

THE Brotherhood of Six

By
CHARLES
K.
MOSER



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MAH NENG, the little mother, sat among the cold embers wailing and scattering handfuls of ashes over her head, while Fong Quong ran through the streets crying, "Loo Puck! Loo Puck! Oh, little peach blossom of thy father's garden, where art thou?" An hour before she had been playing, her tiny baby brother astride her hip, with a troop of small heathen outside the bazaar door, while her father sat inside and sipped sam-shu with his cronies. One moment he looked out and smiled at his merry little girl, with her rosy cheeks set in her shining hair like an Oriental pearl in a clasp of jet. The next moment he looked—she was gone!

The other youngsters were still playing at their games, laughing; whooping like little devils of mischief, scampering hither and yon with pigtailed trailing tassels of red silken floss at their heels, the merry imps played as if nothing had happened. Reassured, Fong Quong had calmly questioned them. They flicked about him.

"Oh, she is here! She is here! She is hiding in that old barrel, revered sire!" they had severely chirruped.

"I saw the fengshin (earth-devils) catch and eat her," cried one tiny rascal, more imaginative than the rest. But she was not here, nor there, nor in the old barrel, nor in the cellars, nor the doorways nor the alleys. Loo Puck, the little celestial maiden of thirteen years, whose beauty was like the ripeness of peaches, like the tulips of Hanou, was gone.

And that is why the rice pot yawmed empty of chow, and the little mother, Mah Neng, sat in its place among the cold embers crying out her grief, while Fong Quong roamed the alleys calling, calling mournfully for his first-born—though she were only a girl!

When he came back to the bazaar at nightfall Mah Neng still sat at her weeping; she did not even raise her head, for she knew that his search had been fruitless. The youthful heir to the house of Fong, finding himself neglected, was contenting himself by solemnly scuffling in a corner with the kittens, while three Chung puppies licked his toes and japed their disapproval of his preferences for feline playmates. Fong picked the little boy up and cuddled him in his arms.

"Hast thou called in the blue-coated, fat-beilies of the white pigs, and hast thou summoned to council the wise ones of thy tong? Some base villain of the dark alleys hath stolen our Loo Puck and hidden her in a nest of foulness; why may not wisdom and blood money bring her back?"

"I have considered these things. The high man of the bluecoats has sent out his best ferrets. Our mighty ones have sent men with cunning eyes and padded feet into dens where the white pigs cannot go—but Loo Puck was not in them. I saw the House of Dreadful Doom and are holding her for ransom. Aie! I know not! except that my heart is very sad and I mourn for my lily bud, Loo Puck. Aie! Aie!"

The little mother arose and slipped her fat feet into sandals.

"I go to the temple and beseech Kum Tai Foo Yum (Goddess of Women) for her help that Loo Puck come to no harm."

"Aie! Aie!" cried Fong Quong to himself when she had gone. "Had I but sold her only two days ago to illustrious Chung Wo, the great one of the Suey Sings, I would now have a thousand yen. But how can one of the Hop Sam Tong sell the flesh of his flesh to a Suey Sing? Besides, I have promised her in marriage to our cousin. But Luey Chen will have none of her now, though she be found again. Aie! Aie! It is hard indeed to lose one's woman-child—or a thousand yen!"

As he sat lamenting with the slyly youngster cuddled in the hollow of his arm, the draught from beneath the loosely hung door to the broken chimney wafted a tiny bit of rice paper across the floor.

He laid the baby tenderly on a mat and picked up the bit of paper.

Spread open, the flimsy billet displayed a line of scraggy Chinese characters rudely brushed in dark green ink. He read:



THE SHARP POINT OF A KNIFE PRICKED INTO HIS THROAT

"See! no more thy flowering rose—lest thou find but a weed. Then of the frost. And finding even this, perchance thou lose thy son and thine own head, also. It is spoken."

Fong Quong sprang to the door, he looked into the alley.

Outside the door he ran against Luey Chen, the young

IN THIS COMPLETE STORY,

"The Brotherhood of Six," Charles K. Moser has given us a flashlight glimpse that pierces through the veil of mystery usually shrouding the Chinaman and his darksome haunts from Western eyes. In this story the Chinaman ceases for the moment to be a yellow, incomprehensible automaton. The ways that are dark are illumined and we can understand and sympathize with the little celestial maiden, with the bereft father and mother, with the outraged feelings of the courageous lover, and rejoice in the fate that overtakes the illustrious Chung Wo. The author knows Chinatown and its denizens and possesses power to make them known to his reader.

Jerome Uhl, the artist who has illustrated "The Brotherhood of Six," shares this intimate knowledge with the author. He uses no lay dummies for his models, but draws from the living, moving figures of Chinese in the innermost recesses of the burrows they call homes. The pictures he presents are in consequence instinct with the spirit of a people that has always been and seem destined always to remain an unsolvable puzzle to the great body of Caucasians.



"AH, LISTEN NOW, FRAGRANT LITTLE JASMINE FLOWER"

son of his mother's sister. Chen gripped his blouse by the full skirt.

"What devil's news is this the street dog bark of the maid thou hast promised me for wife?"

"Aie, most noble of kinsmen, it is true what thou hearest. But I swear to thee, by the sacred shade of our grandsire, that mine is not the fault."

"How is it that this thing has occurred?" the younger man questioned, and Fong Quong told him.

Luey Chen was shrewd. Under his smooth, young skin there dwelt an ancient soul that was wondrous wise in the ways of evil, and it was told of him in the cabalistic books of the ma-ma (sorcerers) that in former incarnations he had been a weasel.

"Thy maid," he breathed in Fong Quong's ear, "had lips like the cherries for ripeness. Her beauty was as the perfume of violets, which maketh a man catch his breath with its sweetness. Canst be that I, alone of many men, desired her? It seems not so to me. What others have sought of thee to have her? Speak softly, cousin, softly."

"Aie," answered Fong. "One only, yet. But two days ago, this night, the illustrious Chung Wo, whom thou knowest is mightiest of all the Suey Sings, did offer me a thousand of the white pigs' yen to make her his young wife. But because she was promised to thee and because she was but young and small—and the flower of my heart—I would not mate her with his gray hairs. 'Tis thus that I have lost at least a thousand silver yen and Loo Puck, too; and I a poor man!"

Luey Chen breathed quickly; the passing breath fanned his eyes to spurts of flame.

"Thou wouldst not sell her to him?"

"Nay, and the great one waxed a morsel wroth. But afterward we sipped from the teneaps of delightful friendship, and he bought of my unworthiness a silken tunic."

"Aye, he did all that, I will not doubt," and Chen's lips curled. "He is no fool. But thou—thou art a thing of wood and hast no more brains than a tomtom."

"Hear me, guileless cousin! Heed thou the warning rice paper and seek no more thy Loo Puck. But keep thy whining tongue between thy teeth and tell it not even in thy prayers that thou hast told me this thing. It may be that I will find Loo Puck for thee—and thou wilt then give her to me."

He turned and slipped through the clanging door into the pi-gow chamber of the Gate of Fortune. Fong Quong, more quiet in his mind, shuffled to his dingy home behind the bazaar, where Mah Neng and her tiny son slumbered together on the rice mats.

But Luey Chen slept not. At the pi-gow table he slyly touched a gaming youth upon the sleeve:

"When the cock crows twice the roost is full," he said very softly.

The gambler did not give him a glance. Sometime after Chen went, he gathered up his winnings and casually strolled out of the den.

Five times that night, in five different palaces of pleasure, Luey Chen stealthily touched a youth and whispered under his breath, "When the cock crows twice the roost is full." Not a man seemed to notice him, but afterward each left what business he was doing and disappeared.

At two o'clock in the morning, when all Chinatown

was stuporous with sleep and opium, Luey Chen and the five chosen striplings squatted together in a little room where only a single candle gleamed. In the center of the huddle of men on the floor lay a black cock of Shanghai, bound and muffled; a shallow bronze bowl, a heavy keen-bladed knife and hypodermic needle were near the rooster.

"Brothers," Luey Chen spoke solemnly, when a bar of iron had been wedged across the door, "there is

grave business before us this night, and, mayhap, for many nights. Let us take the great oath, that our hearts may be strong and beat together as the heart of but one."

The five youths nodded assenting heads, but not a word passed their lips.

Luey Chen caught the black rooster in his hand and whipped the head from its body with a single knife blow. He caught the spurting jets of blood in the bronze bowl.

The Brotherhood of Six then took the hypodermic needle and each extracted from the ball of his thumb a single drop of his own blood and mingled it with the rooster's. Then, one by one, they quaffed from the bowl.

The light from the court outside filtered in between the interstices of the iron bars that guarded the tiny

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window. The four panes, each no wider than a hand's breadth, were grimy with dirt, the accumulations of years. All the windows that spotted the square court, like flyspecks on kaolin walls, were similar; here and there a little painted face peered out through the iron bars, smiling sometimes, a sad, wistful smile.

But this window was high up; a face pressed against it could not be seen from the yard below.

The room itself was not so bad, save that its finery was frayed and soiled with the musty odor of aging nich.

In one corner there was a low couch covered with mats. On the mats lay a little girl. She was weeping softly, her head buried in her arms.

The heavy door swung back on its hinges without a warning creak, and a man came into the room—a fat old man with marthful features, an upper lip like the foreshortened snout of a tapir, eyes that glistened like polished shoe buttons and huge creases under his chin.

He wore breeches of green satin, tightly bound at the ankles, a blouse of wine-colored silk, and an iron-gray queue swung from below his conical cap with its red button, signifying his rank as a mandarin.

"Art still playing the storm-cloud and splashing us with rain, little golden fairy?" he said, noting the girl's tears. "Come, come, Miss Bright Eyes, it is high time for the sun to shine. Lilt up thy face and let me see thy smiles."

The trembling figure in the girlish tunic of blue made no answer.

"Ah, listen now, fragrant little jasmine flower. Hear the words of one who hast much love for thee, and give thyself over to happiness. Behold, I have brought bracelets of jade for thee and silver bangles to tinkle pretty tunes against thine ankles! And here are golden butterflies and star-pins for thy hair, which hath the glory of the night in it already. Wilt thou not accept of these miserable offerings from thy lord?"

"I would have only my mother, Mah Neng, most noble lord," she said between her sobs.

"Foolish one! I am thy father and mother also. There is no other; hast it not yet come to thee thou art the slave of Chung Wo and art bound to his will?"

Loo Puck slipped on her knees at his feet:

"Oh, gracious lord, I pray thee let me go to Mah Neng. Illustrious one, I shall die here, I shall die here! I pray thee, it is that I want the little mother, Mah Neng!"

For answer, Chung Wo caught her under the arms and swung her up to the level of his breast. Instantly the pleading child turned into an infuriated little beast. She screamed like a tortured kitten and flung her pointed nails into his leering yellow face with all her furious strength.

Chung Wo hurled her from him to the heap of matting, and coolly walked to the door. His skin smarted with the sting of her scratches, but he was smiling.

It was late that night when Chung Wo sat in the inner sanctum of the Suey Sing Tong, smoking the pipe of peace with himself. None but his secretary guarded the antechamber, but, in the secret gathering hall, where the blood-clan met in its grisly councils, a score of hatchet wielders played fan-tan within sound of his voice.

The secretary pushed aside the green baize curtain and stood in the presence of the mighty one. He bowed twice, touching his head to the floor:

"Exalted greatness," he said, "a dog of a coolie stands without the door, he craves to infect the air thou breathest with his diseased bones."

Chung Wo frowned.

"What doth he want?"

"He hath a complaint, graciousness."

"Well, let him enter. I will feed his eyeballs to the ravens if he hath not sufficient cause."

The coolie entered, a young man in faded overalls, clogs and a jumper that smelled of fish and seawater. Three times he kowtowed before the great one of earth.

"What wilt thou, base-born?"

"Oh illustrious one, I am a poor man as thou dost see. Alas! My father is dead and his bones lie in this land of the unclean. My mother weepeth for them by the waters of Tes Kiang, and Aie! I have no money to send them. I supplicate—"

"But thy father was not of the Suey Sing?"

"Nay, heaven-born, but—"

The secretary entered again and kowtowed:

"Another vile coolie with a tale of woe, graciousness!"



LOO PUCK, THE LITTLE CELESTIAL MAIDEN.

"Fling him down the stairs!" roared Chong. "I am hearkening to the howls of our cur now."

"But the supplicator fell on his knees again, imploring: 'It is my brother, wonderful one. He hath brought his tears to aid my prayers that the divine-sprung Suey Sings—may they have an hundred thousand sons!—help us entomb our father under the sacred peach tree!'"

The second coolie, looking much like the first entered and fell on his knees beside his brother. His prayers were not less fervent.

There came upon his chain of meditations the subdued sounds of a scuffle in the antechamber. They ceased quickly—and a third coolie appeared beneath the baize curtain.

Chung Wo, instantly suspicious, sprang to his feet. "Who let thee in, scum?"

He strode toward the door....The sharp point of a knife pricked into his throat and he stopped.

"One whisper, and thou shalt rot beside thy fathers!" breathed the coolie that had entered first, pressing the knife point in till a drop of blood trickled down the blade.

Chung Wo's yellow face turned a mottled brown and white, he shivered and his hands dropped helplessly at his sides. Another coolie drew a swastika grute from under his blouse, and, with the help of the third, knotted the great man's hands to his hips.

"Come with us, and hold thy breath—lest thou sicken suddenly," the knife-wielder whispered, switching his weapon into the small of Chung's back.

They passed through the antechamber, where two more coolies were trying to stuff the bound and gagged secretary into a closet three sizes too small for him. These left him, and the party slipped down the stairs on padded soles. In the street a carriage with curtains drawn and the door opened awaited them. Chung Wo was thrust in and three of his captors climbed up with him, while the others mounted the box.

"Now," said the man with the snite, as the carriage rolled noisily over the paving stones, "where hast thou hidden Loo Puck? Speak quickly and see that thou speak no lies, lest we carve thy body into ash bait."

Chung Wo was stubborn and crafty. He knew they would not take his life until he revealed the prison of Loo Puck—and if he could gain a little time the hatchmen would discover the secretary and come to his rescue.

"I know not of whom ye speak nor where any Loo Puck may be," he said.

"The coolies hung themselves upon him and pinned their knees into his puggy stomach. One caught the old man's gray queue, whipped it around his neck and twisted it into a slip-knot. Then he pulled it taut, tauter, tauter still—until Chung Wo choked and his face red toward on his breast.

"Now knowest thou of whom we speak and where she may be found?"

The faintest bobbing of the sunken head answered them. The noose was loosened until the fat prig could catch his breath in quick gasps.

"Have mercy, O strong-hearted ones," he gurgled through his returning breath. "She sleepeth in Sullivan Alley, where the houses are high and there are no doors and the white pigs lose their way in the burrows of the rats. Spare my miserable bones, ye scourges of the gods, and I will take ye to her."

They drove to the close, narrow mouth of Sullivan Alley, into which so many countless crimes have poured dark and bloody secrets. Strolling as non-chantily as though on a mission of pleasure, the party went half the length of the alley, slipped into a cellar and threaded a maze of foul-smelling passages underneath the ground. They emerged into a gloomy, crumbling, old building, its hallway lighted by a flickering tin lamp. A grim-visaged heathen eyed them suspiciously from a shadowy doorway.

"Give him the proper signal—or thou knowest the price," one of the coolies whispered in Chung Wo's ear.

He murmured a word and the heathen faded away. Up one flight of stairs and down another, through corridors and wing passages where the sun never gleamed, the old man led them. There were no lights to guide them, and secret doors, traps and blind halls were passed through or evaded only by the old man's keen sense of direction. Ah, gladly would he have played them false had he dared. But these were, indeed, desperate men.

At length he paused. "She is beyond this door," he said, "and the key is in this pocket."

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Next Week. "The Rival Janitors" by Chas. Fort.