

CHAPTER 13

I WILL tell you, now of a strange dream which I dreamed, and of the stranger things to which I awakened. Since, out of a blank--a void--this vision burst in upon my mind, I cannot do better than relate it, without preamble. It was thus:

I dreamed that I lay writhing on the floor in agony indescribable. My veins were filled with liquid fire, and but that stygian darkness was about me, I told myself that I must have seen the smoke arising from my burning body.

This, I thought, was death.

Then, a cooling shower descended upon me, soaked through skin and tissue to the tortured arteries and quenched the fire within. Panting, but free from pain, I lay--exhausted.

Strength gradually returning to me, I tried to rise; but the carpet felt so singularly soft that it offered me no foothold. I waded and plunged like a swimmer treading water; and all about me rose impenetrable walls of darkness, darkness all but palpable. I wondered why I could not see the windows. The horrible idea flashed to my mind that I was become blind!

Somehow I got upon my feet, and stood swaying dizzily. I became aware of a heavy perfume, and knew it for some kind of incense.

Then--a dim light was born, at an immeasurable distance away. It grew steadily in brilliance. It spread like a bluish-red stain-- like a liquid. It lapped up the darkness and spread throughout the room.

But this was not my room! Nor was it any room known to me.

It was an apartment of such size that its dimensions filled me with a kind of awe such as I never had known: the awe of walled vastness. Its immense extent produced a sensation of sound. Its hugeness had a distinct NOTE.

Tapestries covered the four walls. There was no door visible. These tapestries were magnificently figured with golden dragons; and as the serpentine bodies gleamed and shimmered in the increasing radiance, each dragon, I thought, intertwined its glittering coils more closely with those of another. The carpet was of such richness that I stood knee-deep in its pile. And this, too, was fashioned all over with golden dragons; and they seemed to glide about amid the shadows of the design--stealthily.

At the farther end of the hall--for hall it was--a huge table with dragons' legs stood solitary amid the luxuriance of the carpet. It bore scintillating globes, and tubes that held living organisms, and books of a size and in such bindings as I never had imagined, with instruments of a type unknown to Western science--a heterogeneous litter quite indescribable, which overflowed on to the floor, forming an amazing oasis in a dragon-haunted desert of carpet. A lamp hung above this table, suspended by golden chains from the ceiling--which was so lofty that, following the chains upward, my gaze lost itself in the purple shadows above.

In a chair piled high with dragon-covered cushions a man sat behind this table. The light from the swinging lamp fell fully upon one side of his face, as he leaned forward amid the jumble of weird objects, and left the other side in purplish shadow. From a plain brass bowl upon the corner of the huge table smoke writhed aloft and at times partially obscured that dreadful face.

From the instant that my eyes were drawn to the table and to the man who sat there, neither the incredible extent of the room, nor the nightmare fashion of its mural decorations, could reclaim my attention. I had eyes only for him.

For it was Dr. Fu-Manchu!

Something of the delirium which had seemed to fill my veins with fire, to people the walls with dragons, and to plunge me knee-deep in the carpet, left me. Those dreadful, filmed green eyes acted somewhat like a cold douche. I knew, without removing my gaze from the still face, that the walls no longer lived, but were merely draped in exquisite Chinese dragon tapestry. The rich carpet beneath my feet ceased to be as a jungle and became a normal carpet--extraordinarily rich, but merely a carpet. But the sense of vastness nevertheless remained, with the uncomfortable knowledge that the things upon the table and overflowing about it were all, or nearly all, of a fashion strange to me.

Then, and almost instantaneously, the comparative sanity which I had temporarily experienced began to slip from me again; for the smoke faintly penciled through the air--from the burning perfume on the table-- grew in volume, thickened, and wafted towards me in a cloud of gray horror. It enveloped me, clammy. Dimly, through its oily wreaths, I saw the immobile yellow face of Fu-Manchu. And my stupefied brain acclaimed him a sorcerer, against whom unwittingly we had pitted our poor human wits. The green eyes showed filmy through the fog. An intense pain shot through my lower limbs, and, catching my breath, I looked down. As I did so, the points of the red slippers which I dreamed that I wore increased in length, curled sinuously upward, twined about my throat and choked the breath from my body!

Came an interval, and then a dawning like consciousness; but it was a false consciousness, since it brought with it the idea that my head lay softly pillowed and that a woman's hand caressed my throbbing forehead. Confusedly, as though in the remote past, I recalled a kiss--and the recollection thrilled me strangely. Dreamily content I lay, and a voice stole to my ears:

"They are killing him! they are killing him! Oh! do you not understand?" In my dazed condition, I thought that it was I who had died, and that this musical girl-voice was communicating to me the fact of my own dissolution.

But I was conscious of no interest in the matter.

For hours and hours, I thought, that soothing hand caressed me. I never once raised my heavy lids, until there came a resounding crash that seemed to set my very bones vibrating--a metallic, jangling crash, as the fall of heavy chains. I thought that, then, I half opened my eyes, and that in the dimness I had a fleeting glimpse of a figure clad in gossamer silk, with arms covered with barbaric bangles and slim ankles surrounded by gold bands. The girl was gone, even as I told myself that she was an houri, and that I, though a Christian, had been consigned by some error to the paradise of Mohammed.

Then--a complete blank.

My head throbbed madly; my brain seemed to be clogged--inert; and though my first, feeble movement was followed by the rattle of a chain, some moments more elapsed ere I realized that the chain was fastened to a steel collar-- that the steel collar was clasped about my neck.

I moaned weakly.

"Smith!" I muttered, "Where are you? Smith!"

On to my knees I struggled, and the pain on the top of my skull grew all but insupportable. It was coming back to me now; how Nayland Smith and I had started for the hotel to warn Graham Guthrie; how, as we passed up the steps from the Embankment and into Essex Street, we saw the big motor standing before the door of one of the offices. I could recall coming up level with the car--a modern limousine; but my mind retained no impression of our having passed it-- only a vague memory of a rush of footsteps--a blow. Then, my vision of the hall of dragons, and now this real awakening to a worse reality.

Groping in the darkness, my hands touched a body that lay close beside me. My fingers sought and found the throat, sought and found the steel collar about it.

"Smith," I groaned; and I shook the still form. "Smith, old man--speak to me! Smith!"

Could he be dead? Was this the end of his gallant fight with Dr. Fu-Manchu and the murder group? If so, what did the future hold for me--what had I to face?

He stirred beneath my trembling hands.

"Thank God!" I muttered, and I cannot deny that my joy was tainted with selfishness. For, waking in that impenetrable darkness, and yet obsessed with the dream I had dreamed, I had known what fear meant, at the realization that alone, chained, I must face the dreadful Chinese doctor in the flesh. Smith began incoherent mutterings.

"Sand-bagged!...Look out, Petrie!...He has us at last!...Oh, Heavens!"...He struggled on to his knees, clutching at my hand.

"All right, old man," I said. "We are both alive! So let's be thankful."

A moment's silence, a groan, then:

"Petrie, I have dragged you into this. God forgive me--"

"Dry up, Smith," I said slowly. "I'm not a child. There is no question of being dragged into the matter. I'm here; and if I can be of any use, I'm glad I am here!"

He grasped my hand.

"There were two Chinese, in European clothes--lord, how my head throbs!--in that office door. They sand-bagged us, Petrie--think of it!--in broad daylight, within hail of the Strand! We were rushed into the car--and it was all over, before--" His voice grew faint. "God! they gave me an awful knock!"

"Why have we been spared, Smith? Do you think he is saving us for--"

"Don't, Petrie! If you had been in China, if you had seen what I have seen--"

Footsteps sounded on the flagged passage. A blade of light crept across the floor towards us. My brain was growing clearer. The place had a damp, earthen smell. It was slimy--some noisome cellar. A door was thrown open and a man entered, carrying a lantern. Its light showed my surmise to be accurate, showed the slime-coated walls of a dungeon some fifteen feet square-- shone upon the long yellow robe of the man who stood watching us, upon the malignant, intellectual countenance.

It was Dr. Fu-Manchu.

At last they were face to face--the head of the great Yellow Movement, and the man who fought on behalf of the entire white race. How can I paint the individual who now stood before us-- perhaps the greatest genius of modern times?

Of him it had been fitly said that he had a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan. Something serpentine, hypnotic, was in his very presence. Smith drew one sharp breath, and was

silent. Together, chained to the wall, two mediaeval captives, living mockeries of our boasted modern security, we crouched before Dr. Fu-Manchu.

He came forward with an indescribable gait, cat-like yet awkward, carrying his high shoulders almost hunched. He placed the lantern in a niche in the wall, never turning away the reptilian gaze of those eyes which must haunt my dreams forever. They possessed a viridescence which hitherto I had supposed possible only in the eye of the cat--and the film intermittently clouded their brightness-- but I can speak of them no more.

I had never supposed, prior to meeting Dr. Fu-Manchu, that so intense a force of malignancy could radiate--from any human being. He spoke. His English was perfect, though at times his words were oddly chosen; his delivery alternately was guttural and sibilant.

"Mr. Smith and Dr. Petrie, your interference with my plans has gone too far. I have seriously turned my attention to you."

He displayed his teeth, small and evenly separated, but discolored in a way that was familiar to me. I studied his eyes with a new professional interest, which even the extremity of our danger could not wholly banish. Their greenness seemed to be of the iris; the pupil was oddly contracted--a pin-point.

Smith leaned his back against the wall with assumed indifference.

"You have presumed," continued Fu-Manchu, "to meddle with a world-change. Poor spiders--caught in the wheels of the inevitable! You have linked my name with the futility of the Young China Movement-- the name of Fu-Manchu! Mr. Smith, you are an incompetent meddler-- I despise you! Dr. Petrie, you are a fool--I am sorry for you!"

He rested one bony hand on his hip, narrowing the long eyes as he looked down on us. The purposeful cruelty of the man was inherent; it was entirely untheatrical. Still Smith remained silent.

"So I am determined to remove you from the scene of your blunders!" added Fu-Manchu.

"Opium will very shortly do the same for you!" I rapped at him savagely.

Without emotion he turned the narrowed eyes upon me.

"That is a matter of opinion, Doctor," he said. "You may have lacked the opportunities which have been mine for studying that subject-- and in any event I shall not be privileged to enjoy your advice in the future."

"You will not long outlive me," I replied. "And our deaths will not profit you, incidentally; because--" Smith's foot touched mine.

"Because?" inquired Fu-Manchu softly.

"Ah! Mr. Smith is so prudent! He is thinking that I have FILES!" He pronounced the word in a way that made me shudder. "Mr. Smith has seen a WIRE JACKET! Have you ever seen a wire jacket? As a surgeon its functions would interest you!"

I stifled a cry that rose to my lips; for, with a shrill whistling sound, a small shape came bounding into the dimly lit vault, then shot upward. A marmoset landed on the shoulder of Dr. Fu-Manchu and peered grotesquely into the dreadful yellow face. The Doctor raised his bony hand and fondled the little creature, crooning to it.

"One of my pets, Mr. Smith," he said, suddenly opening his eyes fully so that they blazed like green lamps. "I have others, equally useful. My scorpions--have you met my scorpions? No? My pythons and hamadryads? Then there are my fungi and my tiny allies, the bacilli. I have a collection in my laboratory quite unique. Have you ever visited Molokai, the leper island,

Doctor? No? But Mr. Nayland Smith will be familiar with the asylum at Rangoon! And we must not forget my black spiders, with their diamond eyes--my spiders, that sit in the dark and watch--then leap!"

He raised his lean hands, so that the sleeve of the robe fell back to the elbow, and the ape dropped, chattering, to the floor and ran from the cellar.

"O God of Cathay!" he cried, "by what death shall these die--these miserable ones who would bind thine Empire, which is boundless!"

Like some priest of Tezcat he stood, his eyes upraised to the roof, his lean body quivering--a sight to shock the most unimpressionable mind.

"He is mad!" I whispered to Smith. "God help us, the man is a dangerous homicidal maniac!"

Nayland Smith's tanned face was very drawn, but he shook his head grimly.

"Dangerous, yes, I agree," he muttered; "his existence is a danger to the entire white race which, now, we are powerless to avert."

Dr. Fu-Manchu recovered himself, took up the lantern and, turning abruptly, walked to the door, with his awkward, yet feline gait. At the threshold he looked back.

"You would have warned Mr. Graham Guthrie?" he said, in a soft voice. "To-night, at half-past twelve, Mr. Graham Guthrie dies!"

Smith sat silent and motionless, his eyes fixed upon the speaker.

"You were in Rangoon in 1908?" continued Dr. Fu-Manchu-- "you remember the Call?"

From somewhere above us--I could not determine the exact direction-- came a low, wailing cry, an uncanny thing of falling cadences, which, in that dismal vault, with the sinister yellow-robed figure at the door, seemed to pour ice into my veins. Its effect upon Smith was truly extraordinary. His face showed grayly in the faint light, and I heard him draw a hissing breath through clenched teeth.

"It calls for you!" said Fu-Manchu. "At half-past twelve it calls for Graham Guthrie!"

The door closed and darkness mantled us again.

"Smith," I said, "what was that?" The horrors about us were playing havoc with my nerves.

"It was the Call of Siva!" replied Smith hoarsely.

"What is it? Who uttered it? What does it mean?"

"I don't know what it is, Petrie, nor who utters it. But it means death!"

CHAPTER 14

THERE may be some who could have lain, chained to that noisome cell, and felt no fear--no dread of what the blackness might hold. I confess that I am not one of these. I knew that Nayland Smith and I stood in the path of the most stupendous genius who in the world's history had devoted his intellect to crime. I knew that the enormous wealth of the political group backing Dr. Fu-Manchu rendered him a menace to Europe and to America greater than that of the plague. He was a scientist trained at a great university--an explorer of nature's secrets, who had gone farther into the unknown, I suppose, than any living man. His mission was to remove all obstacles--human obstacles--from the path of that secret movement which was progressing in the Far East. Smith and I were two such obstacles; and of all the horrible devices at his command, I wondered, and my tortured brain refused to leave the subject, by which of them were we doomed to be dispatched?

Even at that very moment some venomous centipede might be wriggling towards me over the slime of the stones, some poisonous spider be preparing to drop from the roof! Fu-Manchu might have released a serpent in the cellar, or the air be alive with microbes of a loathsome disease!

"Smith," I said, scarcely recognizing my own voice, "I can't bear this suspense. He intends to kill us, that is certain, but--"

"Don't worry," came the reply; "he intends to learn our plans first."

"You mean--?"

"You heard him speak of his files and of his wire jacket?"

"Oh, my God!" I groaned; "can this be England?"

Smith laughed dryly, and I heard him fumbling with the steel collar about his neck.

"I have one great hope," he said, "since you share my captivity, but we must neglect no minor chance. Try with your pocket-knife if you can force the lock. I am trying to break this one."

Truth to tell, the idea had not entered my half-dazed mind, but I immediately acted upon my friend's suggestion, setting to work with the small blade of my knife. I was so engaged, and, having snapped one blade, was about to open another, when a sound arrested me. It came from beneath my feet.

"Smith," I whispered, "listen!"

The scraping and clicking which told of Smith's efforts ceased. Motionless, we sat in that humid darkness and listened.

Something was moving beneath the stones of the cellar. I held my breath; every nerve in my body was strung up.

A line of light showed a few feet from where we lay. It widened--became an oblong. A trap was lifted, and within a yard of me, there rose a dimly seen head. Horror I had expected--and death, or worse. Instead, I saw a lovely face, crowned with a disordered mass of curling hair; I saw a white arm upholding the stone slab, a shapely arm clasped about the elbow by a broad gold bangle.

The girl climbed into the cellar and placed the lantern on the stone floor. In the dim light she was unreal--a figure from an opium vision, with her clinging silk draperies and garish jewelry, with her feet encased in little red slippers. In short, this was the hour of my vision, materialized. It was difficult to believe that we were in modern, up-to-date England; easy to dream that we were the captives of a caliph, in a dungeon in old Baghdad.

"My prayers are answered," said Smith softly. "She has come to save YOU."

"S-sh!" warned the girl, and her wonderful eyes opened widely, fearfully. "A sound and he will kill us all."

She bent over me; a key jarred in the lock which had broken my penknife--and the collar was off. As I rose to my feet the girl turned and released Smith. She raised the lantern above the trap, and signed to us to descend the wooden steps which its light revealed.

"Your knife," she whispered to me. "Leave it on the floor. He will think you forced the locks. Down! Quickly!"

Nayland Smith, stepping gingerly, disappeared into the darkness. I rapidly followed. Last of all came our mysterious friend, a gold band about one of her ankles gleaming in the rays of the lantern which she carried. We stood in a low-arched passage.

"Tie your handkerchiefs over your eyes and do exactly as I tell you," she ordered.

Neither of us hesitated to obey her. Blind-folded, I allowed her to lead me, and Smith rested his hand upon my shoulder. In that order we proceeded, and came to stone steps, which we ascended.

"Keep to the wall on the left," came a whisper. "There is danger on the right."

With my free hand I felt for and found the wall, and we pressed forward. The atmosphere of the place through which we were passing was steamy, and loaded with an odor like that of exotic plant life. But a faint animal scent crept to my nostrils, too, and there was a subdued stir about me, infinitely suggestive--mysterious.

Now my feet sank in a soft carpet, and a curtain brushed my shoulder. A gong sounded. We stopped.

The din of distant drumming came to my ears.

"Where in Heaven's name are we?" hissed Smith in my ear; "that is a tom-tom!"

"S-sh! S-sh!"

The little hand grasping mine quivered nervously. We were near a door or a window, for a breath of perfume was wafted through the air; and it reminded me of my other meetings with the beautiful woman who was now leading us from the house of Fu-Manchu; who, with her own lips, had told me that she was his slave. Through the horrible phantasmagoria she flitted--a seductive vision, her piquant loveliness standing out richly in its black setting of murder and devilry. Not once, but a thousand times, I had tried to reason out the nature of the tie which bound her to the sinister Doctor.

Silence fell.

"Quick! This way!"

Down a thickly carpeted stair we went. Our guide opened a door, and led us along a passage. Another door was opened; and we were in the open air. But the girl never tarried, pulling me along a graveled path, with a fresh breeze blowing in my face, and along until, unmistakably, I stood upon the river bank. Now, planking creaked to our tread; and looking downward beneath the handkerchief, I saw the gleam of water beneath my feet.

"Be careful!" I was warned, and found myself stepping into a narrow boat--a punt. Nayland Smith followed, and the girl pushed the punt off and poled out into the stream. "Don't speak!" she directed.

My brain was fevered; I scarce knew if I dreamed and was waking, or if the reality ended with my imprisonment in the clammy cellar and this silent escape, blindfolded, upon the river with a girl for our guide who might have stepped out of the pages of "The Arabian Nights" were fantasy--the mockery of sleep.

Indeed, I began seriously to doubt if this stream whereon we floated, whose waters plashed and tinkled about us, were the Thames, the Tigris, or the Styx.

The punt touched a bank.

"You will hear a clock strike in a few minutes," said the girl, with her soft, charming accent, "but I rely upon your honor not to remove the handkerchiefs until then. You owe me this."

"We do!" said Smith fervently.

I heard him scrambling to the bank, and a moment later a soft hand was placed in mine, and I, too, was guided on to terra firma. Arrived on the bank, I still held the girl's hand, drawing her towards me.

"You must not go back," I whispered. "We will take care of you. You must not return to that place."

"Let me go!" she said. "When, once, I asked you to take me from him, you spoke of police protection; that was your answer, police protection! You would let them lock me up--imprison me--and make me betray him! For what? For what?" She wrenched herself free. "How little you understand me. Never mind. Perhaps one day you will know! Until the clock strikes!"

She was gone. I heard the creak of the punt, the drip of the water from the pole. Fainter it grew, and fainter.

"What is her secret?" muttered Smith, beside me. "Why does she cling to that monster?"

The distant sound died away entirely. A clock began to strike; it struck the half-hour. In an instant my handkerchief was off, and so was Smith's. We stood upon a towing-path. Away to the left the moon shone upon the towers and battlements of an ancient fortress.

It was Windsor Castle.

"Half-past ten," cried Smith. "Two hours to save Graham Guthrie!"

We had exactly fourteen minutes in which to catch the last train to Waterloo; and we caught it. But I sank into a corner of the compartment in a state bordering upon collapse. Neither of us, I think, could have managed another twenty yards. With a lesser stake than a human life at issue, I doubt if we should have attempted that dash to Windsor station.

"Due at Waterloo at eleven-fifty-one," panted Smith. "That gives us thirty-nine minutes to get to the other side of the river and reach his hotel."

"Where in Heaven's name is that house situated? Did we come up or down stream?"

"I couldn't determine. But at any rate, it stands close to the riverside. It should be merely a question of time to identify it. I shall set Scotland Yard to work immediately; but I am hoping for nothing. Our escape will warn him."

I said no more for a time, sitting wiping the perspiration from my forehead and watching my friend load his cracked briar with the broadcut Latakia mixture.

"Smith," I said at last, "what was that horrible wailing we heard, and what did Fu-Manchu mean when he referred to Rangoon? I noticed how it affected you."

My friend nodded and lighted his pipe.

"There was a ghastly business there in 1908 or early in 1909," he replied: "an utterly mysterious epidemic. And this beastly wailing was associated with it."

"In what way? And what do you mean by an epidemic?"

"It began, I believe, at the Palace Mansions Hotel, in the cantonments. A young American, whose name I cannot recall, was staying there on business connected with some new iron buildings. One night he went to his room, locked the door, and jumped out of the window into the courtyard. Broke his neck, of course."

"Suicide?"

"Apparently. But there were singular features in the case. For instance, his revolver lay beside him, fully loaded!"

"In the courtyard?"

"In the courtyard!"

"Was it murder by any chance?"

Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"His door was found locked from the inside; had to be broken in."

"But the wailing business?"

"That began later, or was only noticed later. A French doctor, named Lafitte, died in exactly the same way."

"At the same place?"

"At the same hotel; but he occupied a different room. Here is the extraordinary part of the affair: a friend shared the room with him, and actually saw him go!"

"Saw him leap from the window?"

"Yes. The friend--an Englishman--was aroused by the uncanny wailing. I was in Rangoon at the time, so that I know more of the case of Lafitte than of that of the American. I spoke to the man about it personally. He was an electrical engineer, Edward Martin, and he told me that the cry seemed to come from above him."

"It seemed to come from above when we heard it at Fu-Manchu's house."

"Martin sat up in bed, it was a clear moonlight night-- the sort of moonlight you get in Burma. Lafitte, for some reason, had just gone to the window. His friend saw him look out. The next moment with a dreadful scream, he threw himself forward-- and crashed down into the courtyard!"

"What then?"

"Martin ran to the window and looked down. Lafitte's scream had aroused the place, of course. But there was absolutely nothing to account for the occurrence. There was no balcony, no ledge, by means of which anyone could reach the window."

"But how did you come to recognize the cry?"

"I stopped at the Palace Mansions for some time; and one night this uncanny howling aroused me. I heard it quite distinctly, and am never likely to forget it. It was followed by a hoarse yell. The man in the next room, an orchid hunter, had gone the same way as the others!"

"Did you change your quarters?"

"No. Fortunately for the reputation of the hotel--a first-class establishment-- several similar cases occurred elsewhere, both in Rangoon, in Prome and in Moulmein. A story got about the native quarter, and was fostered by some mad fakir, that the god Siva was reborn and that the cry was his call for victims; a ghastly story, which led to an outbreak of dacoity and gave the District Superintendent no end of trouble."

"Was there anything unusual about the bodies?"

"They all developed marks after death, as though they had been strangled! The marks were said all to possess a peculiar form, though it was not appreciable to my eye; and this, again, was declared to be the five heads of Siva."

"Were the deaths confined to Europeans?"

"Oh, no. Several Burmans and others died in the same way. At first there was a theory that the victims had contracted leprosy and committed suicide as a result; but the medical evidence disproved that. The Call of Siva became a perfect nightmare throughout Burma."

"Did you ever hear it again, before this evening?"

"Yes. I heard it on the Upper Irrawaddy one clear, moonlight night, and a Colassie--a deck-hand--leaped from the top deck of the steamer aboard which I was traveling! My God! to think that the fiend Fu-Manchu has brought That to England!"

"But brought what, Smith?" I cried, in perplexity. "What has he brought? An evil spirit? A mental disease? What is it? What CAN it be?"

"A new agent of death, Petrie! Something born in a plague-spot of Burma-- the home of much that is unclean and much that is inexplicable. Heaven grant that we be in time, and are able to save Guthrie."