birth, and as a child my parents sold me to the House of Kai to become a eunuch. My consent was not asked. Why should I be faithful to my masters?”

“It’s your nature,” asserted Joe. “I said you were a gentleman, and so you are, as we Americans accept the word. With us a gentleman is he who behaves as a gentleman should; not a person highly born. But there is still another reason. A eunuch is of no use in the world outside of his own province. Here you have power. In Europe you would be despised and insulted. You don’t know the big outside world, and you would be unhappy there, in spite of your wealth.”

“You’d feel like a fish out of water,” added Archie, nodding.

Wi-to laughed, and the laugh was not forced, but merry and spontaneous.

“Again you are right!” said he. “My Prince offered twice to take me away with him to see the outside world, and I refused—for the very reasons you have given. Now I will ask another question. Why should I not divide the treasure with Mai Lo and remain here to enjoy it? No one would know where my wealth came from.”

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“I cannot answer that,” said I, musingly; “if you are faithless enough to do such a thing.”

“He is not faithless,” persisted Joe.

“Then you are answered, Wi-to,” I declared, laughing.

“I see I must answer my own question,” said the eunuch. “This estate will become the property of the Celestial and August Emperor, because Prince Kai left no heir to inherit it. It may stand for many years unoccupied, and in that case I may lead a life of ease and be the real master here. If the Celestial and August Emperor should bestow this estate and palace upon some mandarin or high official, it is the custom to retain the services of the Chief Eunuch who has before

ruled the household. So, in any event, I have no incentive to be faithless.”

“Will you allow Mai Lo to carry out his plan to rob the ancestral halls?” inquired Archie.

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“No. You are right in thinking that the governor and I are not friends, for he has tried to interfere with my rights, and that I will allow no man to do. Outside the palace walls Mai Lo commands the province of Kwang-Kai-Nong; within this enclosure my word is law. But he has one privilege within my domain which I cannot refuse him. By virtue of his office he is the sole protector of the chih, or ancestral halls of the House of Kai. He alone has the right to enter there, now that the noble Prince Kai has gone to the Genii. For myself, although I have guarded the entrance for many years, I have never seen the interior of the building, nor do I know the way to the vaults beneath it. But although Mai Lo may enter the halls he must not remove any of the treasure that belongs to those ancestors of the House of Kai that lie buried there. It will be my business to prevent that.”

“Very good,” said I. “And now, Wi-to, since you have seen the written instructions of Prince Kai, how do you intend to treat us who are here to represent his interests?”

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“You shall be honored guests in this palace,” was the prompt reply.

“And will you protect us from the governor?” inquired Joe.

“While you are inside the palace enclosure you shall be safely guarded from Mai Lo and all other enemies. But remember my power does not extend beyond this fu.”

With that he clapped his hands together and two eunuchs stepped forward from behind a screen, so silently that their

appearance startled me. Speaking rapidly, Wi issued some orders to his men in Chinese, and then turned again to us.

“If the suite of rooms I have placed at your disposal is not satisfactory,” said he, “you may have your choice of any the palace contains, excepting only the royal apartments. Your meals will be served in your own rooms at such hours as you direct, and whatever you may desire I shall be prompt to provide. This man,” indicating the taller of the two eunuchs, “is instructed to devote himself to your service. His name is Tun; he is a Manchu and will be faithful. Tomorrow, if you desire, I will myself show you through the palace and the gardens.”

“We thank you, Wi-to,” said I.

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And then the eunuchs led the way and we followed them back into the great hall, up the elaborate winding stairway and along several passages until we came to a richly carved door. Tun opened this and motioned us to enter.

So we went in, followed by Nux and Bryonia; but the eunuchs remained outside.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SACRED APES OF KAI.

I am not much acquainted with palaces, but I venture to state that those of European countries are not more magnificent, even when inhabited by royalty, than that of this Manchu prince of the ancient line of Kai. It is a mistake to think that the Chinese are half civilized, or wholly uncivilized, as I myself had carelessly considered them until I visited their Empire. They boast a civilization older than any other existent nation; they were cultured, artistic and learned thousands of years before the Christian Era, and while the inventions and clever utilities of our modern Western civilization give us advantages in many ways over the Chinese, we cannot withhold our respect and admiration for the accomplishments of this ancient and substantial race.

Our suite was so luxurious as to astonish us. It consisted of ten rooms, five being sleeping rooms furnished in carved teakwood, mahogany and rosewood. The bedsteads and other furniture were marvels of intricate carving, and statues, vases and ornaments were everywhere. The floors were strewn with costly rugs and the walls hung with priceless tapestries. We called it the "Kite Suite," because these tapestries bore many scenes in which kites were flying.

We judged from the parting speech of Wi-to that we were not expected to leave our apartments again that day, so we passed the evening in perfecting our plans of procedure and discussing ways to further our important undertaking. So far we had prospered in our adventure as well as we could possibly expect. Mai Lo had exhibited considerable foolishness and lack of foresight in his opposition to us, and

we were learning to despise the mandarin's enmity. But the Chief Eunuch was more sagacious and discerning, and, as Prince Kai had warned us, he would have no hesitation in cutting us down if he discovered us robbing the ancestral halls of Kai. So we knew that we must plan shrewdly in order to deceive Wi-to, and that above all we must retain his confidence and good will.

We talked long over our plans, but found that we could not map out a definite program without knowing more of the palace and its surroundings. And much must be left to chance and circumstance.

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Our meals were served in one of the rooms of our suite. The food provided was not such as we were accustomed to at home, but it was deliciously cooked and seasoned, and many of the dishes we learned to enjoy with relish. The meal of that evening will serve as a sample of the dinners we ate while in Prince Kai's palace:

First, there was tea—and last, there was tea. But the first tea was followed by shark-fin soup, pigeon-egg stew, bacon fritters with egg batter, shredded duck, pickled watermelon seeds, fried mush of almond meal, chicken combs, stewed mushrooms, almond cream custard, spiced shellfish, bird's-nest pudding, olives and nuts, chicken soup, fresh fish boiled and then mashed after the bones had been removed, snow fungus, brains of yellow-fish, water lily seeds, some mysterious sweets, and queer cakes, and then tea. I ought to say that every course was also a rice course, because a bowl of rice was placed in front of each one of us and kept full by the attendants throughout the meal. Also we were served, between teas, a sickish sweet wine which was warm and sparkling, but which none of us could drink. The Chinese use their fingers a good deal in eating; and, instead of finger-bowls, the attendants pass us from time to time towels that had been dipped in hot water. The funny part of it was that our

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only implements were ivory chop-sticks, and we had much amusement in trying to use these, until our man Tun perceived our difficulties and brought us some Syrian spoons, inlaid with gold, which had probably been purchased by some Kai as curiosities. With these we made out very well.

The palace seemed to throng with eunuchs. There had been sixty in the procession, but those were not all the palace contained. When our meals were served there was a eunuch to wait upon each one of us, and a dozen more to carry in and remove the dishes. These men were invariably respectful and even humble, but they were an ill-looking crew, and we were never at ease in their presence.

As none of Wi's men seemed able to speak English, except Tun, and he very imperfectly, the Chief Eunuch himself came to us in the morning. He asked whether we would like to examine the palace and grounds. We accepted the invitation with alacrity.

Proceeding down the passage we turned a circular elbow where hung a splendid tapestry on which was represented the Earth Dragon, with its coils encircling the figure of a woman, who struggled vainly to escape. The horrible grinning teeth of the monster were close to her despairing face, and my heart beat fast as I recognized this tapestry as the one Prince Kai had told us concealed the secret door to his sleeping chamber.

Archie and Joe recognized it, too, and I feared their significant looks might attract the notice of Wi; but he had no knowledge of the secret himself and so proceeded calmly along the main passage.

Presently we came to an elaborately carved doorway, above which was an ivory fish, with two horns upon its head. Before this doorway stood a sleepy looking eunuch who saluted his chief as we passed by.

“This,” said Wi, “is the entrance to the Suite of the Horned Fish, the royal apartments. I am sorry I cannot allow you to see them, but entrance is prohibited except to those of the royal line of Kai. Opposite, however, is the Suite of the Pink Blossoms, and that is well worth your inspection.” We entered many suites on this upper floor of the palace, and admired their splendor and magnificence. Then we descended the great stairway and inspected the state and family apartments, the royal dining hall, and many other rooms, all gorgeous beyond description. The wealth of bronzes, paintings, ornaments and tapestries was wonderful, and was doubtless the accumulation of centuries of cultured and wealthy princes of Kai.

We passed out at the rear of the palace. A stately flower-garden filled the space between the main building and the numerous outbuildings. All these were located upon the mound, and there were many handsome trees and curious shrubs to lend beauty and shade to the scene. The outbuildings were interesting and consisted of the storehouses, the artisan’s home, the artist’s house, the house of the weavers, the kitchens and the servants’ quarters. Also there were several beautiful summer-houses and retreats, pagoda-shaped and very cool and inviting.

On the further slope of the mound we observed an odd-looking pagoda built of stone pillars supporting a yellow-tiled roof, above which floated many gay pennants. As we drew near we found the central part to consist of a circle of stout brass bars, within which were imprisoned a dozen or more gigantic apes. The beasts set up a series of sharp, barking cries as we approached, and when we stood before the cage they sprang at the bars and shook them angrily, as if they longed to escape and tear us to pieces. Never have I beheld such fierce and horrible beasts as these. Wi-to, who first made obeisance and then stood calmly looking at them, explained that they were the Sacred Apes of the House of Kai, and were

tended with reverent care, having their own corps of servants to minister to them.

They were covered with short gray hairs and their limbs were remarkably powerful. Their eyes were bright and fierce, but gleamed with intelligence. Among them I noticed one enormous fellow who seemed to dominate the band. He did not attack the bars as did the others, but squatted in the center of the cage, with his head slightly bent forward and his grinning teeth wickedly displayed.

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“This is the King Ape, Fo-Chu by name,” said Wi, seeing my eyes fixed upon this dreadful creature. “He is very old—some say a hundred years—and his strength equals his age; Fo-Chu has nine executions to his credit in my own time; how many he has killed since he came here I cannot guess.”

“Who were his victims?” I asked, with a shudder, as the cruel eyes of the King Ape chanced to meet mine.

“His attendants, usually. But there is a story of how Kai-Tu-Ghai, the grandfather of our late Prince, wearying of life because of dissensions in his harem, opened the door of this cage and shook hands with Fo-Chu. When they found Kai-Tu-Ghai he was nothing but shreds, for the King Ape had lapped up every drop of his blood.”

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“What a horrible death!” I exclaimed.

“Of course this added to the importance of Fo-Chu,” continued Wi, with a slight smile, “for he was afterward held more sacred than before, containing, as he does, the soul of Kai-Tu-Ghai. That is why he is the King Ape and the most sacred of all the band, for in him still lives the spirit of an ancestor of the House of Kai, and it is believed that Fo-Chu will live to the end of the world and protect the fortunes of this royal house. When he kills an attendant we say that Kai-

Tu-Ghai was angry, as it is his privilege to be, and what is left of the slave is buried with high honor.”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PEARL OF KAI-NONG.

We were glad to turn away from these disgusting and fearful creatures, and Archie asked our conductor:

“Is there a harem connected with the palace?”

“Of course,” said Wi; “but you are not permitted to visit it.”

“Had the late Prince many wives?” inquired Joe.

“He had none at all. In the harem lives his sister, a young girl but sixteen years of age. Her mother is long since dead, but she has nine aunts, now well advanced in years, to keep her company. They were the wives of Kai-Tien, the father of Prince Kai Lun Pu.”

“And was the Prince fond of his sister?” I asked, remembering that he had never mentioned her.

“He scarcely knew her. She was a mere child when he went to England, and during his brief visits to Kai-Nong afterward he seldom entered the harem.”

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“Will she inherit none of his property?” asked Archie.

“She inherits nothing. But she is entitled to a home in the harem as long as she lives, and our Celestial and August Emperor will doubtless attend to her welfare. Nor-Ghai, as she is named, is quite beautiful, and she will be presented to the Most Serene Emperor as a candidate for his harem, in a few months.”

This was almost as horrible as the story of the King Ape, and I was glad our approach to a beautiful building put an end to the conversation.

We had descended from the mound and passed through a grove of willow trees, finding before us the edifice I have referred to. It was very ornamental in design, and was built almost entirely of bamboo wands polished to a mirror-like surface. The workmanship was everywhere exquisite, and the carving so delicate and flowerlike that I was amazed. The building was not extensive, being perhaps thirty feet square, and on each of its four sides was a flight of steps leading up to a platform before an entrance.

“Oh,” said I, “this must be the House of Ancestors.”

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“You are right,” said a harsh voice beside me, and turning I beheld the expressionless, putty-like countenance of Mai Lo. He reminded me of “old Death’s-Head” more forcibly than ever, and I was not at all pleased to have him intrude upon us.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded angrily.

“This is my domain,” he replied, with a sweep of his arm. “I rule the Ancestral Halls as their especial guardian.”

“You ought to be the Keeper of the Sacred Apes,” I retorted, with a sneer.

“That is my function also,” quietly answered Mai Lo.

Somewhat at a loss how to proceed I turned again to gaze at the Ancestral Halls which were to play so important a part in our adventures. A guard paced slowly up and down before each entrance; not one of the eunuchs, but a soldier in handsome costume and armed with a naked scimitar.

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“Do you live in the palace grounds?” Joe asked the governor.

“My residence is there,” said Mai Lo, pointing to a large, substantial building some distance away. “Prince Kai desired me to live near to the Ancestral Halls. I have another house outside the walls, in the city.”

“Where is the body of Prince Kai?” suddenly demanded Archie.

“It already rests in the chih of his ancestors.”

“Then you will seal up the vaults at once and tear down this beautiful building?” I asked.

“Very soon. When the business of the estate is settled,” replied Mai Lo.

“And then?” I continued.

The governor did not reply, but I saw a smile curl the thin lips of the Chief Eunuch.

“Then,” said Archie, carelessly, “Mai Lo will put a dagger into his heart and join his prince in the Land of the Genii, as a faithful servant should.”

Mai Lo turned his glassy eyes upon the speaker, but said nothing. Evidently it was not pleasant to be reminded of such a duty, and Archie did not gain in popularity with the noble governor by his speech. But we were growing to despise Mai Lo, and cared little what he thought behind the impassive mask of his parchment-like features.

“I should like to see the inside of that building,” remarked Joe.

“It is forbidden,” was the abrupt reply. “No one but Prince Kai and I has been inside it during this generation.”

“Then how do we know that the body of Prince Kai rests in the tombs of his ancestors?” I asked, maliciously, for I liked to annoy the noble governor.

“It is not required of you to know that, or any other business of this province,” returned Mai Lo. “I alone am responsible, and none dares interfere with my duties. You are here on sufferance, young men; the sufferance of Wi-to, who is making a mistake in harboring you. If you abuse the hospitality extended you, I shall hold Wi-to responsible.”

“Hardly that, most wise and noble Governor,” returned Wi-to, quietly. “Your name is signed to the order given these young men by Prince Kai himself.”

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“I did not read the paper.”

“You were not required to read it,” retorted the eunuch, smiling. “Your signature merely vouches for the genuineness of the illustrious Prince’s order. I but obey that order. Those responsible are, first of all, the Royal Prince, himself; and in his absence, Mai Lo, his legal representative.”

It was now the turn of Wi-to to receive the glassy stare of the governor; but as Mai Lo made no reply in words we considered that the eunuch had scored a point.

We now saluted the governor and retired to the mound of the palace, where he did not attempt to follow us.

“It is unfortunate,” said Wi-to, thoughtfully, “that there are two rulers here with powers so intermingled that there is likely to be friction between them. It is the fault of our beloved Prince, who intrusted the hereditary governor of his province with more honors than are customary. But, alas! Mai

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Lo will soon sleep with his ancestors, and his son Mai Tchin will rule in his place.”

“So the governor has a family,” I remarked.

“Yes. Mai Tchin is better than his father, but weak and undecided in character. Also he has a daughter, Mai Mou, who is called the Pearl of Kai Nong.”

“Is she so beautiful?” asked Archie.

“So it is reported. My eyes have never been dazzled by the vision of her presence,” said the eunuch, gravely.

“I thought Chinese women were not confined so closely to the harems,” I remarked.

“They are not,” was the reply. “Before they are married the women of the nobles have much freedom, and wander at will in the gardens of their home. Also the married women are allowed much freedom, and are permitted to visit one another in their sedan chairs.”

We all laughed at this, and explained to Wi-to that this did not seem any great privilege when compared to those of our American girls. But the idea of allowing girls to meet and converse with strangers did not appeal to the eunuch, who thought that Americans must take very little interest in their female chattels to guard them so carelessly.

When we got back to the palace Wi took us to his own room and said:

“You are permitted the freedom of the entire palace, except the royal apartments, and of the palace grounds except the Halls of Ancestors. Wander where you will, and enjoy yourselves. When you are ready to tell me the commands of our illustrious Prince, which you came here to execute, I will

assist you to carry them out. But there is no need to hurry; you have a year, by command of Prince Kai Lun Pu, and I can extend further courtesy to my master's guests if I so desire."

Now, we had been waiting for an opportunity to speak of the matters we were here to attend to, so I said to Wi:

"Let us tell you now of the duties we are required to perform. We wish to be as frank and open with you as possible, to show we are grateful for your trust in us and your faithfulness to your master."

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He bowed low and waited for me to continue.

"You must know that our Prince made many warm friends in Europe and America, for every one loved him who knew him. He was entertained and shown many favors that he greatly appreciated. On his death-bed Kai Lun Pu remembered those friends, and wished to return the favors he had received. So he asked me and my two comrades here, to travel to his city of Kai-Nong and go to his palace here, and there select such ornaments, ivories and bronzes as might suit the pleasure of those destined to receive them. These things we were to choose from among the contents of this palace, and he charged us to carefully pack them ourselves in cases which you, Wi-to, would provide for that purpose. Then we are to carry them back to our own country and distribute the gifts to those for whom they are intended. I have a list of the names in my possession."

I paused here, and again the eunuch bowed gravely.

"Are you to take many of the treasures and precious relics from the palace?" he asked.

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"No. We are not to take anything that is of great value. But among the thousands of articles gathered here we will select modest gifts for the friends of the Prince, and you will

yourself see what we have selected and advise us. If there is anything you prefer to have remain here, we will respect your wishes. The idea is not to rob the palace of its treasures; but the Prince gave us power to select whatever we pleased, so it is our desire to consult you and your pleasure in making our choice.”

He seemed pleased by this consideration on our part, and said:

“We cannot quarrel over that matter, since you are so courteous. Are there any other commands?”

“Yes. We are to get certain books that are in the rooms which were occupied by the Prince, and take them with us, to be given to His Majesty, the King of England.”

I thought it was as well to add to our importance by naming this important ruler as a friend of the Prince, and one who was to figure in this gift distribution. I did not know positively that the Prince had any books in the palace, but judged that a young man educated at the English universities would be more than likely to own something of a library. Moreover, books were heavy, and they would remove any suspicion caused by the weight of the cases we wanted to carry away.

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Fortunately I had guessed correctly. The eunuch bowed gravely once more, but said:

“This is more difficult to carry out than the first order, for it is forbidden to allow any one to enter the royal apartments but the attendants.”

“We can arrange that by your bringing the books yourself to another room, where we can choose what we wish,” said Joe.

The eunuch brightened.

“Of course,” said he, “that will make the order quite easy to fulfil.”

“There is a third order,” I continued, “that will require more time and perhaps be more difficult. The Prince wished me to look over all the documents and papers contained in his private desk and destroy certain ones I am to find among them. I suppose the desk is also in the royal apartments; but that can likewise be brought to our rooms, where I may make the examination at my leisure.”

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After saying this I paused to see what effect it might have. I did not know that the Prince had either a desk or papers; but again I had guessed aright.

“Have you the key to the great cabinet?” inquired Wi-to, thoughtfully.

“Prince Kai said you would furnish the key.”

This was wholly a chance shot; but it hit the mark beautifully.

“Very well,” was the reply. Then he continued: “Our illustrious and sublime Prince has indeed given you important duties to fulfil, but he was right in saying that Wi-to would assist you to do his will.”

“He was sure of your loyalty,” said I.

For a time the eunuch sat thinking upon the information I had given him. Then, suddenly raising his eyes, he inquired:

“What reward are you to have for taking this long journey, and all the trouble and expense of distributing the Prince’s gifts to his friends?”

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For an instant I hesitated how to reply to this question, and I saw the anxious looks on the faces of Archie and Joe, which warned me of the importance of my reply. So I marshaled my wits and smiled at Wi-to to gain time.

CHAPTER XX.

“THREE LITTLE MAIDS FROM SCHOOL.”

The Chief Eunuch eyed me expectantly. He was a clever fellow in his way, and had more than ordinary intelligence; but all his life had been passed in this retired place and he judged people and things from his own limited point of view. He could understand how his master might wish to reward friends with costly gifts, because he had lived surrounded by rare and precious objects of art. Likewise he supposed books precious, because there were so few in the palace, and he had seen so much intrigue in his life that it was but natural that the Prince wished to destroy certain papers left in his desk before a successor obtained possession of them. But he could not understand our undertaking the commission to do these things without reward. So when I answered his question, I said:

“You must not suppose we are mercenary, or that we journeyed to Kai-Nong solely for a reward; but Prince Kai did tell us we might each select a jewel or ornament for ourselves while we were here.”

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“That is just,” said the eunuch.

“But we will confess that the chief reason for favoring your Prince, aside from our friendship for him, was a love of adventure. Mai Lo paid our expenses here, and will pay to send us back if we demand it. We have his contract. But if he is not able to do that, we have funds of our own in Shanghai which we can draw upon. For, mark you, Wi-to, we are important people in our own country.”

“I am sure of that,” was the reply. “And if you have a contract with Mai Lo, he must pay to send you back to Shanghai.”

“If he is alive. But he ought to commit suicide before long.”

“Oh, I see!” exclaimed the eunuch. “You intend to compel him to do this?”

“We intend to see that he doesn’t rob the Ancestral Halls and run away with the treasure. For that reason we may remain your guests longer than would be required to execute the orders of Prince Kai, who greatly feared that Mai Lo would rob his ancestors.”

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“You shall remain as long as it pleases you,” returned Wito, with sparkling eyes. “And you may call upon me and all my followers to assist you, in case the renegade governor tries to escape you.”

“Thanks; that was just what we expected,” I exclaimed.

Then, feeling well satisfied with our interview and our tour of inspection, we left the Chief Eunuch and returned to our own rooms.

“Do you think it wise to harp on the subject of Mai Lo’s robbing the Ancestral Halls?” asked Joe, when we were where we could not be overheard.

“Why isn’t it wise?” I asked.

“Why, the Chief Eunuch may get suspicious that something is up.”

“I want him to get suspicious of Mai Lo, and watch that old fox so carefully that he won’t get a chance to steal anything

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until we get through. Besides, it will relieve us of any suspicions. Wi thinks it's impossible for us to get to the burial vaults, because our enemy the governor guards all entrances. And he's crafty enough to believe that we wouldn't talk about robbing the Ancestral Halls if we had any idea of doing it ourselves."

"Sam's right," declared Archie.

"I think so, too," acknowledged Joe. "But I began to fear we were overdoing the thing. Our talk about the orders of Prince Kai worked all right, didn't it?"

"Why, it was all very reasonable to the eunuch," I said, "and we will have no trouble in getting the packing cases to our rooms, where we can replace the ornaments and books with the treasure."

"It looks too easy altogether," said Archie, doubtfully.

"You must remember Prince Kai planned it all, and he knew the conditions here perfectly," answered Joe. "I imagine our greatest difficulty will be in getting back to Shanghai. If the governor acts ugly and refuses us an escort we won't get fifty miles without being murdered."

"Don't let's worry about that," I said, sharply, for the thought had already worried me a good deal. "That's another bridge that needn't be crossed till we come to it."

We were naturally eager to explore the Ancestral Halls and see what the treasure consisted of which had been so freely given us by Prince Kai—if we could take it. It might be much or little, but judging from the wealth and magnificence of the palace the treasure buried in the vaults was likely to be ample to satisfy us.

After all, I think it was the adventure that charmed us, more than the longing for gain. We had been set a difficult task, and boylike we determined to accomplish it.

Deciding it would not be wise to make any important move for the first few days, we passed the time wandering about the palace or in the grounds. We found that Wi-to trusted us fully now, and we were allowed to do whatever we pleased without being annoyed by the watchful attendance of the eunuchs.

Wi asked me if we wanted a guard at the door of our chamber, and I promptly answered No. There was no one in the palace except ourselves and the eunuchs, and it was not necessary for them to guard us against themselves. So we were left free to come and go as we pleased; but when we wandered as far as the outer walls of the palace enclosure we found eunuchs stationed at every gateway. We did not know whether we would be allowed to pass these guards or not, but we made no attempt to do so, preferring not to trust ourselves to the mercies of our enemy the governor.

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Once in awhile we encountered Mai Lo in our walks, but he kept near to the Ancestral Halls and paid no attention to us. He was supposed to be settling up the estate of his dead master, but according to our observations he seemed chiefly occupied in pacing the paths, in deep thought. However, we let him alone and kept out of his way.

It was while we were exploring an end of the garden where a thicket of fruit trees grew that we met our first real adventure.

The trees formed a regular jungle; but there seemed a well worn path between them, so we followed on, winding this way and that, until the sound of voices and laughter arrested our attention. The voices were sweet and fresh and the laughter ringing and merry.

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While we paused to listen, hesitating whether to retreat or advance, a sentence in English caught our ears, and we looked at one another in surprise. Broken English it was, very quaintly and prettily uttered, and in a girl's voice; but after hearing it none of us cared to run away.

“Seen them I have—a peep—a view only—but they were young and handsome, these foreign devils,” said the voice.

A peal of laughter greeted the remark, and the chatter went on in lower tones.

“We must be near the harem,” whispered Archie.

“Nonsense,” cautiously replied Joe. “The harem's way back by the palace. That's a sort of summer-house ahead of us.”

It was merely a circle of willows, with their branches mingling and interlacing to form a roof.

“If they've had a peep at us, whoever they are, I mean to have a peep at them,” said I; and without waiting for a reply I softly tip-toed toward the willows.

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The others followed, but I did not heed them. Really I was hungry for the sight of a girl, merely to relieve the monotony of our intercourse with the harsh-featured eunuchs; but more than all I was curious.

Halting at the circle of trees I found a place where I could see the interior between the trunks, and then I paused spell-bound.

A table of woven reeds was in the center of the leafy bower, and around it were low chairs and settles of the same material. Seated at the table were three young and pretty Chinese girls—and if you think a Chinese girl cannot be pretty you should have seen this group as I saw it.

One maid was leaning on her dainty elbows over the table, on which lay an open book. She was not reading it, but looking earnestly at another maid half reclining upon a bench opposite. Her eyes were dark and smiling, her teeth white as pearls, her cheeks like rose leaves and her hair had a wonderful arrangement of bows and knitting-needles—or some such things—stuck this way and that to hold it all together.

The girl reclining was even prettier, and wore a wonderful pink gown, all embroidery and fluffy silk trimmings. I may not be describing all this properly, but I am doing my best to tell you what I saw.

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There was a third girl sitting upon a stool and doing a bit of embroidery—at least she had a needle and some work in her hands; but she was not paying much attention to the work, for when I got to my peep-hole it was this maid—a tiny, dainty, dimpled bit of a roguish looking thing—who was engaged in talking.

“I’ll do it, Mai Mou—even if they beat me, or kill me!” she was saying, impetuously; “I’ll have a glance myself, this very evening, from my window, and see what they are like.”

“But why need you care, Nor Ghai?” asked the reclining beauty, in a soft, subdued voice. “What if Ko-Tua has seen these foreign devils, and praises their beauty—what to you is it all?”

“To me!” returned the impetuous one; “they knew my brother, who has gone to join the Genii. I loved well our Lun Pu, who never knew me or cared for me. Perhaps the fearful, handsome strangers will tell me of him.”

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I knew who they were now—at least, two of them. Nor Ghai was the little sister of the Prince—she was the girl with the embroidery. Mai Mou was the daughter of our enemy the

governor; she was well named the Pearl of Kai-Nong. As for the third, the beauty with the book, who had been called Ko-Tua and who claimed to have had a peep at us, I had no idea where she belonged.

But what I had overheard decided me upon a bold step. It would have been bold even in America; here in China it was actually audacious.

I saw the opening in the willows that formed the entrance to this leafy pavilion, and crept toward it, motioning the boys to follow. When near enough I boldly stepped out, walked into the pavilion and then paused as if astonished at what I had discovered there. Archie and Joe were with me, and we were greeted by a panicky chorus of muffled screams. Lucky it was they were muffled, or the cries might have brought the eunuchs upon us. Perhaps the frightened girls remembered this and screamed just loud enough to show they were properly scared.

“Pardon us, ladies, for intruding,” I said, removing my cap and making a low bow. “We are the foreign devils, and we’re glad to make your acquaintance.”

CHAPTER XXI.

AN UNLAWFUL INTERVIEW.

Really, we had created a sensation in the summer-house. The three beauties were huddled together in a bunch as far away as the circling willows would permit, and with clasped hands and wide open eyes they were staring at us intently.

“Permit us to introduce ourselves,” said Joe, in his most polite manner. “I am Joseph Herring, of America.”

“And I am Archie Ackley, of the same grand old country.”

“I am Sam Steele, at your service, ladies. Won’t you sit down?” I continued. “Now that we are here let us tell you all about Prince Kai Lun Pu, and how he sent us to this place.”

“Go away!” said Mai Mou, in low tense tones.

“Oh, no, we can’t do that,” said Joe.

“But you must,” persisted the Pearl.

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“Why so?” asked Archie, calmly seating himself at the table.

“You will be sliced if you are found here,” announced Nor Ghai, with a dimpled smile, half frightened, half amused.

“Sliced! What does that mean, little friend?” I asked.

“You are bound to the plank and the axe begins at your feet and slices you thin until you are dead—and long afterward.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” said Archie, contemptuously. “We’re not afraid.”

“If you care not to consider yourselves, then consider us,” begged the fair Ko-Tua. “If you are found here we shall be beaten with bamboos upon the soles of our feet and cast into dungeons without food.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, assuringly. “I will not allow the eunuchs to harm you.”

“How can you prevent it?” asked Mai Mou, curiously.

“This is our authority,” I replied, exhibiting the Prince’s ruby ring.

“Oh—h!” sighed Nor Ghai, gliding swiftly toward me. Then she knelt and touched the ring with her rose-bud lips, saying:

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“It is his, Mai Mou! It is my brother’s signet, Ko-Tua! We need fear nothing, I am sure.”

“Then sit down and let’s talk it over,” I said, motioning toward the chairs.

Very timidly they approached, like frightened doves about to fly at the least alarm, and then they plumped down upon a bench all together, with their arms twined around each other for mutual encouragement.

“How does it happen you speak English?” I inquired, pretending not to notice their fears.

“One of my father’s wives lived at Hong-Kong before he brought her here, and she taught us,” replied Nor Ghai, simply. “Do you think we the English speak with perfection?”

“Nothing could be more perfect,” laughed Archie.

“Ah—h!” they murmured, looking at each other delightedly.

“We the English talk much with ourselves,” declared Ko-Tua, casting her eyes down modestly to avoid Joe’s stare. “We can faster talk in English than in our own language.”

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“That’s a great blessing,” said Archie; “you must have a lot to say to each other.”

“And we study all the time, velly hard and good,” added Mai Mou, looking earnestly at Archie for approval.

“I’m sure you are very wise and learned,” said he.

“Now,” broke in Nor Ghai, wiggling expectantly in her seat, “tell me of Lun Pu—all of Lun Pu—and how he came to join his ancestors, and how you foreign dev—you, you——”

“That’s right. We’re foreign devils.”

“How you came to Kai-Nong?”

“Let me see,” I rejoined; “you are the Prince’s sister, I believe; Nor Ghai by name.”

“How did you know?” she exclaimed, clasping her hands with a little gesture of pleasure.

“And this must be Mai Mou, the governor’s daughter, called by all the world the Pearl of Kai-Nong,” added Archie.

“How strange,” she murmured. “Do you know everything?”

“Not quite,” laughed Joe. “For instance, we do not know who Ko-Tua is. Will she tell us?”

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Now Ko-Tua was not the least charming of the little maids by any means. Her features were not quite so regular as those of Mai Mou, nor so merry and winning as those of Nor Ghai; but she was sweet and dainty as a spring floweret and her eyes had a pleading and wistful look that was hard to resist. So we were all greatly astonished when Mai Mou answered Joe's question by saying:

“Ko-Tua is my little mother; she is my father's new wife.”

“What!” I exclaimed. “Has the old governor been marrying since he returned?”

“No-no!” answered Ko-Tua, smiling and blushing. “I was married to the noble Mai Lo six years ago.”

“Impossible! How old are you now?”

She looked inquiringly at Mai Mou, who answered:

“Fifteen summers has Mai Mou looked upon.”

“And you were married at nine!”

“That must be it,” she nodded, counting upon her slender fingers. “Ten—'leven—telve—thirt'—fourt—flifteen!”

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“It's preposterous!” cried Joe, indignantly. “The old rascal ought to be sliced for daring to marry a child.”

“What is wrong?” asked Mai Mou, wonderingly. “Is not my little mother beautiful? Is she not nice? Is not my father's harem well appointed and comforting?”

“Are you happy, Ko-Tua?” asked Joe, earnestly.

“Oh, yes, foreign one. Only the birds are happier.”

“Then we won't slice Mai Lo,” I announced, airily.

I picked up the book that lay open upon the table and found it an English translation of Plutarch.

“Do you like this?” I asked.

“Oh, yes!” they cried. And Ko-Tua added: “We are entertained much by its stories.”

It seemed pretty heavy reading for young girls.

“We have the Shakespeare and we have the verse songs of Blyton,” announced Nor Ghai, gleefully. “My brother, Lun Pu, gave them to my father’s wife who came from Hong Kong. But now you may tell us, foreign ones, since you are with us so unlawfully, about my brother’s accident.”

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So we began the story, trying between us to tell it in such a way as to remove all horror from the tragic incidents. But it seemed they loved to dwell mostly upon those very details, having the same love for slaughter and bloodshed that I have observed in the natures of some of our own children. Even Nor Ghai had known the Prince so slightly that he was a mere personage to her, and his untimely end was to these fair and innocent girls but a romance that was delightful to listen to.

With the telling of the story and answering the numerous questions showered upon us, the hours passed rapidly, until finally Ko-Tua sprang up and declared it was time for them to go, or Mai Lo’s eunuchs would be looking for her.

“Will you come here again tomorrow?” I asked Nor Ghai, taking her little hand in mine—a liberty she did not resent.

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She turned to the others.

“Shall we come here tomorrow?” she inquired.

Mai Mou looked at her “little mother.”

“Let us come,” said Ko-Tua, after a little hesitation. “We shall then be able to learn more of the English.”

Nor Ghai laughed at that and said, with a pretty courtesy:

“We shall come.”

Then they glided from the pavilion with quick little steps that were not ungraceful, and we stood silently in our places until all sounds of their departure had ceased.

We were much elated by this meeting, and had no thought of the danger we might incur by arranging for a future interview with the charming orientals. You must not think we had fallen in love with these Chinese beauties, for that was not the case. I don't say that I shall never fall in love; but when I do it will be with an American girl, and it won't matter much whether she is beautiful or not, so long as I love her.

But I think every well regulated young fellow is fond of chatting with nice girls, and in this heathen country we were so beset with dangers and had so little companionship outside of our circle of three, that it was a pleasant change to meet these pretty maids and converse with them.

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“It's wrong, you know,” remarked Archie, as we wandered slowly back to the palace. “That is, from the standard of Chinese etiquette. We may really get ‘sliced’ if we keep up the meetings, and even if we escape that, the girls will be terribly punished if they're caught.”

“That's true,” said Joe. “Do you think the ring would save us in this case, Sam?”

“I think it would with Wi, but we've got to figure on the old governor finding out that we're associating with his wife and daughter. I'm convinced that would make him furious.”

“Then let’s go ahead,” said Archie, grinning with delight. “It will do me good to worry old Mai Lo into fits.”

“Oh, if he finds it out, he’ll be sure to resort to slicing,” said Joe, “if he can get his hands on us.”

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“Never mind,” said I. “The girls come here to visit Nor Ghai, and that’s how we happened to meet them. It’s different from our intruding into the governor’s harem, or even into the harem of the palace. If Mai Lo doesn’t want his wife and daughter to meet strangers he should keep them safe at home.”

“The chances are he doesn’t know they are in the habit of visiting Nor Ghai,” observed Archie. “Anyhow, I’m going to have all the fun I can, in spite of old Death’s-Head.”

That expressed our sentiments exactly. We were foolish, I admit; but boys are apt to be foolish at times, and some great writer—I don’t remember his name—has said that a woman is at the bottom of every misfortune.

Here were three of them, and they looked harmless enough. So we voluntarily thrust our heads into the trap.

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET PASSAGE.

When we met the girls in the secluded pavilion the next afternoon, we found that Nor Ghai had brought the Shakespeare and Byron, and she begged us to explain certain passages in them that had puzzled the fair students of English. This we did, and before we parted that day a friendly footing had been established between us that was very pleasant indeed. Of course another interview was arranged for, as all of us had become reassured by our success in escaping observation, and if we still had any qualms of fear we did not allow them to prevent future meetings.

But the girls were more alive to the conditions surrounding them than we were, and their fertile brains arranged a series of signals to let us know whether it was safe to enter the pavilion or not, since at any time one of the eunuchs or older members of the harem might see fit to accompany them. Also they timed their stay by our watches, so as to leave before there was a chance of their being sought for.

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All this savored of intrigue, but our meetings were harmless enough. I don't say that little Nor Ghai was averse to a bit of flirtation, but none of us encouraged her because we had no thought of flirting with our new friends. We talked in boyish fashion and treated them exactly as if we were brothers and sisters.

Meantime the days flew swiftly by, and still Mai Lo paced the gravel paths before the Ancestral Halls of Kai, and we hesitated to begin our appointed task. But finally one evening, while talking over our plans and chances of success, Joe

proposed that we should explore the secret passage and accustom ourselves to the way to the underground vaults; so we promptly decided upon the adventure.

At about ten o'clock, the usual time, we dismissed our eunuch, Tun, who always remained in waiting until we retired for the night, and then, instead of going to bed, we put out our lights and sat quietly in the darkness until after midnight.

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Every time we had passed by the bend in the hall we had noticed the tapestry of the dragon, but never had we ventured to disturb it to see what was behind the hangings. We dared not show a light in this passage because just around the bend was the guard of the royal apartments, eternally pacing up and down to prevent anyone from penetrating to the sacred precincts.

We had, unfortunately, no candles; but I had unhooked a small oil lamp from a bracket in one of our rooms, and matches were plentiful. When I softly opened our door to listen, there was not a sound to be heard throughout the palace except the steady footfalls of the distant guard; so, being in our stocking-feet, we tip-toed along the corridor, feeling our way in the darkness by keeping one hand on the wall, until we reached the bend in the passage.

We could not see the dragon tapestry, but knowing its exact location I crept beneath the heavy drapery, followed closely by Archie and Joe, and then began to feel for the bronze knob.

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Across the face of the wall in every direction we fumbled, and I had almost begun to despair of finding it without a light when Joe grasped my shoulder and guided my hand to a tiny projection far to the left.

Yes; it was a knob, all right. I grasped it and pulled it toward me, and at once we heard a faint swish, and a breath of colder air reached us. I felt along the wall, and found an

opening, through which I passed, drawing the others with me. Another heavy tapestry was on this side of the wall, and we crept beneath its folds on hands and knees.

“Do you think it’s safe to scratch a match?” I whispered.

“It’s got to be done, safe or unsafe,” replied Joe, and in a moment a faint light flared up, and Joe shaded it with his hands while I cast a hurried glance at the tapestry.

“No light can shine through that, I’m sure,” said I. “Here, Joe; light the lamp.”

I held it while he touched the match to the wick, and then we stood up and gazed curiously around us.

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We found ourselves in a lofty sleeping chamber that was beautifully furnished. The carved mahogany bedstead with its pagoda-like canopy towered fully fifteen feet in height, and its curtains were cloth-of-gold. Around the frieze, just above the heavy tapestry hangings, was a row of embossed golden fishes with ivory horns, set in a background of azure blue. Near to where we stood, at the left of the secret panel, a number of bronze tablets were attached to the wall, their faces engraved with Chinese characters. I supposed these to be the tablets of ancestors, which every house contains in its inmost sanctum. Before the tablets was a sort of altar, containing a vase for burning incense and prayers.

A broad archway, hung with stiff draperies, formed a communication with the next room of the suite, and just beyond it stood a great carved cabinet with numerous drawers and recesses and a writing shelf in the center. This I thought must be the Prince’s “desk” which I had asked the Chief Eunuch to remove to my room, without realizing its size. That he had promised to do so filled me with wonder, for I doubted if it could be carried through the archway.

Passing around the huge bedstead and holding the lamp before us, we peered into the further corner of the room and with one accord shrank back in sudden fear. For before us stood a gigantic form in glittering armor, with a face-mask so terrible in expression that it might well cause a sinking of the heart. And behind the mask glittered two cruel, piercing eyes, while the right arm swung a scimitar as if about to attack the beholder and hack him asunder.

“Never mind,” muttered Joe, with a low laugh. “It isn’t alive, although it looks it.”

“It’s the statue we were searching for,” said I.

“No wonder it used to scare the Prince,” remarked Archie. “Ugh! I shouldn’t want to own that fellow for an ancestor.”

“This was the first Kai,” I rejoined. “They must have been giants in those days, if he’s a sample warrior.”

Then I leaned down and tried to press outward the left foot of the statue, which stood flat upon the floor without any pedestal. It resisted and I knelt down and tried again, pushing with all my strength and using the other foot as a purchase. The foot gave a little—not more than half an inch—and I heard a sharp click and a grating sound behind the tapestries.

“All right,” said Joe, pushing aside the drapery while Archie held the lamp. “The panel is open.”

The opening disclosed was about five feet high and not more than eighteen inches wide, but it was sufficient to allow us to pass through with ease. A secret passage, narrow and low, had been built in the great side-wall of the palace, and a few paces from the panel a flight of steps, made of stone, led downward. These continued to descend until we had passed below the foundations of the building, when we entered a tunnelled passage slanting straight into the earth. The walls

were protected with stone and cement, but there was a damp, musty smell in the passage; and, as we advanced, numerous vermin, such as rats, lizards and fat spiders, scampered away from the path to hide in the little nooks between the stones.

Archie, who went first, carrying the lamp, growled continually at these pests, but I felt they could not be dangerous or the Prince would have warned us against them.

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We traveled what seemed a very long distance to us, under the circumstances; but I now believe the passage was a bee-line to the burial vaults from the palace, and of course the vaults were located some distance from the building that appeared above ground. But my sense of direction was so confused that I would then, and even afterward, have been unable to locate the vaults from the palace grounds.

Finally we reached a steel door which was unlocked and opened easily. Beyond this hung a tapestry, and pushing that aside we came to an alcove, arched high above us and having a grating of bronze or similar metal at the further side.

In the center of the alcove lay a superb sarcophagus or burial casket, set across two slabs of marble. This was of wrought bronze and bore upon the cover a mask with a surprising resemblance to the statue of the first Kai in the Prince's bedroom.

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We did not pause to examine it long, however, for all about the coffin stood carved stands and taborets weighted with curious ornaments in solid gold and silver, while upon a low table were several suits of splendid armor, inlaid with gold and set with precious stones that glistened brightly under the lamplight. Nor was this all. Ornaments of green and yellow jade were scattered about, and at the foot of the coffin stood a semi-circle of big jars of bronze.

I thrust my hand into one of these jars and drew it out filled with beautiful emeralds.

“We don’t need to go any farther, boys!” I exclaimed with a gasp. “Here are riches enough, in this one niche, to satisfy a dozen fortune hunters.”

Archie examined another vase and found rubies and pearls in it. The third was quite empty, and so was the fourth, but the fifth and last one contained many jade rings, bracelets and necklaces, with which were mingled several large sapphires.

“Yes,” said Archie, sighing; “here’s more treasure than the priests of Luxor buried in the desert. But let’s continue our explorations. This can’t be all of the ancestral chih, for only one ancestor is buried here.”

“He must have been very rich in his lifetime, if this was but half of his fortune,” remarked Joe. “I wonder if he got it all honestly?”

“Probably not,” I replied. “This fellow is an ancient, and perhaps lived in an age of robbing and pillaging. But come on, fellows; let’s see if we can pass those gratings.”

Only a catch, worked from either side, held the grating in place, and swinging it open we passed into what was doubtless an immense domed chamber, for our tiny lamp could not light more than a small portion of it. On either side of the alcove from which we had emerged hung magnificent tapestries worked in threads of gold and silver and representing scenes of battles, processions and the like. The workmanship was so fine on the first tapestry we examined that it seemed impossible it could be anything but a painting, and a marvelous one at that. But we found the other fifty or more sections hung around the domed chamber to be equally perfect in execution.

Beyond the tapestry hangings, each section of which was some sixteen feet in width, was another grating leading to an alcove, and this system we afterward found was continued all around the chamber. None of the gratings were locked and all opened readily to our touch. The alcove we next entered contained another splendid casket and even more golden ornaments and precious gems than we had found in the first. We accounted for the empty jars in the first alcove, which connected with the secret passage, by the pilfering from them by Prince Kai, of which he had told us.

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Joe, as we eagerly started to examine the next alcove. “If we’re not careful we’re going to lose our bearings in this big place and get lost. Before we wander any further away let’s mark the grating to the alcove we came from when we entered.”

That seemed good advice, so we retraced our steps until we reached the first alcove, where Joe tied his handkerchief to the grating. Then, feeling assured we could find the place again, we proceeded upon our explorations.

We had examined five or six of the chih, or alcoves of the dead, all of which contained enormous wealth, when suddenly I stumbled against a low stand just outside of a grating. Holding the lamp high to see what the obstruction was, I found upon the stand a large lamp, nearly filled with oil, and a box of London safety-matches.

“Oho!” said I; “Mai Lo has been here.”

“I suppose he can now wander through these ancestral vaults at will, since there is no one to forbid him,” said Joe.

“I hope he won’t decide to come while we’re here,” remarked Archie, “or our pretty plans will be nipped in the bud.”

“Oh, it isn’t necessary for Mai Lo to lose sleep to enter these vaults,” I replied. “But it is as well to be on our guard, and I’m glad we found the evidences of his visit.”

Entering the alcove before which the table and lamp stood, we looked around with astonishment, for here was more evidence of Mai Lo’s presence in the tomb. This niche was evidently very rich in treasure, and the vases and bowls of gems had been emptied into a great heap in the center of the floor. From this heap some one had been assorting the jewels into varieties and sizes. In one place were pearls, the finest of which had been placed in one row, the next largest in a second row, and so on.

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Rubies had been assorted in a similar way on another side of the chih, and emeralds in a third place. No jewels seemed to have been taken away, and from the size of the heap there was much more assorting to be done, and the job was scarcely begun.

The beauty of the row of great pearls appealed to Archie strongly, so he picked them up, one by one, and placed them in the pocket of his jacket.

“If anything should prevent our coming here again,” he remarked, “these pearls will well repay us for our journey to Kai-Nong.”

But he never suspected that they were likely nearly to cost us all our lives.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TREASURE OF THE ANCIENTS.

From alcove to alcove we went, finding in each a different class of treasure, according to the wealth of the occupant and the period in which he had lived. Here a scholar was laid, and beside him a mass of parchment manuscripts, which either represented a half of his fortune or had been purchased at such high prices that his heir preferred to bury the manuscripts with his ancestor and keep the half of his wealth represented by more tangible assets. In another place we found many painted pictures, in another bales of silks, rotted and fallen to decay. But usually the wealth of these ancestors of Kai Lun Pu consisted of splendid gems and jewelry, ornaments of gold, silver and jade, and in many cases golden coins of the Empire. Well might Prince Kai say that his Ancestral Halls contained enough wealth to ransom a kingdom. To carry it all away with us would have required a railway train or the hold of a steamship.

“What we must do,” said Joe, who was a fair judge of gems and jewelry, “is to select only rubies, emeralds and pearls, and perhaps some of the fine jades. These may be carried in a small space, if we don’t take too many of them, and they’ll sell more readily at home for cash.”

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We quite agreed with him in this, and believed we would now be able to order the packing cases of such a size as to fit our needs. We might have some trouble in carrying our plunder through China to Shanghai, and to strive to take too much of this almost inexhaustible wealth might very easily cause us to lose it all.

So eager and excited were we by the sight of this splendid treasure-house that we lingered in the tombs a long time, and finally reached an alcove where rested the casket we had made aboard the *Seagull*, and which contained the bandaged pillows and bolsters that had been substituted for the body of Prince Kai.

It was still locked, and had not been disturbed in any way by Mai Lo; nor was there any treasure beside it. From there on to the alcove where we had entered, and where Joe's handkerchief was attached to the grating, the niches were empty. These ancestral chih would have accommodated several generations yet, had not the last of the royal line perished without an heir.

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“Good gracious! It's after four o'clock!” exclaimed Archie, leaning over to examine his watch by the flame of the lamp.

“Then we must hustle back,” I said, “for it begins to get daylight at five, and we mustn't get caught in the passages of the palace.”

So we ran into the alcove of the first Kai and closed the grating behind us. Then we thrust aside the tapestry, passed through the steel door, and fastened it securely. A moment more and we were treading the tunnel in single file back to the palace.

The way was up hill now, and harder walking, but it did not seem so long as it did when we came down. In a few minutes we had reached the stone steps and were climbing them to the chamber of the Prince.

The sliding panel behind the statue puzzled us a little, but we soon discovered how to close it, and it caught in place with the same little click that had released it when the foot was pushed aside.

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Without pausing again in the bed-chamber, we crept beneath the tapestry and out of the panel door into the corridor, and then paused to listen with bated breath. The guard could still be heard treading heavily before the door to the Suite of the Horned Fish; so we took off our shoes again, pushed aside the dragon tapestry, and noiselessly crept to our own room.

You may be sure we breathed easier when we were safe within our own quarters, for day was just breaking and our return had been timed none too soon.

Nux and Bryonia, whom we had left to guard our rooms from possible intrusion while we were absent, were mighty glad to see us back again, and their eyes opened wide with astonishment when Archie displayed his pearls as proof that we had found the treasure.

But the night of excitement had wearied us greatly, so we all turned in and slept like dead men until our faithful blacks called us to breakfast.

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It was while we were at this meal that Joe uttered an exclamation, and glancing up I saw his face go white and frightened.

“What is it, old man?” I asked quickly.

“My handkerchief!” he replied. “I left it tied to the grating of the alcove!”

We looked at one another in stupid bewilderment for a moment, trying hard to think how to remedy such a blunder. But nothing could be done for that day, anyhow, and if Mai Lo happened to visit the Ancestral Halls during that time he would have ample proof that we had been there.

“Of course he may not notice it,” said Archie, comfortingly.

“Why, it’s a regular flag—white against all those dark hues of tapestries and black spots of alcoves. Of course he’ll notice it,” retorted Joe with a groan.

“Not any more than he’ll notice the absence of the pearls,” I suggested. “Mai Lo is evidently busy assorting the treasure he means to run away with, and his first visit there will assure him someone else has been in the vaults.”

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“Oh, but without the handkerchief he would be unable to guess who it was,” answered Joe. “The handkerchief gives him just the clew he needed.”

“Never mind,” said I; “the governor can’t do anything about it that I can see. If he is onto our game, we are also onto his, and he won’t dare whisper to the people outside that he is visiting the vaults. When he enters the building he is supposed to be praying, and he must not enter the underground chih after laying the body of the Prince there. His only legitimate business now is to seal up the vaults and destroy all traces of them.”

“And then make an end of himself,” added Archie.

“Just so.”

But in spite of our brave talk we were decidedly uneasy over the way in which we had bungled our adventure of the night, and as soon as breakfast was finished we started out with one accord and took the path that led to the Ancestral Halls.

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Nux followed us, but Bry remained in our rooms. This plan we had adopted several days before, having only one of our blacks with us when we ventured out of the palace and leaving the other to guard the entrance to our apartments. The reason for this procedure was that we soon expected to accumulate considerable treasure in our rooms, and we

wanted it understood that we permitted no intrusion further than the outer reception-room. Indeed, Bry was guarding, this morning, a few pearls that Joe estimated to be worth over fifty thousand dollars; and the way he did it was to tie them in a handkerchief and carry them in his pocket. As for separating our faithful servants, it was evident that nothing could ever be done in this place by brute force, and a thousand men would be of no more use to us than one.

We sauntered carelessly along, so as not to convey the impression that we had any object in our walk more than to get a bit of air and exercise. Often we passed the magnificently attired household eunuchs, singly or in groups; but we had now become familiar sights to these creatures, and they merely touched their yellow turbans respectfully and passed on.

Around the outbuildings the place thronged with less important servants, all under the general command of Wi-to and his lieutenants. Sounds of industry came from the House of the Artisans, where the bronze, brass and gold workers were busy. In front of the House of the Weavers were groups throwing shuttles back and forth or spinning the threads to be used in the looms.

Kitchen servants passed and repassed in every direction, and this part of the grounds was in many ways the most interesting of all, for here beat the pulse that gave life to the whole establishment.

Moving on, we took the path descending the mound toward the Ancestral Halls—not the one that led past the cage of Sacred Apes, for we hated those fearful creatures and avoided them—but a shaded, winding way that was very pleasant, though it led past a pond of black water which was said to be the home of a monster Devil-Fish.

Before long we came to a halt directly in front of the north entrance of the beautiful bamboo palace of the dead, and the soldier on guard, radiant in the crimson and sapphire uniform of the governor's service, waved his scimitar partly in salute and partly in warning.

"Mai Lo?" I said to him, questioningly.

He spoke no English, but could not fail to understand I was asking for the governor; so he turned his thumb toward the entrance, to indicate that his master was inside the building, and then resumed his strut back and forth before the door.

Well, that was all we wanted to know, and our hearts sank as we realized that our enemy was even now in the underground chih examining the traces of our midnight visit there. We slowly turned and retraced our steps as far as a group of trees that stood a little way up the mound and commanded an unobstructed view of the entire House of Ancestors. Here we seated ourselves upon shady benches and passed the next two hours moodily talking over the situation.

At the end of that time we observed Mai Lo appear from the building by the entrance nearest us. He was as deliberate and reserved in demeanor as ever, and after a word to the guard he took the very path that led past the trees where we were.

"Let's get out," advised Archie, hastily.

"No," said Joe, "let's stay and hear what the old duffer has to say. Don't be afraid to talk up to him, Sam."

"I won't," was my promise.

Then we grimly awaited the governor's approach. He paced steadily up the path, his hands clasped behind his back and his face turned square to the front.

So he reached the trees and came to a halt before our bench. Upon his parchment-like yellow face there was no sign of expression; in the bead-like eyes turned upon us was no ray of intelligence.

Without doubt Mai Lo had been astounded by the discovery he had made that morning: that we were able to penetrate to the sacred chih of the Ancestors of Kai. If he was human, he must have been stirred to the very depths of his nature. But here he stood, as passionless and cold as a statue, his glassy stare wandering from one to another of us in turn, but no word passing his thin, compressed lips.

What a relief it would have been had he denounced us, threatened us, cursed us for foreign devils and scoundrels! But no. He merely fixed his soulless eyes upon us, and I began to realize how the ancient Greeks might have got their idea of Medusa and the terrible gaze that turned men to stone.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ROYAL CABINET.

When the governor had gone—and he returned along the path as silently as he had come, after his passionless inspection of us—we arose and walked to the palace, finding mighty little to say on our own account.

On the broad piazza that led into the main building of the palace we found the Chief Eunuch, leaning heavily against a pillar. I had been trying to communicate with Wi-to for several days, but Tun, who carried our messages, always returned to say that his master was closely occupied with his duties and begged to postpone the interview. During these days we had neither seen nor heard of the Chief Eunuch, so I was a little surprised to find him on the piazza. His face was haggard and worn, his eyes puffy and bloodshot and his person untidy.

“Good morning, Wi,” said I, cordially. “Have you been ill?”

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He smiled at me rather childishly, and replied:

“The Earth Dragon has had me in his coils—and nearly strangled me. Ah—oh! how unhappy I have been! Who has such deep and dreadful sorrows as poor Wi-to? Who suffers such horrible pangs? Who—but never mind. The sun-god is smiling this morning, and the breeze is sweet and lovely. Are my master’s guests wholly content? Have they any orders for their lowly servant?”

I own this rambling, inconsequent speech somewhat puzzled me. Wi-to did not seem himself; he was surely not at his best today. Ordinarily the Chief Eunuch was the most intelligent, shrewd, courteous and agreeable Chinaman we had met, save only Prince Kai Lun Pu.

But I pretended not to notice his peculiar bearing and asked him when he could have the desk of Prince Kai moved into our rooms. I wanted to begin my work of inspection at once, I told him; but really the only reason I made the request at all was to allay any suspicions he might harbor.

To my surprise he at once blew his whistle and brought a dozen eunuchs running to answer the summons. Still leaning against the pillar Wi-to chattered away in Chinese for a time until his men prostrated themselves and hurried away to fulfil his commands.

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“The cabinet will come to you, my master,” now answered the eunuch. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“Why, as regards the selection of the gifts——”

“Don’t hurry,” he interrupted, rubbing one eye with his knuckles. “Take it easy; much time; no hurry; only Mai Lo want you out of the way. Mai Lo? Dlam Mai Lo! English dlam. Pah!”

Really, I couldn’t understand Wi-to in this peculiar condition, so we left him still leaning against the post and went away to our own rooms.

Pretty soon there was considerable racket in the passageway, and we sent Bry to see what it meant. He returned grinning from ear to ear, and said the eunuchs were moving a house. So we looked out, and there were some twenty or more of the palace servants, perspiring and struggling with the immense cabinet that had been standing in

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the Prince's bed-chamber. How they ever moved it at all was a wonder; but move it they did, inch by inch, and squeezed it through the great entrance door to our reception-room. I had them place it against the wall nearest the door and then they went away glad that the task was accomplished.

It was an absurd thing to do, and in all reason and common sense we should have been permitted to examine the cabinet where it originally stood; but oriental prejudices are difficult things to overcome, and since it was forbidden strangers to enter the royal apartments, the mountainous cabinet had to come to Mahomet Sam.

Now I had no right, as a matter of fact, to examine this private cabinet of the royal line of Kai, and my request to do so was but a blind to further our real plans. But since it was here, and since Wi-to had sent me a bunch of keys to unlock the different compartments, the temptation to look inside was irresistible.

“It's this way,” I said to the boys; “if we don't look over these things, others who may not be as friendly to Prince Kai's memory are sure to do so. The estate and palace will shortly pass to the Emperor, who will either retain it for himself or give it to some favorite. So I believe we are justified in seeing what this old mystery-box contains.”

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They agreed with me fully, so we began the examination. First we opened the desk part and found many documents in Chinese, sealed, signed and filed in a very business-like manner. These we could not read, and their importance was all unknown to us. Also there were numerous letters. One bunch of yellow missives bore the Imperial Vermilion Seal of the Emperor.

In order to carry out our deception I tore up a number of the least important looking papers and burned them in a brazier. At the bottom of the heap of letters I found a book in which

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the Prince had written in English a sort of diary, although the entries were seldom dated and seemed to be whimsical sentences he had recorded merely to relieve his mind. The poor fellow had had no one around him in whom he could confide, as to an intimate friend; so he had made this little book his confidant.

Believing that here, if anywhere we would be likely to find clues to guide us in our undertaking, we read this book aloud, so that among the three of us, to say nothing of Nux and Bry, we might catch whatever ideas it contained that might be of service to us.

Many of the passages were sarcastic comparisons between the customs of his own people and those of Europeans, and I must admit that, from Prince Kai's point of view, the Europeans did not always come out best. One entry that interested us was as follows:

“What unselfish and responsible servants am I blest with! What competent officials direct my affairs in my absence! Look upon them, oh my ancestors, and pity me. At the head of my province is a man born to be its governor who, lacking such birthright, would be unfit for the duties of the humblest slave. Cold, unfeeling, ambitious and without honor, this man works but for his own selfish interests, and lacks the strength of intellect to ruin me for his own gain. Since I read him so truly he cannot injure me; but what a farce is this hereditary right to govern a great province such as Kwang-Kai-Nong! When Mai Lo lies with his ancestors there will be his son to govern, a weak imbecile, helplessly degenerate. I am quite certain I must find an excuse to behead both father and son, that I may free myself of this incubus of the House of Kai.

“The Fuh-yin of the city of Kai-Nong is even a worse scoundrel than Mai Lo. I have proof that he murdered his own brother, in order to become mayor and rob the city of its revenues. Some day when I have time I shall accuse and

condemn my Fuh-yin, and invent a horrible execution worthy of his sins.”

“In the palace the one power is the Chief Eunuch, who might make things very unpleasant for me were he not by nature faithful and obedient to his master. I made him chief when old Koa-Ming-Dhu was stabbed by one of my father’s wives, raising Wi-to from the ranks of the eunuchs. I believe he is grateful, and so am willing to overlook his one weakness. For Wi-to gets drunk periodically, and frequently stays drunk a week, and while he is in this condition everything about the palace is neglected.”

“I see,” said Joe, when I read this extract. “That was the trouble with Wi-to today. He’s been on a drunk and is just coming ’round.”

“That is an unfortunate trait,” I said, musingly. “For if we happened to need the services of the Chief Eunuch and he failed us, being on one of his sprees, we might lose our lives.”

Presently we found another interesting item in the book. It said:

“I’ve been making a careful inspection of the riches contained in the tombs of my ancestors. It seems strange that I am the first of our race to abjure ancestor worship and look upon these dead effigies of my forefathers as they really are—heaps of dust. Nothing could be more foolish, according to the enlightened age in which I live, than burying wealth in the tomb of its owner, where neither he nor any one else can apply it to use. Yet so ingrained in my nature are racial prejudices that it was long before I could induce myself to touch that wealth. When finally I did so I took the contents of several jars in the chih of the first Kai. The Jews to whom I sold the treasure in London robbed me, but I obtained enough money to make a lavish display of wealth while I was at college. But today I discovered a rare treasure indeed in the tombs of my ancestors. It is in the chih of Kai-Abon, the seventh of our royal race. The contents of his alcove seemed

so unattractive that I had never given the place much attention before; but today I discovered that the great wealth of this prince was carefully arranged to deceive any one who might be tempted by an open display. Turning over a heap of cheap brass trinkets I uncovered a superb gem which has been known to the world as the Beryl of Tartary. No one has ever known what became of this family heirloom until now. I covered it up again, because the time has not yet come when I can sell it or use it myself. In a corner was an old scimitar with plaster and mud covering its surface. I rubbed away the filth and found upon the handle the Seven Rubies of Persia, which one of my ancestors won in battle. Each ruby is said to contain a drop of blood from the heart of a king, and whoever wields this scimitar is considered invincible, for the spirits of the seven kings fight for its champion. This treasure I could not leave buried, so I have brought it to my chamber and concealed it in the lower drawer of my cabinet. No one now alive will know where I got it.”

“Hold on a minute,” cried Archie. “Let’s take a look at this wonderful weapon.”

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So we unlocked the lower drawer and at first could find nothing. But Archie soon saw that the drawer was so deep that it must have a false bottom. This was indeed the case, and when we had pried up this false bottom with our knives, we came upon a chamois bag in which was the famous scimitar. It had no sheath and the Prince had carefully polished it. Its delicately tempered blade of blue steel was bright as a mirror. The handle was of gold, and seven splendid rubies, blood-red in color, were imbedded in the yellow metal.

Also in the drawer were a necklace of magnificent pearls and a single emerald as big as a pigeon’s egg. These we gave to Bry to add to our collection, but the scimitar we replaced in the top of the drawer, where it could easily be obtained if required. Upon examination we found many of the

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compartments of the cabinet empty. At a recent period someone—probably the Prince—had evidently cleared it out.

There was more written about the wonderful treasures in the tomb of Kai-Abon, which there is no need to repeat in these pages. Nor were any of the other entries in the book of especial interest to my patient reader, although we read them all and got a clearer idea of Prince Kai's inner nature than we had ever had before. Only once did he mention his sister, Nor Ghai, and then it was merely to say that he intended some day to send her to England or America to be educated according to modern methods.

We passed the rest of the day in the examination of this wonderful cabinet, and when evening arrived we were undecided whether or not to make another trip that night to the underground vaults. Somehow I could not get that inscrutable glassy stare of the mandarin out of my mind, and the recollection of it seemed to trouble my comrades as it did me.

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We finally decided to postpone our next trip through the underground passage until we were prepared to carry away a portion of the treasure; so we locked the cabinet, put the keys away and quietly went to bed.

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CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG.

Next morning we found the Chief Eunuch quite recovered from his debauch and as keen and attentive to his duties as ever. One of his men had neglected his tasks while Wi-to was under the influence of liquor, so his chief called him into his private office and cut him down with his own scimitar.

The incident created no excitement in the palace, and when we met Wi after breakfast was over he was as smiling and complaisant as ever. But it taught us how little human life was valued in this strange land.

I ventured to ask the Chief Eunuch once again to assist me to select the ornaments for Prince Kai's friends, and to my relief he consented readily. So we walked through the state apartments and made choice of some moderate-sized articles, of no great value but of considerable weight. Also I chose two teakwood chests bound in bronze, with excellent locks, in which I said that I would pack the books.

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Wi-to was pleased that we were so modest in our demands and showed no disposition to rob the palace of its most rare and precious objects of art. So when it came to a choice of our own gifts the eunuch declared that he would himself make the selection, acting as the confidential servant of his late master, whose generous nature he well knew.

“I will send the gifts to your rooms,” he said, “and the gifts for our royal prince's friends shall be brought as well; and the packing-cases as soon as our artisans can prepare them.”

We thanked him, and he added, cordially:

“Do not let these preparations hasten your departure, I entreat you. It is good to have guests in the palace. If you go away there will be nothing for me to do but quarrel with Mai Lo.”

We had an appointment that afternoon to meet the girls in the willow pavilion; so when the hour arrived we sauntered away from the palace and lost ourselves in the shrubbery, afterward picking our way cautiously toward the remote corner where the pavilion stood.

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The girls were all assembled and eagerly awaiting our coming, for we had promised to tell them more about our American women, in whom they were greatly interested, and to describe their dress and social privileges and methods of amusement. I suppose that to these poor secluded creatures, who experienced so little variety in their narrow lives, our stories sounded like fairy tales. Some inkling of woman's position in our western civilization they had gleaned from their copies of Byron and Shakespeare, which, by the way, only Ko-Tua had the ability to read. But the books could not answer questions, and the pretty maids were full of questions today, some of which we were puzzled to answer.

During our several interviews our relations with the little Chinese beauties had become so friendly and free from constraint that they were no longer afraid of us and we sat around the wicker table like brothers and sisters.

As Joe was describing a bit of modern finery Mai Mou exclaimed:

“Ah! You can wear that when you become a widow, Ko-Tua.”

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“A widow!” said I. “When will that be, Ko-Tua?”

“I do not know; but before long, Sam. My husband must soon kill himself, you know.”

“I’ve heard something of the sort. Will it make you unhappy to become a widow?”

“No, I shall be glad. I hate Mai Lo,” she replied, simply.

I glanced at Mai Mou.

“And you, little Pearl?” I inquired.

“I do not like my father, either,” she replied. “But I do not know him very well. Perhaps he is better than he seems.”

“No, he is worse,” said Archie, positively. “I’m sure of it.”

“But when the time comes,” continued Ko-Tua, raising her big, wistful eyes, “my husband——”

She gave a great start, and a look of horror spread over her beautiful face and actually transformed it. For her eyes had caught some object beyond our circle, and remained fixed and dilated.

Mai Mou followed her gaze and gave a little cry that conveyed the agony of a wounded deer. Nor Ghai stood up in her place and the smile faded from her pallid face.

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Of course we boys whirled around at once, and there stood Mai Lo, just within the entrance, his glassy stare taking us all in, his hands folded tightly upon his brodered robe.

That last posture was new to me and gave me the idea that at last the mandarin was as much aroused as he had ever before been in his life.

He must have enjoyed the confusion he had caused, for I confess that I felt as guilty as a school-boy caught in the act of

robbing an apple-orchard.

The discovery was so unexpected that for a time I could hardly comprehend its import, but presently vague thoughts of possible consequences to these innocent girls began to pass through my brain, and they steadied me and made me grow angry instead of afraid. The other boys must have felt the same way, for it was Archie who broke the terrible silence by saying with a growl:

“Shall I kill him, Sam?”

I was almost tempted to consent, but when Archie drew his revolver and cocked it with a cool deliberation, I put my hand on his arm and said:

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“Not yet.”

One thing puzzled me. Bryonia had come with us to a place within sight of the pavilion, where we left him in the thicket of trees as a watch to warn us of danger. But here was the mandarin, and Bry was still silent. What could have become of our faithful black?

Perhaps Archie’s threatening attitude helped to unlimber the silent Mai Lo’s tongue, for without altering his position he said in his calm, monotonous tones:

“I suppose you are aware, young men, of the penalty for this outrage.”

“Outrage!” I cried, resentfully.

“An outrage against the most sacred institution of China—the harem.”

“Fiddlesticks!” said Archie. “Don’t be an ass, Mai Lo. You’ve traveled a little and you know you’re talking rot.”

“This is not America; it is Kai-Nong,” said the governor, grimly. “You have violated the sanctity of my family relations. You have disgraced Nor Ghai, the daughter of the princely and royal Kais. For this our laws have provided a relentless penalty—death!”

“It is so,” wailed the little Nor Ghai, bursting into tears. “You will die—you will all be sliced! And I knew it and warned you.”

Mai Lo lifted his hand and Mai Mou and Ko-Tua crept obediently toward him with bowed heads and passed out of the pavilion. I saw them push through a hedge and in a flash realized why Bryonia had not seen the approach of the governor. We were nearer to Mai Lo’s house than the palace, and there was probably a gate in the wall that had admitted the girls and the governor from a direction opposite to that in which we had ourselves come.

Nor Ghai had started to follow her companions, but Mai Lo uttered a harsh order in Chinese and she halted, standing like a statue.

The mandarin clapped his hands, and four of his gaudily dressed soldiers burst through the hedge and entered the pavilion, guarding its entrance. There was no other way for us to escape.

Mai Lo thoughtfully took a position behind his soldiers before he made his next move.

“If you will leave this place at once, without a moment’s delay, and travel straight to Shanghai,” he said, deliberately, “I will spare your lives. If not——”

“Well, what then?”

“I will summon my eunuchs and have you killed.”

“Go ahead!” I said, scornfully.

“You refuse?”

“Of course. We are not afraid of you.”

The mandarin blew a whistle, and through the hedge leaped a band of a dozen fierce fellows wearing the governor’s colors of crimson and azure. They bore naked scimitars, and at a word from Mai Lo dashed past the soldiers and flew toward us.

Three revolvers cracked and three of the eunuchs fell, while others stumbled over them; and as the fellows held back, startled at such unexpected opposition, with one accord we saw our chance to escape. Each seized a stool and swinging it for a weapon we leaped upon our enemies and literally fought our way to the entrance. I tried to see Mai Lo and brain him as a farewell token, but the wily mandarin had taken pains to be out of the way.

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Once free of the imprisoning willows we fled with all our speed toward the palace, and as soon as they had recovered from their astonishment the soldiers and eunuchs were after us in hot chase.

Emerging from the thicket into the palace gardens we came plump upon a rescue party, consisting of Nux and Bry at the head of a band of eunuchs led by Wi-to himself.

Our pursuers halted until the governor came up, running with somewhat undignified haste. He jabbered away to the Chief Eunuch, behind whose men we had taken refuge, and Wi appeared both astonished and embarrassed by what he heard. Turning to me, he asked:

“Is it true? Have you forced yourselves into the presence of Mai Lo’s wife and daughter, and also of the Princess Nor

Ghai?”

“Why we have seen and talked with them, if that’s what you mean,” I replied.

“I demand the culprits,” called Mai Lo. “In the name of the law, I demand them!”

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“Go quick,” whispered the Chief Eunuch, scowling. “Quick, for your lives, to the palace!”

We obeyed without question, sprinting along the paths at our best gait and urged by the loud clamor of protesting voices behind us.

Bry and Nux brought up our rear more leisurely, and Wi-to held back the mandarin’s gang of cut-throats until we had a good start.

But after we had reached our apartments and bolted the outer door securely we had not time fully to regain our breath before the shouts of our pursuers were heard in the halls and passages.

The noise calmed down presently, and after several minutes a sharp rap came at our door.

“It is I; admit me!” said the voice of the Chief Eunuch.

Joe opened the door, but bolted it again as soon as Wi-to had stalked into the room.

The eunuch gazed upon each of us in turn with black looks. Then he said, slowly and bitterly:

“Why, in the name of Buddha, have you done the one thing that has forfeited my right to protect you?”

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“Have we?” I asked, curiously.

“Yes,” he snapped, grinding his teeth savagely. “You are doomed. Even my power cannot save you!”

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FEARFUL ENCOUNTER.

I have always believed Wi-to was the best friend we had in Kai-Nong, and that he was quite willing to serve us to the best of his ability, thus honoring the will of his dead master. But his oriental education and surroundings had saturated his otherwise liberal mind with the conventions and prejudices of his people; and he had a supreme contempt for women and could not tolerate such an unwarranted act as we had committed; in other words, making the acquaintance of three pretty and interesting girls who were inmates of harems.

So Wi-to stormed and paced the floor, in one breath condemning us to horrible tortures and in the next trying to figure out a way to save us.

Meantime we, the culprits, maintained an appearance subdued and expectant, but could not bring ourselves to realize that we had merited punishment.

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“I will not give you up to Mai Lo,” declared the Chief Eunuch, positively; “but he has the right to send his men to capture you. For a time I can hold him at bay, but such delay cannot save you. If I provided for your escape from the palace, which I might easily do, you could not cross the province ruled by Mai Lo, and his influence as governor of Kwang-Kai-Nong extends more or less throughout the Empire.”

“Where is Mai Lo now?” I asked.

“He has returned to his house. But his soldiers are left to guard the exits of the palace, and they are ordered to capture you alive or dead. It is an insult to me to invade my territory in this way, and had you been guilty of any other crime I could have driven away the slaves of the governor. But a violation of the sanctity of the harem is so serious that our laws allow the criminals to be taken wherever they seek refuge.”

“We haven’t been near the harem,” protested Archie.

“Your action is worse. You met the women clandestinely.”

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“Are not foreigners sometimes introduced to Chinese women by their lords?” I asked.

“It is sometimes done in the coast cities, such as Shanghai and Hong-Kong; but never where the ancient laws of our Empire prevail,” said the eunuch. “Besides, only the master of the harem can demand the death penalty for its violation; so, had Mai Lo introduced you to his wife and daughter, you would have had nothing to fear. As it is, the old serpent will have your lives.”

“Not if we can help it,” said I. “What would you advise us to do, Wi?”

He paced up and down for a time in deep thought. Then he said:

“Your only hope is to escape from Kai-Nong. Perhaps the governor will not care to follow you, once you are out of his way.”

“We won’t go until we have carried out the wishes of Prince Kai,” I returned, stubbornly.

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“You can do that very easily and quickly.” He cast his eyes around the room and noticed the ashes of the burnt paper in the brazier. “I see you have examined the cabinet.”

I nodded.

“The other work need not take you long,” he continued. “I will at once send the ornaments and cases here to your room, and you may pack them at your leisure. Then my men will carry them for you to the border of Kwang-Kai-Nong, and there await your coming. They will arouse no suspicion, and you must disguise yourselves and travel separately to the meeting place. The signet ring of the House of Kai will doubtless protect you from interference on the journey. So, while the governor’s men are still guarding the exits of the palace, you will be on your way out of the country. Yes! That is a good plan to follow.”

“But how can we get away if Mai Lo guards all the exits?” inquired Joe.

“Ah, that is my secret. No one knows this palace as I do. There are secret ways of which the governor does not dream.”

This statement made me uneasy until I remembered that Prince Kai had assured me that the private passage to the underground vaults was unknown to any member of his household but himself.

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To gain time we agreed to the suggestion of Wi-to, and the eunuch went away to issue his commands.

Before long all the ornaments, the two chests, and the packing-cases had been brought to our rooms and placed at our disposal. Also Wi-to sent our own gifts, and I was pleased to find that he had selected some exquisite ivory carvings that were of great artistic value. Perhaps they were worth more

than all the other things we had chosen, and I was delighted at the evidence of the Chief Eunuch's good will.

Our evening meal was served in our rooms as usual, and was as sumptuous as ever; but we had not our usual appetites and were glad when the dragging, ceremonious meal was ended.

"Of course," said Archie, "we've got to make a trip to the vaults tonight and bring back all the treasure we can."

That was inevitable; so we waited patiently until midnight and then removed our shoes and stole softly down the passage to the dragon tapestry. We took Bry with us and left Nux to guard our rooms.

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Being now acquainted with the way we proceeded more quickly than on the first occasion and were soon treading the damp and musty tunnel leading to the tombs.

When we reached the alcove of the first Kai we looked for Joe's handkerchief and found that it had been removed from the grating. This was no more than we had expected.

"My idea," said I, "is to go straight to the alcove of the seventh Kai, old Abon, which the Prince's book declares is the richest of all. We'll get that big beryl, for one thing, and anything else that seems especially valuable."

"All right," said Archie, unfastening the grating. "It must be the seventh alcove to the left of this, for those on the right are still vacant."

Joe started first and I came next with the lamp. Archie and Bry were just behind me. Suddenly we all stopped short.

From out of the darkness of the vast domed chamber a harsh cry smote our ears and we heard a rush of footsteps

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toward us.

Spellbound, we stood peering into the gloom, expecting we knew not what. And then into the dim circle of light made by our lamp there bounded a huge gray form, which like a catapult hurled itself upon Joe.

I gave a scream of fear, and the cry went echoing through the great dome like the roar of a multitude. For in a flash I realized what had happened. The great ape, Fo-Chu—the man-eater—had been loosed upon us.

The body of the ferocious beast beat Joe down as if he had been a feather, and sent him sprawling upon the floor. But at the same time the ape, blinded by the violence of its own onslaught, struck its head with terrific force against a grating and rolled over again and again before it could recover itself.

Instantly Bry seized Joe in his strong arms and fled back to the alcove we had just left, and Archie and I were but an instant behind. Yet so active was the great ape that, just as I pulled the grating to behind me, he made a second leap, and the weight of his body against the bronze bars sent me plunging head foremost into the alcove. The lamp flew from my hand and was extinguished, while in my fall I threw down one of the vases and its contents scattered themselves over the floor and rained around me like hailstones.

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It was Archie who had presence of mind to throw the catch in place that secured the grating, and so protect us from Fo-Chu, who raged and beat upon the bars in his desire to reach us.

In the darkness I struggled to my feet, while Bry lighted a match and recovered the lamp, which, being metal, was not broken. Not much oil had been spilled, and when the flame from the wick flared up we looked at each other to see what damage had been done. The blood was streaming from a cut

in my cheek and Joe had a bump upon his forehead as big as a goose-egg; but when we glanced at the horrible visage of the Sacred Ape, who clung fast to the outside of the grating and regarded us with evil eyes and vicious bared teeth, we were thankful enough that we had escaped so lightly.

“Here is another item of account against Mai Lo,” growled Archie, staring at the beast.

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“Yes,” said I, while Bry bound up my cut with a handkerchief; “it’s easy enough to explain this little surprise. The governor is keeper of the Sacred Apes, and discovering that we knew a way to enter the vaults he loosed the old man-killer in them, expecting the ape to make an end of us all.”

“He nearly succeeded,” said Joe, tenderly feeling of his bruise. “I thought when old Fo-Chu struck me that my game was up.”

“Well, what’s to do now?” demanded Archie.

“Let’s take what is in this alcove and be satisfied,” I suggested, shuddering as I glanced at the ape and met its cruel gaze.

Silently we began to gather up the scattered gems that littered the floor. Bryonia had brought along a strip of tapestry from our rooms, and we spread this upon the tiles and placed the gems upon it in a glittering heap.

We took such pearls, rubies and emeralds as seemed of good size and color, but the jade and golden ornaments were too clumsy and big to be utilized. When we had emptied the jars and vases we had a princely fortune piled upon the cloth, yet it did not satisfy us.

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“You see, Prince Kai had robbed this alcove already,” remarked Joe, “and there is so much to be had in the other

places that I hate to go back and call this a night's work.”

“But what can we do?” I asked, eyeing the great ape who still clung to the bars of the grating and fiercely watched our every movement.

“Confound the beast!” exclaimed Archie, and threw a small emerald at the brute.

The jewel missed him and fell in the domed chamber. In a flash Fo-Chu bounded after it, caught it in his claws, and examined it with almost human shrewdness. Then he sprang at the grating again, and clung there as before.

“Good!” cried Joe. “I believe we can capture the ape and get him out of the way for good. Shall we risk it?”

When he explained his plan we thought it was worth a trial. On looking around we found a chain necklace, with heavy links of gold set with gems. Joe stood before the grating and waved the necklace just out of reach of the beast's hand, tantalizing old Fo-Chu until he grew furious and shook the bars with fierce energy.

Then suddenly Joe released the necklace and sent it flying far into the chamber.

With a bound the ape was after it, and Joe released the catch and skipped out of our alcove in an instant, running to the next grating to the right, which he opened before Fo-Chu discovered he had been tricked. But seeing Joe standing quietly at the next alcove the beast uttered a snarl and with savage impetuosity hurled his huge body straight at his proposed victim. Joe slid behind the wall and allowed the ape to fall sprawling within the alcove. The next instant the boy was outside, slamming the grating to and springing the catch.

We who had watched this bold trick with bated breath now uttered a cry of joy and dashed out of our retreat.

“The tables are turned,” said Joe, panting a little from his exertions. “You are now our prisoner, Fo-Chu.”

The ape realized it and with blood-curdling yelps was furiously testing the bars in his effort to escape. But they held securely and we knew we were safe.

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The only danger was that the beast would discover the method of releasing the catch; but Bry happened to have a small Yale lock in his pocket, so we unearthed a heavy bronze chain from one of the alcoves, and by tossing an object inside the niche induced Fo-Chu to dive for it. This gave us a chance to snap the lock through its links.

Knowing we were now masters of the situation we proceeded to the tomb of Kai Abon and examined it with care. It yielded us about two quarts of superb rubies, besides three dozen magnificent pearls and the great beryl. From there we visited the place where Mai Lo had been assorting his jewels, but found he had removed the heap and secreted his treasure elsewhere. The vault of the third Kai, however, contained a vast store of fine gems, and after we had secured these and added them to the treasure already acquired, we were well satisfied with the result of our night's adventure.

Before we returned along the passage we went to take another look at the Sacred Ape. He was squatting upon the floor of his alcove, motionless but alert, and by the lamplight I thought his eyes glowed like two great rubies.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BATTLE IN THE CORRIDOR.

When we reached our rooms and behind bolted doors examined the contents of the tapestry curtain, we were amazed at the splendor of the treasure we had obtained.

“But it isn’t on board the *Seagull* yet,” Joe reminded us, and we sighed regretfully as we realized the truth of this statement. Nux took charge of the booty and then we all went to bed and tried to sleep; but on my part the attempt was not very successful. I wakened every little while with a start to see the glowing eyes of the great ape regarding me from the darkness, or the great gray body hurtling through the air to fall upon me; and my cheek pained me from the deep gash it had received.

So I slept but fitfully until daybreak, when I rose to find Archie and Joe already up and Bryonia making coffee over an alcohol stove.

Our first care was to dispose of the jewels, and this we did by tearing the leaves out of some of the books of Prince Kai, a big heap of which had been sent us by the eunuch, and wrapping the gems in them. Afterward we packed two boxes with them and nailed on the covers. To carry out the deception we had planned, we next concealed in the empty drawers of the cabinet enough ornaments to have filled the two boxes.

So far our work had progressed very well, and we had just finished breakfast and were congratulating ourselves on our progress when our eunuch Tun ran in and told us that the

governor's troops had been ordered to advance upon our retreat and capture us in our rooms.

“Send for Wi-to at once,” I commanded.

The eunuch hesitated.

“No can,” he said, with downcast eyes.

“Why not?” asked Archie, impatiently.

“Wi-to no see anybody,” answered the man.

“Great Cæsar! He isn't drunk again, is he?” I cried, recalling with sudden fear what such a calamity would mean to us.

The fellow was loyal to his chief and would not confess the truth; but it was not hard to guess. It occurred to me that his annoyance over our trouble about the women had sent him upon another spree, fast upon the heels of the last one. But the loss of the Chief Eunuch's protection was a serious thing to us just then, and evidently Mai Lo, having heard the news, had decided to order an attack at once, a thing he would not otherwise have dared do.

“Shall we barricade the door?” I asked.

“I've a better plan than that,” replied Joe, who was a thoughtful fellow and full of resource. “Let us stand in the passage outside and shoot down any one who turns the corner by the dragon tapestry. There are two reasons for adopting this plan. One is that we can reserve the use of the secret panel in case we want to get to the vaults by way of the underground passage, and the other is that we can retire into our rooms as a last resort and bolt the door.”

“And in that case we'd be like rats in a trap,” added Archie.

I saw the wisdom of Joe's proposal and at once sent our two blacks with revolvers to hold the passage.

"Don't be afraid to shoot," I said. "It's our lives against theirs, and if they find we mean business they may decide to let us alone."

Nux and Bry grinned approvingly and took their stand in the passage, while we remained to discuss the situation.

Presently we heard the crack of pistols and howls of rage, and gained the passage in time to see the governor's soldiers come crowding around the bend while our blacks discharged their weapons with cool aim and telling effect.

The foremost wanted to draw back when they met with opposition, but those behind, who could not see what was happening, pushed them along by main force, and so dense was the pack of crimson and azure tunics that Nux and Bry could not fire without hitting some of them.

But there was another danger—that their very numbers would defeat us if they obtained the advantage; so we all joined in the scrimmage and poured a hail of bullets into the foe. Those who fell literally blocked the bend in the passage, and at last their cries were heeded by those in the rear and the mob surged back and disappeared from sight.

We could hear their loud jabbering for a few minutes and then from the sounds we knew they had all retreated to the lower hall of the passage.

Presently a head slid slowly into view, which we recognized as that of Tun. The eunuch signalled to us not to shoot, and then ran up to ask if the soldiers could remove their dead and wounded. We gave permission at once and then stood on guard while the fallen were dragged away.

Pretty soon Tun came back to say that there would be no further attack until the soldiers could find their governor and get from him further orders. Just now Mai Lo was nowhere to be found.

So we left Bry alone in the passage and sat down in our room to talk over our predicament.

Now it seems that just beyond the main doorway that led into our suite of rooms this length of passage abruptly ended, and as it was hung with tapestry we supposed it was a blank wall. But as Bry paced up and down he was astonished to see the tapestry move. Then it was pushed aside and a lovely girl emerged and signalled to him by placing her finger over her lips.

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Our man understood and was discreet enough to show the girl into our reception-room without a word. We sprang up amazed when Nor Ghai stood before us, her hands crossed upon her breast and her head bobbing with courtesies in a comical fashion. But as I looked at her I saw her eyes were red with weeping; so I took her hand and said gently:

“What is it, little friend? Have they dared to harm you?”

“No—no—no!” she replied, hastily. “Wi-to has but told me not to leave the palace. It is not for myself I weep, but for my poor companions,” and she broke down and sobbed bitterly.

We three fellows looked uncomfortably enough at this exhibition of female misery, and did not know how to comfort Nor Ghai.

So to hide our embarrassment, Archie demanded in a rough voice:

“What has old Death’s-Head been doing to them?”

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“Who—who mean you?” sobbed Nor Ghai.

“Why, the gov’nor, of course, Mai Lo.”

“Him—him has took away all their jewels and silks an’ clothe poor Ko-Tua an’ Mai Mou in black cotton. An’—an’—” with fresh sobs—“tomorrow him say him cut out both their tongues for talk with foreign devils!”

The little maid, in her misery, wasn’t doing very well with her English; but we understood.

“The old scoundrel!” cried Archie, greatly shocked.

“We mustn’t allow this, boys,” said Joe, with decision.

“Why, it strikes me we’re in rather bad shape to interfere,” I suggested, regretfully.

“We *must* interfere,” declared Archie. “We got these girls into this trouble by our rashness, and we must get ’em out of it again.”

“We’ve also got ourselves into trouble,” I reminded him.

“That doesn’t make any difference,” said Joe. “We’re men and they’re just girls, and helpless in this heathen country. We’ve got to hunt up Mai Lo and stop this little game before it’s too late. If we can’t save the treasure and the girls both, let the treasure go to blazes!”

Nor Ghai looked at him gratefully, and Archie gave him a sounding whack on the shoulder.

“Where is the governor?” I asked the girl.

“I know not. But Ko-Tua, she run away and come to me, with Mai Mou. They in my harem now.”

“Why, that’s better than finding the governor,” I said. “Don’t let them go home again, Nor Ghai.”

“I cannot help. The eunuchs will take them,” she said.

“Well, there’s only one thing to be done,” I announced, gravely. “They must come here.”

“Ah, oh!” exclaimed the girl. “If they do that, Mai Lo cut off their heads.”

“He won’t get a chance,” said Archie; “or if he does, he’ll have to cut off our heads too. Bring your friends here, Nor Ghai.”

She hesitated, looking from one to the other of us in bewilderment.

“Have no fear, little friend,” said I, gently. “Go and fetch Ko-Tua and Mai Mou to us. In that way alone can you possibly save them.”

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She nodded brightly, smiling through her tears, and tripped away.

We watched the passage an hour; two hours. Then we began to fear that Nor Ghai had in some way been prevented from returning. But no; she appeared, finally, leading the governor’s girl wife and daughter by either hand, and then she explained that she had much trouble in inducing her friends to accept our protection.

To them the governor of Kwang-Kai-Nong was a mighty power, and they feared to defy his authority by seeking the protection of three boys who were foreigners and themselves fighting for their lives.

Indeed, when I came to consider the matter from this point of view, I was surprised that Nor Ghai had succeeded in winning them over.

But here they were, finally, and Ko-Tua said to us in her simple way:

“With no tongue a woman could not live happy, could she? So we do not care if we lose our lives. We come to you and trust you, for Nor Ghai says Wi-to is your servant, and Wi-to is almost as great as Mai Lo.”

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I had my doubts of Wi-to's usefulness to us at this juncture, but did not express them. As well as we could we impressed the maids with the fact that we were not beaten yet and intended to put up a good fight to the last. Nor Ghai told us that the news of our defeat of the soldiers had already reached the harem, and had caused the condemned girls to decide to place themselves under our protection.

We had Nux lead Ko-Tua and Mai Mou to the further chamber of our suite, and when they had entered we ordered the black to stand at the door and guard them.

Nor Ghai thanked us and went back to her harem. She said she was in no danger, as no one had authority to punish her except Wi-to. There would be a hunt for Ko-Tua and Mai Mou presently, but only Nor Ghai knew the secret entrance to our corridor.

When she had gone we felt our responsibilities overpowering us, and tried to concoct some plan to force old Mai Lo to pardon his wife and daughter. If we could not do that we must carry them away with us to Shanghai; but in that case they would double our danger and we should not know what to do with them after they were safe out of Kwang-Kai-Nong.

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“I say, Sam,” remarked Archie, after we had been thinking it over for a long time, “this is one of those bridges you’re always talking about. Don’t let’s cross it till we come to it.”

After luncheon, which Tun and his helpers served as usual, we passed an anxious and dreary afternoon. Tun had informed us that the captain of the soldiers had still been unable to locate the governor to get his commands, and seemed unwilling to attack us again without further orders. Also we gleaned the information in a roundabout way that Wi was still shut up in his room under the influence of a strong drink brewed from rice.

About three o’clock Archie slapped his leg and exclaimed:

“I’ll bet a cookie Mai Lo is in the vaults sorting treasure!”

“I feel sure of it,” said I.

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“Well, then,” proposed Joe, after a pause, “let’s go down and find him, and have it out with the old rascal in the tombs of the ancestors.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“Let’s offer to divide with him. There’s enough for us all. Who cares what becomes of the governor—whether he suicides or not—so long as we get out of this infernal country and back to Shanghai with our share of the plunder?”

“That’s a clever idea, Joe!” I exclaimed. “There’s no use fighting if a peaceable arrangement can be made. Why haven’t we thought of making a bargain with Mai Lo before?”

It did not take us long to prepare for the trip. The passage was still deserted, but it was necessary to leave both Nux and Bry to guard the entrance to the rooms, and the girls.

So we three boys crept to the dragon tapestry, passed the secret panel without being discovered and soon were creeping along the tunnel for the third time on our way to the chih of the Ancestors of Kai.

I carried with me the famous scimitar we had found in the cabinet—the one with the seven great rubies set in the hilt. For our ammunition was getting low, and if we found a need to use weapons in our present adventure the scimitar might prove very handy.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE VENGEANCE OF THE RUBY SCIMITAR.

I think we had all forgotten that the King Ape had been left imprisoned in the vaults. But when we entered the first alcove from the tunnel and heard the monster barking and growling in the recess at our right, the presence of the beast was recalled to us very forcibly. We paid little attention to the ape just then, however, for we were eager to discover whether or not the governor was really in the ancestral vaults.

As we passed from behind the tapestry we put out our lamp, each of us holding a few matches in our hands to use in case of emergency.

The blackness was now intense, and as we crept stealthily in single file toward the gate the gloom seemed to press upon us and embrace us. Likewise the silence of the immense vaults, which had been hewn out of solid rock beneath the great mound, was oppressive; for while the jabbering of the King Ape and his violent shaking of his grating at times reverberated through the dome with a thousand echoes, the hush of death that otherwise pervaded the place was but rendered the more effective.

On the occasions of our former visits I had looked upon these chih as mere treasure-houses; now, moving silently through the darkness, I suddenly realized we were in a place of the dead, with many generations of warriors, princes and imperial viceroys lying in state in their heretofore inviolable tombs. Would not the spirits of these great ancestors of Kai resent our intrusion? Spirits! I gave a start at the recollection of a remark Kai Lun Pu had made on his deathbed: "If I find

that I possess a spirit I shall try to watch you, and enjoy the fun.”

I am not usually nervous, but I admit that when I recalled this significant speech I shuddered and grasped the scimitar of Kai Abon more tightly in my hand.

“What in thunder’s the matter with you, Sam?” growled Archie, who had his hand on my shoulder.

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I did not care to say; but just then Joe, who was in advance of me, touched the grating and whispered:

“Here’s the gate—stop a minute.”

He unfastened the catch and we passed into the great domed hall.

On our right came a sudden rattling of the bars, where the monster ape was still struggling to escape his prison. I reflected that he must be getting hungry by this time, and hunger would make him more ferocious than ever. But our first impulse was to peer anxiously around the great chamber to discover if any light indicated the presence of Mai Lo.

There it was! a faint glimmer coming from one of the alcoves far to the right.

“We’ve got him,” muttered Archie, triumphantly.

“Why, he’s here, all right,” I replied in a low tone, “but in order to reach the place we must creep along the wall, so as not to get lost.”

“Come ahead, then,” said Joe, and started feeling his way by keeping one hand on the tapestry hangings that separated the various alcoves.

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Suddenly there came a violent rattling of metal near at hand and Joe stopped so abruptly that I ran into him.

“Say, fellows; we can’t pass this alcove,” warned Joe. “That infernal monkey might reach out and grab us if we came too near.”

“Light the lamp,” said I, “and hold it under your coat. Mai Lo is in an alcove and he’s too busy to notice us at this distance.”

Joe obeyed. As the light of the wick illuminated our surroundings we found we had halted none too soon. The huge ape had his body pressed close to the grating, which, to our astonishment, we saw was now a mass of twisted and bent metal, so loosened and displaced by the constant wrenching of the powerful beast that only the chain and lock with which we had fastened it seemed to hold the grating in place.

“He’ll be out of there before long,” remarked Joe, half fearfully.

“Then we must dive into some alcove,” I suggested. “But I guess the bars will hold until we’ve had our talk with Mai Lo.”

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Circling around the place so as to avoid the reach of the ape’s long arms we came to the tapestries beyond his den and continued our progress, extinguishing the light as we drew nearer to the alcove from whence came the glimmer we had first observed.

We walked with stealthy tread and stood before the alcove without a sound of our approach having been noted.

The grating had been set wide open and held from swinging to by a big vase set against it. In the center of the alcove a light burned upon a low taboret, and near it squatted Mai Lo,

absorbed in selecting and arranging a mass of jewels piled up before him.

So occupied was the governor with this pleasant task that he never looked up until after we had entered and stood in a silent row before him.

Then his body gave a twitch beneath his broidered robes, but his passive face showed no expression at all. Perhaps it was incapable of expression. Even the eyes had no more animation beneath their surfaces than shoe-buttons.

“So you have escaped,” he said.

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“Oh, there was nothing to escape,” I answered with a smile.

“My guards surrounded you.”

“They tried to, but there were not enough of them. And they are fewer in number now than they were.”

He stared at us without reply; without altering his position. He even rubbed the ruby that was in his hand against the satin of his sleeve as if to polish it.

“Hasn’t all this nonsense gone far enough, Mai Lo?” I inquired. “Are you not getting tired of opposing us when you know we can defy your power and carry out our plans without your consent?”

He calmly lowered his gaze and began to polish the ruby again. From the distant alcove where Fo-Chu was confined came the ape’s horrid growls and the shaking of the bars; but the governor seemed little interested in anything but the heap of plunder before him.

“You have tried in various ways to destroy us,” I went on. “You set your eunuchs on us in the pavilion; you ordered your

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soldiers to cut us down in the palace; you loosed the King Ape in these vaults to tear us to pieces. But what is the result? We are here still, and free, and masters of the situation.”

Mai Lo slipped the ruby in his pocket and took another from the heap before him.

“How can you enter the Ancestral Chih?” he asked. “My soldiers guard every avenue of approach.”

“There are some things it is not necessary for you to know,” I retorted; “and that is one of them. But we did not come here to quarrel, but to make peace with you.”

This seemed to interest him, for he transferred his beady gaze from the gems to my face.

“This constant opposition is annoying,” I continued, “and while Prince Kai Lun Pu gave to us the riches contained in these vaults, and showed us how to secure them, we find there is more than we need, or can carry back with us.”

“Prince Kai had no right to give you the wealth of his ancestors,” said Mai Lo.

“Perhaps not. Neither have you any right to rob the Ancestral Halls. Instead, you ought to seal them up, and commit suicide. But you won’t do that. You want to escape with enough treasure to make you rich for the rest of your life.”

He regarded me intently, but made no reply. So I went on:

“We do not care whether you escape or kill yourself, except that by working together, instead of in opposition, we may all succeed in getting away with the treasure. There’s more than enough for us all.”

Still he made no reply. From the dome came a sudden crash of metal and the wild yelp of the giant ape. But we all stood motionless, wrapped in the importance of the governor's decision.

“Well, what is it to be—war or peace?” I asked, impatiently.

“War,” he said, quietly. “You are miserable foreign pigs, and I will kill you. Not one gem of this treasure shall you carry away. Your knowledge of these chih has sealed your doom.”

I felt like striking the rascal with the naked scimitar I held—the scimitar for which the seven kings fought whose life-blood was contained in the seven rubies. But I resisted the temptation, while Archie exclaimed: “Don't be a fool, Mai Lo!”

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“Your obstinacy may ruin us all,” Joe added.

“We don't intend to be killed,” I observed, bitterly; “and you ought to know that by this time. We——”

I stopped short with a thrill of horror, for a sudden pattering of feet reached my ears. The governor sprang up just as we three with one accord shrank back against the wall, and the next instant the King Ape bounded into the alcove, his eyes like balls of fire, his grinning teeth bared viciously.

Mai Lo alone confronted the beast, who faced his victim chattering with an almost human expression of cruel joy. I saw the mandarin feel in his breast and draw out a glittering poniard, while his eyes fastened themselves upon those of the ape. An instant more and the brute sprang forward and caught Mai Lo in his embrace.

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Once, twice, I saw the keen blade bury itself in the hairy breast of Fo-Chu. Then the monster, with a shriek of mingled rage and agony, thrust the man from him and bounded back against me, the sudden movement sending me reeling against the wall. As I fell I extended my arm in which I still clasped the ruby scimitar, and in a flash the ape had snatched the weapon from my hand and with renewed screams swung it in a gleaming circle around his head.

But his attention was distracted from us, who stood motionless with fear, toward the form of the governor, who was rising from the place where he had fallen. And Fo-Chu remembered that the great pain in his breast had been caused by the weapon of Mai Lo. So with a wild cry he leaped forward and swung the scimitar with tremendous power. It caught Mai Lo just above the shoulders, and the rarely tempered blade sheared through bone and muscle. The head toppled with a dreadful thud to the pavement, while for an instant the body stood erect and swaying. Then it fell in a heap, and with a screech that chilled my very blood with horror, the monster threw himself upon the body and rent it limb from limb with a fury that was absolutely devilish. The cracking bones and tearing flesh sickened me so that for the first time in my life I fainted, losing all sense of danger and surroundings as I sank limply to the floor.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SEVERED HEAD.

“It’s all right, Sam,” said Archie, vigorously shaking me. “Sit up, old man.”

I obeyed, opening my eyes to gaze fearfully around me. The lamp on the taboret still burned steadily and crouching motionless upon the mangled remains of Mai Lo was the form of the giant ape. Joe and Archie supported me to my feet, peering into my face anxiously.

“Is—is he dead?” I asked in a faint voice.

“Dead as nails!” declared Archie, with a laugh. “Old Fo-Chu has saved us a lot of trouble, while the governor kindly saved us from the beast by giving Fo-Chu his quietus. It couldn’t have been better if we had planned it; but my! wasn’t it a jolly fight?”

“It was awful, boys!” I exclaimed.

Joe nodded.

“The horror of it nearly got me, too,” he admitted. “But, as Archie says, it was a fortunate thing for us, take it all in all.”

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Feeling somewhat restored in strength I stooped down and picked up the scimitar, which lay where the ape had dropped it. The blade was reeking with warm blood, and I hastily wiped it clean with the rich tapestry that hung upon the wall of the room.

“The seven kings must have fought for the scimitar that time,” I observed. “It was a fearful blow.”

Together we rolled the great body of the dead ape over, with the idea of getting together the remains of Mai Lo. But the nauseating heap of flesh, mingled with shreds of the brodered robes that had enveloped it, was so repulsive that we decided not to touch it.

“Leave him with the ancestors of Kai,” advised Joe. “We’ll be away from here before long.”

“I’ll never enter this place again!” I declared, with a shudder, for my nerves were still on edge.

“Nor I,” said Joe, hastily.

“Then let’s get all we want now,” suggested Archie.

We did. Without fear of further interruption we explored such alcoves as we had not previously visited and appropriated the best of the treasure they contained. We were all fairly well loaded when at last we returned to the scene of the recent tragedy, where we added the heap of jewels that Mai Lo had been examining. There was no time to assort them, so we took them all.

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Archie seized the scimitar and hacked away a section of the tapestry, and while I wondered what he was going to do he picked up the severed head of Mai Lo by its queue and dropped it into the cloth, gathering up the corners to form a bag.

“What is that for?” I asked, wonderingly.

“Why, it’s proof that the governor is extinct,” he said, with a grin. “No one is allowed to enter this place, so we must

establish the demise of our dearly detested enemy in the upper world. Are you fellows ready?"

"Come on," I said, picking up my burdens.

We returned to the alcove of the first Kai and for the last time crept behind the tapestry and emerged into the tunnel through the steel door.

Silently we plodded along the incline, for the dreadful sight we had witnessed and the repulsive burden Archie carried in his left hand depressed us in spite of our attempt to appear cheerful.

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As we reached the flight of steps leading to the palace, Joe, who bore the lamp, turned to me and said:

"Going to take that thing home with you, Sam?"

Then I remembered I was carrying the ruby scimitar. As I looked upon it a horror of the weapon suddenly took possession of me. I set down my bundles, snapped the blade across my knee, close to the handle, and cast the ancient bit of steel upon the ground. The golden hilt, set with the seven rubies of the kings, I slipped into my pocket. It is the one prize of those I secured in Kai-Nong that I have never parted with.

By the time we reached our rooms we found that twilight had fallen. Bry met us at the door with the information that no one had disturbed him during our absence. We placed our burdens in a corner and covered them with a cloth, afterward retiring to our rooms to wash the grime from our hands and faces.

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Tun came in shortly to ask if he should serve dinner, and told us that Wi-to was "better now" and would be "alle light" by morning.

We had little appetite for the meal, but made an attempt to eat. The exciting events of the past few days were beginning to tell upon us and there was little hope of relaxing the nervous tension until our strange adventure had been accomplished.

The death of Mai Lo had simplified matters very much. “Unless,” said Joe, “we are accused of his murder; in which case our goose is cooked.”

“That’s why I brought the head,” remarked Archie, glancing at the corner.

“That’s why you ought not to have brought it,” I objected.

“But we must have peace and the good will of the natives in order to get away safely with the treasure,” he replied, sensibly enough. “Mai Lo has committed suicide.”

“Suicide!” I exclaimed.

“Certainly, my boy. It was up to him to make away with himself, thus doing his duty and fulfilling the expectations of the people.”

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I looked at him admiringly.

“Will you please tell me, Archie,” I said, “how we can convince the people that Mai Lo cut off his own head?”

“Why, tell ’em the truth,” he returned. “Tell them Mai Lo gave the Sacred Ape a scimitar and fought a duel with him. That would be a neat way to suicide and appeal to their artistic sense. The ape got in the first swipe and—and——”

“And what?”

“And here’s the head to prove it,” he answered triumphantly.

I shook my head.

“It won’t do, old man. Such an absurd story, coming from us, his enemies, would be enough to condemn us.”

We sat thinking over the situation for a time, and then Joe exclaimed abruptly:

“I have it! We will get Wi-to to tell the story.”

“That’s better,” I said, relieved. “He ought to be sober enough to act the part tomorrow. But in the meantime what are we to do with the governor’s wife and daughter? They are in no further danger, so we needn’t keep them cooped up in that room any longer.”

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“Send for them,” suggested Joe.

So we asked Nux to summon the two maids, and soon they toddled timidly into our presence.

“Ko-Tua,” said I, solemnly, “you may go home and put on your widow’s gown.”

“What you mean, Sam?” she asked, eagerly.

“Why, your respected husband, the admirable old villain Mai Lo, has had the kindness to commit suicide.”

“Ah, oh!” cried both the girls, with one voice; and then to our amazement they plumped down upon their knees and bowed their heads to the floor and began wailing and beating their front hair with the palms of their hands.

We allowed their emotions full play for a time, but they kept up the monotonous cries and self-inflicted blows longer than we thought necessary.

“Oh, shut up, Ko-Tua!” grunted Archie, stooping down to give the pretty widow’s shoulder a vigorous shake. “Stop the racket until you’re in public. You’re not so eternally sorry, are you?”

She looked up with a smile and slowly rose, Mai Mou demurely following her example.

“I’m glad,” said Ko-Tua, frankly. “Now I no have tongue cut out. But Mai Lo my husban’, an’ he dead, an’—oh, oh! ah-oh! oh-ah!——”

“Hi! cut it out!” yelled Archie, as the widow relapsed into her wails. “If you don’t behave, I’ll—I’ll bring Mai Lo to life again!”

She stopped at once.

“You sure he dead?” inquired Mai Mou.

“Absolutely sure,” I replied. “He committed suicide, and we saw him do it. But see here, young ladies; you mustn’t mention this till tomorrow, when public announcement is made. Do you understand? Go home and control your grief until you hear the news from others, and then howl as much as you please.”

They were puzzled at this order, but when we explained that our own lives depended upon their silence they willingly promised to obey.

At first we were all unable to figure out how they were to return to their homes without being seen and causing gossip; but Bry proposed that he should rap upon the door at the end of the passage and see if he could not arouse Nor Ghai.

The rapping had no effect for a time, and after a few attempts we abandoned that idea and tried to think of

something else. Meantime, as our dinner-table still stood piled with eatables, we prevailed upon Ko-Tua and Mai Mou to satisfy their hunger, which they did with ardor but exquisite daintiness, smiling at us happily as they ate.

“Really,” whispered Archie, “if I’d known Mai Lo’s death could cause so much pleasure I’d have asked him to commit suicide long ago.”

Presently, without warning, Nor Ghai glided into the room and took in the scene with one comprehensive glance.

“I heard the knock, but could not come then, as I was not alone,” she explained. “Is there something you wish me to do?”

“You might take these girls into your harem and keep them there,” I replied.

“But Mai Lo’s eunuchs will find them!” she exclaimed.

“Never mind; there is nothing to fear. Mai Lo is dead.”

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“Dead!” she repeated, clasping her little hands.

“He has committed suicide,” I answered.

“Never! Mai Lo never suicide,” she declared, positively. “If Mai Lo dead, somebody kill him.”

“Somebody did,” I replied, smiling at her shrewd knowledge of the governor’s character. “It was the Sacred Ape, Fo-Chu.”

“But Fo-Chu is escaped and lost. I heard it today.”

“Well, Mai Lo found him, and thought it was a good time to shuffle off his mortal coil. You remember that in Shakespeare?”

She nodded.

“So Mai Lo shuffled.”

“Isn’t it nice, Nor Ghai?” asked the widow, delightedly. Then with a sudden thought: “Ah—oo! ah-oo! ah——”

“Cut it out, Ko-Tua,” warned Archie.

“Her tongue!” gasped Nor Ghai.

“No, that’s quite safe; but she isn’t supposed to use it for wailing except in public. Take her to your rooms, little one, and don’t fear for her or Mai Mou any longer. Your troubles are nearly over, I’m sure.”

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So Nor Ghai smiled also, and led her two friends away. The last we ever saw of them were their pretty forms toddling up the passage with their pretty faces turned over their shoulders to smile upon us. Then the tapestry hid them and they were gone.

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CHAPTER XXX.

THE POOL OF THE DEVIL-FISH.

That evening, being unable to sleep, we sat up late, packing our booty into the chests furnished by the eunuch. They were light and strong and so closely did the gems pack that we were able to get our ivories and some other valuable ornaments into an extra case. Before we went to bed all the boxes were tightly nailed, wound with cords, and the cords sealed with wax. As the seals bore the impression of Prince Kai's signet ring I felt sure they would be respected.

Next morning we sent for Wi-to, and when he appeared, looking still a bit "groggy," as Archie expressed it, we told him the story we had invented to suit our necessity.

"Mai Lo is dead," I began.

The Chief Eunuch started.

"You have killed him?" he asked.

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"No; he committed suicide."

"Impossible!"

"So I would have said had I not seen it," I answered, gravely. "And perhaps, after all, the governor did not intend to fulfil his duty so hastily. Sit down, Wi-to, and listen to the story."

He sat down, but looked incredulous and uneasy.

“While you were ill yesterday,” I began, “we went out to take a walk.”

“With the governor’s soldiers guarding every door?” he asked.

“Why, you yourself have said there were secret passages that the governor did not know of. You must not forget, sir, that we are the trusted friends and emissaries of Prince Kai Lun Pu.”

This may or may not have satisfied him. Anyhow, he said nothing but looked at me inquiringly.

“We wandered through the grounds, trying not to meet anyone,” I continued, “until we came to the great pool by the rocks which your people say is inhabited by the devil-fish.”

“It is true,” said Wi-to. “I, myself, have seen the monster.”

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I was much relieved to hear this, for it made my invention seem more plausible.

“While we stood looking into the pool,” said I, “the governor suddenly stepped from the grove of trees nearby and advanced toward us. He held a naked scimitar in his hand, such as his soldiers use, and he seemed very angry. He reproached us for making the acquaintance of his wife and daughter and for opposing his soldiers, and declared we should not escape him again.”

This struck the eunuch as quite reasonable. He began to look interested.

“We were angry, and argued with him,” I went on, “and while we were quarreling Mai Lo suddenly gave a loud cry. We looked around and saw the great ape called Fo-Chu, the King, leaping toward us from the grove.”

I paused and Wi-to said:

“He escaped from the pagoda several days ago, and could not be found.”

“We were all frightened,” said I, “for the beast seemed fierce and excited. The governor alone was armed, and as Fo-Chu bounded forward Mai Lo thrust out the scimitar, and ran it through the ape’s body. But Fo-Chu drew the blade from his own breast, swung it in the air, and with one blow severed the governor’s head from his shoulders. Then the ape seized the body and leaped into the pool with it, and both sank quickly beneath the black waters. I am quite sure the beast was dying at the time, and perhaps the devil-fish grabbed them, for neither one came to the surface again.”

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As I finished the yarn the Chief Eunuch coughed and looked puzzled.

“But although the bodies were gone,” I added, “the head of Mai Lo remained upon the ground where it had fallen.”

“Here it is,” announced Archie, “we used to call him old Death’s-Head, and may be it is appropriate,” and holding the horrible thing in his hand, he advanced and laid it at the eunuch’s feet.

Wi-to grew pale and stared into the placid face of his enemy. Mai Lo stared back at him, and I could not see that the beady eyes or parchment face had changed at all in death.

“Ugh!” said the eunuch, turning away. “It is certain the man is dead. But who will believe your story?”

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“You will, to begin with,” said I, confidently, “and you will make others believe it.”

“How?”

I brought some rice-paper, brush and ink from the cabinet, where there was a store of such material, and laid them on the table.

“Write the words I shall give you, in Chinese, as Mai Lo would have written them,” I said.

The eunuch smiled as if suddenly enlightened, and accepted the task cheerfully.

“Wishing to die, as it is my duty to do,” I dictated, “I have loosed the Sacred Ape and trusted myself to his avenging hand. If I am dead after we have met, all the world will know that Mai Lo, Governor of Kwang-Kai-Nong and the trusted servant of Prince Kai Lun Pu, who lies with his ancestors, has done his full duty.”

Wi-to nodded like an automaton and wrote with much skill upon the paper, beginning at one of the bottom corners of the sheet and working up.

The Chinese characters were neat and uniform, and when the document was finished Wi-to laid down the brush with a sigh of content.

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“I have not used your words,” said he, “but I have used the idea. And the signature,” he added, with a sly leer, “is the signature of Mai Lo himself. I will now go and exhibit the head and the paper, and salute Mai-Tchin as the new governor.”

So eager was he that he caught up the head by its queue and dragged the grinning trophy away with him without having it wrapped into a neat parcel, as I had intended should be done.

Wi-to might not believe our story, but he was assuredly glad to be rid of his long-standing foe, and we had given the wily eunuch the clew that would enable him to deceive

anyone who might be interested in knowing how the governor met his death.

I have beside me, as I write, a clipping from the Hong-Kong Gazette announcing the death of the Governor of the Province of Kwang-Kai-Nong. It states that he committed suicide according to Shinto requirements, owing to the premature death of his master, Prince Kai Lun Pu, late Viceroy of the Imperial Chinese Empire.

Within an hour we left our rooms and ventured to walk out into the palace and wander in the grounds again. The soldiers had all been withdrawn and the palace eunuchs made humble obeisance to us as we passed.

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There was no excitement apparent around the palace. The artisans were busy with their tasks and the gardeners pruned and weeded as deliberately as ever. But when we descended the mound we heard a loud chorus of moans proceeding from the governor's house, and knew that his death was now publicly recognized.

The place was getting decidedly distasteful to us, and that evening we told Wi-to that we had performed all the requests of Prince Kai and wanted to return to Shanghai at once. He replied that he was sorry to have us go, but appreciated the fact that the unpleasant incidents of our visit must outweigh with us the pleasure we had had.

Next morning we were waited upon by the new governor, who received us in the state apartment of the palace. We found him a weak, undecided young man, who seemed frightfully nervous at his sudden accession to power and eager to get rid of us. We explained to him the terms of our contract with his father, Mai Lo, and while we did not mention the ten thousand taels, we insisted upon a proper escort to Ichang and payment of all the expenses of the trip back to Shanghai. He

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agreed to every demand with alacrity, and I could see he was in positive terror of the “foreign devils.”

Within forty-eight hours the arrangements were all completed and the train of elephants, horses and attendants gathered in the open space before the palace. The eunuchs carried down our heavy cases and loaded them upon the elephants, and while the bearers must have thought them tremendously heavy they dared not complain, and the Chief Eunuch’s suspicions were in no way aroused.

Wi-to seemed really grieved to lose his guests, and we thanked him cordially for his hospitality and parted from him, both he and we expressing the utmost good will.

Our escort was led by a very polite fellow, who spoke amusing pigeon-English and had evidently been instructed by Mai Tchin to show us especial deference and obey our slightest command.

323

The result was that we met with little annoyance from the natives along the route, and reached Ichang with our entire treasure intact, after a very agreeable journey.

There we left our elephants and horses and boarded the steamer for Shanghai, taking with us merely an escort of a dozen soldiers. These richly dressed warriors commanded sufficient respect to insure our safety on the trip.

At Shanghai Uncle Naboth was waiting for us, and the dear old fellow was overjoyed at our safe return.

“Got any treasure?” he asked.

We pointed to the sealed packing-cases which the porters were laboriously unloading.

“There’s enough there, Uncle,” I whispered, “to make us all rich as Rockefeller—if we can get it safe aboard the *Seagull*.”

“Why, we’ll hire a special steamer to transport it to Woosung,” he declared; and knowing Mr. Perkins as we did we were all relieved when the treasure had been turned over to his care.

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We met Dr. Gaylord in Shanghai, and he was still “out of a job.” He seemed amazed that we had returned safely from our adventure and asked us a thousand questions which we answered discreetly, without telling him too much. But he was a good-hearted old fellow, and had been of much service to us before his courage had failed him and led him to desert our cause. Remembering this, I placed a small packet in his hands when we parted at the wharf and asked him not to open it until after we had gone.

I hope it helped the good doctor to buy that farm in England which he so much desired; for although the packet merely contained what Archie described as “some of the loose plunder that was in our pockets,” it ought to have been sufficient to set the doctor up for life.

Fortunately there are no customs officials at the port of Woosung, and our chartered steamer puffed directly to the side of the *Seagull* and loaded us and our treasure on our own craft.

We received a joyful welcome from my father and the officers and crew, you may be sure, and before we had told all of our story we were well out at sea and were homeward bound.

325

I have often wondered if our visits to the Ancestral Halls of the House of Kai have ever been discovered, or the treasure we abstracted at the instance of the Prince ever missed.

But from the far-away Province of Kwang-Kai-Nong to the deck of the wandering *Seagull* is a far cry, and it is unlikely we shall ever know what happened in Kai-Nong after our departure.

Since that time we "Boy Fortune Hunters" have been through many other experiences, not all rewarded with equal profit, but, I can assure you, quite as thrilling; and some of these I purpose to relate at another time. Some of our earlier adventures, such as those with which we entertained the dying Prince Kai, may be read in "The Boy Fortune Hunters in Alaska," "The Boy Fortune Hunters in Panama," and "The Boy Fortune Hunters in Egypt."

THE END.

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