

SERIAL STORY

The Sable Lorcha

BY
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SYNOPSIS

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the room was unoccupied and the head later removed by means of a string unnoticed by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, theorizes that the portrait was mutilated as a target. Clyde pledges Evelyn to secrecy. Clyde learns that a Chinese boy employed by Philatus Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a rifle from Cameron's bookkeeper. Clyde makes an excuse to call on Murphy and is repulsed. He pretends to be investigating alleged infractions of the game laws and speaks of finding the bowl of an opium pipe under the tree where Cameron's portrait was found. The Chinese boy is found dead next morning. While visiting Cameron in his dressing room a Nell Gwynne mirror is mysteriously shattered. Cameron becomes seriously ill as a result of the shock. The third letter appears mysteriously on Cameron's sick bed. It makes direct threats against the life of Cameron. Clyde tells Cameron the envelope was empty. He tells Evelyn everything and plans to take Cameron on a yacht trip. A yacht picks up a fisherman found helplessly in a boat. He gives the name of Johnson. Cameron disappears from a yacht while Clyde's back is turned. A fruitless search is made for a motor boat seen by the captain just before Cameron disappeared. Johnson is allowed to go after being closely questioned. Evelyn takes the letters to an expert in Chinese literature, who pronounces them of Chinese origin. Clyde seeks assistance from a Chinese fellow college student, who recommends him to Yip Sing, most prominent Chinaman in New York. The latter promises to seek information of Cameron among his countrymen. Among Cameron's letters is found one from one Addison, who speaks of seeing Cameron in Pekin. Cameron had frequently declared to Clyde that he had never been in China. Clyde calls on Dr. Addison. He learns that Addison and Cameron were at one time intimate friends, but had a falling out over Cameron's denial of having been seen in Pekin by Addison. Clyde goes to meet Yip Sing, seeks Johnson, attempts to follow him, falls into a basement, sprains his ankle and becomes unconscious. Clyde is found by Miss Clement, a missionary among the Chinese. He is sick several days as a result of inhaling charcoal fumes. Evelyn tells Clyde of a peculiarly acting anesthetist which renders a person temporarily unconscious. Clyde is discovered to have mysterious relations with the Chinese. Miss Clement promises to get information about Cameron. Slump in Crystal Consolidated, of which Cameron is the president, has caused a rumor of Cameron's illness. Clyde finds Cameron on Fifth avenue in a dazed and emaciated condition and takes him home. Cameron awakes from a long sleep and speaks in a strange tongue. He gives orders to an imaginary crew in Chinese jargon. Then in terror cries: "I didn't kill them."

CHAPTER XIX.—Continued.

"Below!" he yelled, fiercely. "Below, you yellow dogs! Below, I say! Every cur's son of you! Below!"

Despite this truculence he was not difficult to master. Together Bryan and I grappled him; in another moment we had him flat on his bed once more, and the nurse was pressing home the piston of that little shining instrument of glass and silver which I had so recently seen him take up from the medicine table.

For a moment the patient rolled about, restlessly, muttering strange oaths, mingled with suppliant murmurs. And to me this was the most sadly trying part of the incident. I would gladly have retreated, but Evelyn begged me to wait.

"Just until he is quiet," she pleaded; "just until he falls asleep."

At length he lay quite still and we thought from his regular breathing he had succumbed to the narcotic, and so were about to go, when he started up with a little feeble cry, low-voiced, but clearly distinct.

"No, no, for God's sake, not that! I didn't kill them. I swear I didn't kill them. It was an accident. She stove on a rock. I—I—didn't, I say! I didn't—I—"

His voice trailed into silence. He dropped back, heavily, upon the pillows. He slept.

It is one thing to have your faith in a friend shaken. That is serious enough in all conscience. But your faith may tremble, and away and rock, and still there is always the possibility of its being restated and made firm again by explanation—by extenuation even. It is quite another thing to have your faith toppled headlong, by the snatching away of the last vestige of support, the last sliver of underpinning. That is more than serious. It is calamitous; it is catastrophic; it is tragic.

Back in the library again, I set to pacing the floor. I think Evelyn resumed her seat in the big leather chair I am sure. For a time I was

not conscious that she was in the room. That it was inconsiderate of me, I admit. It was, perhaps, unpardonable. And yet it was not wilful. Frankly, I had forgotten her, absolutely, in the stress of the emotional tempest raised by that revelation in the darkened bedchamber.

Back and forth, I strode from bookcase to bookcase, over the soft, neutral-tinted Persian rugs; and all the while there echoed those repeated denials of Cameron's that he had ever been in China. "Never nearer than Yokohama," he had said. "Once I ate chop suey in a Chicago Chinese restaurant." "I have always been interested in China and the Chinese, but I know only what I have read." And the words of his quondam friend came back to me now, too, with redoubled emphasis. "He refused to admit what I knew to be the truth."

Nevertheless I had chosen to believe that Cameron, should he ever return to us, would be able to clarify this turbid stream of circumstance, and prove the fallibility of appearances.

The illusion to which I had clung, however, was now in shreds. Cameron, returning, with body enfeebled and brain confused, had spoken in his unguarded delirium. The mask was dropped, the screen thrown down, and barefaced and stark he stood revealed, a woeful figure in the impartial glare of truth.

At the moment I could see no extenuation. He was a liar and he was a coward; and all the sympathy, all the friendship I ever felt for him died utterly, as I thought how, probably, every untoward incident of the past month, with its chain of vexatious consequences, might have been avoided had he been brave to the point of confession.

It was now plain enough for the least astute to see that at some time he had committed an act which had aroused certain of the Chinese to retaliation. It was this which I had feared from the first. It was this which he had chosen to hide.

As I paced to and fro, his craven words rang once more in my ears: "No, no, for God's sake, not that! I didn't kill them! I swear I didn't kill them! It was an accident!" And I knew that he was lying. The very tone of his disclaimer convinced me of his guilt. He had killed, and he cowered before the avengers.

Disgust, abhorrence, anger, all were mine in turn.

At length I paused before a window, and remained there, with my back to the room, looking down on the withered garden behind the house, yet seeing nothing but the red of my own passion.

A touch upon my shoulder aroused me to a realization of my surroundings, and informed me that I was not alone. Startled as one awakened abruptly from a dream, I turned, and turning, there came a revulsion. Every surcharging emotion that had held and bound me gave way instantly to a violent self-reproach, excited by the pathos of Evelyn's sad, questioning eyes and sadder, quivering mouth.

My impulse was to take her in my arms, and pacifying, to plead pardon for what must have seemed to her an inexcusable churlishness. But the conditions which so recently she had set upon me forbidding the coveted embrace, I compromised on a hand-clasp.

"My dear child," I began, earnestly, "I'm sorry. But then you must know how what we just saw and heard distressed me. I think I have been mad since we left that room. I hardly know what I have been doing. To see him so unstrung, demented, raving. To hear him—"

But she would not allow me to finish.

"Philip!" she cried, passionately. "Oh, Philip! Can't you see? Don't you understand? It is a mistake, an awful nightmare of a mistake. That creature over there is not my uncle. I am convinced that he is not my Uncle Robert."

CHAPTER XX.

An Enigma and Its Solution.

To my amazement I found that Evelyn meant more than I fancied. My interpretation of her words was that Cameron was not in his right mind—that he was not her Uncle Robert, as she had known him. But in a very brief moment she disabused me.

"It is not he, at all," she declared, with emphasis. "There is a resemblance, yes. But the man you found in the street is not Robert Cameron; I am sure of that."

The idea that I had brought there, not my friend, but my friend's double, seemed to me too preposterous for a moment's entertainment. I fear I suspected, just then, that Evelyn's reason had been warped a trifle by the racking scene of which we had been witnesses.

"I would to God, my dear child," I said, sympathetically, "that you were right. But there can be no question as to the identity of the sick man. Every one who has seen him recognized him at once—Checkbeedy, Louis, Stephen, Dr. Massey. No, no, Evelyn, you must not be misled by his ravings." And at this point there occurred to me a tentative explanation—one in which I did not in the least believe, but which, at all events, was

worth trying; one which, indeed, I prayed would serve.

"Cameron, you must remember, has been with his Chinese captors for four weeks. In that time he must have picked up something of their language. It is only natural that he should. So, you see, to hear him use a few words of pidgin-English in his insane gibberish is not so remarkable, after all. And as for that spirited denial just before he dropped off to sleep, it is very evident that they accused him of something with which he had no connection, though quite cognizant of the facts."

But the girl would have none of it. Tolerantly she listened, and tolerantly she smiled when I had finished.

"No, no, Philip," she insisted, "I see it all quite clearly. Whatever crime was committed, the creature lying there committed it. But he is not my uncle. Others mistook the resemblance for identity, just as you did, only the situation was reversed. Those who abducted Uncle Robert thought they were abducting that villain we are now housing."

It was an ingenious notion, but of course it was not possible. However, I saw that it would be idle to continue to dispute with her.

"What would you suggest, then? Shall we send our invalid to a hospital?" I asked, in pretended seriousness.

But very sagely she shook her head. "Oh, no," she returned. "We must keep him. He is very valuable to us. Perhaps we can do as contending armies do—arrange an exchange of prisoners."

In spite of my wretchedness, I suppressed a smile. It was all very amusing; and yet the fear that she was suffering aberration due to hysteria, tempered pitifully the humor of it.

When, later in the afternoon, Dr. Massey called, I told him everything, including this hallucination of Evelyn's.

"You did perfectly right," he said, in tone of cordial approval. "The malady with which Cameron is afflicted has a tendency to distort certain lineaments. Especially at times of excitement his face changes, so that Miss Grayson is justified in fancying that this is not the Robert Cameron she knew. I have noticed the dissimilarity myself, but it is due, of course, entirely to distorted expression. In a couple of days, at most, he will be fully restored, and then he himself will be the best one to rectify her error. Meanwhile, if I were you, I would not dispute her. She has gone through a great deal, and gone through it bravely; indeed with a courage that is quite phenomenal, and she is entitled to any little consolatory beliefs that she chooses to entertain."

And then, as if such advice were not wholly superfluous, he added: "Be kind to her, Clyde; be good to her. She is a wonderful young woman."

Whereat I grasped his hand, and promised him, lifting him a notch in my estimation because of his perspicacity. And all the while a lump kept rising in my throat and threatening my tear ducts.

On the following day I heard nothing from Miss Clement, which somewhat surprised me, though she had told me that her prospective informants were likely to take their own time. Early, on the second morning, however, I had a note from her, the enigmatic character of which impelled me to speculation.

"Dear Mr. Clyde," she wrote, "I hope you can make it convenient to visit me this evening, at the Mission. I want to talk with Ling Fo, an exceptionally well-educated young Chinaman, who tells me that his people are much mystified over a recent event; and, if what he says be true—and I never knew him to lie—a new complexion is placed upon this whole matter. Come about nine-thirty, after our service is over."

As Dr. Massey's orders forbidding any one save Mr. Bryan to enter Cameron's room, issued immediately after our hideous experience, had not yet been rescinded, our knowledge of his condition was, perforce, gleaned entirely through physician and nurse. Both now assured me that he was progressing satisfactorily, and that there had been no return of the dementia.

Evelyn still persisted in her notion that the patient was not her uncle, but his double, and following the doctor's directions I refrained from trying to convince her of the truth; even going so far as to pretend that I believed as she did, and planning to begin negotiations through Miss Clement and her Chinese confidants for an exchange of captives as soon as our hostage was able to be moved.

"I am to see Miss Clement, tonight," I told her, late that afternoon, "also an Oriental acquaintance of hers, who appears to be informed on the subject which interests us. It is possible that he will prove the very person who can arrange it all."

"Let me go with you," she urged, laying a beseeching hand on my arm. "Do let me go with you, Philip. I am so anxious. It will seem years if I have to wait here for you to bring me the news; and there are sure to be some things you will forget to ask about, if I'm not there to prompt you."

In spite of the unflattering of her speech I smiled, indulgent. Her great blue eyes, pathetically pleading as her words, were able advocates. It was

hard to deny her under any circumstances, and now, as I thought it over, I saw no reason why in this instance she should not have her desire.

"Yes," I agreed, "you shall go. But remember, you must be very careful, for the present at least, not to let slip the slightest inkling that we suspect our Cameron is not the real Cameron. We are seeking information, you know, Evelyn, not squandering it."

Pell street wore its night gaudery when the Cameron electric brougham with Evelyn and myself as occupants glided to a halt before the door of the Mission over which Miss Clement ably and successfully presided. The pale, varicolored light of lanterns from the balcony of a restaurant across the way, mingling with the flickering yellow beam of the city's gas lamps, threw into sharp relief the curious pendent black signs with their red cloth borders and gilded Chinese lettering, hanging before shop doors. It revealed, too, oddly contrasting figures of loungers and pedestrians, residents and visitors. And it bared, back of all that was bizarre, the commonplace brick fronts of the typically American buildings, with their marring gridironing of fire-escapes. To Evelyn, rarely observant, the combination was interesting, but disappointing.

"It does not look at all as I expected it would," she said to me. "It hasn't the air. It is neither one thing nor the other. It is like a stage scene, carelessly mounted."

As we alighted at the Mission door, the last notes of a familiar hymn, mangled in words and melody almost beyond recognition, flowed out to join the babel of street sounds; and before we could mount the brass steps there had begun to pour forth a motley, malodorous freshet of felt-shod soles, that gave us pause; blocking, for a few minutes, not merely the ascent but the sidewalk as well.

When, at length, the way was clear, and by direction of a youth at the entrance, we had passed through the close, ill-smelling hall, where the lights had already been lowered, we came upon Miss Clement, alone in a little well-ventilated and brightly-lighted office or parlor, jutting off at the rear.

If she was surprised at seeing Evelyn, she gave no sign. She welcomed us both with the smiling cordiality of a life-long friend. But abruptly her smile died.

"I tried to get you on the telephone an hour ago," she explained, "but there was some trouble with the wire. I hoped to save you this journey for nothing."

"Your protege couldn't come?" I queried.

"Unfortunately, no," she returned, with a little quaver in her voice. "My protege will never come again. He was shot to death. Poor, poor Ling Fo!"

"Shot to death!" I cried, while Evelyn, with cheeks suddenly pale and eyes wide, held her underlip fast between her teeth, and gripped hard on the arms of the rocking chair in which Miss Clement had placed her.

"Yes," and this strong, sweet-faced, gray-haired woman in gray, her momentarily-lost composure quite recovered, laid a quieting hand softly over Evelyn's tensed clutch. "Yes. That sort of thing is not unusual down here, you know. There is always more or less bad blood between the tongas. But it was most unfortunate, just at this time, because I feel sure he could have told you something worth learning. I'm glad he was a good boy. He was one of the few converts that are really sincere."

"Perhaps he knew too much," I suggested.

But Miss Clement made no comment. I fancy it was out of consideration for Evelyn that she refrained from endorsing my conclusion; while I reproached myself for being less thoughtful, I was all the more convinced that I had voiced the motive for the shooting.

As Evelyn did not ask for particulars, I profited by the lesson thus taught and curbed my curiosity. But I was in no mood to drop the subject. From Miss Clement's note it was clear that Ling Fo had already communicated to her some of the more important facts in this connection, and of these I hoped to possess myself.

"And so, Miss Clement," I ventured, sharpening my wedge, "Chinatown is mystified, I understand."

She was seated, now, by her little desk, and for a moment had been turning up, searchingly, one paper after another, from an open drawer. At my observation, she paused and raised her glance, a folded sheet of note size in her hand; for a heart-beat her eyes held mine.

"Yes," she said at length. "Chinatown is all at sea, so to speak."

"Over what?" I pressed.

Slowly she unfolded the scrap of writing she held, and before replying she read it through, slowly and deliberately.

"If you don't mind," she proposed, "I would prefer not to talk about it. I am in a peculiar position here, Mr. Clyde, as you can well understand, and I can't afford to play false to those who trust me. At the same time I do not always know whom among these people to trust. Some one who knew them very well wrote, once upon a time, something like this:

You can take a Chinik away from his fan.
Away from his lotteries, fiddies and joss.
You can give his queue to the barber.
But you can't get down to the roots that start
From the yellow base of his yellow heart.

And it's very true. There are those here who pretend to adore me, who would think nothing of treating me as they treated poor Ling Fo, if they suspected I knew anything and gave information."

"I don't want you to think I'm a coward, Miss Grayson," she went on, turning to Evelyn. "I think I've proved to you that I want to help you and mean to, but I'm rather upset tonight, and I'm so afraid we shall have to let matters rest a little longer. There is one thing, though, that you can do for me, if you will."

The last sentence was addressed to me, and I made haste to assure her that she had only to command me.

As she had spoken she had been folding and refolding the paper in her hand, until it was now a tiny, one-inch square.

"Take this," she said, handing it to me, her voice a low murmur, "and after you have read it, destroy it. I shouldn't want it found in my possession."

"I understand, Miss Clement," I returned and the folded square went into my waistcoat pocket.

"It may mean more to you," she added, in a whisper, "than anything I could say."

When once more in the brougham, speeding northward, Evelyn, who had been unusually taciturn throughout the interview, asked me a question.

"Did you mean what you said, Philip?"

"What did I say?" I queried.

"That you understood."

"I understood that it might not be well for her to have this letter of Ling Fo's about."

"But the rest? Her refusal to talk? Her uneasiness? Her fear of possible traitors?" she persisted.

Once more she had gone straight to the heart of the situation. I had been as puzzled as she by the missionary's attitude of constraint, which I could not attribute wholly to the tragedy she had told us of; and I admitted as much to Evelyn.

"If she suspected eavesdroppers," the girl argued, "she said too much. If she didn't fear being overheard, why couldn't she tell us all she knew?"

For want of a better answer I said: "Perhaps the letter will solve the enigma," and plucking it from my pocket with thumb and forefinger I began carefully to unfold it.

The interior of the vehicle was brilliantly alight, and though we were already far beyond the Chinatown zone and the chance observation of any lurking spies, I nevertheless chose discreetly to draw the shades prior to outreading the written page.

Before the sheet with its network of creases was quite flattened, Evelyn, who was bending attentively near, exclaimed in surprise. "It is her own handwriting! See, it is written by Miss Clement herself!"

Already absorbed, I made no response. Avidly my eyes were racing over the lines; greedily, my brain was digesting them.

"Tidings of the cruel murder of Ling Fo have just reached me. When you come, as I know you will, I shall not dare to speak what I have written, and which is all that the poor boy ever told me. Already there are spies about me, and your visit is a risk to us both. I would have prevented it, if I could."

"Three weeks ago, according to Ling Fo, a white man was abducted by order of the Six Companies, and shipped to China for punishment, aboard a tramp steamer. Ling Fo would not give me the white man's name or any of the particulars, save that sixteen years ago he had committed a crime, known to every Chinaman in America as 'The Crime of the Sable Lorcha,' or 'black funeral ship,' by which nearly one hundred Chinese coolies lost their lives.

"It seems now that this man, who they thought was on the ocean, suddenly reappeared in New York, a few nights ago. He was recognized and set upon by two Chinamen, but he escaped, and the Six Companies and all the tongas are in a ferment over the mystery."

Evelyn's hand was on my arm as I read, her face close to mine, reading with me. Having finished, I held the sheet for a moment, waiting for her to signify that she, too, had reached the end. And in that moment the brougham came to a sudden halt.

Before either of us could voice a word the door on my side was wrenched violently open, and the blue steel muzzle of a revolver covered me.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A False Alarm.

"Mrs. Gabbit felt quite foolish last night."

"How did that happen?"

"Mr. Gabbit opened his mouth several times, as if he were just about to get in a word edgewise, and Mrs. Gabbit talked a blue streak for an hour before she found out he was merely yawning."