

THE PIGTAIL OF HI WING HO

Sax Rohmer

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THE PIGTAIL OF HI WING HO

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THE PIGTAIL OF HI WING HO

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I. HOW I OBTAINED IT

Leaving the dock gates behind me I tramped through the steady drizzle, going parallel with the river and making for the Chinese quarter. The hour was about half-past eleven on one of those September nights when, in such a locality as this, a stifling quality seems to enter the atmosphere, rendering it all but unbreathable. A mist floated over the river, and it was difficult to say if the rain was still falling, indeed, or if the ample moisture upon my garments was traceable only to the fog. Sounds were muffled, lights dimmed, and the frequent hooting of sirens from the river added another touch of weirdness to the scene.

Even when the peculiar duties of my friend, Paul Harley, called him away from England, the lure of this miniature Orient which I had first explored under his guidance, often called me from my chambers. In the house with the two doors in Wade Street, Limehouse, I would discard the armour of respectability, and, dressed in a manner unlikely to provoke comment in dockland, would haunt those dreary ways sometimes from midnight until close upon dawn. Yet, well as I knew the district and the strange and often dangerous creatures lurking in its many burrows, I experienced a chill partly physical and partly of apprehension to-night; indeed, strange though it may sound, I hastened my footsteps in order the sooner to reach the low den for which I was bound—Malay Jack's—a spot marked plainly on the crimes-map and which few respectable travellers would have regarded as a haven of refuge.

But the chill of the adjacent river, and some quality of utter desolation which seemed to emanate from the deserted wharves and ramshackle buildings about me, were driving me thither now; for I knew that human companionship, of a sort, and a glass of good liquor—from a store which the Customs would have been happy to locate—awaited me there. I might chance, too, upon Durham or Wessex, of New Scotland Yard, both good friends of mine, or even upon the Terror of Chinatown, Chief Inspector Kerry, a man for whom I had an esteem which none of his ungracious manners could diminish.

I was just about to turn to the right into a narrow and nameless alley, lying at right angles to the Thames, when I pulled up sharply, clenching my fists and listening.

A confused and continuous sound, not unlike that which might be occasioned by several large and savage hounds at close grips, was proceeding out of the darkness ahead of me; a worrying, growling, and scuffling which presently I identified as human, although in fact it was animal enough. A moment I hesitated, then, distinguishing among the sounds of conflict an unmistakable, though subdued, cry for help, I leaped forward and found myself in the midst of the melee. This was taking place in the lee of a high, dilapidated brick wall. A lamp in a sort of iron bracket spluttered dimly above on the right, but the scene of the conflict lay in densest shadow, so that the figures were indistinguishable.

"Help! By Gawd! they're strangling me——"

From almost at my feet the cry arose and was drowned in Chinese chattering. But guided by it I now managed to make out that the struggle in progress waged between a burly English sailor and two lithe Chinese. The yellow men seemed to have gained the advantage and my course was clear.

A straight right on the jaw of the Chinaman who was engaged in endeavouring to throttle the victim laid him prone in the dirty roadway. His companion, who was holding the wrist of the recumbent man, sprang upright as though propelled by a spring. I struck out at him savagely. He uttered a shrill scream not unlike that of a stricken hare, and fled so rapidly that he seemed to melt in the mist.

"Gawd bless you, mate!" came chokingly from the ground—and the rescued man, extricating himself from beneath the body of his stunned assailant, rose unsteadily to his feet and lurched toward me.

As I had surmised, he was a sailor, wearing a rough, blue-serge jacket and having his greasy trousers thrust into heavy seaboots—by which I judged that he was but newly come ashore. He stooped and picked up his cap. It was covered in mud, as were the rest of his garments, but he brushed it with his sleeve as though it had been but slightly soiled and clapped it on his head.

He grasped my hand in a grip of iron, peering into my face, and his breath was eloquent.

"I'd had one or two, mate," he confided huskily (the confession was unnecessary). "It was them two in the

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Blue Anchor as did it; if I 'adn't 'ad them last two, I could 'ave broke up them Chinks with one 'and tied behind me."

"That's all right," I said hastily, "but what are we going to do about this Chink here?" I added, endeavouring at the same time to extricate my hand from the vise-like grip in which he persistently held it. "He hit the tiles pretty heavy when he went down."

As if to settle my doubts, the recumbent figure suddenly arose and without a word fled into the darkness and was gone like a phantom. My new friend made no attempt to follow, but:

"You can't kill a bloody Chink," he confided, still clutching my hand; "it ain't 'umanly possible. It's easier to kill a cat. Come along o' me and 'ave one; then I'll tell you somethink. I'll put you on somethink, I will."

With surprising steadiness of gait, considering the liquid cargo he had aboard, the man, releasing my hand and now seizing me firmly by the arm, confidently led me by divers narrow ways, which I knew, to a little beerhouse frequented by persons of his class.

My own attire was such as to excite no suspicion in these surroundings, and although I considered that my acquaintance had imbibed more than enough for one night, I let him have his own way in order that I might learn the story which he seemed disposed to confide in me. Settled in the corner of the beerhouse—which chanced to be nearly empty—with portentous pewters before us, the conversation was opened by my new friend:

"I've been paid off from the Jupiter—Samuelson's Planet Line," he explained. "What I am is a fireman."

"She was from Singapore to London?" I asked.

"She was," he replied, "and it was at Suez it 'appened—at Suez."

I did not interrupt him.

"I was ashore at Suez—we all was, owin' to a 'itch with the canal company—a matter of money, I may say. They make yer pay before they'll take yer through. Do you know that?"

I nodded.

"Suez is a place," he continued, "where they don't sell whisky, only poison. Was you ever at Suez?"

Again I nodded, being most anxious to avoid diverting the current of my friend's thoughts.

"Well, then," he continued, "you know Greek Jimmy's—and that's where I'd been."

I did not know Greek Jimmy's, but I thought it unnecessary to mention the fact.

"It was just about this time on a steamin' 'ot night as I come out of Jimmy's and started for the ship. I was walkin' along the Waghorn Quay, same as I might be walkin' along to-night, all by myself—bit of a list to port but nothing much—full o' joy an' happiness, 'appy an' free—'appy an' free. Just like you might have noticed to-night, I noticed a knot of Chinks scrappin' on the ground all amongst the dust right in front of me. I rammed in, windmillin' all round and knocking 'em down like skittles. Seemed to me there was about ten of 'em, but allowin' for Jimmy's whisky, maybe there wasn't more than three. Anyway, they all shifted and left me standin' there in the empty street with this 'ere in my 'and."

At that, without more ado, he thrust his hand deep into some concealed pocket and jerked out a Chinese pigtail, which had been severed, apparently some three inches from the scalp, by a clean cut. My acquaintance, with somewhat bleared eyes glistening in appreciation of his own dramatic skill—for I could not conceal my surprise—dangled it before me triumphantly.

"Which of 'em it belong to," he continued, thrusting it into another pocket and drumming loudly on the counter for more beer, "I can't say, 'cos I don't know. But that ain't all."

The tankards being refilled and my friend having sampled the contents of his own:

"That ain't all," he continued. "I thought I'd keep it as a sort of relic, like. What 'appened? I'll tell you.

Amongst the crew there's three Chinks—see? We ain't through the canal before one of 'em, a new one to me—Li Ping is his name—offers me five bob for the pigtail, which he sees me looking at one mornin'. I give him a punch on the nose an' 'e don't renew the offer: but that night (we're layin' at Port Said) 'e tries to pinch it! I dam' near broke his neck, and 'e don't try any more. To-night"—he extended his right arm forensically—"a deppitation of Chinks waits on me at the dock gates; they explains as from a patriotic point of view they feels it to be their dooty to buy that pigtail off of me, and they bids a quid, a bar of gold—a Jimmy o' Goblin!"

He snapped his fingers contemptuously and emptied his pewter. A sense of what was coming began to dawn on me. That the "hold-up" near the riverside formed part of the scheme was possible, and, reflecting on my rough treatment of the two Chinamen, I chuckled inwardly. Possibly, however, the scheme had germinated in my

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acquaintance's mind merely as a result of an otherwise common assault, of a kind not unusual in these parts, but, whether elaborate or comparatively simple, that the story of the pigtail was a "plant" designed to reach my pocket, seemed a reasonable hypothesis.

"I told him to go to China," concluded the object of my suspicion, again rapping upon the counter, "and you see what come of it. All I got to say is this: If they're so bloody patriotic, I says one thing: I ain't the man to stand in their way. You done me a good turn to-night, mate; I'm doing you one. 'Ere's the bloody pigtail, 'ere's my empty mug. Fill the mug and the pigtail's yours. It's good for a quid at the dock gates any day!"

My suspicions vanished; my interest arose to boiling point. I refilled my acquaintance's mug, pressed a sovereign upon him (in honesty I must confess that he was loath to take it), and departed with the pigtail coiled neatly in an inner pocket of my jacket. I entered the house in Wade Street by the side door, and half an hour later let myself out by the front door, having cast off my dockland disguise.

II. HOW I LOST IT

It was not until the following evening that I found leisure to examine my strange acquisition, for affairs of more immediate importance engrossed my attention. But at about ten o'clock I seated myself at my table, lighted the lamp, and taking out the pigtail from the table drawer, placed it on the blotting-pad and began to examine it with the greatest curiosity, for few Chinese affect the pigtail nowadays.

I had scarcely commenced my examination, however, when it was dramatically interrupted. The door bell commenced to ring jerkily. I stood up, and as I did so the ringing ceased and in its place came a muffled beating on the door. I hurried into the passage as the bell commenced ringing again, and I had almost reached the door when once more the ringing ceased; but now I could hear a woman's voice, low but agitated:

"Open the door! Oh, for God's sake be quick!"

Completely mystified, and not a little alarmed, I threw open the door, and in there staggered a woman heavily veiled, so that I could see little of her features, but by the lines of her figure I judged her to be young.

Uttering a sort of moan of terror she herself closed the door, and stood with her back to it, watching me through the thick veil, while her breast rose and fell tumultuously.

"Thank God there was someone at home!" she gasped.

I think I may say with justice that I had never been so surprised in my life; every particular of the incident marked it as unique—set it apart from the episodes of everyday life.

"Madam," I began doubtfully, "you seem to be much alarmed at something, and if I can be of any assistance to you——"

"You have saved my life!" she whispered, and pressed one hand to her bosom. "In a moment I will explain."

"Won't you rest a little after your evidently alarming experience?" I suggested.

My strange visitor nodded, without speaking, and I conducted her to the study which I had just left, and placed the most comfortable arm-chair close beside the table so that as I sat I might study this woman who so strangely had burst in upon me. I even tilted the shaded lamp, artlessly, a trick I had learned from Harley, in order that the light might fall upon her face.

She may have detected this device; I know not; but as if in answer to its challenge, she raised her gloved hands and unfastened the heavy veil which had concealed her features.

Thereupon I found myself looking into a pair of lustrous black eyes whose almond shape was that of the Orient; I found myself looking at a woman who, since she was evidently a Jewess, was probably no older than eighteen or nineteen, but whose beauty was ripely voluptuous, who might fittingly have posed for Salome, who, despite her modern fashionable garments, at once suggested to my mind the wanton beauty of the daughter of Herodias.

I stared at her silently for a time, and presently her full lips parted in a slow smile. My ideas were diverted into another channel.

"You have yet to tell me what alarmed you," I said in a low voice, but as courteously as possible, "and if I can be of any assistance in the matter."

My visitor seemed to recollect her fright—or the necessity for simulation. The pupils of her fine eyes seemed to grow larger and darker; she pressed her white teeth into her lower lips, and resting her hands upon the table leaned toward me.

"I am a stranger to London," she began, now exhibiting a certain diffidence, "and to-night I was looking for the chambers of Mr. Raphael Philips of Figtree Court."

"This is Figtree Court," I said, "but I know of no Mr. Raphael Philips who has chambers here."

The black eyes met mine despairingly.

"But I am positive of the address!" protested my beautiful but strange caller—from her left glove she drew out a scrap of paper, "here it is."

I glanced at the fragment, upon which, in a woman's hand the words were pencilled: "Mr. Raphael Philips, 36–b Figtree Court, London."

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I stared at my visitor, deeply mystified.

"These chambers are 36-b!" I said. "But I am not Raphael Philips, nor have I ever heard of him. My name is Malcolm Knox. There is evidently some mistake, but"—returning the slip of paper—"pardon me if I remind you, I have yet to learn the cause of your alarm."

"I was followed across the court and up the stairs."

"Followed! By whom?"

"By a dreadful-looking man, chattering in some tongue I did not understand!"

My amazement was momentarily growing greater.

"What kind of a man?" I demanded rather abruptly.

"A yellow-faced man—remember I could only just distinguish him in the darkness on the stairway, and see little more of him than his eyes at that, and his ugly gleaming teeth—oh! it was horrible!"

"You astound me," I said; "the thing is utterly incomprehensible." I switched off the light of the lamp. "I'll see if there's any sign of him in the court below."

"Oh, don't leave me! For heaven's sake don't leave me alone!"

She clutched my arm in the darkness.

"Have no fear; I merely propose to look out from this window."

Suiting the action to the word, I peered down into the court below. It was quite deserted. The night was a very dark one, and there were many patches of shadow in which a man might have lain concealed.

"I can see no one," I said, speaking as confidently as possible, and relighting the lamp, "if I call a cab for you and see you safely into it, you will have nothing to fear, I think."

"I have a cab waiting," she replied, and lowering the veil she stood up to go.

"Kindly allow me to see you to it. I am sorry you have been subjected to this annoyance, especially as you have not attained the object of your visit."

"Thank you so much for your kindness; there must be some mistake about the address, of course."

She clung to my arm very tightly as we descended the stairs, and often glanced back over her shoulder affrightedly, as we crossed the court. There was not a sign of anyone about, however, and I could not make up my mind whether the story of the yellow man was a delusion or a fabrication. I inclined to the latter theory, but the object of such a deception was more difficult to determine.

Sure enough, a taxicab was waiting at the entrance to the court; and my visitor, having seated herself within, extended her hand to me, and even through the thick veil I could detect her brilliant smile.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Knox," she said, "and a thousand apologies. I am sincerely sorry to have given you all this trouble."

The cab drove off. For a moment I stood looking after it, in a state of dreamy incertitude, then turned and slowly retraced my steps. Reopening the door of my chambers with my key, I returned to my study and sat down at the table to endeavour to arrange the facts of what I recognized to be a really amazing episode. The adventure, trifling though it seemed, undoubtedly held some hidden significance that at present was not apparent to me. In accordance with the excellent custom of my friend, Paul Harley, I prepared to make notes of the occurrence while the facts were still fresh in my memory. At the moment that I was about to begin, I made an astounding discovery.

Although I had been absent only a few minutes, and had locked my door behind me, the pigtail was gone!

I sat quite still, listening intently. The woman's story of the yellow man on the stairs suddenly assumed a totally different aspect—a new and sinister aspect. Could it be that the pigtail was at the bottom of the mystery?—could it be that some murderous Chinaman who had been lurking in hiding, waiting his opportunity, had in some way gained access to my chambers during that brief absence? If so, was he gone?

From the table drawer I took out a revolver, ascertained that it was fully loaded, and turning up light after light as I proceeded, conducted a room-to-room search. It was without result; there was absolutely nothing to indicate that anyone had surreptitiously entered or departed from my chambers.

I returned to the study and sat gazing at the revolver lying on the blotting-pad before me. Perhaps my mind worked slowly, but I think that fully fifteen minutes must have passed before it dawned on me that the explanation not only of the missing pigtail but of the other incidents of the night, was simple enough. The yellow man had been a fabrication, and my dark-eyed visitor had not been in quest of "Raphael Philips," but in quest of the pigtail: and her quest had been successful!

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"What a hopeless fool I am!" I cried, and banged my fist down upon the table, "there was no yellow man at all—there was——"

My door bell rang. I sprang nervously to my feet, glanced at the revolver on the table—and finally dropped it into my coat pocket ere going out and opening the door.

On the landing stood a police constable and an officer in plain clothes.

"Your name is Malcolm Knox?" asked the constable, glancing at a note-book which he held in his hand.

"It is," I replied.

"You are required to come at once to Bow Street to identify a woman who was found murdered in a taxi-cab in the Strand about eleven o'clock to-night."

I suppressed an exclamation of horror; I felt myself turning pale.

"But what has it to do——"

"The driver stated she came from your chambers, for you saw her off, and her last words to you were 'Good night, Mr. Knox, I am sincerely sorry to have given you all this trouble.' Is that correct, sir?"

The constable, who had read out the information in an official voice, now looked at me, as I stood there stupefied.

"It is," I said blankly. "I'll come at once." It would seem that I had misjudged my unfortunate visitor: her story of the yellow man on the stair had apparently been not a fabrication, but a gruesome fact!

III. HOW I REGAINED IT

My ghastly duty was performed; I had identified the dreadful thing, which less than an hour before had been a strikingly beautiful woman, as my mysterious visitor. The police were palpably disappointed at the sparsity of my knowledge respecting her. In fact, had it not chanced that Detective Sergeant Durham was in the station, I think they would have doubted the accuracy of my story.

As a man of some experience in such matters, I fully recognized its improbability, but beyond relating the circumstances leading up to my possession of the pigtail and the events which had ensued, I could do no more in the matter. The weird relic had not been found on the dead woman, nor in the cab.

Now the unsavoury business was finished, and I walked along Bow Street, racking my mind for the master-key to this mystery in which I was become enmeshed. How I longed to rush off to Harley's rooms in Chancery Lane and to tell him the whole story! But my friend was a thousand miles away—and I had to see the thing out alone.

That the pigtail was some sacred relic stolen from a Chinese temple and sought for by its fanatical custodians was a theory which persistently intruded itself. But I could find no place in that hypothesis for the beautiful Jewess; and that she was intimately concerned I did not doubt. A cool survey of the facts rendered it fairly evident that it was she and none other who had stolen the pigtail from my rooms. Some third party—possibly the "yellow man" of whom she had spoken—had in turn stolen it from her, strangling her in the process.

The police theory of the murder (and I was prepared to accept it) was that the assassin had been crouching in hiding behind or beside the cab—or even within the dark interior. He had leaped in and attacked the woman at the moment that the taxi-man had started his engine; if already inside, the deed had proven even easier. Then, during some block in the traffic, he had slipped out unseen, leaving the body of the victim to be discovered when the cab pulled up at the hotel.

I knew of only one place in London where I might hope to obtain useful information, and for that place I was making now. It was Malay Jack's, whence I had been bound on the previous night when my strange meeting with the seaman who then possessed the pigtail had led to a change of plan. The scum of the Asiatic population always come at one time or another to Jack's, and I hoped by dint of a little patience to achieve what the police had now apparently despaired of achieving—the discovery of the assassin.

Having called at my chambers to obtain my revolver, I mounted an eastward-bound motor-bus. The night, as I have already stated, was exceptionally dark. There was no moon, and heavy clouds were spread over the sky; so that the deserted East End streets presented a sufficiently uninviting aspect, but one with which I was by no means unfamiliar and which certainly in no way daunted me.

Changing at Paul Harley's Chinatown base in Wade Street, I turned my steps in the same direction as upon the preceding night; but if my own will played no part in the matter, then decidedly Providence truly guided me. Poetic justice is rare enough in real life, yet I was destined to-night to witness swift retribution overtaking a malefactor.

The by-ways which I had trodden were utterly deserted; I was far from the lighted high road, and the only signs of human activity that reached me came from the adjacent river; therefore, when presently an outcry arose from somewhere on my left, for a moment I really believed that my imagination was vividly reproducing the episode of the night before!

A furious scuffle—between a European and an Asiatic—was in progress not twenty yards away!

Realizing that such was indeed the case, and that I was not the victim of hallucination, I advanced slowly in the direction of the sounds, but my footsteps reechoed hollowly from wall to wall of the narrow passage-way, and my coming brought the conflict to a sudden and dramatic termination.

"Thought I wouldn't know yer ugly face, did yer?" yelled a familiar voice. "No good squealin'—I got yer! I'd bust you up if I could!" (a sound of furious blows and inarticulate chattering) "but it ain't 'umanly possible to kill a Chink——"

I hurried forward toward the spot where two dim figures were locked in deadly conflict.

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"Take that to remember me by!" gasped the husky voice as I ran up.

One of the figures collapsed in a heap upon the ground. The other made off at a lumbering gait along a second and even narrower passage branching at right angles from that in which the scuffle had taken place.

The clatter of the heavy sea-boots died away in the distance. I stood beside the fallen man, looking keenly about to right and left; for an impression was strong upon me that another than I had been witness of the scene—that a shadowy form had slunk back furtively at my approach. But the night gave up no sound in confirmation of this, and I could detect no sign of any lurker.

I stooped over the Chinaman (for a Chinaman it was) who lay at my feet, and directed the ray of my pocket-lamp upon his yellow and contorted countenance. I suppressed a cry of surprise and horror.

Despite the human impossibility referred to by the missing fireman, this particular Chinaman had joined the shades of his ancestors. I think that final blow, which had felled him, had brought his shaven skull in such violent contact with the wall that he had died of the thundering concussion set up.

Kneeling there and looking into his upturned eyes, I became aware that my position was not an enviable one, particularly since I felt little disposed to set the law on the track of the real culprit. For this man who now lay dead at my feet was doubtless one of the pair who had attempted the life of the fireman of the Jupiter.

That my seafaring acquaintance had designed to kill the Chinaman I did not believe, despite his stormy words: the death had been an accident, and (perhaps my morality was over-broad) I considered the assault to have been justified.

Now my ideas led me further yet. The dead Chinaman wore a rough blue coat, and gingerly, for I found the contact repulsive, I inserted my hand into the inside pocket. Immediately my fingers closed upon a familiar object—and I stood up, whistling slightly, and dangling in my left hand the missing pigtail!

Beyond doubt Justice had guided the seaman's blows. This was the man who had murdered my dark-eyed visitor!

I stood perfectly still, directing the little white ray of my flashlight upon the pigtail in my hand. I realized that my position, difficult before, now was become impossible; the possession of the pigtail compromised me hopelessly. What should I do?

"My God!" I said aloud, "what does it all mean?"

"It means," said a gruff voice, "that it was lucky I was following you and saw what happened!"

I whirled about, my heart leaping wildly. Detective-Sergeant Durham was standing watching me, a grim smile upon his face!

I laughed rather shakily.

"Lucky indeed!" I said. "Thank God you're here. This pigtail is a nightmare which threatens to drive me mad!"

The detective advanced and knelt beside the crumpled-up figure on the ground. He examined it briefly, and then stood up.

"The fact that he had the missing pigtail in his pocket," he said, "is proof enough to my mind that he did the murder."

"And to mine."

"There's another point," he added, "which throws a lot of light on the matter. You and Mr. Harley were out of town at the time of the Huang Chow case; but the Chief and I outlined it, you remember, one night in Mr. Harley's rooms?"

"I remember it perfectly; the giant spider in the coffin——"

"Yes; and a certain Ah Fu, confidential servant of the old man, who used to buy the birds the thing fed on. Well, Mr. Knox, Huang Chow was the biggest dealer in illicit stuff in all the East End—and this battered thing at our feet is—Ah Fu!"

"Huang Chow's servant?"

"Exactly!"

I stared, uncomprehendingly, and:

"In what way does this throw light on the matter?" I asked.

Durham—a very intelligent young officer—smiled significantly.

"I begin to see light!" he declared. "The gentleman who made off just as I arrived on the scene probably had a private quarrel with the Chinaman and was otherwise not concerned in any way."

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"I am disposed to agree with you," I said guardedly.

"Of course, you've no idea of his identity?"

"I'm afraid not."

"We may find him," mused the officer, glancing at me shrewdly, "by applying at the offices of the Planet Line, but I rather doubt it. Also I rather doubt if we'll look very far. He's saved us a lot of trouble, but"—peering about in the shadowy corners which abounded—"didn't I see somebody else lurking around here?"

"I'm almost certain there was someone else!" I cried. "In fact, I could all but swear to it."

"H'm!" said the detective. "He's not here now. Might I trouble you to walk along to Limehouse Police Station for the ambulance? I'd better stay here."

I agreed at once, and started off.

Thus a second time my plans were interrupted, for my expedition that night ultimately led me to Bow Street, whence, after certain formalities had been observed, I departed for my chambers, the mysterious pigtail in my pocket. Failing the presence of Durham, the pigtail must have been retained as evidence, but:

"We shall know where to find it if it's wanted, Mr. Knox," said the Yard man, "and I can trust you to look after your own property."

The clock of St. Paul's was chiming the hour of two when I locked the door of my chambers and prepared to turn in. The clangour of the final strokes yet vibrated through the night's silence when someone set my own door bell loudly ringing.

With an exclamation of annoyance I shot back the bolts and threw open the door.

A Chinaman stood outside upon the mat!

IV. HOW IT ALL ENDED

"Me wishee see you," said the apparition, smiling blandly; "me comee in?"

"Come in, by all means," I said without enthusiasm, and, switching on the light in my study, I admitted the Chinaman and stood facing him with an expression upon my face which I doubt not was the reverse of agreeable.

My visitor, who wore a slop-shop suit, also wore a wide-brimmed bowler hat; now, the set bland smile still upon his yellow face, he removed the bowler and pointed significantly to his skull.

His pigtail had been severed some three inches from the root!

"You gotchee my pigtail," he explained; "me callee get it—thank you."

"Thank you," I said grimly. "But I must ask you to establish your claim rather more firmly."

"Yessir," agreed the Chinaman.

And thereupon in tolerable pidgin English he unfolded his tale. He proclaimed his name to be Hi Wing Ho, and his profession that of a sailor, or so I understood him. While ashore at Suez he had become embroiled with some drunken seamen: knives had been drawn, and in the scuffle by some strange accident his pigtail had been severed. He had escaped from the conflict, badly frightened, and had run a great distance before he realized his loss. Since Southern Chinamen of his particular Tong hold their pigtails in the highest regard, he had instituted inquiries as soon as possible, and had presently learned from a Chinese member of the crew of the S. S. Jupiter that the precious queue had fallen into the hands of a fireman on that vessel. He (Hi Wing Ho) had shipped on the first available steamer bound for England, having in the meanwhile communicated with his friend on the Jupiter respecting the recovery of the pigtail.

"What was the name of your friend on the Jupiter?"

"Him Li Ping—yessir!"—without the least hesitation or hurry.

I nodded. "Go on," I said.

He arrived at the London docks very shortly after the Jupiter. Indeed, the crew of the latter vessel had not yet been paid off when Hi Wing Ho presented himself at the dock gates. He admitted that, finding the fireman so obdurate, he and his friend Li Ping had resorted to violence, but he did not seem to recognize me as the person who had frustrated their designs. Thus far I found his story credible enough, excepting the accidental severing of the pigtail at Suez, but now it became wildly improbable, for he would have me believe that Li Ping, or Ah Fu, obtaining possession of the pigtail (in what manner Hi Wing Ho protested that he knew not) he sought to hold it to ransom, knowing how highly Hi Wing Ho valued it.

I glared sternly at the Chinaman, but his impassive countenance served him well. That he was lying to me I no longer doubted; for Ah Fu could not have hoped to secure such a price as would justify his committing murder; furthermore, the presence of the unfortunate Jewess in the case was not accounted for by the ingenious narrative of Hi Wing Ho. I was standing staring at him and wondering what course to adopt, when yet again my restless door-bell clamoured in the silence.

Hi Wing Ho started nervously, exhibiting the first symptoms of alarm which I had perceived in him. My mind was made up in an instant. I took my revolver from the drawer and covered him.

"Be good enough to open the door, Hi Wing Ho," I said coldly.

He shrank from me, pouring forth voluble protestations.

"Open the door!"

I clenched my left fist and advanced upon him. He scuttled away with his odd Chinese gait and threw open the door. Standing before me I saw my friend Detective Sergeant Durham, and with him a remarkably tall and very large-boned man whose square-jawed face was deeply tanned and whose aspect was dourly Scottish.

When the piercing eyes of this stranger rested upon Hi Wing Ho an expression which I shall never forget entered into them; an expression coldly murderous. As for the Chinaman, he literally crumpled up.

"You rat!" roared the stranger.

Taking one long stride he stooped upon the Chinaman, seized him by the back of the neck as a terrier might seize a rat, and lifted him to his feet.

THE PIGTAIL OF HI WING HO

"The mystery of the pigtail, Mr. Knox," said the detective, "is solved at last."

"Have ye got it?" demanded the Scotsman, turning to me, but without releasing his hold upon the neck of Hi Wing Ho.

I took the pigtail from my pocket and dangled it before his eyes.

"Suppose you come into my study," I said, "and explain matters."

We entered the room which had been the scene of so many singular happenings. The detective and I seated ourselves, but the Scotsman, holding the Chinaman by the neck as though he had been some inanimate bundle, stood just within the doorway, one of the most gigantic specimens of manhood I had ever set eyes upon.

"You do the talking, sir," he directed the detective; "ye have all the facts."

While Durham talked, then, we all listened—excepting the Chinaman, who was past taking an intelligent interest in anything, and who, to judge from his starting eyes, was being slowly strangled.

"The gentleman," said Durham—"Mr. Nicholson—arrived two days ago from the East. He is a buyer for a big firm of diamond merchants, and some weeks ago a valuable diamond was stolen from him——"

"By this!" interrupted the Scotsman, shaking the wretched Hi Wing Ho terrier fashion.

"By Hi Wing Ho," explained the detective, "whom you see before you. The theft was a very ingenious one, and the man succeeded in getting away with his haul. He tried to dispose of the diamond to a certain Isaac Cohenberg, a Singapore moneylender; but Isaac Cohenberg was the bigger crook of the two. Hi Wing Ho only escaped from the establishment of Cohenberg by dint of sandbagging the moneylender, and quitted the town by a boat which left the same night. On the voyage he was indiscreet enough to take the diamond from its hiding-place and surreptitiously to examine it. Another member of the Chinese crew, one Li Ping—otherwise Ah Fu, the accredited agent of old Huang Chow!—was secretly watching our friend, and, knowing that he possessed this valuable jewel, he also learned where he kept it hidden. At Suez Ah Fu attacked Hi Wing Ho and secured possession of the diamond. It was to secure possession of the diamond that Ah Fu had gone out East. I don't doubt it. He employed Hi Wing Ho—and Hi Wing Ho tried to double on him!"

"We are indebted to you, Mr. Knox, for some of the data upon which we have reconstructed the foregoing and also for the next link in the narrative. A fireman ashore from the Jupiter intruded upon the scene at Suez and deprived Ah Fu of the fruits of his labours. Hi Wing Ho seems to have been badly damaged in the scuffle, but Ah Fu, the more wily of the two, evidently followed the fireman, and, deserting from his own ship, signed on with the Jupiter."

While this story was enlightening in some respects, it was mystifying in others. I did not interrupt, however, for Durham immediately resumed:

"The drama was complicated by the presence of a fourth character—the daughter of Cohenberg. Realizing that a small fortune had slipped through his fingers, the old moneylender dispatched his daughter in pursuit of Hi Wing Ho, having learned upon which vessel the latter had sailed. He had no difficulty in obtaining this information, for he is in touch with all the crooks of the town. Had he known that the diamond had been stolen by an agent of Huang Chow, he would no doubt have hesitated. Huang Chow has an international reputation.

"However, his daughter—a girl of great personal beauty—relied upon her diplomatic gifts to regain possession of the stone, but, poor creature, she had not counted with Ah Fu, who was evidently watching your chambers (while Hi Wing Ho, it seems, was assiduously shadowing Ah Fu!). How she traced the diamond from point to point of its travels we do not know, and probably never shall know, but she was undeniably clever and unscrupulous. Poor girl! She came to a dreadful end. Mr. Nicholson, here, identified her at Bow Street to-night."

Now the whole amazing truth burst upon me.

"I understand!" I cried. "This"—and I snatched up the pigtail—

"That my pigtail," moaned Hi Wing Ho feebly.

Mr. Nicholson pitched him unceremoniously into a corner of the room, and taking the pigtail in his huge hand, clumsily unfastened it. Out from the thick part, some two inches below the point at which it had been cut from the Chinaman's head, a great diamond dropped upon the floor!

For perhaps twenty seconds there was perfect silence in my study. No one stooped to pick the diamond from the floor—the diamond which now had blood upon it. No one, so far as my sense informed me, stirred. But when, following those moments of stupefaction, we all looked up—Hi Wing Ho, like a phantom, had faded from the room!

THE PIGTAIL OF HI WING HO