THE YELLOW MAN.

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Captain Bob Kingston, who has been roving for several years in foreign seas away from his wife and son, writes home to his wife telling her that he has made enemies and that they are seeking to be revenged on him. He warns her to give information to no one concerning him. That same day a foreigner arrives at Mrs Kingston's cottage to inquire where the captain is. He questions Davie Kingston and his mother and finally departs, leaving a curious mark affixed to the gate. II. and III.—They take counsel with Mrs Kingston's brother Jim, but he derides her fears. Jim takes his nephew Davie to the play that night, and when they return they find Mrs. Kingston and the servant murdered. A mysterious sign similar to that on the gate has been left on their foreheads. IV.—The murderers are never discovered. Davie's uncle takes charge of him, and they live together till the sign appears on their door also. Then young Kingston is sent to school, his name being changed to James Davie, so that the mysterious assassins can be thrown off the scent. His uncle meanwhile seeks for the murderers, but does not discover them. V.—After two years the lad's father returns and declares that he is being hunted by the members of a secret society and that the mark they place upon their victims is the Sign of the Hidden Meaning, or the Boxers. VI, VII and IX.—He and his son travel from town to town, trying to throw the emissaries of the society off the scent, his uncle always on their track. VIII.—He and his son travel from town to town, trying to throw the emissaries of the society of the scent, but alway fail. It is apparent that all attempts at flight or protection are futile and that a favorable opportunity alone is being waited for before the conspirators take the old man's life. X.—Captain Kingston is at last murdered by the emissaries of the Society of the Hidden Meaning. XI. and XII.—He leaves a manuscript recounting how he came to fall under the ban of the society. Having become a member, he was ordered by the head of the society, Kung, to kill a certain chief magistrate. Instead of doing so he revealed the conspiracy. He tells his successors that in order to remove the ban they must go to Cathay and find Koon-Si and kill Kung. XIII, XIV and XV.—Davie and his uncle form acquaintances, who are evidently working together to get them into a position where they can be murdered readily. One of these acquaintances discharges a pistol (he claims accidentally), which grazes Davie's head. XVI.—Mr. Charles Hilbury of Melbourne, Australia, is mysteriously murdered by an agent of the society of Hidden Meaning. It was plain that the murder had been committed by the man who shot at Davie. Davie receives an envelope containing the sign of the society. XVII and XVIII.—Davie and his uncle leave London in disguise on their way to China. On the voyage they meet with Mrs. and Miss Hurst, a widow and her daughter. XIX.—Miss Hurst, who is also under the ban of the Society of the Hidden Meaning, is thrown overboard by one of the agents, a Chinaman, and is saved by Davie. XX.—The Hursts turn out to be the wife and daughter of Mr. Hilbury, who was murdered in London. XXI.—Davie falls in love with Miss Hilbury and proposes for her hand.

He filled his brass bound pipe, drew in a deep, full breath, knocked the ashes out on the floor, and then, after apparently swallowing the smoke, ejected it in a dense volume from his nose. This he did again, consuming, amid a strange silence, at least half a dozen pipes. Then Jim, who was beginning to get restless, spoke:

"You have information? You know of Kung's whereabouts?"

"Ah," replied Koon-Si, rapping his pipe on the floor, "to gain intelligence of such a man as Kung is, as you may imagine, a feat not easy to achieve. For years I have vainly hunted, for I have a great wish to meet him once again, but it was not until a few months ago that I received reliable information of his whereabouts."

"And he is now"—

"Where he is now I cannot say, for as I have told you, Kung is everywhere, even as his influence is felt beyond the big seas, but when last I heard of him he had set up as a boat builder at Ching-hi."

"And where is Ching-hi?"

"In the Yang-tse-Kiang. It is a small island some miles below Hankow in the province of Hu-Peh."

The information, which was apparently most precise, still left much to be desired. Of course we had heard of the Yang-tse river, but through what provinces it ran, what they were like and in which was situated Hankow, we had not the faintest conception.

"And we can get there?" asked Jim.

"Easily, excellency, by steamer to Hankow."

"Good. When shall we start?"

"I am a poor man, excellency. It will cost money."

"I will see to that. You take us there."

"It shall be as you wish."

"And now," said Jim, "how had we better set to work?"

"There is no difficulty at all, excellency, if you have money. I let my shop or shut it up. It matters nothing. Then we go to Shanghai. From there to Hankow is nothing. Your excellency has money. We shall procure assistance, and Kung"—

"Well?"

"Kung is your excellency's, to do with him what you will."

It sounded simple enough, and Koon-Si had arranged an admirable little plan, but to me there seemed to be something wanting in the story, and I said, addressing the Chinaman, "Kung is a great political plotter?"

"The greatest, excellency."

"And no doubt the government would liberally reward those who captured him?"

"They would pay much, excellency. There never was one whom they feared so much as Kung."

"Then why have you not betrayed his hiding place to the government? It would relieve you of much responsibility."

I expected the man to show some sort of confusion, were it ever so little, at this direct thrust, but instead his equanimity appeared not in the least disturbed. He smiled with apparent complacency, but to my thinking his face looked infinitely diabolic.

"True, excellency, I might have done as you suggest. But you forget I am a Chinese, and I have been personally mutilated. Unlike you Christians, we Chinese do not forgive our enemies. It would not please me to hand Kung over to the government. It would not be satisfaction enough merely to know that he was punished. I want to see his punishment. I want to punish him myself."

I confess, knowing something of the Chinese character, that there was reason in this, and my momentary doubts were satisfied. Koon-Si was not pleasant to look upon, but that he was the instrument ordained for our use was so painfully apparent that there could be no question of severing ourselves from his guidance.

And so for another hour we smoked and talked intimately agreeing upon a [illegible] Koon-Si, being one of those persons who seem to know everything, counseled energetic action and, seeing that we fell readily into his wishes, informed us that on the morrow the Foochow would sail for Shanghai and advised a passage by her. Knowing no reason why we should delay our departure, we at once accepted this proposal, and Jim there and then handed the carpenter sufficient money to enable him to purchase a few necessaries and his passage. Then, overwhelmed with thanks and compliments, we were shown down stairs and out through the shop, and thankful I was to taste again the comparatively fresh air of the street.

"Tomorrow," said Koon-Si as he peered up, blinking, from his cellar, "we shall meet on board the Foochow?"

"Tomorrow," answered my uncle.

"You may not see me during the passage up," continued the carpenter, "but if you should you will remember that we are strangers. Otherwise"—here he lowered his voice and looked fearfully about—"well, the society is everywhere."

"I understand," said Jim. "We shall meet again at Shanghai?"

"At Shanghai you shall know everything."

We turned from Koon-Si and walked down the narrow street, and as we reached the bottom we hesitated for a moment which way to turn. Then it was that our friend Ah Yon advanced, smiling and bowing.

"Makee losem way?" he said.

"Hello!" cried Jim. "What are you doing here?"

"My makee wait; t'ink you makee losem way."

"Well, it is a puzzling, evil smelling place," was the reply.

Ah Yon grinned.

"Chinaman welly dirty beast. He allee same belong dog—likee bad smell. You no takee 'lickshaw?"

"No."

"Welly good. Makee walk. My makee lead."

The rascal stepped out with a jaunty gait, and with elbows, fists and tongue cleared a way for us whenever our progress was liable to receive a check from the masses of people which choked the streets.

At length we left the worst part of the native quarter behind, and as Ah Yon still continued to pace ahead my uncle and I busied ourselves with discussing the remarkable carpenter, Koon-Si.

"He's not exactly the sort of fellow I should choose for a traveling companion," said Jim, "but I'm glad we met him. It is evident that without his aid there would not be the remotest possibility of our ever coming in contact with Kung—that is, unless he were to seek us."

"Instead of which we seek him. But tell me, Jim, if by any chance Kung falls into our power—what then?"

I asked this question, apparently so superfluous, because hitherto our threats of vengeance had been of an indefinite kind, or at least mine had, for I was not one who could contemplate murder with any equanimity. My plan was to seize Kung and hand him over to the government. There would be nothing more for me to fear or to do after that.

As I spoke Jim swung around and laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. His blue eyes sought mine, and they were hard, cold, repellent.

"I shall kill him."

Never was a man more in earnest. The bitterness of years was crowded into that moment. There was no hesitation here, no doubt. I knew now that the easy going city man, who had hitherto concocted nothing more deadly than an ingenious piece of reasoning in the shape of a prospectus, had gone about for years with murder in his heart. I saw it now as I had never seen it before, and though I could not gainsay the frightful justice of the contemplated act, I would have given much not to have seen that awful look in my uncle's eyes.

Farther on we stopped again to watch the shipping in the bay, the landing of some square boxes from a launch also receiving a little of our attention. Ah Yon, seeing this, drew near.

"You no sabbee what belong inside?" he said.

"No."

"It welly bad for poor piecee Chinaman. It allee same belong opium. Welly fine t'ing for trade, you sabbee, but no welly good for Chinaman. That small piecee box belong welly dear. Opium allee same expensive luxuly."

"So I've heard," said Jim. "Where has this lot come from?"

"India. Englishyman makee glow, you sabbee; collupt poor Chinaman. It come by ship Foochow," and he pointed to a long, low steamer with one funnel which lay at her buoy some little way out in the stream.

"So, so," said Jim, who, like myself, had immediately turned to inspect the vessel, "that's the Foochow, is it?"

"Yes, cap'n. She comes from Calcutta thlee day ago. Tomollow she makee Shanghai side."

We watched the ship for a few minutes longer and then passed on, while Yon, who had taken it for granted that we were in need of his company, kept beside us and pointed out this and that object of interest and expatiated on matters in general with an uncommon ability. Presently Jim stopped and beckoned to him closer.

"Tell me. Have you ever been in Shanghai?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"Hankow?"

Yon hesitated a moment, and a curious, searching look crept into his little black eyes. Then he smiled. It was a pleasant smile, but somewhat oily and singularly inscrutable.

"'Ave been 'Ankow side," he said.

"Do you know it well?"

"Pletty well, cap'n. 'Ave makee long look, see."

"You sabbee the river Yang-tse also?"

"Sabbee," answered Yon. "'Ave been one—two—thlee time 'Ankow side."

"Do you know the island of Ching-hi?"

Yon screwed up his ugly face in a vain effort to remember.

"No sabbee Ching-hi," he said at last. "Yang-tse 'ave got plenty island. You go 'Ankow side, cap'n?"

Jim hesitated for a moment, and I saw by his face that the question put him on his guard. He fixed Mr. Yon with a keen look, but the imperturbable Chinaman bore the scrutiny with an indifference which was most reassuring.

"I may," said Jim.

"You no 'ave got boy, cap'n?"

"No."

"Supposee you takee me along? My makee welly ploper servant. You belong stlanger. 'Ankow no welly good place for stlanger. My makee speak Chinee, sabbee?"

Jim looked at me and I at him. The need of an interpreter was not a necessity while Koon-Si formed one of the party, but suppose by any chance we should lose the valuable services of that gentleman? Moreover, Mr. Yon was an extremely intelligent fellow. and by payment we might command undivided allegiance.

Jim looked at me inquiringly, and, knowing what was passing in his thoughts, I said, "We must make inquiries."

He turned to Mr. Yon.

"I will think over your proposal, Yon. Come to the hotel tomorrow and you shall know."

"My makee welly glateful," said the fellow. "Yon, he belong first chop boy."

I could not help smiling at this quaint eulogy of self. The rascal had a Celestial sense of humor.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HE STRIKES TWICE WHO STRIKES FIRST.

Upon our return to the hotel we made a few necessary inquiries concerning Mr. Yon more as a sop to our consciences than aught else, for so that he proved not an absolute scamp we cared little for his reputation. For the work we had in hand intelligence and nerve were of more importance than a good character. That he had the one we did not doubt, that he possessed the other time alone would show. At all events we were not long in deciding to take him with us. This journey we contemplated was a strange one, and out of it much might come.

The following morning he presented himself at the hotel and was duly engaged, and later on in the day we went off together to join the Foochow. Yon, who held the proud position of our boy, took advantage of that privilege and carried our things below and otherwise displayed a conspicuous ability to please. Then there followed the shriek of the whistle, a warning to imprudent sampans, the shouting and the bustle, and presently the Foochow stood up for Ly-ee Moon pass, the straits through which we had entered not a week before.

Of the voyage to Shanghai I have little to relate. We found Ah Yon a perfect jewel of a servant, bright, intelligent and always willing, and on more than one occasion we gave him good proof of our appreciation. He was a strange creature, and he had funny Chinese eyes, which was nothing unusual in a Chinaman, but he always seemed grateful for a kind act or a kind word, perhaps the first that had ever come his way.

Before the ship cleared the Ly-ee Moon pass we caught a glimpse of Koon-Si among the cooly passengers. Feeling a trifle curious and just a little suspicious of having shown too much confidence in the carpenter, we strolled forward, and there, leaning against the winch, was our esteemed friend of the slit nostril. Though he looked a little cleaner than when we last saw him, he was still dressed as a cooly, barelegged and barefooted, and but for his nose, at which one had to look closely before discovering the slit, offered no contrast to the surrounding ugliness of his compatriots.

We passed on the other side of the hatchway and within a few yards of him, but beyond fixing us with the stolid stare which we ordinarily received from his countrymen he gave no sign of recognition. This, however, mattered nothing. We had seen him, and that was enough. The fact that he kept below for the rest of the journey was something that concerned him only. We were quite satisfied that our confidence had not been misplaced.

The journey northward proved entirely barren of incident, and in due course of time we arrived at Shanghai. Here, that very night, Ah Yon brought my uncle a letter, which, he said, had been left at the hotel by a messenger and which upon opening we found was a communication from Koon-Si. It was very short and very untidy, but it conveyed the information that the steamer Chungking would leave early on the following morning for Hankow, and it advised a passage by the same, adding: "It is my intention to go by this ship, for not a moment should be lost in the pursuit of our mission. He strikes twice who strikes first."

That it was excellent advice and backed up by an excellent maxim and one for which I duly notched a point in favor of Mr. Koon-Si, may be at once admitted, and I could discover no reason why such excellent advice should not be followed up. Nor could my uncle, when put to the test, though he needed no spur to his endeavor. His one object in life was to stand face to face with Kung and that at the earliest opportunity.

Well, the next morning we were up betimes and away, and once more Koon-Si lived a man apart along with the coolies. We knew he was aboard, and that was all. It would have puzzled the keenest spy of the society to discover any connection between us and the slit nosed rascal forward. Koon-Si evidently knew how to meet cunning with cunning, and I felt glad that we were in the hands of such a

Yon carried our things below.

shrewd being and congratulated myself on the great good fortune which had followed us since we first seriously set out to combat our enemies, not that Koon-Si was a lovable creature or one for whom it was possible to develop any immediate affection. His manner reminded me too forcibly of the awful, mysterious movements of the society. There were a cunning and a shrewdness in him which, though extremely valuable, were not pleasant. When Kung made an enemy of him, he committed a fatal mistake and one which I believed would cost him dearly. It was not without reason my father had said, "Find Koon-Si."

Had we searched the whole of China I doubt if we could have discovered a man more fitted for our purpose.

The Chungking was not a nice steamer, and her captain was not a nice captain, but she plodded her way up the great river with commendable dignity, and one afternoon the gallant skipper informed us that we should be in Hankow early the next morning. We thanked him. It was a piece of information supplied gratuitously, even chucked at us, but we thanked him. It is extremely pleasant to meet an amiable fellow countryman in a foreign land.

Toward dusk, as we rounded a long bend of the river, an island opened out in the distance, and by the time we were abreast of it the day had appreciably darkened. As Jim and I stood at the side watching the narrow strip of land, upon a slight eminence of which we could just distinguish the outline of a dilapidated pagoda, a voice muttered from behind, "Ching-hi."

Turning sharply, we encountered the form of Mr. Koon-Si. The beggar gave me a start. The quiet, crawling, mysterious movements of these yellow men had got upon my nerves. Out of the shadows they came like ghosts or ghouls, and into them they vanished again, silent, mysterious, leaving no impression behind save a chill round the heart.

"Ching-hi," repeated Jim indifferently, though I knew that the carpenter had also given him a start. "So he is there?"

"Was there, excellency. Where he is now who shall say? Kung is like the dark shadows which the clouds fling before the moor—a moment here, a moment there, in one place never."

"Then," said Jim, "you seem to have led us on a pretty wild goose chase. Anyhow we must see."

"We shall see, excellency, and if, as I believe, the virtuous are rewarded upon this earth as well as in heaven the end of Kung is close at hand. From the birth to the death of an old man is a long journey; but, excellency, it ends at last. So is it with the evildoer. He goes his way and wounds and riots and strikes terror throughout the land, but his day dawns and his sun sets, and behold there is nothing for him but darkness evermore! So shall it be with Kung. His foot shall grow weary, his eyes shall fail him, and he who has made many tremble shall tremble himself at last. Like a cold north wind the end shall come swift upon him, and the great river shall carry his death wail down to the great ocean."

He stopped and with a horribly familiar movement laid his hand upon my shoulder, and I felt a cold shudder sweep me from head to foot. Indeed I almost fancied I could hear the walling of ghosts in the m of the river. With an exclamation anger I shook the cold claw from me and drew back a pace. Mr. Koon-Si smiled, and I was fearful lest he should understand the movement. What's to become of the white man's dignity if he allows a heathen to frighten him in this fashion?

"That's all very well," said Jim, who, however much the carpenter may have impressed him, showed no sign of it, "but we haven't heard his death wail yet, and I should like to know how you intend that we shall hear it."

"Excellency, the future is in the hands of the gods, and who am I that I should say them yea or nay?"

"My worthy Koon-Si, the future is also somewhat in our hands. How know you that the gods have not chosen us as instruments of their pleasure?"

"Nay, excellency, I know not. It may be even as you say; the gods move mysteriously. If I could only think so, I would spit in the face of Kung."

"First meet him, my illustrious carpenter. Tell me, what are your plans?"

"Tomorrow we shall be in Hankow, in the country of Kung, one might say. The utmost vigilance will be necessary if we wish to escape detection."

"Well?"

"I have arranged all that. We shall land early tomorrow morning, when I hope few people will be about. Your excellencies will follow me from the ship, but without speaking. You may bring your servant with you, he may be useful. I have a cous in Hankow, a worthy tailor, who has suffered somewhat through Kung. He will give us a hearty welcome."

"And then?"

"Once I have your excellencies safe in the house of my illustrious cousin we shall soon devise a plan of reaching the island of Ching-hi. It is even possible that my distinguished relative may know something of the movements of Kung. Your excellency understands?"

"Quite."

"He strikes twice who strikes first."

The gaunt figure of the carpenter slipped from our side and disappeared in the gloom, and friend as he was, and avenger, too, I was glad that he had gone. But I felt to the full our impotence and the horror of being dependent upon this ghoulish creature. He was like a bad exhalation of the night, and I almost wished that he would dissolve into the bosom of his mother.

At daybreak of the following morning we arrived at Hankow, and in accordance with our prearranged plan followed the worthy carpenter from the ship, our invaluable Ah Yon bringing up the rear with our few worldly possessions in a valise. Fortunately there were not many people about, and such as were belonged so obviously to the cooly class that we surveyed them with little apprehension. They merely honored us with the usual stolid stare of the oriental, made some remarks unintelligible to us, but in no way evinced a flattering curiosity.

Koon-Si in the meantime marched steadily ahead, turning to the right upon leaving the landing stage, and after pursuing his way for some distance through a long, shambling street he suddenly branched off to the left, and presently we found ourselves before a house, upon the door of which the carpenter knocked somewhat anxiously, and I saw our guide give two or three uneasy glances over his shoulder as though he feared the neighbors in the street. Then there was an unbolting of bars, and presently a yellow, sleepy face appeared in the aperture caused by the gradual opening of the door. It was not a pretty face, and it might easily have been cleaner, but that was nothing. As soon as it saw Koon-Si it welcomed him with a smile, and while he spoke it opened wide the door.

The carpenter evidently knew his ground well, for, turning to us with a smile, he bade us enter and at once led us through a stuffy, dimly lit passage to a room at the back. Then, bowing us to a seat, he seemed to breathe freely for the first time.

"Safe," he said. "Having got so far, the rest is easy."

I was sorry I could not share his optimism. It seemed to me that our difficulties were just about to begin.

"I hope [illegible]" said Jim, "but I should like to know [illegible] we are going to accomplish the 'res[illegible]"

"All in good time," replied the carpenter. "You shall see. You are within striking distance. This is something accomplished."

"Something," Jim admitted.

"Good. Now I shall speak to my cousin. He is a shrewd man and has many ideas." He turned to go, but, seeing Ah Yon lingering in one corner, beckoned to him and said something in Chinese, something sharp, I fancied, judging from the tone and the look which accompanied the words. Ah Yon turned to my uncle, I thought, almost appealingly, but Koon-Si stepped between them.

"I will take this fellow with me," he said. "He is shrewd and may be of use. I will explain to him and test his courage."

Then he spoke again in his native tongue, more sharply still, I thought, and Yon bowed humbly. The carpenter was a man who meant to be obeyed, and he spoke and moved like one who had been accustomed to rule men. Truth to tell, I had long marveled at the depths to which my father must have sunk before he had taken as a colleague this degraded looking creature, but something in that momentary flash of authority revealed another Koon-Si, one who had not always been a sawyer of wood. It was a strange country we were in, and the people about us were worthy to inhabit it. It might even have been interesting to know what Koon-Si originally was.

At all events, despite his evident unwillingness to go, Ah Yon marched off, Koon-Si promising to be back in a few minutes. Jim looked at me and I at him, and some commonplace remarks passed between us, neither giving utterance to the thought which was uppermost in his mind. An unaccounta-

As soon as it saw Koon-Si it welcomed him with a smile.

ble depression seized me, and I'm afraid my face showed it. Nothing was clear. We were like children groping in the dark. We were too much in the hands of this carpenter.

"I agree with you," said Jim, to whom I had expressed these doubts, "but it is fairly evident that without him we should be more in the dark than ever. I admit that I don't like the fellow, but what of that? He is in the same boat with us, and I believe him to be a shrewd and a masterful man, and he is absolutely necessary to us. Beyond that I do not trust him. When the pinch comes, you may be sure that he will fight only for his own hand. Well, we can't expect more. Walk with your hand on your revolver."

The entrance of Koon-Si, a bundle under his arm, here cut short any further conversation. He was smiling pleasantly and seemed in the best of spirits.

"I have spoken to my illustrious cousin," he said, "and he is hopeful. But we must move with caution. The eyes of Kung are everywhere."

"You have news?"

"Nothing definite. But we have hopes that Kung is still on his island."

"If that is so," said I, reverting to a former idea, "why does your cousin not denounce him?"

"To whom?" asked the carpenter, turning upon me with an amused smile.

"Why, to the authorities, of course. You say they would give much to secure him."

"True. But you must not forget that Kung is the head of a society which embraces all ranks. The very official to whom you confided your secret would probably be in the employ of the very man you wished to denounce. Then for you the end is not far off. No; it is not in that way that Kung shall be brought to book. We must strike with our own hands. You are prepared?"

"Always," answered Jim grimly.

"You carry"—

"That which will send Kung hurriedly to join his ancestors."

"Good. You are brave men. Brave men are dangerous. You have come far to kill."

This was rather an unhappy remark and one I am sure which neither Jim nor I appreciated. And yet that's what it looked like. For what other reason had we come? I had no wish personally to kill Kung, and yet I knew rather than let him escape I would bring him down. But I always had the vague sort of hope that something would intervene and that the law would ultimately punish him for his many crimes.

Jim, however, evinced no squeamishness. The deadly determination of the man was shown in every look and word.

"Have we not good cause?" he said.

"Aye, many of us have good cause," repeated the carpenter. "The sins of Kung must be paid for."

"Mark you, Koon-Si," said Jim, "it is written in our good book that there shall be blood for blood, and so it has been, and so it shall be. And now, tell us your plan."

Koon-Si looked steadily at Jim, and I knew that the subtle brain of the Chinaman was beating fast behind those inscrutable eyes, but he said:

"My plan is this: This evening we descend by boat to the island of Ching-hi. We shall run down in half the time it took the steamer to come up. But it will be necessary for you to dress in the native fashion, so that you may pass through the streets unobserved. I have the clothes here," and he touched the aforementioned bundle. "You can easily slip them over your own things."

"And who goes with us?"

"Your boy, Ah Yon, and perhaps two boatmen. Friends, you understand, who will wait for us in case we have to retreat suddenly." He turned to go and then came back with a cautious finger uplifted. "I am sorry to add that your excellencies had better remain within doors today. The eyes of Kung are everywhere. It would not do for him to gain an inkling of your esteemed presence in Hankow—would not do, that is, for your excellencies."

CHAPTER XXV.

A RUN DOWN THE YANG-TSE.

Shortly after breakfast Koon-Si came and helped us to dress in our Chinese clothes, a complete outfit of which, even to a big cooly hat and pendent pigtail, had been provided. But it was nevertheless a long and dreary day we spent shut up in the back parlor of the illustrious cousin. I thought the sun would never set, and when at length the shadows did begin to fall I seemed unable to realize it. The carpenter had paid us two or three short visits during the day, but he had nothing to report. Ah Yon, who had been dispatched on a scouting expedition, was not expected back until the evening, so that Jim and I had nothing to divert us but our own thoughts, and if mine might be accepted as a criterion of his they were not such as men gladly welcome.

However, the day did eventually draw to a close, and when the dark had come Koon-Si entered with the welcome information that it was time to start. Our small preparations were hurriedly made, and we quickly followed the carpenter to the door.

"Where is Ah Yon?" asked my uncle.

"He will meet us at the boat. Too many going together might excite suspicion."

A wonderful fellow was the carpenter. He seemed to think of everything. And, though personally I did not like the man, I had to admit that for our needs we could not have created a better one.

Out into the street we went, our big sutraw hats pulled well forward so as to shade the face, and in this manner we pursued our way without raising remarks or any undue curiosity from the passersby. Koon-Si led us swiftly and silently along, having previously cautioned us not to speak; for, as he said, the very streets have ears and Kung is everywhere.

It seemed to me that we were taking a direction contrary to that from which we had come, though this was no cause for wonder, as the island was some miles below the town. Nevertheless it was anything but a pleasant journey, and I heaved a sigh of relief as we gradually left the ill smelling alleys behind and came more into the straggling streets which denoted the outskirts of the town. These in turn gave place to still more open country, and presently we began the descent of a slope, at the bottom of which I thought I could detect the sparkle of water.

"The river?" said Jim.

"Yes," answered Koon-Si. "Here we can embark with perfect safety, as we are some distance below the town."

He led us on for another hundred yards or so along the water's edge, and then, stopping for a minute and looking round as if to locate the exact spot, he uttered the cry of a night bird. Waiting a little while, he signaled again, but this time the cry was varied, there being three distinct calls. Almost immediately a sound like an echo came over the water, and this was followed shortly after by the soft swish of a steering scull. Then from the gloom, which lay like a cloak upon the river, I saw a darker shadow emerge, and presently a boat grated on the shingle at our feet.

"Aboard quickly," said Koon-Si. "The wind is fair, and the current is strong. In two or three hours we shall be abreast of Ching-hi."

The boat was steadied for us, and we instantly scrambled aboard. The carpenter followed, one of the men shoved off, and presently we were spinning down the great river.

Jim and I sat in the little cabin aft, a structure with which every Chinese sampan is rigged. Koon-Si sat on the after thwart, facing us, and seizing an oar laid to with a will. A man on the bench forward also tugged like a galley slave. A second sat still forward of him and kept a good lookout. Ah Yon, our worthy servant, stood aft, the long steering scull in his hand.

It was a strange journey, that rush down the dark river, and if the peculiar conditions were not without their effect on me it is small cause for wonder. Jim was significantly mute, and I felt keenly that this was no occasion for the use of idle words. I knew that his thoughts had traveled no farther than the island of Ching-hi and that they wandered there at large. Ching-hi and Kung and the society, what a black world of thought those three words conjured up! It seemed to me as though the whole misery of life was concentrated in them, and as the boat rushed on and on, swinging blindly, as it were, toward destiny, I thought of Cecil, of my sins and of such things as stir the imagination when a great event is foreshadowed. Truly we were in the hands of fate, and I prayed and hoped.

For some time nothing but the swirling of the waters, the rising and falling of the oars, the dirgelike soughing of the wind as it swept down the great black waterway, beat an accompaniment to our thoughts, but presently upon the canvas tilt which roofed our little cabin I heard a sound not unlike that which the rubbing of a finger nail would produce.

For a time I paid little heed to it, but as it continued without cessation I

"Look, yonder is the island of Ching-hi."

pricked up my ears and listened still more intently. The sound came at regular intervals, and after a little hesitation I connected it in some manner with the swing of the big steering scull aft. Then the thought of the scull conjured up a vision of the man who was working it, and Mr. Ah Yon immediately stood before my mind's eye.

Ever on the alert and but sure of one thing, that the unexpected always happens, I instantly made up my mind that Ah Yon was signaling me, and further to test the truth of this surmise I got up, opened the flap at the back of the little cabin and looked out.

Ah Yon's face was but darkly seen, yet his figure stood out distinctly, a darker shadow against the dark background of the sky. As he saw me he stooped, his finger to his lips, but at that moment the voice of Koon-Si was heard, and Yon immediately stood upright and stiffened himself to his work. But the carpenter, continuing to speak and somewhat excitedly, I thought, the man who had been keeping the lookout forward came and took Yon's place, the latter scrambling forward in turn. Then for a space there was peace on the boat, and we swung on, on.

Though at the moment I thought the occurrence a little strange, a fuller mental investigation failed to lay bare any important fact. That Ah Yon had meant to communicate with me was obvious, but that his communication was of any moment it would be difficult to say. That he had been relieved from his post aft was only natural, considering the time he had stood there. Nevertheless I mentioned the incident to Jim, who could make no more out of it than I. Among friends the uttered word is not always big with meaning; the word unuttered is easily forgiven.

No incident of any importance marked the continuation of our journey. It was long and dull to a degree, and the only satisfaction we received from Koon-Si, whom we importuned with queries as to distances, etc., was the invariable reply, "Presently." Everything was "presently," and for want of a fuller answer we were forced to possess our souls in patience.

But at length the apparently interminable journey drew to a close. Koon-Si, who for some time had been intently peering through the gloom, suddenly pushed his face into our cabin and said: "We have arrived, excellencies. Look, yonder is the island of Ching-hi."

We looked, but for some little time I could scarcely distinguish the land, it lay so low, but at length it rose swiftly like a dark exhalation from the bosom of the river, and I felt a strange thrill play about my heart. This was the island of Ching-hi; this, for the nonce, was the home of Kung; here it was I was to grapple face to face with destiny.

At a word from Koon-Si the sail was lowered, and slowly we began to drift down upon the land. The carpenter came and leaned over the tilt and held a hurried conversation with the steersman, the result of which was that we changed our course somewhat, making for what appeared to be a break in the island. This, thanks to the current which about here, where the waters parted, ran with an increased velocity, we soon approached sufficiently for one to descry a little inlet or bay, and into this we steered. The boatmen, if not Koon-Si, appeared to know the lay of the land, and with that accuracy which men who live on ships seem to command we made our way without mishap. Once in still water, the oars were again brought into requisition, and presently I felt the boat's keel grate on the bottom. Then the carpenter slipped overboard and held the boat while Jim and I leaped ashore, a feat we accomplished for the mere wetting of our boots. Koon-Si immediately joined us.

"At last, excellencies," he said, "we are on the island of Ching-hi. He whom we have come to find is here. The gods have greatly favored our endeavors."

"Indeed, it seems so," replied Jim. "You are a wonderful man, Koon-Si. Thanks to you, we have accomplished what at one time seemed to be an impossible journey. I think we have not come so far for nothing."

"Believe me, excellency, you have not come for nothing, nor have I. I have waited long for this. I have suffered much, endured much degradation, but the gods are wise, and in their hands is vengeance."

"Good. And how?"

"Now, excellency, with the aid of these worthy boatmen, who know of the habitation of Kung and his manner of living, we will make our way to his abode. What shall follow we know not, but this we do know: It is already written in the book of destiny."

To be continued.

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