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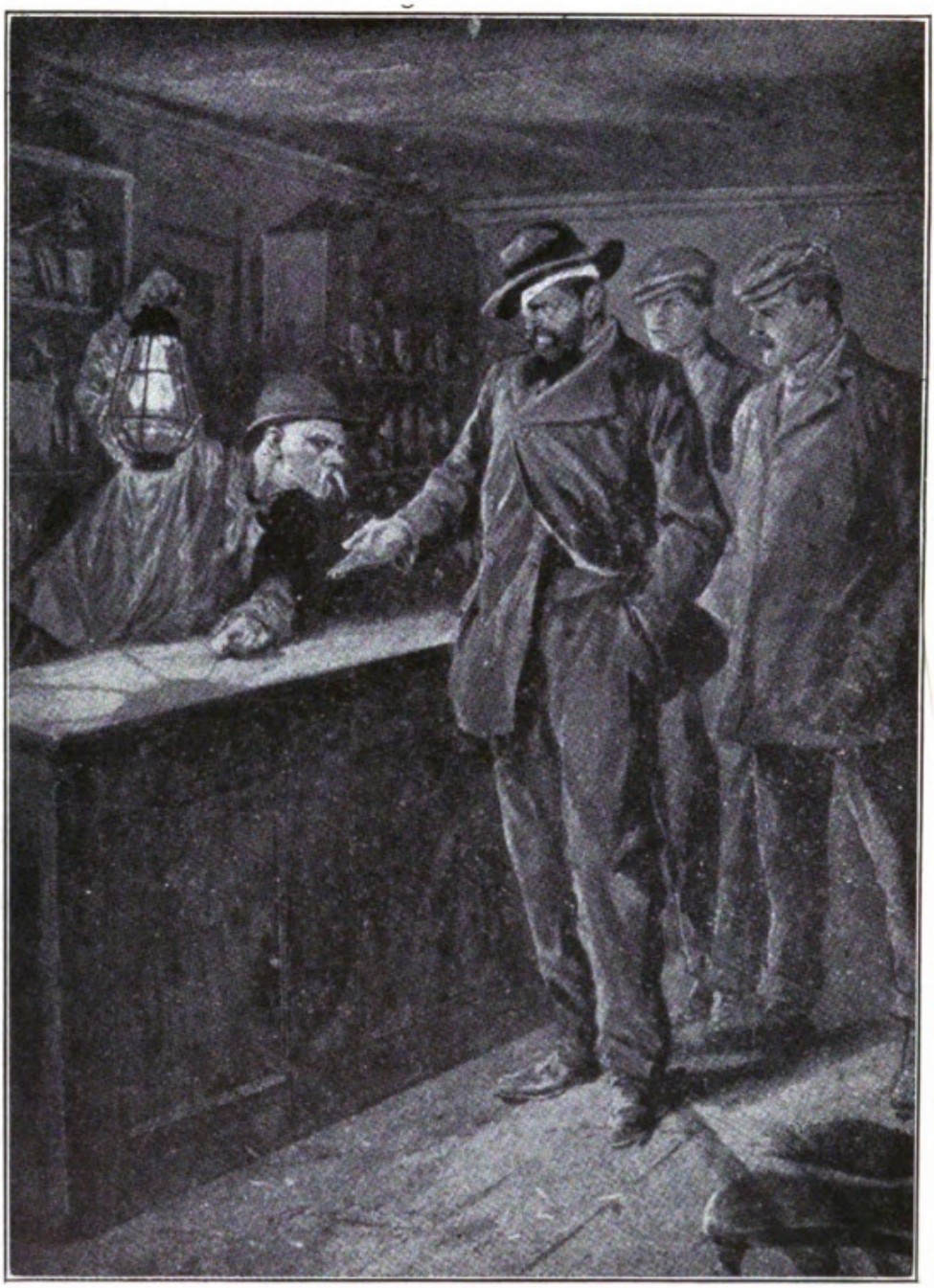

The Chinaman lifted the lamp and directed its light fully upon me

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THE
HAND OF FU-MANCHU

By SAX ROHMER

BEING A NEW PHASE IN THE ACTIVITIES
OF FU-MANCHU, THE DEVIL DOCTOR

McKINLAY, STONE & MACKENZIE
NEW YORK

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THE HAND OF FU-MANCHU

CHAPTER I

THE TRAVELER FROM TIBET

"WHO'S there?" I called sharply.

I turned and looked across the room. The window had been widely opened when I entered, and a faint fog haze hung in the apartment, seeming to veil the light of the shaded lamp. I watched the closed door intently, expecting every moment to see the knob turn. But nothing happened.

"Who's there?" I cried again, and, crossing the room, I threw open the door.

The long corridor without, lighted only by one inhospitable lamp at a remote end, showed choked and yellowed with this same fog so characteristic of London in November. But nothing moved to right nor left of me. The New Louvre Hotel was in some respects yet incomplete, and the long passage in which I stood, despite its marble facings, had no air of comfort or good cheer; palatial it was, but inhospitable.

I returned to the room, reclosing the door behind

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me, then for some five minutes or more I stood listening for a repetition of that mysterious sound, as of something that both dragged and tapped, which already had arrested my attention. My vigilance went unrewarded. I had closed the window to exclude the yellow mist, but subconsciously I was aware of its encircling presence, walling me in, and now I found myself in such a silence as I had known in deserts but could scarce have deemed possible in fog-bound London, in the heart of the world's metropolis, with the traffic of the Strand below me upon one side and the restless life of the river upon the other.

It was easy to conclude that I had been mistaken, that my nervous system was somewhat overwrought as a result of my hurried return from Cairo — from Cairo where I had left behind me many a fondly cherished hope. I addressed myself again to the task of unpacking my steamer-trunk and was so engaged when again a sound in the corridor outside brought me upright with a jerk.

A quick footstep approached the door, and there came a muffled rapping upon the panel.

This time I asked no question, but leapt across the room and threw the door open. Nayland Smith stood before me, muffled up in a heavy traveling coat, and with his hat pulled down over his brows.

"At last!" I cried, as my friend stepped in and quickly reclosed the door.

Smith threw his hat upon the settee, stripped off

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the great-coat, and pulling out his pipe began to load it in feverish haste.

"Well," I said, standing amid the litter cast out from the trunk, and watching him eagerly, "what's afoot?"

Nayland Smith lighted his pipe, carelessly dropping the match-end upon the floor at his feet.

"God knows what *is* afoot this time, Petrie!" he replied. "You and I have lived no commonplace lives; Dr. Fu-Manchu has seen to that; but if I am to believe what the Chief has told me to-day, even stranger things are ahead of us!"

I stared at him wonder-stricken.

"That is almost incredible," I said; "terror can have no darker meaning than that which Dr. Fu-Manchu gave to it. Fu-Manchu is dead, so what have we to fear?"

"We have to fear," replied Smith, throwing himself into a corner of the settee, "the Si-Fan!"

I continued to stare, uncomprehendingly.

"The Si-Fan ——"

"I always knew and you always knew," interrupted Smith in his short, decisive manner, "that Fu-Manchu, genius though he was, remained nevertheless the servant of another or others. He was not the head of that organization which dealt in wholesale murder, which aimed at upsetting the balance of the world. I even knew the name of one, a certain mandarin, and member of the Sublime Order of the White Peacock, who was his immediate supe-

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rior. I had never dared to guess at the identity of what I may term the Head Center."

He ceased speaking, and sat gripping his pipe grimly between his teeth, whilst I stood staring at him almost fatuously. Then —

"Evidently you have much to tell me," I said, with forced calm.

I drew up a chair beside the settee and was about to sit down.

"Suppose you bolt the door," jerked my friend.

I nodded, entirely comprehending, crossed the room and shot the little nickle bolt into its socket.

"Now," said Smith as I took my seat, "the story is a fragmentary one in which there are many gaps. Let us see what we know. It seems that the despatch which led to my sudden recall (and incidentally yours) from Egypt to London and which only reached me as I was on the point of embarking at Suez for Rangoon, was prompted by the arrival here of Sir Gregory Hale, whilom attaché at the British Embassy, Peking. So much, you will remember, was conveyed in my instructions."

"Quite so."

"Furthermore, I was instructed, you'll remember, to put up at the New Louvre Hotel; therefore you came here and engaged this suite whilst I reported to the chief. A stranger business is before us, Petrie, I verily believe, than any we have known hitherto. In the first place, Sir Gregory Hale is here ——"

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"Here?"

"In the New Louvre Hotel. I ascertained on the way up, but not by direct inquiry, that he occupies a suite similar to this, and incidentally on the same floor."

"His report to the India Office, whatever its nature, must have been a sensational one."

"He has made no report to the India Office."

"What! made no report?"

"He has not entered any office whatever, nor will he receive any representative. He's been playing at Robinson Crusoe in a private suite here for close upon a fortnight — *id est* since the time of his arrival in London!"

I suppose my growing perplexity was plainly visible, for Smith suddenly burst out with his short, boyish laugh.

"Oh! I told you it was a strange business," he cried.

"Is he mad?"

Nayland Smith's gaiety left him; he became suddenly stern and grim.

"Either mad, Petrie, stark raving mad, or the savior of the Indian Empire — perhaps of all Western civilization. Listen. Sir Gregory Hale, whom I know slightly and who honors me, apparently, with a belief that I am the only man in Europe worthy of his confidence, resigned his appointment at Peking some time ago, and set out upon a private expedition to the Mongolian frontier with the avowed intention

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of visiting some place in the Gobi Desert. From the time that he actually crossed the frontier he disappeared for nearly six months, to reappear again suddenly and dramatically in London. He buried himself in this hotel, refusing all visitors and only advising the authorities of his return by telephone. He demanded that *I* should be sent to see him; and — despite his eccentric methods — so great is the Chief's faith in Sir Gregory's knowledge of matters Far Eastern, that behold, here I am."

He broke off abruptly and sat in an attitude of tense listening. Then —

"Do you hear anything, Petrie?" he rapped.

"A sort of tapping?" I inquired, listening intently myself the while.

Smith nodded his head rapidly.

We both listened for some time, Smith with his head bent slightly forward and his pipe held in his hands; I with my gaze upon the bolted door. A faint mist still hung in the room, and once I thought I detected a slight sound from the bedroom beyond, which was in darkness. Smith noted me turn my head, and for a moment the pair of us stared into the gap of the doorway. But the silence was complete.

"You have told me neither much nor little, Smith," I said, resuming for some reason, in a hushed voice. "Who or what is this Si-Fan at whose existence you hint?"

Nayland Smith smiled grimly.

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"Possibly the real and hitherto unsolved riddle of Tibet, Petrie," he replied —"a mystery concealed from the world behind the veil of Lamaism." He stood up abruptly, glancing at a scrap of paper which he took from his pocket —"Suite Number 14a," he said. "Come along! We have not a moment to waste. Let us make our presence known to Sir Gregory — the man who has dared to raise that veil."

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CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITH THE LIMP

"LOCK the door!" said Smith significantly, as we stepped into the corridor.

I did so and had turned to join my friend when, to the accompaniment of a sort of hysterical muttering, a door further along, and on the opposite side of the corridor, was suddenly thrown open, and a man whose face showed ghastly white in the light of the solitary lamp beyond, literally hurled himself out. He perceived Smith and myself immediately. Throwing one glance back over his shoulder he came tottering forward to meet us.

"My God! I can't stand it any longer!" he babbled, and threw himself upon Smith, who was foremost, clutching pitifully at him for support. "Come in and see him, sir — for Heaven's sake come in! I think he's dying; and he's going mad. I never disobeyed an order in my life before, but I can't help myself — I can't help myself!"

"Brace up!" I cried, seizing him by the shoulders as, still clutching at Nayland Smith, he turned his ghastly face to me. "Who are you, and what's your trouble?"

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"I'm Beeton, Sir Gregory Hale's man."

Smith started visibly, and his gaunt, tanned face seemed to me to have grown perceptibly paler.

"Come on, Petrie!" he snapped. "There's some devilry here."

Thrusting Beeton aside he rushed in at the open door — upon which, as I followed him, I had time to note the number, 14a. It communicated with a suite of rooms almost identical with our own. The sitting-room was empty and in the utmost disorder, but from the direction of the principal bedroom came a most horrible mumbling and gurgling sound — a sound utterly indescribable. For one instant we hesitated at the threshold — hesitated to face the horror beyond; then almost side by side we came into the bedroom. . . .

Only one of the two lamps was alight — that above the bed; and on the bed a man lay writhing. He was incredibly gaunt, so that the suit of tropical twill which he wore hung upon him in folds, showing, if such evidence were necessary, how terribly he was fallen away from his constitutional habit. He wore a beard of at least ten days' growth, which served to accentuate the cavitous hollowness of his face. His eyes seemed starting from their sockets as he lay upon his back uttering inarticulate sounds and plucking with skinny fingers at his lips.

Smith bent forward peering into the wasted face; and then started back with a suppressed cry.

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"Merciful God! can it be Hale?" he muttered. "What does it mean? what does it mean?"

I ran to the opposite side of the bed, and placing my arms under the writhing man, raised him and propped a pillow at his back. He continued to babble, rolling his eyes from side to side hideously; then by degrees they seemed to become less glazed, and a light of returning sanity entered them. They became fixed; and they were fixed upon Nayland Smith, who, bending over the bed, was watching Sir Gregory (for Sir Gregory I concluded this pitiable wreck to be) with an expression upon his face compound of many emotions.

"A glass of water," I said, catching the glance of the man Beeton, who stood trembling at the open doorway.

Spilling a liberal quantity upon the carpet, Beeton ultimately succeeded in conveying the glass to me. Hale, never taking his gaze from Smith, gulped a little of the water and then thrust my hand away. As I turned to place the tumbler upon a small table he resumed the wordless babbling, and now, with his index finger, pointed to his mouth.

"He has lost the power of speech!" whispered Smith.

"He was stricken dumb, gentlemen, ten minutes ago," said Beeton in a trembling voice. "He dropped off to sleep out there on the floor, and I brought him in here and laid him on the bed. When he woke up he was like that!"

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The man on the bed ceased his inchoate babbling and now, gulping noisily, began to make quick nervous movements with his hands.

"He wants to write something," said Smith in a low voice. "Quick! hold him up!"

He thrust his notebook, open at a blank page, before the man whose moments were numbered, and placed a pencil in the shaking right hand.

Faintly and unevenly Sir Gregory commenced to write — whilst I supported him. Across the bent shoulders Smith silently questioned me, and my reply was a negative shake of the head.

The lamp above the bed was swaying as if in a heavy draught; I remembered that it had been swaying as we entered. There was no fog in the room, but already from the bleak corridor outside it was entering; murky, yellow clouds steaming in at the open door. Save for the gulping of the dying man, and the sobbing breaths of Beeton, there was no sound. Six irregular lines Sir Gregory Hale scrawled upon the page; then suddenly his body became a dead weight in my arms. Gently I laid him back upon the pillows, gently disengaged his fingers from the notebook, and, my head almost touching Smith's as we both craned forward over the page, read, with great difficulty, the following: —

"Guard my diary. . . . Tibetan frontier . . . Key of India. Beware man . . . with the limp. Yellow . . . rising. Watch Tibet . . . the *Si-Fan*. . . ."

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From somewhere outside the room, whether above or below I could not be sure, came a faint dragging sound, accompanied by a *tap — tap — tap*. . . .

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CHAPTER III

"SÂKYA MÛNI"

THE faint disturbance faded into silence again. Across the dead man's body I met Smith's gaze. Faint wreaths of fog floated in from the outer room. Beeton clutched the foot of the bed, and the structure shook in sympathy with his wild trembling. That was the only sound now; there was absolutely nothing physical so far as my memory serves to signalize the coming of the brown man.

Yet, stealthy as his approach had been, something must have warned us. For suddenly, with one accord, we three turned our eyes away from the poor emaciated thing upon the bed, and stared out into the room from which the fog wreaths floated in.

Beeton stood nearest to the door, but, although he turned, he did not go out, but with a smothered cry crouched back against the bed. Smith it was who moved first, then I followed, and close upon his heels burst into the disordered sitting-room. The outer door had been closed but not bolted, and what with the tinted light, diffused through the silken Japanese shade, and the presence of fog in the room, I was almost tempted to believe myself the victim of a delusion. What I saw or thought I saw was this: —

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A tall screen stood immediately inside the door, and around its end, like some materialization of the choking mist, glided a lithe, yellow figure, a slim, crouching figure, wearing a sort of loose robe. An impression I had of jet-black hair, protruding from beneath a little cap, of finely chiseled features and great, luminous eyes, then, with no sound to tell of a door opened or shut, the apparition was gone.

"You saw him, Petrie! — you saw him!" cried Smith.

In three bounds he was across the room, had tossed the screen aside and thrown open the door. Out he sprang into the yellow haze of the corridor, tripped, and, uttering a cry of pain, fell sprawling upon the marble floor. Hot with apprehension I joined him, but he looked up with a wry smile and began furiously rubbing his left shin.

"A queer trick, Petrie," he said, rising to his feet; "but nevertheless effective."

He pointed to the object which had occasioned his fall. It was a small metal chest, evidently of very considerable weight, and it stood immediately outside the door of Number 14a.

"That was what he came for, sir! That was what he came for! You were too quick for him!"

Beeton stood behind us, his horror-bright eyes fixed upon the box.

"Eh?" rapped Smith, turning upon him.

"That's what Sir Gregory brought to England," the man ran on almost hysterically; "that's what

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he's been guarding this past two weeks, night and day, crouching over it with a loaded pistol. That's what cost him his life, sir. He's had no peace, day or night, since he got it. . . ."

We were inside the room again now, Smith bearing the coffer in his arms, and still the man ran on:

"He's never slept for more than an hour at a time, that I know of, for weeks past. Since the day we came here he hasn't spoken to another living soul, and he's lain there on the floor at night with his head on that brass box, and sat watching over it all day.

"'Beeton!' he'd cry out, perhaps in the middle of the night—'Beeton—do you hear that damned woman!' But although I'd begun to think I could hear something, I believe it was the constant strain working on my nerves and nothing else at all.

"Then he was always listening out for some one he called 'the man with the limp.' Five and six times a night he'd have me up to listen with him. 'There he goes, Beeton!' he'd whisper, crouching with his ear pressed flat to the door. 'Do you hear him dragging himself along?'

"God knows how I've stood it as I have; for I've known no peace since we left China. Once we got here I thought it would be better, but it's been worse.

"Gentlemen have come (from the India Office, I believe), but he would not see them. Said he would see no one but Mr. Nayland Smith. He had never

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lain in his bed until to-night, but what with taking no proper food nor sleep, and some secret trouble that was killing him by inches, he collapsed altogether a while ago, and I carried him in and laid him on the bed as I told you. Now he's dead—now he's dead."

Beeton leant up against the mantelpiece and buried his face in his hands, whilst his shoulders shook convulsively. He had evidently been greatly attached to his master, and I found something very pathetic in this breakdown of a physically strong man. Smith laid his hand upon his shoulders.

"You have passed through a very trying ordeal," he said, "and no man could have done his duty better; but forces beyond your control have proved too strong for you. I am Nayland Smith."

The man spun around with a surprising expression of relief upon his pale face.

"So that whatever can be done," continued my friend, "to carry out your master's wishes, will be done now. Rely upon it. Go into your room and lie down until we call you."

"Thank you, sir, and thank God you are here," said Beeton dazedly, and with one hand raised to his head he went, obediently, to the smaller bedroom and disappeared within.

"Now, Petrie," rapped Smith, glancing around the littered floor, "since I am empowered to deal with this matter as I see fit, and since you are a medical man, we can devote the next half-hour, at

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any rate, to a strictly confidential inquiry into this most perplexing case. I propose that you examine the body for any evidences that may assist you in determining the cause of death, whilst I make a few inquiries here."

I nodded, without speaking, and went into the bedroom. It contained not one solitary item of the dead man's belongings, and in every way bore out Beeton's statement that Sir Gregory had never inhabited it. I bent over Hale, as he lay fully dressed upon the bed.

Saving the singularity of the symptom which had immediately preceded death — viz., the paralysis of the muscles of articulation—I should have felt disposed to ascribe his end to sheer inanition; and a cursory examination brought to light nothing contradictory to that view. Not being prepared to proceed further in the matter at the moment I was about to rejoin Smith, whom I could hear rummaging about amongst the litter of the outer room, when I made a curious discovery.

Lying in a fold of the disordered bed linen were a few petals of some kind of blossom, three of them still attached to a fragment of slender stalk.

I collected the tiny petals, mechanically, and held them in the palm of my hand studying them for some moments before the mystery of their presence there became fully appreciable to me. Then I began to wonder. The petals (which I was disposed to class as belonging to some species of *Curcas* or

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Physic Nut), though bruised, were fresh, and therefore could not have been in the room for many hours. How had they been introduced, and by whom? Above all, what could their presence there at that time portend?

"Smith," I called, and walked towards the door carrying the mysterious fragments in my palm. "Look what I have found upon the bed."

Nayland Smith, who was bending over an open despatch case which he had placed upon a chair, turned—and his glance fell upon the petals and tiny piece of stem.

I think I have never seen so sudden a change of expression take place in the face of any man. Even in that imperfect light I saw him blanch. I saw a hard glitter come into his eyes. He spoke, evenly, but hoarsely:

"Put those things down — there, on the table; anywhere."

I obeyed him without demur; for something in his manner had chilled me with foreboding.

"You did not break that stalk?"

"No. I found it as you see it."

"Have you smelt the petals?"

I shook my head. Thereupon, having his eyes fixed upon me with the strangest expression in their gray depths, Nayland Smith said a singular thing.

"Pronounce, slowly, the words '*Sâkya Mûni*,'" he directed.

I stared at him, scarce crediting my senses; but —

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"I mean it!" he rapped. "Do as I tell you."
"Sâkya Mûni," I said, in ever increasing wonder. Smith laughed unmirthfully.
"Go into the bathroom and thoroughly wash your hands," was his next order. "Renew the water at least three times." As I turned to fulfil his instructions, for I doubted no longer his deadly earnestness: "Beeton!" he called.

Beeton, very white-faced and shaky, came out from the bedroom as I entered the bathroom, and whilst I proceeded carefully to cleanse my hands I heard Smith interrogating him.

"Have any flowers been brought into the room to-day, Beeton?"

"Flowers, sir? Certainly not. Nothing has ever been brought in here but what I have brought myself."

"You are certain of that?"

"Positive."

"Who brought up the meals, then?"

"If you'll look into my room here, sir, you'll see that I have enough tinned and bottled stuff to last us for weeks. Sir Gregory sent me out to buy it on the day we arrived. No one else had left or entered these rooms until you came to-night."

I returned to find Nayland Smith standing tugging at the lobe of his left ear in evident perplexity. He turned to me.

"I find my hands over full," he said. "Will you oblige me by telephoning for Inspector Weymouth?

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Also, I should be glad if you would ask M. Samarkan, the manager, to see me here immediately."

As I was about to quit the room —

"Not a word of our suspicions to M. Samarkan," he added; "nor a word about the brass box."

I was far along the corridor ere I remembered that which, remembered earlier, had saved me the journey. There was a telephone in every suite. However, I was not indisposed to avail myself of an opportunity for a few moments' undisturbed reflection, and, avoiding the lift, I descended by the broad, marble staircase.

To what strange adventure were we committed? What did the brass coffer contain which Sir Gregory had guarded night and day? Something associated in some way with Tibet, something which he believed to be "the key of India" and which had brought in its train, presumably, the sinister "man with a limp."

Who was the "man with the limp"? What was the Si-Fan? Lastly, by what conceivable means could the flower, which my friend evidently regarded with extreme horror, have been introduced into Hale's room, and why had I been required to pronounce the words "Sâkya Mûni"?

So ran my reflections — at random and to no clear end; and, as is often the case in such circumstances, my steps bore them company; so that all at once I became aware that instead of having gained the lobby of the hotel, I had taken some wrong turning

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and was in a part of the building entirely unfamiliar to me.

A long corridor of the inevitable white marble extended far behind me. I had evidently traversed it. Before me was a heavily curtained archway. Irritably, I pulled the curtain aside, learnt that it masked a glass-paneled door, opened this door — and found myself in a small court, dimly lighted and redolent of some pungent, incense-like perfume.

One step forward I took, then pulled up abruptly. A sound had come to my ears. From a second curtained doorway, close to my right hand, it came — a sound of muffled *tapping*, together with that of something which dragged upon the floor.

Within my brain the words seemed audibly to form: "The man with the limp!"

I sprang to the door; I had my hand upon the drapery . . . when a woman stepped out, barring the way!

No impression, not even a vague one, did I form of her costume, save that she wore a green silk shawl, embroidered with raised white figures of birds, thrown over her head and shoulders and draped in such fashion that part of her face was concealed. I was transfixed by the vindictive glare of her eyes, of her huge dark eyes.

They were ablaze with anger — but it was not this expression within them which struck me so forcibly as the fact that they were in some way familiar.

Motionless, we faced one another. Then —

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"You go away," said the woman — at the same time extending her arms across the doorway as barriers to my progress.

Her voice had a husky intonation; her hands and arms, which were bare and of old ivory hue, were laden with barbaric jewelry, much of it tawdry silverware of the bazaars. Clearly she was a half caste of some kind; probably a Eurasian.

I hesitated. The sounds of dragging and tapping had ceased. But the presence of this grotesque Oriental figure only increased my anxiety to pass the doorway. I looked steadily into the black eyes; they looked into mine unflinchingly.

"You go away, please," repeated the woman, raising her right hand and pointing to the door whereby I had entered. "These private rooms. What you doing here?"

Her words, despite her broken English, served to recall to me the fact that I was, beyond doubt, a trespasser! By what right did I presume to force my way into other people's apartments?

"There is some one in there whom I must see," I said, realizing, however, that my chance of doing so was poor.

"You see nobody," she snapped back uncompromisingly. "You go away!"

She took a step towards me, continuing to point to the door. Where had I previously encountered the glance of those splendid, savage eyes?

So engaged was I with this taunting, partial mem-

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ory, and so sure, if the woman would but uncover her face, of instantly recognizing her, that still I hesitated. Whereupon, glancing rapidly over her shoulder into whatever place lay beyond the curtained doorway, she suddenly stepped back and vanished, drawing the curtains to with an angry jerk.

I heard her retiring footsteps; then came a loud bang. If her object in intercepting me had been to cover the slow retreat of some one she had succeeded.

Recognizing that I had cut a truly sorry figure in the encounter, I retraced my steps.

By what route I ultimately regained the main staircase I have no idea; for my mind was busy with that taunting memory of the two dark eyes looking out from the folds of the green embroidered shawl. Where, and when, had I met their glance before? To that problem I sought an answer in vain.

The message despatched to New Scotland Yard, I found M. Samarkan, long famous as a *maître d'hôtel* in Cairo, and now host of London's newest and most palatial *khan*. Portly, and wearing a gray imperial, M. Samarkan had the manners of a courtier, and the smile of a true Greek.

I told him what was necessary, and no more, desiring him to go to suite 14a without delay and also without arousing unnecessary attention. I dropped no hint of foul play, but M. Samarkan expressed profound (and professional) regret that so distinguished, though unprofitable, a patron should have

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selected the New Louvre, thus early in its history, as the terminus of his career.

"By the way," I said, "have you Oriental guests with you, at the moment?"

M. Samarkan raised his heavy eyebrows.

"No, monsieur," he assured me.

"Not a certain Oriental lady?" I persisted.

M. Samarkan slowly shook his head.

"Possibly monsieur has seen one of the *ayahs?* There are several Anglo-Indian families resident in the New Louvre at present."

An *ayah?* It was just possible, of course. Yet . . .

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CHAPTER IV

THE FLOWER OF SILENCE

"WE are dealing now," said Nayland Smith, pacing restlessly up and down our sitting-room, "not, as of old, with Dr. Fu-Manchu, but with an entirely unknown quantity — the Si-Fan."

"For Heaven's sake!" I cried, "what is the Si-Fan?"

"The greatest mystery of the mysterious East, Petrie. Think. You know, as I know, that a malignant being, Dr. Fu-Manchu, was for some time in England, engaged in 'paving the way' (I believe those words were my own) for nothing less than a giant Yellow Empire. That dream is what millions of Europeans and Americans term 'the Yellow Peril'! Very good. Such an empire needs must have ——"

"An emperor!"

Nayland Smith stopped his restless pacing immediately in front of me.

"Why not an *empress*, Petrie!" he rapped.

His words were something of a verbal thunderbolt; I found myself at loss for any suitable reply.

"You will perhaps remind me," he continued rapidly, "of the lowly place held by women in the

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East. I can cite notable exceptions, ancient and modern. In fact, a moment's consideration will reveal many advantages in the creation by a hypothetical body of Eastern dynast-makers not of an emperor but of an empress. Finally, there is a persistent tradition throughout the Far East that such a woman will one day rule over the known peoples. I was assured some years ago, by a very learned pundit, that a princess of incalculably ancient lineage, residing in some secret monastery in Tartary or Tibet, was to be the future empress of the world. I believe this tradition, or the extensive group who seek to keep it alive and potent, to be what is called the Si-Fan!"

I was past greater amazement; but —

"This lady can be no longer young, then?" I asked.

"On the contrary, Petrie, she remains always young and beautiful by means of a continuous series of reincarnations; also she thus conserves the collated wisdom of many ages. In short, she is the archetype of Lamaism. The real secret of Lama celibacy is the existence of this immaculate ruler, of whom the Grand Lama is merely a high priest. She has, as attendants, maidens of good family, selected for their personal charms, and rendered dumb in order that they may never report what they see and hear."

"Smith!" I cried, "this is utterly incredible!"

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"Her body slaves are not only mute, but blind; for it is death to look upon her beauty unveiled."

I stood up impatiently.

"You are amusing yourself," I said.

Nayland Smith clapped his hands upon my shoulders, in his own impulsive fashion, and looked earnestly into my eyes.

"Forgive me, old man," he said, "if I have related all these fantastic particulars as though I gave them credence. Much of this is legendary, I know, some of it mere superstition, but — I am serious now, Petrie — *part of it is true.*"

I stared at the square-cut, sun-tanned face; and no trace of a smile lurked about that grim mouth.

"Such a woman may actually exist, Petrie, only in legend; but, nevertheless, she forms the head center of that giant conspiracy in which the activities of Dr. Fu-Manchu were merely a part. Hale blundered on to this stupendous business; and from what I have gathered from Beeton and what I have seen for myself, it is evident that in yonder coffer"— he pointed to the brass chest standing hard by —"Hale got hold of something indispensable to the success of this vast Yellow conspiracy. That he was followed here, to the very hotel, by agents of this mystic Unknown is evident. But," he added grimly, "they have failed in their object!"

A thousand outrageous possibilities fought for precedence in my mind.

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"Smith!" I cried, "the half-caste woman whom I saw in the hotel . . ."

Nayland Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably, as M. Samarkan suggests, an *ayah!*" he said; but there was an odd note in his voice and an odd look in his eyes.

"Then again, I am almost certain that Hale's warning concerning 'the man with the limp' was no empty one. Shall you open the brass chest?"

"At present, decidedly *no*. Hale's fate renders his warning one that I dare not neglect. For I was with him when he died; and they cannot know how much *I* know. How did he die? How did he die? How was the Flower of Silence introduced into his closely guarded room?"

"The Flower of Silence?"

Smith laughed shortly and unmirthfully.

"I was once sent for," he said, "during the time that I was stationed in Upper Burma, to see a stranger — a sort of itinerant Buddhist priest, so I understood, who had desired to communicate some message to me personally. He was dying — in a dirty hut on the outskirts of Manipur, up in the hills. When I arrived I saw at a glance that the man was a Tibetan monk. He must have crossed the river and come down through Assam; but the nature of his message I never knew. He had lost the power of speech! He was gurgling, inarticulate, just like poor Hale. A few moments after my arrival he breathed his last. The fellow who had guided me to

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the place bent over him — I shall always remember the scene — then fell back as though he had stepped upon an adder.

"'He holds the Flower of Silence in his hand!' he cried —' the Si-Fan! the Si-Fan!'— and bolted from the hut.

"When I went to examine the dead man, sure enough he held in one hand a little crumpled spray of flowers. I did not touch it with my fingers naturally, but I managed to loop a piece of twine around the stem, and by that means I gingerly removed the flowers and carried them to an orchid-hunter of my acquaintance who chanced to be visiting Manipur.

"Grahame — that was my orchid man's name — pronounced the specimen to be an unclassified species of *jatropha;* belonging to the *Curcas* family. He discovered a sort of hollow thorn, almost like a fang, amongst the blooms, but was unable to surmise the nature of its functions. He extracted enough of a certain fixed oil from the flowers, however, to have poisoned the pair of us!"

"Probably the breaking of a bloom . . ."

"Ejects some of this acrid oil through the thorn? Practically the uncanny thing stings when it is hurt? That is my own idea, Petrie. And I can understand how these Eastern fanatics accept their sentence — silence and death — when they have deserved it, at the hands of their mysterious organization, and commit this novel form of *hara-kiri.* But I shall not sleep soundly with that brass coffer in my possession

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until I know by what means Sir Gregory was induced to touch a Flower of Silence, and by what means it was placed in his room!"

"But, Smith, why did you direct me to-night to repeat the words, 'Sâkya Mûni'?"

Smith smiled in a very grim fashion.

"It was after the episode I have just related that I made the acquaintance of that pundit, some of whose statements I have already quoted for your enlightenment. He admitted that the Flower of Silence was an instrument frequently employed by a certain group, adding that, according to some authorities, one who had touched the flower might escape death by immediately pronouncing the sacred name of Buddha. He was no fanatic himself, however, and, marking my incredulity, he explained that the truth was this:—

"No one whose powers of speech were imperfect could possibly pronounce correctly the words 'Sâkya Mûni.' Therefore, since the first effects of this damnable thing is instantly to tie the tongue, the uttering of the sacred name of Buddha becomes practically a test whereby the victim may learn whether the venom has entered his system or not!"

I repressed a shudder. An atmosphere of horror seemed to be enveloping us, foglike.

"Smith," I said slowly, "we must be on our guard," for at last I had run to earth that elusive memory. "Unless I am strangely mistaken, the 'man' who so mysteriously entered Hale's room

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and the supposed *ayah* whom I met downstairs are one and the same. Two, at least, of the Yellow group are actually here in the New Louvre!"

The light of the shaded lamp shone down upon the brass coffer on the table beside me. The fog seemed to have cleared from the room somewhat, but since in the midnight stillness I could detect the muffled sounds of sirens from the river and the reports of fog signals from the railways, I concluded that the night was not yet wholly clear of the choking mist. In accordance with a pre-arranged scheme we had decided to guard "the key of India" (whatever it might be) turn and turn about throughout the night. In a word — we feared to sleep unguarded. Now my watch informed me that four o'clock approached, at which hour I was to arouse Smith and retire to sleep to my own bedroom.

Nothing had disturbed my vigil — that is, nothing definite. True once, about half an hour earlier, I had thought I heard the dragging and tapping sound from somewhere up above me; but since the corridor overhead was unfinished and none of the rooms opening upon it yet habitable, I concluded that I had been mistaken. The stairway at the end of our corridor, which communicated with that above, was still blocked with bags of cement and slabs of marble, in fact.

Faintly to my ears came the booming of London's clocks, beating out the hour of four. But still I sat beside the mysterious coffer, indisposed to awaken

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my friend any sooner than was necessary, particularly since I felt in no way sleepy myself.

I was to learn a lesson that night: the lesson of strict adherence to a compact. I had arranged to awaken Nayland Smith at four; and because I dallied, determined to finish my pipe ere entering his bedroom, almost it happened that Fate placed it beyond my power ever to awaken him again.

At ten minutes past four, amid a stillness so intense that the creaking of my slippers seemed a loud disturbance, I crossed the room and pushed open the door of Smith's bedroom. It was in darkness, but as I entered I depressed the switch immediately inside the door, lighting the lamp which swung from the center of the ceiling.

Glancing towards the bed, I immediately perceived that there was something different in its aspect, but at first I found this difference difficult to define. I stood for a moment in doubt. Then I realized the nature of the change which had taken place.

A lamp hung above the bed, attached to a moveable fitting, which enabled it to be raised or lowered at the pleasure of the occupant. When Smith had retired he was in no reading mood, and he had not even lighted the reading-lamp, but had left it pushed high up against the ceiling.

It was the position of this lamp which had changed. For now it swung so low over the pillow that the silken fringe of the shade almost touched my friend's face as he lay soundly asleep with one

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lean brown hand outstretched upon the coverlet.

I stood in the doorway staring, mystified, at this phenomenon; I might have stood there without intervening, until intervention had been too late, were it not that, glancing upward toward the wooden block from which ordinarily the pendant hung, I perceived that no block was visible, but only a round, black cavity from which the white flex supporting the lamp swung out.

Then, uttering a hoarse cry which rose unbidden to my lips, I sprang wildly across the room . . . for now I had seen something else!

Attached to one of the four silken tassels which ornamented the lamp-shade, so as almost to rest upon the cheek of the sleeping man, was a little corymb of bloom . . . the *Flower of Silence!*

Grasping the shade with my left hand I seized the flex with my right, and as Smith sprang upright in bed, eyes wildly glaring, I wrenched with all my might. Upward my gaze was set; and I glimpsed a yellow hand, with long, pointed finger nails. There came a loud resounding snap; an electric spark spat venomously from the circular opening above the bed; and, with the cord and lamp still fast in my grip, I went rolling across the carpet — as the other lamp became instantly extinguished.

Dimly I perceived Smith, arrayed in pajamas, jumping out upon the opposite side of the bed.

"Petrie, Petrie!" he cried, "where are you? what has happened?"

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A laugh, little short of hysterical, escaped me. I gathered myself up and made for the lighted sitting-room.

"Quick, Smith!" I said — but I did not recognize my own voice. "Quick — come out of that room."

I crossed to the settee, and shaking in every limb, sank down upon it. Nayland Smith, still wild-eyed, and his face a mask of bewilderment, came out of the bedroom and stood watching me.

"For God's sake what has happened, Petrie?" he demanded, and began clutching at the lobe of his left ear and looking all about the room dazedly.

"The Flower of Silence!" I said; "some one has been at work in the top corridor. . . . Heaven knows when, for since we engaged these rooms we have not been much away from them . . . the same device as in the case of poor Hale. . . . You would have tried to brush the thing away . . ."

A light of understanding began to dawn in my friend's eyes. He drew himself stiffly upright, and in a loud, harsh voice uttered the words: "Sâkya Mûni"—and again: "Sâkya Mûni."

"Thank God!" I said shakily. "I was not too late."

Nayland Smith, with much rattling of glass, poured out two stiff pegs from the decanter. Then —

"*Ssh!* what's that?" he whispered.

He stood, tense, listening, his head cast slightly to one side.

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A very faint sound of shuffling and tapping was perceptible, coming, as I thought, from the incomplete stairway communicating with the upper corridor.

"The man with the limp!" whispered Smith.

He bounded to the door and actually had one hand upon the bolt, when he turned, and fixed his gaze upon the brass box.

"No!" he snapped; "there are occasions when prudence should rule. Neither of us must leave these rooms to-night!"

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CHAPTER V

JOHN KI'S

"WHAT is the meaning of Si-Fan?" asked Detective-sergeant Fletcher.

He stood looking from the window at the prospect below; at the trees bordering the winding embankment; at the ancient monolith which for unnumbered ages had looked across desert sands to the Nile, and now looked down upon another river of many mysteries. The view seemed to absorb his attention. He spoke without turning his head.

Nayland Smith laughed shortly.

"The Si-Fan are the natives of Eastern Tibet," he replied.

"But the term has some other significance, sir?" said the detective; his words were more of an assertion than a query.

"It has," replied my friend grimly. "I believe it to be the name, or perhaps the sigil, of an extensive secret society with branches stretching out into every corner of the Orient."

We were silent for awhile. Inspector Weymouth, who sat in a chair near the window, glanced appreciatively at the back of his subordinate, who still

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stood looking out. Detective-sergeant Fletcher was one of Scotland Yard's coming men. He had information of the first importance to communicate, and Nayland Smith had delayed his departure upon an urgent errand in order to meet him.

"Your case to date, Mr. Smith," continued Fletcher, remaining with hands locked behind him, staring from the window, "reads something like this, I believe: A brass box, locked, contents unknown, has come into your possession. It stands now upon the table there. It was brought from Tibet by a man who evidently thought that it had something to do with the Si-Fan. He is dead, possibly by the agency of members of this group. No arrests have been made. You know that there are people here in London who are anxious to regain the box. You have theories respecting the identity of some of them, but there are practically no facts."

Nayland Smith nodded his head.

"Exactly!" he snapped.

"Inspector Weymouth, here," continued Fletcher, "has put me in possession of such facts as are known to him, and I believe that I have had the good fortune to chance upon a valuable one."

"You interest me, Sergeant Fletcher," said Smith. "What is the nature of this clue?"

"I will tell you," replied the other, and turned briskly upon his heel to face us.

He had a dark, clean-shaven face, rather sallow complexion, and deep-set, searching eyes. There

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was decision in the square, cleft chin and strong character in the cleanly chiseled features. His manner was alert.

"I have specialized in Chinese crime," he said; "much of my time is spent amongst our Asiatic visitors. I am fairly familiar with the Easterns who use the port of London, and I have a number of useful acquaintances among them."

Nayland Smith nodded. Beyond doubt Detective-sergeant Fletcher knew his business.

"To my lasting regret," Fletcher continued, "I never met the late Dr. Fu-Manchu. I understand, sir, that you believe him to have been a high official of this dangerous society? However, I think we may get in touch with some other notabilities; for instance, I'm told that one of the people you're looking for has been described as 'the man with the limp'?"

Smith, who had been about to relight his pipe, dropped the match on the carpet and set his foot upon it. His eyes shone like steel.

"'The man with the limp,'" he said, and slowly rose to his feet—"what do you know of the man with the limp?"

Fletcher's face flushed slightly; his words had proved more dramatic than he had anticipated.

"There's a place down Shadwell way," he replied, "of which, no doubt, you will have heard; it has no official title, but it is known to habitués as the Joy-Shop. . . ."

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Inspector Weymouth stood up, his burly figure towering over that of his slighter confrère.

"I don't think you know John Ki's, Mr. Smith," he said. "We keep all those places pretty well patrolled, and until this present business cropped up, John's establishment had never given us any trouble."

"What is this Joy-Shop?" I asked.

"A resort of shady characters, mostly Asiatics," replied Weymouth. "It's a gambling-house, an unlicensed drinking-shop, and even worse — but it's more use to us open than it would be shut."

"It is one of my regular jobs to keep an eye on the visitors to the Joy-Shop," continued Fletcher. "I have many acquaintances who use the place. Needless to add, they don't know my real business! Well, lately several of them have asked me if I know who the man is that hobbles about the place with two sticks. Everybody seems to have heard him, but no one has seen him."

Nayland Smith began to pace the floor restlessly.

"I have heard him myself," added Fletcher, "but never managed to get so much as a glimpse of him. When I learnt about this Si-Fan mystery, I realized that he might very possibly be the man for whom you're looking — and a golden opportunity has cropped up for you to visit the Joy-Shop, and, if our luck remains in, to get a peep behind the scenes."

"I am all attention," snapped Smith.

"A woman called Zarmi has recently put in an appearance at the Joy-Shop. Roughly speaking,

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she turned up at about the same time as the unseen man with the limp. . . ."

Nayland Smith's eyes were blazing with suppressed excitement; he was pacing quickly up and down the floor, tugging at the lobe of his left ear.

"She is — different in some way from any other woman I have ever seen in the place. She's a Eurasian and good-looking, after a tigerish fashion. I have done my best"— he smiled slightly —"to get in her good books, and up to a point I've succeeded. I was there last night, and Zarmi asked me if I knew what she called a 'strong feller.'

"'These,' she informed me, contemptuously referring to the rest of the company, 'are poor weak Johnnies!'

"I had nothing definite in view at the time, for I had not then heard about your return to London, but I thought it might lead to something anyway, so I promised to bring a friend along to-night. I don't know what we're wanted to do, but . . ."

"Count upon me!" snapped Smith. "I will leave all details to you and to Weymouth, and I will be at New Scotland Yard this evening in time to adopt a suitable disguise. Petrie"— he turned impetuously to me —"I fear I shall have to go without you; but I shall be in safe company, as you see, and doubtless Weymouth can find you a part in his portion of the evening's program."

He glanced at his watch.

"Ah! I must be off. If you will oblige me, Petrie,

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by putting the brass box into my smaller portmanteau, whilst I slip my coat on, perhaps Weymouth, on his way out, will be good enough to order a taxi. I shall venture to breathe again once our unpleasant charge is safely deposited in the bank vaults!"

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CHAPTER VI

THE SI-FAN MOVE

A SLIGHT drizzling rain was falling as Smith entered the cab which the hall-porter had summoned. The brown bag in his hand contained the brass box which actually was responsible for our presence in London. The last glimpse I had of him through the glass of the closed window showed him striking a match to light his pipe — which he rarely allowed to grow cool.

Oppressed with an unaccountable weariness of spirit, I stood within the lobby looking out upon the grayness of London in November. A slight mental effort was sufficient to blot out that drab prospect and to conjure up before my mind's eye a balcony overlooking the Nile — a glimpse of dusty palms, a white wall overgrown with purple blossoms, and above all the dazzling vault of Egypt. Upon the balcony my imagination painted a figure, limning it with loving details, the figure of Kâramanèh; and I thought that her glorious eyes would be sorrowful and her lips perhaps a little tremulous, as, her arms resting upon the rail of the balcony, she looked out across the smiling river to the domes and minarets of Cairo — and beyond, into the hazy distance; see-

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ing me in dreary, rain-swept London, as I saw her, at Gezîra, beneath the cloudless sky of Egypt.

From these tender but mournful reflections I aroused myself, almost angrily, and set off through the muddy streets towards Charing Cross; for I was availing myself of the opportunity to call upon Dr. Murray, who had purchased my small suburban practise when (finally, as I thought at the time) I had left London.

This matter occupied me for the greater part of the afternoon, and I returned to the New Louvre Hotel shortly after five, and seeing no one in the lobby whom I knew, proceeded immediately to our apartment. Nayland Smith was not there, and having made some changes in my attire I descended again and inquired if he had left any message for me.

The booking-clerk informed me that Smith had not returned; therefore I resigned myself to wait. I purchased an evening paper and settled down in the lounge where I had an uninterrupted view of the entrance doors. The dinner hour approached, but still my friend failed to put in an appearance. Becoming impatient, I entered a call-box and rang up Inspector Weymouth.

Smith had not been to Scotland Yard, nor had they received any message from him.

Perhaps it would appear that there was little cause for alarm in this, but I, familiar with my friend's punctual and exact habits, became strangely uneasy. I did not wish to make myself ridiculous,

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but growing restlessness impelled me to institute inquiries regarding the cabman who had driven my friend. The result of these was to increase rather than to allay my fears.

The man was a stranger to the hall-porter, and he was not one of the taximen who habitually stood upon the neighboring rank; no one seemed to have noticed the number of the cab.

And now my mind began to play with strange doubts and fears. The driver, I recollected, had been a small, dark man, possessing remarkably well-cut olive-hued features. Had he not worn spectacles he would indeed have been handsome, in an effeminate fashion.

I was almost certain, by this time, that he had not been an Englishman; I was almost certain that some catastrophe had befallen Smith. Our ceaseless vigilance had been momentarily relaxed — and this was the result!

At some large bank branches there is a resident messenger. Even granting that such was the case in the present instance, I doubted if the man could help me, unless, as was possible, he chanced to be familiar with my friend's appearance, and had actually seen him there that day. I determined, at any rate, to make the attempt; reentering the call-box, I asked for the bank's number.

There proved to be a resident messenger, who, after a time, replied to my call. He knew Nayland Smith very well by sight, and as he had been on duty

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in the public office of the bank at the time that Smith should have arrived, he assured me that my friend had not been there that day!

"Besides, sir," he said, "you say he came to deposit valuables of some kind here?"

"Yes, yes!" I cried eagerly.

"I take all such things down on the lift to the vaults at night, sir, under the supervision of the assistant manager — and I can assure you that nothing of the kind has been left with us to-day."

I stepped out of the call-box unsteadily. Indeed, I clutched at the door for support.

"What is the meaning of Si-Fan?" Detective-sergeant Fletcher had asked that morning. None of us could answer him; none of us knew. With a haze seeming to dance between my eyes and the active life in the lobby before me, I realized that the Si-Fan —'that unseen, sinister power — had reached out and plucked my friend from the very midst of this noisy life about me, into its own mysterious, deathly silence.

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CHAPTER VII

CHINATOWN

"IT'S no easy matter," said Inspector Weymouth, "to patrol the vicinity of John Ki's Joy-Shop without their getting wind of it. The entrance, as you'll see, is a long, narrow rat-hole of a street running at right angles to the Thames. There's no point, so far as I know, from which the yard can be overlooked; and the back is on a narrow cutting belonging to a disused mill."

I paid little attention to his words. Disguised beyond all chance of recognition even by one intimate with my appearance, I was all impatience to set out. I had taken Smith's place in the night's program; for, every possible source of information having been tapped in vain, I now hoped against hope that some clue to the fate of my poor friend might be obtained at the Chinese den which he had designed to visit with Fletcher.

The latter, who presented a strange picture in his make-up as a sort of half-caste sailor, stared doubtfully at the Inspector; then —

"The River Police cutter," he said, "can drop down on the tide and lie off under the Surrey bank.

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There's a vacant wharf facing the end of the street, and we can slip through and show a light there, to let you know we've arrived. You reply in the same way. If there's any trouble, I shall blaze away with this"— he showed the butt of a Service revolver protruding from his hip-pocket —"and you can be ashore in no time."

The plan had one thing to commend it, viz., that no one could devise another. Therefore it was adopted, and five minutes later a taxi-cab swung out of the Yard containing Inspector Weymouth and two ruffianly looking companions — myself and Fletcher.

Any zest with which, at another time, I might have entered upon such an expedition, was absent now. I bore with me a gnawing anxiety and sorrow that precluded all conversation on my part, save monosyllabic replies, to questions that I comprehended but vaguely.

At the River Police Depot we found Inspector Ryman, an old acquaintance, awaiting us. Weymouth had telephoned from Scotland Yard.

"I've got a motor-boat at the breakwater," said Ryman, nodding to Fletcher, and staring hard at me.

Weymouth laughed shortly.

"Evidently you don't recognize Dr. Petrie!" he said.

"Eh!" cried Ryman —"Dr. Petrie! why, good heavens, Doctor, I should never have known you in a month of Bank holidays! What's afoot, then?"

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— and he turned to Weymouth, eyebrows raised interrogatively.

"It's the Fu-Manchu business again, Ryman."

"Fu-Manchu! But I thought the Fu-Manchu case was off the books long ago? It was always a mystery to me; never a word in the papers; and we as much in the dark as everybody else — but didn't I hear that the Chinaman, Fu-Manchu, was dead?"

Weymouth nodded.

"Some of his friends seem to be very much alive, though!" he said. "It appears that Fu-Manchu, for all his genius — and there's no denying he was a genius, Ryman — was only the agent of somebody altogether bigger."

Ryman whistled softly.

"Has the real head of affairs arrived, then?"

"We find we are up against what is known as the Si-Fan."

At that it came to the inevitable, unanswerable question.

"What is the Si-Fan?" asked Ryman blankly.

I laughed, but my laughter was not mirthful. Inspector Weymouth shook his head.

"Perhaps Mr. Nayland Smith could tell you that," he replied; "for the Si-Fan got him to-day!"

"Got him!" cried Ryman.

"Absolutely! He's vanished! And Fletcher here has found out that John Ki's place is in some way connected with this business."

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I interrupted — impatiently, I fear.

"Then let us set out, Inspector," I said, "for it seems to me that we are wasting precious time — and you know what that may mean." I turned to Fletcher. "Where is this place situated, exactly? How do we proceed?"

"The cab can take us part of the way," he replied, "and we shall have to walk the rest. Patrons of John's don't turn up in taxis, as a rule!"

"Then let us be off," I said, and made for the door.

"Don't forget the signal!" Weymouth cried after me, "and don't venture into the place until you've received our reply. . . ."

But I was already outside, Fletcher following; and a moment later we were both in the cab and off into a maze of tortuous streets toward John Ki's Joy-Shop.

With the coming of nightfall the rain had ceased, but the sky remained heavily overcast and the air was filled with clammy mist. It was a night to arouse longings for Southern skies; and when, discharging the cabman, we set out afoot along a muddy and ill-lighted thoroughfare bordered on either side by high brick walls, their monotony occasionally broken by gateways, I felt that the load of depression which had settled upon my shoulders must ere long bear me down.

Sounds of shunting upon some railway siding came to my ears; train whistles and fog signals hooted and

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boomed. River sounds there were, too, for we were close beside the Thames, that gray old stream which has borne upon its bier many a poor victim of underground London. The sky glowed sullenly red above.

"There's the Joy-Shop, along on the left," said Fletcher, breaking in upon my reflections. "You'll notice a faint light; it's shining out through the open door. Then, here is the wharf."

He began fumbling with the fastenings of a dilapidated gateway beside which we were standing; and a moment later —

"All right — slip through," he said.

I followed him through the narrow gap which the ruinous state of the gates had enabled him to force, and found myself looking under a low arch, with the Thames beyond, and a few hazy lights coming and going on the opposite bank.

"Go steady!" warned Fletcher. "It's only a few paces to the edge of the wharf."

I heard him taking a box of matches from his pocket.

"Here is my electric lamp," I said. "It will serve the purpose better."

"Good," muttered my companion. "Show a light down here, so that we can find our way."

With the aid of the lamp we found our way out on to the rotting timbers of the crazy structure. The mist hung denser over the river, but through it, as through a dirty gauze curtain, it was possible to discern some of the greater lights on the opposite

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shore. These, without exception, however, showed high up upon the fog curtain; along the water level lay a belt of darkness.

"Let me give them the signal," said Fletcher, shivering slightly and taking the lamp from my hand.

He flashed the light two or three times. Then we both stood watching the belt of darkness that followed the Surrey shore. The tide lapped upon the timbers supporting the wharf and little whispers and gurgling sounds stole up from beneath our feet. Once there was a faint splash from somewhere below and behind us.

"There goes a rat," said Fletcher vaguely, and without taking his gaze from the darkness under the distant shore. "It's gone into the cutting at the back of John Ki's."

He ceased speaking and flashed the lamp again several times. Then, all at once out of the murky darkness into which we were peering, looked a little eye of light — once, twice, thrice it winked at us from low down upon the oily waters; then was gone.

"It's Weymouth with the cutter," said Fletcher; "they are ready . . . now for John Ki's."

We stumbled back up the slight aclivity beneath the archway to the street, leaving the ruinous gates as we had found them. Into the uninviting little alley immediately opposite we plunged, and where the faint yellow luminance showed upon the muddy path before us, Fletcher paused a moment, whispering to me warningly.

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"Don't speak if you can help it," he said; "if you do, mumble any old jargon in any language you like, and throw in plenty of cursing!"

He grasped me by the arm, and I found myself crossing the threshold of the Joy-Shop — I found myself in a meanly furnished room no more than twelve feet square and very low ceiled, smelling strongly of paraffin oil. The few items of furniture which it contained were but dimly discernible in the light of a common tin lamp which stood upon a packing-case at the head of what looked like cellar steps.

Abruptly, I pulled up; for this stuffy little den did not correspond with pre-conceived ideas of the place for which we were bound. I was about to speak when Fletcher nipped my arm — and out from the shadows behind the packing-case a little bent figure arose!

I started violently, for I had had no idea that another was in the room. The apparition proved to be a Chinaman, and judging from what I could see of him, a very old Chinaman, his bent figure attired in a blue smock. His eyes were almost invisible amidst an intricate map of wrinkles which covered his yellow face.

"Evening, John," said Fletcher — and, pulling me with him, he made for the head of the steps.

As I came abreast of the packing-case, the Chinaman lifted the lamp and directed its light fully upon my face.

Great as was the faith which I reposed in my

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make-up, a doubt and a tremor disturbed me now, as I found myself thus scrutinized by those cunning old eyes looking out from the mask-like, apish face. For the first time the Chinaman spoke.

"You blinger fliend, Charlie?" he squeaked in a thin, piping voice.

"Him play piecee card," replied Fletcher briefly. "Good fellow, plenty much money."

He descended the steps, still holding my arm, and I perforce followed him. Apparently John's scrutiny and Fletcher's explanation respecting me, together had proved satisfactory; for the lamp was replaced upon the lid of the packing-case, and the little bent figure dropped down again into the shadows from which it had emerged.

"Allee lightee," I heard faintly as I stumbled downward in the wake of Fletcher.

I had expected to find myself in a cellar, but instead discovered that we were in a small square court with the mist of the night about us again. On a doorstep facing us stood a duplicate of the lamp upon the box upstairs. Evidently this was designed to indicate the portals of the Joy-Shop, for Fletcher pushed open the door, whose threshold accommodated the lamp, and the light of the place beyond shone out into our faces. We entered and my companion closed the door behind us.

Before me I perceived a long low room lighted by flaming gas-burners, the jets hissing and spluttering in the draught from the door, for they were entirely

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innocent of shades or mantles. Wooden tables, their surfaces stained with the marks of countless wet glasses, were ranged about the place, café fashion; and many of these tables accommodated groups, of nondescript nationality for the most part. One or two there were in a distant corner who were unmistakably Chinamen; but my slight acquaintance with the races of the East did not enable me to classify the greater number of those whom I now saw about me. There were several unattractive-looking women present.

Fletcher walked up the center of the place, exchanging nods of recognition with two hang-dog poker-players, and I was pleased to note that our advent had apparently failed to attract the slightest attention. Through an opening on the right-hand side of the room, near the top, I looked into a smaller apartment, occupied exclusively by Chinese. They were playing some kind of roulette and another game which seemed wholly to absorb their interest. I ventured no more than a glance, then passed on with my companion.

"*Fan-tan!*" he whispered in my ear.

Other forms of gambling were in progress at some of the tables; and now Fletcher silently drew my attention to yet a third dimly lighted apartment — this opening out from the left-hand corner of the principal room. The atmosphere of the latter was sufficiently abominable; indeed, the stench was appalling; but a wave of choking vapor met me as I

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paused for a moment at the threshold of this inner sanctuary. I formed but the vaguest impression of its interior; the smell was sufficient. This annex was evidently reserved for opium-smokers.

Fletcher sat down at a small table near by, and I took a common wooden chair which he thrust forward with his foot. What should be our next move I could not conjecture. I was looking around at the sordid scene, filled with a bitter sense of my own impotency to aid my missing friend, when that occurred which set my heart beating wildly at once with hope and excitement. Fletcher must have seen something of this in my attitude, for —

"Don't forget what I told you," he whispered. "Be cautious! — be very cautious! . . ."

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CHAPTER VIII

ZARMI OF THE JOY-SHOP

DOWN the center of the room came a girl carrying the only ornamental object which thus far I had seen in the Joy-Shop: a large Oriental brass tray. She was a figure which must have formed a center of interest in any place, trebly so, then, in such a place as this. Her costume consisted in a series of incongruities, whilst the entire effect was barbaric and by no means unpicturesque. She wore high-heeled red slippers, and, as her short gauzy skirt rendered amply evident, black silk stockings. A brilliantly colored Oriental scarf was wound around her waist and knotted in front, its tasseled ends swinging girdle fashion. A sort of chemise — like the *'anteree* of Egyptian women — completed her costume, if I except a number of barbaric ornaments, some of them of silver, with which her hands and arms were bedecked.

But strange as was the girl's attire, it was to her face that my gaze was drawn irresistibly. Evidently, like most of those around us, she was some kind of half-caste; but, unlike them, she was wickedly handsome. I use the adverb *wickedly* with deliberation; for the pallidly dusky, oval face, with the full red lips, between which rested a large yellow cigarette,

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and the half-closed almond-shaped eyes, possessed a beauty which might have appealed to an artist of one of the modern perverted schools, but which filled me less with admiration than with horror. For I *knew* her — I recognized her, from a past, brief meeting; I knew her, beyond all possibility of doubt, to be one of the Si-Fan group!

This strange creature, tossing back her jet-black, frizzy hair, which was entirely innocent of any binding or ornament, advanced along the room towards us, making unhesitatingly for our table, and carrying her lithe body with the grace of a *Gházeeyeh*.

I glanced at Fletcher across the table.

"Zarmi!" he whispered.

Again I raised my eyes to the face which now was close to mine, and became aware that I was trembling with excitement. . . .

Heavens! why did enlightenment come too late! Either I was the victim of an odd delusion, or Zarmi had been the driver of the cab in which Nayland Smith had left the New Louvre Hotel!

Zarmi placed the brass tray upon the table and bent down, resting her elbows upon it, her hands upturned and her chin nestling in her palms. The smoke from the cigarette, now held in her fingers, mingled with her dishevelled hair. She looked fully into my face, a long, searching look; then her lips parted in the slow, voluptuous smile of the Orient. Without moving her head she turned the wonderful eyes (rendered doubly luminous by the *kohl* with

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which her lashes and lids were darkened) upon Fletcher.

"What you and your strong friend drinking?" she said softly.

Her voice possessed a faint husky note which betrayed her Eastern parentage, yet it had in it the siren lure which is the ancient heritage of the Eastern woman — a heritage more ancient than the tribe of the *Gházeeyeh*, to one of whom I had mentally likened Zarmi.

"Same thing," replied Fletcher promptly; and, raising his hand, he idly toyed with a huge gold earring which she wore.

Still resting her elbows upon the table and bending down between us, Zarmi turned her slumbering, half-closed black eyes again upon me, then slowly, languishingly, upon Fletcher. She replaced the yellow cigarette between her lips. He continued to toy with the ear-ring.

Suddenly the girl sprang upright, and from its hiding-place within the silken scarf, plucked out a Malay *krîs* with a richly jeweled hilt. Her eyes now widely opened and blazing, she struck at my companion!

I half rose from my chair, stifling a cry of horror; but Fletcher, regarding her fixedly, never moved . . . and Zarmi stayed her hand just as the point of the dagger had reached his throat!

"You see," she whispered softly but intensely, "how soon I can kill you."

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