THE DAUGHTER OF HUANG CHOW

Sax Rohmer

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THE DAUGHTER OF HUANG CHOW

I. "DIAMOND FRED"

In the saloon bar of a public−house, situated only a few hundred yards from the official frontier of Chinatown, two men sat at a small table in a corner, engaged in earnest conversation. They afforded a sharp contrast. One was a thick−set and rather ruffianly looking fellow, not too cleanly in either person or clothing, and, amongst other evidences that at one time he had known the prize ring, possessing a badly broken nose. His companion was dressed with that spruceness which belongs to the successful East End Jew; he was cleanly shaven, of slight build, and alert in manner and address.

Having ordered and paid for two whiskies and sodas, the Jew, raising his glass, nodded to his companion and took a drink. The glitter of a magnificent diamond which he wore seemed to attract the other's attention almost hypnotically.

"Cheerio, Freddy!" said the thick−set man. "Any news?"

"Nothing much," returned the one addressed as Freddy, setting his glass upon the table and selecting a cigarette from a packet which he carried in his pocket.

"I'm not so sure," growled the other, watching him suspiciously. "You've been lying low for a long time, and it's not like you to slack off except when there's something big in sight."

"Hm!" said his companion, lighting his cigarette. "What do you mean exactly?"

Jim Poland for such was the big man's name growled and spat reflectively into a spittoon.

"I've had my eye on you, Freddy," he replied; "I've had my eye on you!"

"Oh, have you?" murmured the other. "But tell me what you mean!"

Beneath his suave manner lay a threat, and, indeed, Freddy Cohen, known to his associates as "Diamond Fred," was in many ways a formidable personality. He had brought to his chosen profession of crook a first−rate American training, together with all that mental agility and cleverness which belong to his race, and was at once an object of envy and admiration amongst the fraternity which keeps Scotland Yard busy.

Jim Poland, physically a more dangerous character, was not in the same class with him; but he was not without brains of a sort, and Cohen, although smiling agreeably, waited with some anxiety for his reply.

"I mean," growled Poland, "that you're not wasting your time with Lala Huang for nothing."

"Perhaps not," returned Cohen lightly. "She's a pretty girl; but what business is it of yours?"

"None at all. I ain't interested in 'er good looks; neither are you."

Cohen shrugged and raised his glass again.

"Come on," growled Poland, leaning across the table. "I know, and I'm in on it. D'ye hear me? I'm in on it. These are hard times, and we've got to stick together."

"Oh," said Cohen, "that's the game, is it?"

"That's the game right enough. You won't go wrong if you bring me in, even at fifty−fifty, because maybe I know things about old Huang that you don't know."

The Jew's expression changed subtly, and beneath his drooping lids he glanced aside at the speaker. Then:

"It's no promise," he said, "but what do you know?"

Poland bent farther over the table.

"Chinatown's being watched again. I heard this morning that Red Kerry was down here."

Cohen laughed.

"Red Kerry!" he echoed. "Red Kerry means nothing in my young life, Jim."

"Don't 'e?" returned Jim, snarling viciously. "The way he cleaned up that dope crowd awhile back seemed to show he was no jug, didn't it?"

The Jew made a racial gesture as if to dismiss the subject.

"All right," continued Poland. "Think that way if you like. But the patrols have been doubled. I suppose you know that? And it's a cert there are special men on duty, ever since the death of that Chink."

Cohen shifted uneasily, glancing about him in a furtive fashion.

"See what I mean?" continued the other. "Chinatown ain't healthy just now."

He finished his whisky at a draught, and, standing up, lurched heavily across to the counter. He returned with two more glasses. Then, reseating himself and bending forward again:

"There's one thing I reckon you don't know," he whispered in Cohen's ear. "I saw that Chink talking to Lala Huang only a week before the time he was hauled out of Limehouse Reach. I'm wondering, Diamond, if, with all your cleverness, you may not go the same way."

"Don't try to pull the creep stuff on me, Jim," said Cohen uneasily. "What are you driving at, anyway?"

"Well," replied Poland, sipping his whisky reflectively, "how did that Chink get into the river?"

"How the devil do I know?"

"And what killed him? It wasn't drowning, although he was all swelled up."

"See here, old pal," said Cohen. "I know 'Frisco better than you know Limehouse. Let me tell you that this little old Chinatown of yours is pie to me. You're trying to get me figuring on Chinese death traps, secret poisons, and all that junk. Boy, you're wasting your poetry. Even if you did see the Chink with Lala, and I doubt it Oh, don't get excited, I'm speaking plain there's no connection that I can see between the death of said Chink and old Huang Chow."

"Ain't there?" growled Poland huskily. He grasped the other's wrist as in a vise and bent forward so that his battered face was close to the pale countenance of the Jew. "I've been covering old Huang for months and months. Now I'm going to tell you something. Since the death of that Chink Red Kerry's been covering him, too."

"See here!" Cohen withdrew his arm from the other's grasp angrily. "You can't freeze me out of this claim with bogey stuff. You're listed, my lad, and you know it. Chief Inspector Kerry is your pet nightmare. But if he walked in here right now I could ask him to have a drink. I wouldn't but I could. You've got the wrong angle, Jim. Lala likes me fine, and although she doesn't say much, what she does say is straight. I'll ask her to−night about the Chink."

"Then you'll be a damned fool."

"What's that?"

"I say you'll be a damned fool. I'm warning you, Freddy. There are Chinks and Chinks. All the boys know old Huang Chow has got a regular gold mine buried somewhere under the floor. But all the boys don't know what I know, and it seems that you don't either."

"What is that?"

Jim Poland bent forward more urgently, again seizing Cohen's wrist, and:

"Huang Chow is a mighty big bug amongst the Chinese," he whispered, glancing cautiously about him. "He's hellish clever and rotten with money. A man like that wants handling. I'm not telling you what I know. But call it fifty−fifty and maybe you'll come out alive."

The brow of Diamond Fred displayed beads of perspiration, and with a blue silk handkerchief which he carried in his breast pocket he delicately dried his forehead.

"You're an old hand at this stuff, Jim," he muttered. "It amounts to this, I suppose; that if I don't agree you'll queer my game?"

Jim Poland's brow lowered and he clenched his fists formidably. Then:

"Listen," he said in his hoarse voice. "It ain't your claim any more than mine. You've covered it different, that's all. Yours was always the petticoat lay. Mine's slower but safer. Is anyone else in with you?"

"No."

"Then we'll double up. Now I'll tell you something. I was backing out."

"What? You were going to quit?"

"I was."

"Why?"

"Because the thing's too dead easy, and a thing like that always looks like hell to me."

Freddy Cohen finished his glass of whisky.

"Wait while I get some more drinks," he said.

In this way, then, at about the hour of ten on a stuffy autumn night, in the crowded bar of that Wapping public−house, these two made a compact; and of its outcome and of the next appearance of Cohen, the Jewish−American cracksman, within the ken of man, I shall now proceed to tell.

II. THE END OF COHEN

"I've been expecting this," said Chief Inspector Kerry. He tilted his bowler hat farther forward over his brow and contemplated the ghastly exhibit which lay upon the slab of the mortuary. Two other police officers one in uniform were present, and they treated the celebrated Chief Inspector with the deference which he had not only earned but had always demanded from his subordinates.

Earmarked for important promotion, he was an interesting figure as he stood there in the gloomy, ill−lighted place, his pose that of an athlete about to perform a long jump, or perhaps, as it might have appeared to some, that of a dancing−master about to demonstrate a new step.

His close−cropped hair was brilliantly red, and so was his short, wiry, aggressive moustache. He was ruddy of complexion, and he looked out unblinkingly upon the world with a pair of steel−blue eyes. Neat he was to spruceness, and while of no more than medium height he had the shoulders of an acrobat.

The detective who stood beside him, by name John Durham, had one trait in common with his celebrated superior. This was a quick keenness, a sort of alert vitality, which showed in his eyes, and indeed in every line of his thin, clean−shaven face. Kerry had picked him out as the most promising junior in his department.

"Give me the particulars," said the Chief Inspector. "It isn't robbery. He's wearing a diamond ring worth two hundred pounds."

His diction was rapid and terse so rapid as to create the impression that he bit off the ends of the longer words. He turned his fierce blue eyes upon the uniformed officer who stood at the end of the slab.

"They are very few, Chief Inspector," was the reply. "He was hauled out by the river police shortly after midnight, at the lower end of Limehouse Reach. He was alive then they heard his cry but he died while they were hauling him into the boat."

"Any statement?" rapped Kerry.

"He was past it, Chief Inspector. According to the report of the officer in charge, he mumbled something which sounded like: 'It has bitten me,' just before he became unconscious."

"'It has bitten me,'" murmured Kerry. "The divisional surgeon has seen him?"

"Yes, Chief Inspector. And in his opinion the man did not die from drowning, but from some form of virulent poisoning."

"Poisoning?"

"That's the idea. There will be a further examination, of course. Either a hypodermic injection or a bite."

"A bite?" said Kerry. "The bite of what?"

"That I cannot say, Chief Inspector. A venomous reptile, I suppose."

Kerry stared down critically at the swollen face of the victim, and then glanced sharply aside at Durham.

"Accounts for his appearance, I suppose," he murmured.

"Yes," said Durham quietly. "He hadn't been in the water long enough to look like that." He turned to the local officer. "Is there any theory as to the point at which he went in?"

"Well, an arrest has been made."

"By whom? of whom?" rapped Kerry.

"Two constables patrolling the Chinatown area arrested a man for suspicious loitering. He turned out to be a well−known criminal Jim Poland, with a whole list of convictions against him. They're holding him at Limehouse Station, and the theory is that he was operating with " He nodded in the direction of the body.

"Then who's the smart with the swollen face?" inquired Kerry. "He's a new one on me."

"Yes, but he's been identified by one of the K Division men. He is an American crook with a clean slate, so far as this side is concerned. Cohen is his name. And the idea seems to be that he went in at some point between where he was found by the river police and the point at which Jim Poland was arrested."

Kerry snapped his teeth together audibly, and:

"I'm open to learn," he said, "that the house of Huang Chow is within that area."

"It is."

"I thought so. He died the same way the Chinaman died awhile ago," snapped Kerry savagely.

"It looks very queer." He glanced aside at the local officer. "Cover him up," he ordered, and, turning, he walked briskly out of the mortuary, followed by Detective Durham.

Although dawn was not far off, this was the darkest hour of the night, so that even the sounds of dockland were muted and the riverside slept as deeply as the great port of London ever sleeps. Vague murmurings there were and distant clankings, with the hum of machinery which is never still.

Few of London's millions were awake at that hour, yet Scotland Yard was awake in the person of the fierce−eyed Chief Inspector and his subordinate. Perhaps those who lightly criticize the Metropolitan Force might have learned a new respect for the tireless vigilance which keeps London clean and wholesome, had they witnessed this scene on the borders of Limehouse, as Kerry, stepping into a waiting taxi−cab accompanied by Durham, proceeded to Limehouse Police Station in that still hour when the City slept.

The arrival of Kerry created something of a stir amongst the officials on duty. His reputation in these days was at least as great as that of the most garrulous Labour member.

The prisoner was in cells, but the Chief Inspector elected to interview him in the office; and accordingly, while the officer in charge sat at an extremely tidy writing−table, tapping the blotting−pad with a pencil, and Detective John Durham stood beside him, Kerry paced up and down the little room, deep in reflection, until the door opened and the prisoner was brought in.

One swift glance the Chief Inspector gave at the battle−scarred face, and recognized instantly that this was a badly frightened man. Crossing to the table he took up a typewritten slip which lay there, and:

"Your name is James Poland?" he said. "Four convictions; one, robbery with violence."

Jim Poland nodded sullenly.

"You were arrested at the corner of Pekin Street about midnight. What were you doing there?"

"Taking a walk."

"I'll say it again," rapped Kerry, fixing his fierce eyes upon the man's face. "What were you doing there?"

"I've told you."

"And I tell you you're a liar. Where did you leave the man Cohen?"

Poland blinked his small eyes, cleared his throat, and looked down at the floor uneasily. Then:

"Who's Cohen?" he grunted.

"You mean, who was Cohen?" cried Kerry.

The shot went home. The man clenched his fists and looked about the room from face to face.

"You don't tell me " he began huskily.

"I've told you," said Kerry. "He's on the slab. Spit out the truth; it'll be good for your health."

The man hesitated, then looked up, his eyes half closed and a cunning expression upon his face.

"Make out your own case," he said. "You've got nothing against me."

Kerry snapped his teeth together viciously.

"I've told you what happened to your pal," he warned. "If you're a wise man you'll come in on our side, before the same thing happens to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled Poland.

Kerry nodded to the constable at the doorway.

"Take him back," he ordered.

Jim Poland being returned to his cell, Kerry, as the door closed behind the prisoner and his guard, stared across at Durham where he stood beside the table.

"An old hand," he said. "But there's another way." He glanced at the officer in charge. "Hold him till the morning. He'll prove useful."

From his waistcoat pocket he took out a slip of chewing gum, unwrapped it, and placed the mint−flavoured wafer between his large white teeth. He bit upon it savagely, settled his hat upon his head, and, turning, walked toward the door. In the doorway he paused.

"Come with me, Durham," he said. "I am leaving the conduct of the case entirely in your hands from now onward."

Detective Durham looked surprised and not a little anxious.

"I am doing so for two reasons," continued the Chief Inspector. "These two reasons I shall now explain."

III. THE SECRET TREASURE−HOUSE

Unlike its sister colony in New York, there are no show places in Limehouse. The visitor sees nothing but mean streets and dark doorways. The superficial inquirer comes away convinced that the romance of the Asiatic district has no existence outside the imaginations of writers of fiction. Yet here lies a secret quarter, as secret and as strange, in its smaller way, as its parent in China which is called the Purple Forbidden City.

On a morning when mist lay over the Thames reaches, softening the harshness of the dock buildings and lending an air of mystery to the vessels stealing out upon the tide, a man walked briskly along Limehouse Causeway, looking about him inquiringly, as one unfamiliar with the neighbourhood. Presently he seemed to recognize a turning to the right, and he pursued this for a time, now walking more slowly.

A European woman, holding a half−caste baby in her arms, stood in an open doorway, watching him uninterestedly. Otherwise, except for one neatly dressed young Chinaman, who passed him about halfway along the street, there was nothing which could have told the visitor that he had crossed the borderline dividing West from East and was now in an Oriental town.

A very narrow alleyway between two dingy houses proved to be the spot for which he was looking; and, having

stared about him for a while, he entered this alleyway. At the farther end it was crossed T−fashion, by another alley, the only object of interest being an iron post at the crossing, and the scenery being made up entirely of hideous brick walls.

About halfway along on the left, set in one of these walls, were strong wooden gates, apparently those of a warehouse. Beside them was a door approached by two very dirty steps. There was a bell−push near the door, but upon neither of these entrances was there any plate to indicate the name of the proprietor of the establishment.

From his pocket−book the visitor extracted a card, consulted something written upon it, and then pressed the bell.

It was very quiet in this dingy little court. No sound of the busy thoroughfares penetrated here; and although the passage forming the top of the "T" practically marked the river bank, only dimly could one discern the sounds which belong to a seaport.

Presently the door was opened by a Chinese boy who wore the ordinary native working dress, and who regarded the man upon the step with oblique, tired−looking eyes.

"Mr. Huang Chow?" asked the caller.

The boy nodded.

"You wantchee him see?"

"If he is at home."

The boy glanced at the card, which the visitor still held between finger and thumb, and extended his hand silently. The card was surrendered. It was that of an antique dealer of Dover Street, Piccadilly, and written upon the back was the following: "Mr. Hampden would like to do business with you." The signature of the dealer followed.

The boy turned and passed along a dim and perfectly unfurnished passage which the opening of the door had revealed, while Mr. Hampden stood upon the step and lighted a cigarette.

In less than a minute the boy returned and beckoned to him to come in. As he did so, and the door was closed, he almost stumbled, so dark was the passage.

Presently, guided by the boy, he found himself in a very business−like little office, where a girl sat at an American desk, looking up at him inquiringly.

She was of a dark and arresting type. Without being pretty in the European sense, there was something appealing in her fine, dark eyes, and she possessed the inviting smile which is the heritage of Eastern women. Her dress was not unlike that of any other business girl, except that the neck of her blouse was cut very low, a fashion affected by many Eurasians, and she wore a gaily coloured sash, and large and very costly pearl ear−rings. As Mr. Hampden paused in the doorway:

"Good morning," said the girl, glancing down at the card which lay upon the desk before her. "You come from Mr. Isaacs, eh?"

She looked at him with a caressing glance from beneath half− lowered lashes, but missed no detail of his appearance. She did not quite like his moustache, and thought that he would have looked better cleanshaven. Nevertheless, he was a well−set−up fellow, and her manner evidenced approval.

"Yes," he replied, smiling genially. "I have a small commission to execute, and I am told that you can help me."

The girl paused for a moment, and then:

"Yes, very likely," she said, speaking good English but with an odd intonation. "It is not jade? We have very little jade."

"No, no. I wanted an enamelled casket."

"What kind?"

"Cloisonne."

"Cloisonne? Yes, we have several."

She pressed a bell, and, glancing up at the boy who had stood throughout the interview at the visitor's elbow, addressed him rapidly in Chinese. He nodded his head and led the way through a second doorway. Closing this, he opened a third and ushered Mr. Hampden into a room which nearly caused the latter to gasp with astonishment.

One who had blundered from Whitechapel into the Khan Khalil, who had been transported upon a magic carpet from a tube station to the Taj Mahal, of dropped suddenly upon Lebanon hills to find himself looking down upon the pearly domes and jewelled gardens of Damascus, could not well have been more surprised. This great treasure−house of old Huang Chow was one of Chinatown's secrets a secret shared only by those whose commercial interests were identical with the interests of Huang Chow.

The place was artificially lighted by lamps which themselves were beautiful objects of art, and which swung from the massive beams of the ceiling. The floor of the warehouse, which was partly of stone, was covered with thick matting, and spread upon it were rugs and carpets of Karadagh, Kermanshah, Sultan−abad, and Khorassan, with lesser−known loomings of almost equal beauty. Skins of rare beasts overlay the divans. Furniture of ivory, of ebony and lemonwood, preciously inlaid, gave to the place an air of cunning confusion. There were tall cabinets, there were caskets and chests of exquisite lacquer and enamel, loot of an emperor's palace; robes heavy with gold; slippers studded with jewels; strange carven ivories; glittering weapons; pots, jars, and bowls, as delicate and as fragile as the petals of a lily.

Last, but not least, sitting cross−legged upon a low couch, was old Huang Chow, smoking a great curved pipe, and peering half blindly across the place through large horn−rimmed spectacles. This couch was set immediately beside a wide ascending staircase, richly carpeted, and on the other side of the staircase, in a corresponding recess, upon a gilded trestle carved to represent the four claws of a dragon, rested perhaps the strangest exhibit of that strange collection a Chinese coffin of exquisite workmanship.

The boy retired, and Mr. Hampden found himself alone with Huang Chow. No word had been exchanged between master and servant, but:

"Good morning, Mr. Hampden," said the Chinaman in a high, thin voice. "Please be seated. It is from Mr. Isaacs you come?"

IV. PERSONAL REPORT OF DETECTIVE JOHN DURHAM TO CHIEF INSPECTOR KERRY, OFFICER IN CHARGE OF LIMEHOUSE INQUIRY

Dear Chief Inspector, Following your instructions I returned and interviewed the prisoner Poland in his cell. I took the line which you had suggested, pointing out to him that he had nothing to gain and everything to lose by keeping silent.

"Answer my questions," I said, "and you can walk straight out. Otherwise, you'll be up before the magistrate, and on your record alone it will mean a holiday which you probably don't want."

He was very truculent, but I got him in a good humour at last, and he admitted that he had been cooperating with the dead man, Cohen, in an attempt to burgle the house of Huang Chow. His reluctance to go into details seemed to be due rather to fear of Huang Chow than to fear of the law, and I presently gathered that he regarded Huang as responsible for the death not only of Cohen, but also of the Chinaman who was hauled out of the river about three weeks ago, as you well remember. The post−mortem showed that he had died of some kind of poisoning, and when we saw Cohen in the mortuary, his swollen appearance struck me as being very similar to that of the Chinaman. (See my report dated 31st ultimo.)

He finally agreed to talk if I would promise that he should not be charged and that his name should never be mentioned to anyone in connection with what he might tell me. I promised him that outside the ordinary official routine I would respect his request, and he told me some very curious things, which no doubt have a bearing on the case.

For instance, he had discovered I don't know in what way that the dead Chinaman, whose name was Pi Lung, had been in negotiation with Huang Chow for some sort of job in his warehouse. Poland had seen the man talking to Huang's daughter, at the end of the alley which leads to the place. He seemed to attach extraordinary importance to this fact. At last:

"I'll tell you what it is," he said. "That Chink was a stranger to Limehouse; I can swear to it. He was a gent of his hands; I reckon they've got 'em in China as well as here. He went out for the old boy's money−box, and finished like Cohen finished."

"Make your meaning clearer," I said.

"My meaning's this: Old Huang Chow is the biggest dealer in stolen and smuggled valuables from overseas we've got in London. He's something else as well; he's a big swell in China. But here's the point. He's got business with buyers all over London, and they have to pay cash no checks. He doesn't bank it: I've proved that. He's got it in gold, or diamonds, or something, being wise to present conditions, hidden there in the house. Pi Lung was after his hoard. He didn't get it. Cohen and me was after it. Where's Cohen?"

I agreed that it looked very suspicious, and presently:

"When I went in with Cohen," continued Poland, "I knew one thing he didn't know a short cut into the warehouse. He's been playing pretty−like with Lala, old Huang's daughter, and it's my belief that he knew where the store was hidden; but he never told me. We knew there were special men on duty, and we'd arranged that I was to give a signal when the patrol had passed. Cohen all the time had planned to double on me. While I was watching down on the Causeway end he climbed up and got in through the skylight I'd shown him. When I got there he was missing, but the skylight was open. I started off after him."

Then Poland clutched me, and his fright was very real.

"I heard a shriek like nothing I ever heard in my life. I saw a light shine through the trap, and then I heard a sort of moaning. Last, I heard a bang, and the light went out. I staggered down the passage half silly, started to run, and ran straight into the arms of two coppers."

This evidence I thought was conclusive, and in accordance with your instructions I proceeded to Mr. Isaacs in Dover Street. He didn't seem too pleased at my suggestion, but when I pointed out to him that one good turn deserved another, he agreed to give me an introduction to Huang Chow.

I adopted a very simple disguise, just altering my complexion and sticking on a moustache with spirit gum, hair by hair, and trimming it down military fashion. Everything ran smoothly, and I seemed to make a fairly favourable impression upon Lala Huang, the Chinaman's daughter, who evidently interviews prospective customers before they are admitted to the warehouse.

She is a Eurasian and extremely good looking. But when I found myself in the room where old Huang keeps his treasures, I really thought I was dreaming. It's a collection that must be worth thousands. He showed me snuff−bottles, cut out of gems, and with a little opening no bigger than the hole in a pipe−stem, but with wonderful paintings done inside the bottles. He'd got a model of a pagoda made out of human teeth, and a big golden rug woven from the hair of Circassian slave girls. Excuse this, Chief Inspector; I know it is what you call the romantic stuff; but I think it would have impressed you if you had seen it.

Anyway, I bought a little enamelled box, in accordance with Mr. Isaacs's instructions, although whether I succeeded in convincing Huang Chow that I knew anything about the matter is more than doubtful. He got up from a sort of throne he sits on, and led the way up a broad staircase to a private room above.

"Of course, you have brought the cash, Mr. Hampden?" he said.

He speaks quite faultless English. He walked up three steps to a sort of raised writing−table in this upstairs room, and I counted out the money to him. When he sat at the table he faced toward the room, and I couldn't help thinking that, in his horn−rimmed spectacles, he looked like some old magistrate. He explained that he would pack the purchase for me, but that I must personally take it away. And:

"You understand," said he, "that you bought it from a gentleman who had purchased it abroad."

I said I quite understood. He bowed me out very politely, and presently I found myself back in the office with Lala Huang.

She seemed quite disposed to talk, and I chatted with her while the box was being packed for me to take away. I knew I must make good use of my time, but you have never given me a job I liked less. I mean, there is something very appealing about her, and I hated to think that I was playing a double game. However, without actually agreeing to see me again, she told me enough to enable me to meet her "accidentally," if I wanted to. Therefore, I am going to look out for her this evening, and probably take her to a picture palace, or somewhere where we can have a quiet talk. She seems to be fancy free, and for some reason I feel sorry for the girl. I don't altogether like the job, but I hope to justify your faith in me, Chief.

I will prepare my official report this evening when I return.

Yours obediently, JOHN DURHAM.

V. LALA HUANG

"No," said Lala Huang, "I don't like London not this part of London."

"Where would you rather be?" asked Durham. "In China?"

Dusk had dropped its merciful curtain over Limehouse, and as the two paced slowly along West India Dock Road it seemed to the detective that a sort of glamour had crept into the scene.

He was a clever man within his limitations, and cultured up to a point; but he was not philosopher enough to know that he viewed the purlieus of Limehouse through a haze of Oriental mystery conjured up by the conversation of his companion. Temple bells there were in the clangour of the road cars. The smoke−stacks had a semblance of pagodas. Burma she had conjured up before him, and China, and the soft islands where she had first seen the light. For as well as a streak of European, there was Kanaka blood in Lala, which lent her an appeal quite new to Durham, insidious and therefore dangerous.

"Not China," she replied. "Somehow I don't think I shall ever see China again. But my father is rich, and it is dreadful to think that we live here when there are so many more beautiful places to live in."

"Then why does he stay?" asked Durham with curiosity.

"For money, always for money," answered Lala, shrugging her shoulders. "Yet if it is not to bring happiness, what good is it?"

"What good indeed?" murmured Durham.

"There is no fun for me," said the girl pathetically. "Sometimes someone nice comes to do business, but mostly they are Jews, Jews, always Jews, and " Again she shrugged eloquently.

Durham perceived the very opening for which he had been seeking..

"You evidently don't like Jews," he said endeavouring to speak lightly.

"No," murmured the girl, "I don't think I do. Some are nice, though. I think it is the same with every kind of people there are good and bad."

"Were you ever in America?" asked Durham.

"No."

"I was just thinking," he explained, "that I have known several American Jews who were quite good fellows."

"Yes?" said Lala, looking up at him naively, "I met one not long ago. He was not nice at all."

"Oh!" exclaimed Durham, startled by this admission, which he had not anticipated. "One of your father's customers?"

"Yes, a man named Cohen."

"Cohen?"

"A funny little chap," continued the girl. "He tried to make love to me." She lowered her lashes roguishly. "I knew all along he was pretending. He was a thief, I think. I was afraid of him."

Durham did some rapid thinking, then:

"Did you say his name was Cohen?" he asked.

"That was the name he gave."

"A man named Cohen, an American, was found dead in the river quite recently."

Lala stopped dead and clutched his arm.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"There was a paragraph in this morning's paper."

She hesitated, then:

"Did it describe him?" she asked.

"No," replied Durham, "I don't think it did in detail. At least, the only part of the description which I remember is that he wore a large and valuable diamond on his left hand."

"Oh!" whispered Lala.

She released her grip of Durham's arm and went on.

"What?" he asked. "Did you think it was someone you knew?"

"I did know him," she replied simply. "The man who was found drowned. It is the same. I am sure now, because of the diamond ring. What paper did you read it in? I want to read it myself."

"I'm afraid I can't remember. It was probably the Daily Mail."

"Had he been drowned?"

"I presume so yes," replied Durham guardedly.

Lala Huang was silent for some time while they paced on through the dusk. Then:

"How strange!" she said in a low voice.

"I am sorry I mentioned it," declared Durham. "But how was I to know it was your friend?"

"He was no friend of mine," returned the girl sharply. "I hated him. But it is strange nevertheless. I am sure he intended to rob my father."

"And is that why you think it strange?"

"Yes," she said, but her voice was almost inaudible.

They were come now to the narrow street communicating with the courtway in which the great treasure−house of Huang Chow was situated, and; Lala stopped at the corner.

"It was nice of you to walk along with me," she said. "Do you live in Limehouse?"

"No," replied Durham, "I don't. As a matter of fact, I came down here to−night in the hope of seeing you again."

"Did you?"

The girl glanced up at him doubtfully, and his distaste for the task set him by his superior increased with the passing of every moment. He was a man of some imagination, a great reader, and ambitious professionally. He appreciated the fact that Chief Inspector Kerry looked for great things from him, but for this type of work he had little inclination.

There was too much chivalry in his make−up to enable him to play upon a woman's sentiments, even in the interests of justice. By whatever means the man Cohen had met his death, and whether or no the Chinaman Pi Lung had died by the same hand, Lala Huang was innocent of any complicity in these matters, he was perfectly well assured.

Doubts were to come later when he was away from her, when he had had leisure to consider that she might regard him in the light of a third potential rifler of her father's treasure−house. But at the moment, looking down into her dark eyes, he reproached himself and wondered where his true duty lay.

"It is so gray and dull and sordid here," said the girl, looking down the darkened street. "There is no one much to talk to."

"But you have your business interests to keep you employed during the day, after all."

"I hate it all. I hate it all."

"But you seem to have perfect freedom?"

"Yes. My mother, you see, was not Chinese."

"But you wish to leave Limehouse?"

"I do. I do. Just now it is not so bad, but in the winter how I tire of the gray skies, the endless drizzling rain. Oh!" She shrank back into the shadow of a doorway, clutching at Durham's arm. "Don't let Ah Fu see me."

"Ah Fu? Who is Ah Fu?" asked Durham, also drawing back as a furtive figure went slinking down the opposite side of the street.

"My father's servant. He let you in this morning."

"And why must he not see you?"

"I don't trust him. I think he tells my father things."

"What is it that he carries in his hand?"

"A birdcage, I expect."

"A birdcage?"

"Yes!"

He caught the gleam of her eyes as she looked up at him out of the shadow.

"Is he, then, a bird−fancier?"

"No, no, I can't explain because I don't understand myself. But Ah Fu goes to a place in Shadwell regularly and buys young birds, always very young ones and very little ones."

"For what or for whom?"

"I don't know."

"Have you an aviary in your house?"

"No."

"Do you mean that they disappear, these purchases of Ah Fu's?"

"I often see him carrying a cage of young birds, but we have no birds in the house."

"How perfectly extraordinary!" muttered Durham.

"I distrust Ah Fu," whispered the girl. "I am glad he did not see me with you."

"Young birds," murmured Durham absently. "What kind of young birds? Any particular breed?"

"No; canaries, linnets all sorts. Isn't it funny?" The girl laughed in a childish way. "And now I think Ah Fu will have gone in, so I must say good night."

But when presently Detective Durham found himself walking back along West India Dock Road, his mind's eye was set upon the slinking figure of a Chinaman carrying a birdcage.

VI. A HINT OF INCENSE

One Chinaman more or less does not make any very great difference to the authorities responsible for maintaining law and order in Limehouse. Asiatic settlers are at liberty to follow their national propensities, and to knife one another within reason. This is wisdom. Such recreations are allowed, if not encouraged, by all wise rulers of Eastern peoples.

"Found drowned," too, is a verdict which has covered many a dark mystery of old Thames, but "Found in the river, death having been due to the action of some poison unknown," is a finding which even in the case of a Chinaman is calculated to stimulate the jaded official mind.

New Scotland Yard had given Durham a roving commission, and had been justified in the fact that the second victim, and this time not a Chinaman, had been found under almost identical conditions. The link with the establishment of Huang Chow was incomplete, and Durham fully recognized that it was up to him to make it sound and incontestable.

Jim Poland was not the only man in the East End who knew that the dead Chinaman had been in negotiation with Huang Chow. Kerry knew it, and had passed the information on to Durham.

Some mystery surrounded the life of the old dealer, who was said to be a mandarin of high rank, but his exact association with the deaths first of the Chinaman Pi Lung, and second of Cohen, remained to be proved. Certain

critics have declared the Metropolitan detective service to be obsolete and inefficient. Kerry, as a potential superintendent, resented these criticisms, and in his protege Durham, perceived a member of the new generation who was likely in time to produce results calculated to remove this stigma.

Durham recognized that a greater responsibility rested upon his shoulders than the actual importance of the case might have indicated; and now, proceeding warily along the deserted streets, he found his brain to be extraordinarily active and his imagination very much alive.

There is a night life in Limehouse, as he had learned, but it is a mole life, a subterranean life, of which no sign appears above ground after a certain hour. Nevertheless, as he entered the area which harbours those strange, hidden resorts the rumour of which has served to create the glamour of Chinatown, he found himself to be thinking of the great influence said to be wielded by Huang Chow, and wondering if unseen spies watched his movements.

Lala was Oriental, and now, alone in the night, distrust leapt into being within him. He had been attracted by her and had pitied her. He told himself now that this was because of her dark beauty and the essentially feminine appeal which she made. She was perhaps a vampire of the most dangerous sort, one who lured men to strange deaths for some sinister object beyond reach of a Western imagination.

He found himself doubting the success of those tactics upon which, earlier in the day, he had congratulated himself. Perhaps beneath the guise of Hampden, who bought antique furniture on commission, those cunning old eyes beneath the horn−rimmed spectacles had perceived the detective hidden, or at least had marked subterfuge.

While he could not count Lala a conquest for he had not even attempted to make love to her the ease with which he had developed the acquaintance now, afforded matter for suspicion.

At the entrance to the court communicating with the establishment of Huang Chow he paused, looking cautiously about him. The men on the Limehouse beats had been warned of the investigation afoot tonight, and there was a plain−clothes man on point duty at no great distance away, although carefully hidden, so that Durham had quite failed to detect his presence.

Durham wore rough clothes and rubber−soled shoes; and now, as he entered the court, he was thinking of the official report of the police sergeant who, not so many hours before, had paid a visit to the house of Huang Chow in order to question him respecting his knowledge of the dead man Cohen, and to learn when last he had seen him.

Old Huang, who had received his caller in the large room upstairs, the room which boasted the presence of the writing− dais, had exhibited no trace of confusion, assuring the sergeant that he had not seen the man Cohen for several days. Cohen had come to him with an American introduction, which he, Huang, believed to be forged, and had wanted him to undertake a shady agency, respecting the details of which he remained peculiarly reticent. In short, nothing had been gained by this official interrogation, and Huang blandly denied any knowledge of an attempted burglary of his establishment.

"What have I to lose?" he had asked the inquirer. "A lot of old lumber which I have accumulated during many years, and a reputation for being wealthy, due to my lonely habits and to the ignorance of those who live around me."

Durham, mentally reviewing the words of the report, reconstructed the scene in his mind; and now, having come to the end of the lane where the iron post rested, he stood staring up at a place in the ancient wall where several bricks had decayed, and where it was possible, according to the statement of the man Poland, to climb up on to a piece of sloping roof, and thence gain the skylight through which Cohen had obtained admittance on the night of his death.

He made sure that his automatic pistol was in his pocket, questioned the dull sounds of the riverside for a moment, looking about him anxiously, and then, using the leaning post as a stepping−stone, he succeeded in wedging his foot into a crevice in the wall. By the exercise of some agility he scrambled up to the top, and presently found himself lying upon a sloping roof.

The skylight remained well out of reach, but his rubber−soled shoes enabled him to creep up the slates until he could grasp the framework with his hands. Presently he found himself perched upon the trap which, if his information could be relied upon, possessed no fastener, or one so faulty that the trap could be raised by means of a brad−awl. He carried one in his pocket, and, screwing it into the framework, he lifted it cautiously, making very little noise.

The trap opened, and up to his nostrils there stole a queer, indefinable odour, partly that which belongs to old Oriental furniture and stuffs, but having mingled with it a hint of incense and of something else not so easily named. He recognized the smell of that strange store−room, which, as Mr. Hampden, he had recently visited.

For one moment he thought he could detect the distant note of a bell. But, listening, he heard nothing, and was reassured.

He rested the trap back against the frame, and shone the ray of an electric torch down into the darkness beneath him. The light fell upon the top of a low carven table, dragon−legged and gilded. Upon it rested the model pagoda constructed of human teeth, and there was something in this discovery which made Durham feel inclined to shudder. However, the impulse was only a passing one.

He measured the distance with his eye. The little table stood beside a deep divan, and he saw that with care it would be possible to drop upon this divan without making much noise. He calculated its exact position before replacing the torch in his pocket, and then, resting back against one side of the frame, he clutched the other with his hands. He wriggled gradually down until further purchase became impossible. He then let himself drop, and swung for a moment by his hands before releasing his hold.

He fell, as he had calculated, upon the divan. It creaked ominously. Catching his foot in the cushions, he stumbled and lay forward for a moment upon his face, listening intently.

The room was very hot but nothing stirred.

VII. THE SCUFFLING SOUND

Detective Durham, as he lay there inhaling the peculiar perfume of the place, recognized that he had put himself outside the pale of official protection, and was become technically a burglar.

He wondered if Chief Inspector Kerry would have approved; but he had outlined this plan of investigation for himself, and knew well that, if it were crowned by success, the end would be regarded as having justified the means. On the other hand, in the event of detention he must personally bear the consequences of such irregular behaviour. He knew well, however, that his celebrated superior had achieved promotion by methods at least as irregular; and he knew that if he could but obtain evidence to account for the death of the man Cohen, and of the Chinaman Pi Lung, who had preceded him by the same mysterious path, the way of his obtaining it would not be too closely questioned.

He was an ambitious man, and consequently one who took big chances. Nothing disturbed the silence; he sat upon the divan and again pressed the button of his torch, shining it all about the low−beamed apartment and peering curiously into the weird shadows of the place. He calculated he was now in the position which Cohen had

occupied during the last moments of his life, and a sense of the uncanny touched him coldly.

As he thought of the unnatural screams spoken of by Poland, some strange instinct prompted him to curl up his feet upon the divan again, as though a secret menace crawled upon the floor amid its many rugs and carpets.

He must now endeavour to reconstruct the plan upon which the American cracksman had operated. Poland had a persistent belief that Cohen had known where the fabled hoard of Huang Chow was concealed.

Durham began a deliberate inspection of the place. He thought it unlikely that a wily old Chinaman, assuming that he possessed hidden wealth, would keep it in so accessible a spot as this. It was far more probable that he had a fireproof safe in the room upstairs, perhaps built into the wall. Yet, according to Poland's account, it was in this room and not in any other that death came to Diamond Fred.

The wall−hangings first engaged Durham's attention. He moved them aside systematically, one after another, seeking for any hiding−place, but failing to find one. The door communicating with the outer office he found to be locked, but he did not believe for a moment that the office would be worthy of inspection.

There were cases containing jewelled weapons and cups and goblets inlaid with precious stones, but none of these seemed to have been tampered with, and all were locked, as was the big cabinet filled with snuff bottles.

Many of the larger pieces about the place contained drawers and cupboards, and these he systematically opened one after another, without making any discovery of note. Some of the cupboards contained broken pieces of crockery, and more or less damaged curios of one kind and another, but none of them gave him the clue for which he was seeking.

He examined the couch upon which Huang Chow had been seated when first he had met him, but although he searched it scientifically he was rewarded by no discovery.

A very fusty and unpleasant smell was more noticeable at this point than elsewhere in the room, and he found himself staring speculatively up the wide, carpeted stairs. Next he turned his attention to the lacquered coffin which occupied the corresponding recess to that filled by the couch. It was an extraordinarily ornate piece of lacquer work and probably of great value.

The lid appeared to be screwed on, and Durham stood staring at the thing, half revolted and half fascinated. He failed to discover any means of opening it, however, and when he tried to move it bodily found it very heavy. He came to the conclusion that all the portable valuables were contained in locked cases or cabinets, and out of this discovery grew an idea.

The case containing the snuff bottles stood too close to the wall to enable him t test his new theory, but a square case near the office door, in which were five of six small but almost priceless pieces of porcelain, afforded the very evidence for which he was looking.

Thin electric flex descended from somewhere inside the case down one of the legs of the pedestal, and through a neatly drilled hole in the floor, evidently placed there to accommodate it.

"Burglar alarm!" he muttered.

The opening of this case, and doubtless of any of the others, would set alarm bells ringing. This was not an unimportant discovery, but it brought him very little nearer to a solution of the chief problem which engaged his mind. Assuming that Cohen had opened one of the cases and had alarmed old Huang Chow, what steps had the latter taken to deal with the intruder which had resulted in so ghastly a death? And how had he disposed of the

body?

As Durham stood there musing and looking down through the plate− glass at the delicate porcelain beneath, a faint sound intruded itself upon the stillness. It gave him another idea. Part of the floor was stone−paved, but part was wood.

Upon a portion of the latter, where no carpet rested, Durham dropped flat, pressing his ear to the floor.

A faint swishing and trickling sound was perceptible from some place beneath.

"Ah!" he murmured.

Remembering that the premises almost overhung the Thames, he divined that the cellars were flooded at high tide, or that there was some kind of drain or cutting running underneath the house.

He stood up again, listening intently for any sound within the building. He thought he had detected something, and now, as he stood there alert, he heard it again a faint scuffling, which might have been occasioned by rats or even mice, but which, in some subtle and very unpleasant way, did not suggest the movements of these familiar rodents.

Even as he perceived it, it ceased, leaving him wondering, and uncomfortably conscious of a sudden dread of his surroundings. He wondered in what part of this mysterious house Lala resided, and recognizing that his departure must leave traces, he determined to prosecute his inquiries as far as possible, since another opportunity might not arise.

He was baffled but still hopeful. Something there was in the smell of the place which threatened to unnerve him; or perhaps in its silence, which remained quite unbroken save when, by acute listening, one detected the dripping of water.

That unexplained scuffling sound, too, which he had failed to trace or identify, lingered in his memory insistently, and for some reason contained the elements of fear.

He crossed the room and began softly to mount the stair. It creaked only slightly, and the door at the top proved to be ajar. He peeped in, to find the place empty. It was a typical Chinese apartment, containing very little furniture, the raised desk being the most noticeable item, except for a small shrine which faced it on the other side of the room.

He mounted the steps to the desk and inspected a number of loose papers which lay upon it. Without exception they were written in Chinese. A sort of large, dull white blotting−pad lay upon the table, but its surface was smooth and glossy.

Over it was suspended what looked like a lampshade, but on inspection it proved to contain no lamp, but to communicate, by a sort of funnel, with the ceiling above.

At this contrivance Durham stared long and curiously, but without coming to any conclusion respecting its purpose. He might have investigated further, but he became aware of a dull and regular sound in the room behind him.

He turned in a flash, staring in the direction of two curtains draped before what he supposed to be a door.

On tiptoe he crossed and gently drew the curtains aside.

He looked into a small, cell−like room, lighted by one window, where upon a low bed Huang Chow lay sleeping peacefully!

Durham almost held his breath; then, withdrawing as quietly as he had approached, he descended the stair. At the foot his attention was again arrested by the faint scuffling sound. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun, leaving him wondering and conscious anew of a chill of apprehension.

He had already made his plans for departure, but knew that they must leave evidence, when discovered, of his visit.

A large and solid table stood near the divan, and he moved this immediately under the trap. Upon it he laid a leopard−skin to deaden any noise he might make, and then upon the leopard−skin he set a massive chair: he replaced his torch in his pocket and drew himself up on to the roof again. Reclosing the trap by means of the awl which he had screwed into it, he removed the awl and placed it in his pocket.

Then, sliding gently down the sloping roof, he dropped back into the deserted court.

VIII. A CAGE OF BIRDS

"No," said Lala, "we have never had robbers in the house." She looked up at Durham naively. "You are not a thief, are you?" she asked.

"No, I assure you I am not," he answered, and felt himself flushing to the roots of his hair.

They were seated in a teashop patronized by the workers of the district; and as Durham, his elbows resting on the marble−topped table, looked into the dark eyes of his companion, he told himself again that whatever might be the secrets of old Huang Chow, his daughter did not share them.

The Chinaman had made no report to the authorities, although the piled up furniture beneath the skylight must have afforded conclusive evidence that a burglarious entry had been made into the premises.

"I should feel very nervous," Durham declared, "with all those valuables in the house."

"I feel nervous about my father," the girl answered in a low voice. "His room opens out of the warehouse, but mine is shut away in another part of the building. And Ah Fu sleeps behind the office."

"Were you not afraid when you suspected that Cohen was a burglar? You told me yourself that you did suspect him."

"Yes, I spoke to my father about it."

"And what did he say?"

"Oh" she shrugged her shoulders "he just smiled and told me not to worry."

"And that was the last you heard about the matter?"

"Yes, until you told me he was dead."

Again he questioned the dark eyes and again was baffled. He felt tempted, and not for the first time, to throw up

the case. After all, it rested upon very slender data the mysterious death of a Chinaman whose history was unknown and the story of a crook whose word was worth nothing.

Finally he asked himself, as he had asked himself before, what did it matter? If old Huang Chow had disposed of these people in some strange manner, they had sought to rob him. The morality of the case was complicated and obscure, and more and more he was falling under the spell of Lala's dark eyes.

But always it was his professional pride which came to the rescue. Murder had been done, whether justifiably or otherwise, and to him had been entrusted the discovery of the murderer. It seemed that failure was to be his lot, for if Lala knew anything she was a most consummate actress, and if she did not, his last hope of information was gone.

He would have liked nothing better than to be rid of the affair, provided he could throw up the case with a clear conscience. But when presently he parted from the attractive Eurasian, and watched her slim figure as, turning, she waved her hand and disappeared round a corner, he knew that rest was not for him.

He had discovered the emporium of a Shadwell live−stock dealer with whom Ah Fu had a standing order for newly fledged birds of all descriptions. Purchases apparently were always made after dusk, and Ah Fu with his birdcage was due that evening.

A scheme having suggested itself to Durham, he now proceeded to put it into execution, so that when dusk came, and Ah Fu, carrying an empty birdcage, set out from the house of Huang Chow, a very dirty−looking loafer passed the corner of the street at about the time that the Chinaman came slinking out.

Durham had mentally calculated that Ah Fu would be gone about half an hour upon his mysterious errand, but the Chinaman travelled faster than he had calculated.

Just as he was about to climb up once more on to the sloping roof, he heard the pattering footsteps returning to the courtyard, although rather less than twenty minutes had elapsed since the man had set out.

Durham darted round the corner and waited until he heard the door closed; then, returning, he scrambled up on to the roof, creeping forward until he was lying looking down through the skylight into the darkened room below.

For ten minutes or more he waited, until he began to feel cramped and uncomfortable. Then that happened which he had hoped and anticipated would happen. The place beneath became illuminated, not fully, by means of the hanging lamps, but dimly so that distorted shadows were cast about the floor. Someone had entered carrying a lantern.

Durham's view−point limited his area of vision, but presently, as the light came nearer and nearer, he discerned Ah Fu, carrying a lantern in one hand and a birdcage in the other. He could hear nothing, for the trap fitted well and the glass was thick. Moreover, it was very dirty. He was afraid, however, to attempt to clean a space.

Ah Fu apparently had set the lantern upon a table, and into the radius of its light there presently moved a stooping figure. Durham recognized Huang Chow, and felt his heart beats increasing in rapidity.

Clutching the framework of the trap with his hands, he moved his head cautiously, so that presently he was enabled to see the two Chinamen. They were standing beside the lacquered coffin upon its dragon−legged pedestal. Durham stifled an exclamation.

One end of the ornate sarcophagus had been opened in some way!

Now, to the watcher's unbounded astonishment, Ah Fu placed the birdcage in the opening, and apparently reclosed the trap in the end of the coffin. He made other manipulations with his bony yellow fingers, which Durham failed to comprehend. Finally the birdcage was withdrawn again, and as it was passed before the light of the lantern he saw that it was empty, whereas previously it had contained a number of tiny birds all huddled up together!

The light gleamed upon the spectacles of Huang Chow. Watching him, Durham saw him take out from a hidden drawer in the pedestal a long, slender key, insert it in a lock concealed by the ornate carving, and then slightly raise the lid which had so recently defied his own efforts.

He raised it only a few inches, and then, taking up the lantern, peered into the interior of the coffin, at the same time waving his hand in dismissal to Ah Fu. For a while he stood there, peering into the interior, and then, lowering the lid again, he relocked this gruesome receptacle and, lantern in hand, began to mount the stair.

Durham inhaled deeply. He realized that during the last few seconds he had been holding his breath. Now, as he began to creep back down the slope, he discovered that his hands were shaking.

He dropped down into the court again, and for several minutes leaned against the wall, endeavouring to reason out an explanation of what he had seen, and in a measure to regain his composure.

There was a horror underlying it all which he was half afraid to face. But the real clue to the mystery still eluded him.

Whether what he had witnessed were some kind of obscene ceremony, or whether an explanation more vile must be sought, he remained undetermined. He must repeat his exploit, if possible, and once more gain access to the room which contained the lacquer coffin.

But the adventure was very distasteful. He recollected the smell of the place, and the memory brought with it a sense of nausea. He thought of Lala Huang, and his ideas became grotesque and chaotic. Yet the solution of the mystery lay at last within his grasp, and to the zest of the investigator everything else became subjugated.

He walked slowly away, silent in his rubber−soled shoes.

IX. THE PICTURE ON THE PAD

Lala Huang lay listening to the vague sounds which disturbed the silence of the night. Presently her thoughts made her sigh wearily. During the lifetime of her mother, who had died while Lala was yet a little girl, life had been different and so much brighter.

She imagined that in the mingled sounds of dock and river which came to her she could hear the roar of surf upon a golden beach. The stuffy air of Limehouse took on the hot fragrance of a tropic island, and she sighed again, but this time rapturously, for in spirit she was a child once more, lulled by the voice of the great Pacific.

Young as she was, the death of her mother had been a blow from which it had taken her several years to recover. Then had commenced those long travels with her father, from port to port, from ocean to ocean, sometimes settling awhile, but ever moving onward, onward.

He had had her educated after a fashion, and his love for her she did not doubt. But her mother's blood spoke more strongly than that part of her which was Chinese, and there was softness and a delicious languor in her nature which her father did not seem to understand, and of which he did not appear to approve.

She knew that he was wealthy. She knew that his ways were not straight ways, although that part of his business to which he had admitted her as an assistant, and an able one, was legitimate enough, or so it seemed.

Consignments of goods arrived at strange hours of the night at the establishment in Limehouse, and from this side of her father's transactions she was barred. The big double doors opening on the little courtyard would be opened by Ah Fu, and packing cases of varying sizes be taken in. Sometimes the sounds of these activities would reach her in her room in a distant part of the house; but only in the morning would she recognize their significance, when in the warehouse she would discover that some new and choice pieces had arrived.

She wondered with what object her father accumulated wealth, and hoped, against the promptings of her common sense, that he designed to return East, there to seek a retirement amidst the familiar and the beautiful things of the Orient which belonged to Lala's dream of heaven.

Stories about her father often reached her ears. She knew that he had held high rank in China before she had been born; but that he had sacrificed his rights in some way had always been her theory. She had been too young to understand the stories which her mother had told her sometimes; but that there were traits in the character of Huang Chow which it was not good for his daughter to know she appreciated and accepted as a secret sorrow.

He allowed her all the freedom to which her education entitled her. Her life was that of a European and not of an Oriental woman. She loved him in a way, but also feared him. She feared the dark and cruel side of his character, of which, at various periods during their life together, she had had terrifying glimpses.

She had decided that cruelty was his vice. In what way he gratified it she had never learned, nor did she desire to do so. There were periodical visits from the police, but she had learned long ago that her father was too clever to place himself within reach of the law.

However crooked one part of his business methods might be, his dealings with his clients were straight enough, so that no one had any object in betraying him; and the legality or otherwise of his foreign relations evidently afforded no case against him upon which the authorities could act, or upon which they cared to act.

In America it had been graft which had protected him. She had learned this accidentally, but never knew whether he bought his immunity in the same way in London.

Some of the rumours which reached her were terrifying. Latterly she had met many strange glances in her comings and goings about Limehouse. This peculiar atmosphere had always preceded the break−up of every home which they had shared. She divined the fact that in some way Huang Chow had outstayed his welcome in Chinatown, London. Where their next resting−place would be she could not imagine, but she prayed that it might be in some more sunny clime.

She found herself to be thinking over much of John Hampden. His bona fides were not above suspicion, but she could scarcely expect to meet a really white man in such an environment.

Lala would have liked to think that he was white, but could not force herself to do so. She would have liked to think that he sought her company because she appealed to him personally; but she had detected the fact that another motive underlay his attentions. She wondered if he could be another of those moths drawn by the light of that fabled wealth of her father.

It was curious, she reflected, that Huang Chow never checked indeed, openly countenanced her friendship with the many chance acquaintances she had made, even when her own instincts told her that the men were crooked; so that, knowing the acumen of her father, she was well aware that he must know it too.

Several of these pseudo lovers of hers had died. It was a point which often occurred to her mind, but upon which she did not care to dwell even now. But John Hampden John Hampden was different. He was not wholly sincere. She sighed wearily. But nevertheless he was not like some of the others.

She started up in bed, seized with a sudden dreadful idea. He was a detective!

She understood now why she had found so much that was white in him, but so much that was false. His presence seemed to be very near her. Something caressing in his voice echoed in her mind. She found herself to be listening to the muted sounds of Limehouse and of the waterway which flowed so close beside her.

That old longing for the home of her childhood returned tenfold, and tears began to trickle down her cheeks. She was falling in love with this man whose object was her father's ruin. A cold terror clutched at her heart. Even now, while their friendship was so new, so strange, there was a query, a stark, terrifying query, to stand up before her.

If put to the test, which would she choose?

She was unable to face that issue, and dropped back upon her pillow, stifling a sob.

Yes, he was a detective. In some way her father had at last attracted the serious attention of the law. Rumours of this were flying round Chinatown, to which she had not been entirely deaf. She thought of a hundred questions, a hundred silences, and grew more and more convinced of the truth.

What did he mean to do? Before her a ghostly company uprose the shadows of some she had known with designs upon her father. John Hampden's design was different. But might he not join that mysterious company?

Now again she suddenly sprang upright, this time because of a definite sound which had reached her ears from within the house: a very faint, bell−like tinkling which ceased almost immediately. She had heard it one night before, and quite recently; indeed, on the night before she had met John Hampden. Cohen Cohen, the Jew, had died that night!

She sprang lightly on to the floor, found her slippers, and threw a silk kimono over her nightrobe. She tiptoed cautiously to the door and opened it.

It was at this very moment that old Huang Chow, asleep in his cell−like apartment, was aroused by the tinkling of a bell set immediately above his head. He awoke instantly, raised his hand and stopped the bell. His expression, could anyone have been present to see it, was a thing unpleasant to behold. Triumph was in it, and cunning cruelty.

His long yellow fingers reached out for his hornrimmed spectacles which lay upon a little table beside him. Adjusting them, he pulled the curtains aside and shuffled silently across the large room.

Mounting the steps to the raised writing−table, he rested his elbows upon it, and peered down at that curious blotting−pad which had so provoked the curiosity of Durham. Could Durham have seen it now the mystery must have been solved. It was an ingenious camera obscura apparatus, and dimly depicted upon its surface appeared a reproduction of part of the storehouse beneath! The part of it which was visible was that touched by the light of an electric torch, carried by a man crossing the floor in the direction of the lacquered coffin upon the gilded pedestal!

Old Huang Chow chuckled silently, and his yellow fingers clutched the table edge as he moved to peer more closely into the picture.

"Poor fool!" he whispered in Chinese. "Poor fool!"

It was the man who had come with the introduction from Mr. Isaacs a new impostor who sought to rob him, who sought to obtain information from his daughter, who had examined his premises last night, and had even penetrated upstairs, so that he, old Huang Chow, had been compelled to disconnect the apparatus and to feign sleep under the scrutiny of the intruder.

To−night it would be otherwise. To−night it would be otherwise.

X. THE LACQUERED COFFIN

Durham gently raised the trap in the roof of Huang Chow's treasure−house. He was prepared for snares and pitfalls. No sane man, on the evidence which he, Durham, had been compelled to leave behind, would have neglected to fasten the skylight which so obviously afforded a means of entrance into his premises.

Therefore, he was expected to return. The devilish mechanism was set ready to receive him. But the artist within him demanded that he should unmask the mystery with his own hands.

Moreover, he doubted that an official visit, even now, would yield any results. Old Huang Chow was too cunning for that. If he was to learn how the man Cohen had died, he must follow the same path to the bitter end. But there were men on duty round the house, and he believed that he had placed them so secretly as to deceive even this master of cunning with whom he was dealing.

He repeated his exploit, dropping with a dull thud upon the cushioned divan. Then, having lain there listening awhile, he pressed the button of his torch, and, standing up, crept across the room in the direction of the stairway.

Here he paused awhile, listening intently. The image of Lala Huang arose before his mind's eye reproachfully, but he crushed the reproach, and advanced until he stood beside the lacquered coffin.

He remembered where the key was hidden, and, stooping, he fumbled for a while and then found it. He was acutely conscious of an unnameable fear. He felt that he was watched, and yet was unwilling to believe it. The musty and unpleasant smell which he had noticed before became extremely perceptible.

He quietly sought for the hidden lock, and, presently finding it, inserted the key, then paused awhile. He rested his torch upon the cushions of the divan where the light shone directly upon the coffin. Then, having his automatic in his left hand, he turned the key.

He had expected now to be able to raise the lid as he had seen Huang Chow do; but the result was far more surprising.

The lid, together with a second framework of fine netting, flew open with a resounding bang; and from the interior of the coffin uprose a most abominable stench.

Durham started back a step, and as he did so witnessed a sight which turned him sick with horror.

Out on to the edge of the coffin leapt the most gigantic spider which he had ever seen in his life! It had a body as big as a man's fist, jet black, with hairy legs like the legs of a crab and a span of a foot or more!

A moment it poised there, while he swayed, sick with horror. Then, unhesitatingly, it leapt for his face!

He groaned and fired, missed the horror, but diverted its leap, so that it fell with a sickening thud a yard behind him. He turned, staggering back towards the stair, and aware that a light had shone out from somewhere.

A door had been opened only a few yards from where he stood, and there, framed in the opening, was Lala Huang, her eyes wide with terror and her gaze set upon him across the room.

"You!" she whispered. "You!"

"Go back!" he cried hoarsely. "Go back! Close the door. You don't understand close the door!"

Her gaze set wildly upon him, Lala staggered forward; stopped dead; looked down at her bare ankle, and then, seeing the thing which had fastened upon her, uttered a piercing shriek which rang throughout the place.

At which moment the floor slid away beneath Durham, and he found himself falling falling and then battling for life in evil− smelling water, amidst absolute darkness.

Police whistles were skirling around the house of Huang Chow. As the hidden men came running into the court:

"You heard the shot?" cried the sergeant in charge. "I warned him not to go alone. Don't waste time on the door. One man stay on duty there; the rest of you follow me."

In a few moments, led by the sergeant, the party came dropping heavily through the skylight into the treasure−house of Huang Chow, in which every lamp was now alight. A trap was open near the foot of the stairs, and from beneath it muffled cries proceeded. In this direction the sergeant headed. Craning over the trap:

"Hallo, Mr. Durham!" he called. "Mr. Durham!"

"Get a rope and a ladder," came a faint cry from below. "I can just touch bottom with my feet and keep my head above water, but the tide's coming in. Look to the girl, though, first. Look to the girl!"

The sergeant turned to where, stretched upon a tiger skin before a half−open door, Lala Huang lay, scantily clothed and white as death.

Upon one of her bare ankles was a discoloured mark.

As the sergeant and another of the men stooped over her a moaning sound drew their attention to the stair, and there, bent and tottering slowly down, was old Huang Chow, his eyes peering through the owl−like glasses vacantly across the room to where his daughter lay.

"My God!" whispered the sergeant, upon one knee beside her. He looked blankly into the face of the other man. "She's dead!"

Two plain−clothes men were busy knotting together tapestries and pieces of rare stuff with which to draw Durham out of the pit; but at these old Huang Chow looked not at all, but gropingly crossed the room, as if he saw imperfectly, or could not believe what he saw. At last he reached the side of the dead girl, stooped, touched her, laid a trembling yellow hand over her heart, and then stood up again, looking from face to face.

Ignoring the mingled activities about him, he crossed to the open coffin and began to fumble amongst the putrefying mass of bones and webbing which lay therein. Out from this he presently drew an iron coffer.

Carrying it across the room he opened the lid. It was full almost to the top with uncut gems of every variety diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, topaz, amethysts, flashing greenly, redly, whitely. In handfuls he grasped them and sprinkled them upon the body of the dead girl.

"For you," he crooned brokenly in Chinese. "They were all for you!"

The extemporized rope had just been lowered to Durham, when:

"My God!" cried the sergeant, looking over Huang Chow's shoulder. "What's that?"

He had seen the giant spider, the horror from Surinam, which the Chinaman had reared and fed to guard his treasure and to gratify his lust for the strange and cruel. The insect, like everything else in that house, was unusual, almost unique. It was one of the Black Soldier spiders, by some regarded as a native myth, but actually existing in Surinam and parts of Brazil. A member of the family, Mygale, its sting was more quickly and certainly fatal than that of a rattle−snake. Its instinct was fearlessly to attack any creature, great or small, which disturbed it in its dark hiding−place.

Now, with feverish, horrible rapidity it was racing up the tapestries on the other side of the room.

"Merciful God!" groaned the sergeant.

Snatching a revolver from his pocket he fired shot after shot. The third hit the thing but did not kill it. It dropped back upon the floor and began to crawl toward the coffin. The sergeant ran across and at close quarters shot it again.

Red blood oozed out from the hideous black body and began to form a deep stain upon the carpet.

When Durham, drenched but unhurt, was hauled back into the treasure−house, he did not speak, but, scrambling into the room stood pallid staring dully at old Huang Chow.

Huang Chow, upon his knees beside his daughter, was engaged in sprinkling priceless jewels over her still body, and murmuring in Chinese:

"For you, for you, Lala. They were all for you."