

CHAPTER 27

WE quitted the wrecked launch but a few seconds before her stern settled down into the river. Where the mud-bank upon which we found ourselves was situated we had no idea. But at least it was terra firma and we were free from Dr. Fu-Manchu.

Smith stood looking out towards the river.

"My God!" he groaned. "My God!"

He was thinking, as I was, of Weymouth.

And when, an hour later, the police boat located us (on the mud-flats below Greenwich) and we heard that the toll of the poison cellars was eight men, we also heard news of our brave companion.

"Back there in the fog, sir," reported Inspector Ryman, who was in charge, and his voice was under poor command, "there was an uncanny howling, and peals of laughter that I'm going to dream about for weeks--"

Karamaneh, who nestled beside me like a frightened child, shivered; and I knew that the needle had done its work, despite Weymouth's giant strength.

Smith swallowed noisily.

"Pray God the river has that yellow Satan," he said. "I would sacrifice a year of my life to see his rat's body on the end of a grappling-iron!"

We were a sad party that steamed through the fog homeward that night. It seemed almost like deserting a staunch comrade to leave the spot--so nearly as we could locate it--where Weymouth had put up that last gallant fight. Our helplessness was pathetic, and although, had the night been clear as crystal, I doubt if we could have acted otherwise, it came to me that this stinking murk was a new enemy which drove us back in coward retreat.

But so many were the calls upon our activity, and so numerous the stimulants to our initiative in those times, that soon we had matter to relieve our minds from this stress of sorrow.

There was Karamaneh to be considered--Karamaneh and her brother. A brief counsel was held, whereat it was decided that for the present they should be lodged at a hotel.

"I shall arrange," Smith whispered to me, for the girl was watching us, "to have the place patrolled night and day."

"You cannot suppose--"

"Petrie! I cannot and dare not suppose Fu-Manchu dead until with my own eyes I have seen him so!"

Accordingly we conveyed the beautiful Oriental girl and her brother away from that luxurious abode in its sordid setting. I will not dwell upon the final scene in the poison cellars lest I be accused of accumulating horror for horror's sake. Members of the fire brigade, helmed against contagion, brought out the bodies of the victims wrapped in their living shrouds....

From Karamaneh we learned much of Fu-Manchu, little of herself.

"What am I? Does my poor history matter--to anyone?" was her answer to questions respecting herself.

And she would droop her lashes over her dark eyes.

The dacoits whom the Chinaman had brought to England originally numbered seven, we learned. As you, having followed me thus far, will be aware, we had thinned the ranks of the Burmans. Probably only one now remained in England. They had lived in a camp in the grounds of the house near Windsor (which, as we had learned at the time of its destruction, the Doctor had bought outright). The Thames had been his highway.

Other members of the group had occupied quarters in various parts of the East End, where sailormen of all nationalities congregate. Shen-Yan's had been the East End headquarters. He had employed the hulk from the time of his arrival, as a laboratory for a certain class of experiments undesirable in proximity to a place of residence.

Nayland Smith asked the girl on one occasion if the Chinaman had had a private sea-going vessel, and she replied in the affirmative. She had never been on board, however, had never even set eyes upon it, and could give us no information respecting its character. It had sailed for China.

"You are sure," asked Smith keenly, "that it has actually left?"

"I understood so, and that we were to follow by another route."

"It would have been difficult for Fu-Manchu to travel by a passenger boat?"

"I cannot say what were his plans."

In a state of singular uncertainty, then, readily to be understood, we passed the days following the tragedy which had deprived us of our fellow-worker.

Vividly I recall the scene at poor Weymouth's home, on the day that we visited it. I then made the acquaintance of the Inspector's brother. Nayland Smith gave him a detailed account of the last scene.

"Out there in the mist," he concluded wearily, "it all seemed very unreal."

"I wish to God it had been!"

"Amen to that, Mr. Weymouth. But your brother made a gallant finish. If ridding the world of Fu-Manchu were the only good deed to his credit, his life had been well spent."

James Weymouth smoked awhile in thoughtful silence. Though but four and a half miles S.S.E. of St. Paul's the quaint little cottage, with its rustic garden, shadowed by the tall trees which had so lined the village street before motor 'buses were, was a spot as peaceful and secluded as any in broad England. But another shadow lay upon it to-day--chilling, fearful. An incarnate evil had come out of the dim East and in its dying malevolence had touched this home.

"There are two things I don't understand about it, sir," continued Weymouth. "What was the meaning of the horrible laughter which the river police heard in the fog? And where are the bodies?"

Karamaneh, seated beside me, shuddered at the words. Smith, whose restless spirit granted him little repose, paused in his aimless wanderings about the room and looked at her.

In these latter days of his Augean labors to purge England of the unclean thing which had fastened upon her, my friend was more lean and nervous-looking than I had ever known him. His long residence in Burma had rendered him spare and had burned his naturally dark skin to a coppery hue; but now his gray eyes had grown feverishly bright and his face so lean as at times to appear positively emaciated. But I knew that he was as fit as ever.

"This lady may be able to answer your first question," he said. "She and her brother were for some time in the household of Dr. Fu-Manchu. In fact, Mr. Weymouth, Karamaneh, as her name implies, was a slave."

Weymouth glanced at the beautiful, troubled face with scarcely veiled distrust. "You don't look as though you had come from China, miss," he said, with a sort of unwilling admiration.

"I do not come from China," replied Karamaneh. "My father was a pure Bedawee. But my history does not matter." (At times there was something imperious in her manner; and to this her musical accent added force.) "When your brave brother, Inspector Weymouth, and Dr. Fu-Manchu, were swallowed up by the river, Fu-Manchu held a poisoned needle in his hand. The laughter meant that the needle had done its work. Your brother had become mad!"

Weymouth turned aside to hide his emotion. "What was on the needle?" he asked huskily.

"It was something which he prepared from the venom of a kind of swamp adder," she answered. "It produces madness, but not always death."

"He would have had a poor chance," said Smith, "even had he been in complete possession of his senses. At the time of the encounter we must have been some considerable distance from shore, and the fog was impenetrable."

"But how do you account for the fact that neither of the bodies have been recovered?"

"Ryman of the river police tells me that persons lost at that point are not always recovered--or not until a considerable time later."

There was a faint sound from the room above. The news of that tragic happening out in the mist upon the Thames had prostrated poor Mrs. Weymouth.

"She hasn't been told half the truth," said her brother-in-law. "She doesn't know about--the poisoned needle. What kind of fiend was this Dr. Fu-Manchu?" He burst out into a sudden blaze of furious resentment. "John never told me much, and you have let mighty little leak into the papers. What was he? Who was he?"

Half he addressed the words to Smith, half to Karamaneh.

"Dr. Fu-Manchu," replied the former, "was the ultimate expression of Chinese cunning; a phenomenon such as occurs but once in many generations. He was a superman of incredible genius, who, had he willed, could have revolutionized science. There is a superstition in some parts of China according to which, under certain peculiar conditions (one of which is proximity to a deserted burial-ground) an evil spirit of incredible age may enter unto the body of a new-born infant. All my efforts thus far have not availed me to trace the genealogy of the man called Dr. Fu-Manchu. Even Karamaneh cannot help me in this. But I have sometimes thought that he was a member of a certain very old Kiangsu family--and that the peculiar conditions I have mentioned prevailed at his birth!"

Smith, observing our looks of amazement, laughed shortly, and quite mirthlessly.

"Poor old Weymouth!" he jerked. "I suppose my labors are finished; but I am far from triumphant. Is there any improvement in Mrs. Weymouth's condition?"

"Very little," was the reply; "she has lain in a semi-conscious state since the news came. No one had any idea she would take it so. At one time we were afraid her brain was going. She seemed to have delusions."

Smith spun round upon Weymouth.

"Of what nature?" he asked rapidly.

The other pulled nervously at his mustache.

"My wife has been staying with her," he explained, "since--it happened; and for the last three nights poor John's widow has cried out at the same time--half-past two--that someone was knocking on the door."

"What door?"

"That door yonder--the street door."

All our eyes turned in the direction indicated.

"John often came home at half-past two from the Yard," continued Weymouth; "so we naturally thought poor Mary was wandering in her mind. But last night--and it's not to be wondered at--my wife couldn't sleep, and she was wide awake at half-past two."

"Well?"

Nayland Smith was standing before him, alert, bright-eyed.

"She heard it, too!"

The sun was streaming into the cozy little sitting-room; but I will confess that Weymouth's words chilled me uncannily. Karamaneh laid her hand upon mine, in a quaint, childish fashion peculiarly her own. Her hand was cold, but its touch thrilled me. For Karamaneh was not a child, but a rarely beautiful girl-- a pearl of the East such as many a monarch has fought for.

"What then?" asked Smith.

"She was afraid to move--afraid to look from the window!"

My friend turned and stared hard at me.

"A subjective hallucination, Petrie?"

"In all probability," I replied. "You should arrange that your wife be relieved in her trying duties, Mr. Weymouth. It is too great a strain for an inexperienced nurse."

CHAPTER 28

OF all that we had hoped for in our pursuit of Fu-Manchu how little had we accomplished. Excepting Karamaneh and her brother (who were victims and not creatures of the Chinese doctor's) not one of the formidable group had fallen alive into our hands. Dreadful crimes had marked Fu-Manchu's passage through the land. Not one-half of the truth (and nothing of the later developments) had been made public. Nayland Smith's authority was sufficient to control the press.

In the absence of such a veto a veritable panic must have seized upon the entire country; for a monster--a thing more than humanly evil-- existed in our midst.

Always Fu-Manchu's secret activities had centered about the great waterway. There was much of poetic justice in his end; for the Thames had claimed him, who so long had used the stream as a highway for the passage to and fro for his secret forces. Gone now were the yellow men who had been the instruments of his evil will; gone was the giant intellect which had controlled the complex murder machine. Karamaneh, whose beauty he had used as a lure, at last was free, and no more with her smile would tempt men to death-- that her brother might live.

Many there are, I doubt not, who will regard the Eastern girl with horror. I ask their forgiveness in that I regarded her quite differently. No man having seen her could have condemned her unheard. Many, having looked into her lovely eyes, had they found there what I found, must have forgiven her almost any crime.

That she valued human life but little was no matter for wonder. Her nationality--her history--furnished adequate excuse for an attitude not condonable in a European equally cultured.

But indeed let me confess that hers was a nature incomprehensible to me in some respects. The soul of Karamaneh was a closed book to my short-sighted Western eyes. But the body of Karamaneh was exquisite; her beauty of a kind that was a key to the most extravagant rhapsodies of Eastern poets. Her eyes held a challenge wholly Oriental in its appeal; her lips, even in repose, were a taunt. And, herein, East is West and West is East.

Finally, despite her lurid history, despite the scornful self-possession of which I knew her capable, she was an unprotected girl-- in years, I believe, a mere child--whom Fate had cast in my way. At her request, we had booked passages for her brother and herself to Egypt. The boat sailed in three days. But Karamaneh's beautiful eyes were sad; often I detected tears on the black lashes. Shall I endeavor to describe my own tumultuous, conflicting emotions? It would be useless, since I know it to be impossible. For in those dark eyes burned a fire I might not see; those silken lashes veiled a message I dared not read.

Nayland Smith was not blind to the facts of the complicated situation. I can truthfully assert that he was the only man of my acquaintance who, having come in contact with Karamaneh, had kept his head.

We endeavored to divert her mind from the recent tragedies by a round of amusements, though with poor Weymouth's body still at the mercy of unknown waters Smith and I made but a poor show of gaiety; and I took a gloomy pride in the admiration which our lovely companion everywhere excited. I learned, in those days, how rare a thing in nature is a really beautiful woman.

One afternoon we found ourselves at an exhibition of water colors in Bond Street. Karamaneh was intensely interested in the subjects of the drawings--which were entirely Egyptian. As usual, she furnished matter for comment amongst the other visitors, as did the boy, Aziz, her brother, anew upon the world from his living grave in the house of Dr. Fu-Manchu.

Suddenly Aziz clutched at his sister's arm, whispering rapidly in Arabic. I saw her peachlike color fade; saw her become pale and wild-eyed--the haunted Karamaneh of the old days.

She turned to me.

"Dr. Petrie--he says that Fu-Manchu is here!"

"Where?"

Nayland Smith rapped out the question violently, turning in a flash from the picture which he was examining.

"In this room!" she whispered glancing furtively, affrightedly about her. "Something tells Aziz when HE is near--and I, too, feel strangely afraid. Oh, can it be that he is not dead!"

She held my arm tightly. Her brother was searching the room with big, velvet black eyes. I studied the faces of the several visitors; and Smith was staring about him with the old alert look, and tugging nervously at the lobe of his ear. The name of the giant foe of the white race instantaneously had strung him up to a pitch of supreme intensity.

Our united scrutinies discovered no figure which could have been that of the Chinese doctor. Who could mistake that long, gaunt shape, with the high, mummy-like shoulders, and the indescribable gait, which I can only liken to that of an awkward cat?

Then, over the heads of a group of people who stood by the doorway, I saw Smith peering at someone--at someone who passed across the outer room. Stepping aside, I, too, obtained a glimpse of this person.

As I saw him, he was a tall, old man, wearing a black Inverness coat and a rather shabby silk hat. He had long white hair and a patriarchal beard, wore smoked glasses and walked slowly, leaning upon a stick.

Smith's gaunt face paled. With a rapid glance at Karamaneh, he made off across the room.

Could it be Dr. Fu-Manchu?

Many days had passed since, already half-choked by Inspector Weymouth's iron grip, Fu-Manchu, before our own eyes, had been swallowed up by the Thames. Even now men were seeking his body, and that of his last victim. Nor had we left any stone unturned. Acting upon information furnished by Karamaneh, the police had searched every known haunt of the murder group. But everything pointed to the fact that the group was disbanded and dispersed; that the lord of strange deaths who had ruled it was no more.

Yet Smith was not satisfied. Neither, let me confess, was I. Every port was watched; and in suspected districts a kind of house-to-house patrol had been instituted. Unknown to the great public, in those days a secret war waged--a war in which all the available forces of the authorities took the field against one man! But that one man was the evil of the East incarnate.

When we rejoined him, Nayland Smith was talking to the commissionaire at the door. He turned to me.

"That is Professor Jenner Monde," he said. "The sergeant, here, knows him well."

The name of the celebrated Orientalist of course was familiar to me, although I had never before set eyes upon him.

"The Professor was out East the last time I was there, sir," stated the commissionaire. "I often used to see him. But he's an eccentric old gentleman. Seems to live in a world of his own. He's recently back from China, I think."

Nayland Smith stood clicking his teeth together in irritable hesitation. I heard Karamaneh sigh, and, looking at her, I saw that her cheeks were regaining their natural color.

She smiled in pathetic apology.

"If he was here he is gone," she said. "I am not afraid now."

Smith thanked the commissionaire for his information and we quitted the gallery.

"Professor Jenner Monde," muttered my friend, "has lived so long in China as almost to be a Chinaman. I have never met him-- never seen him, before; but I wonder--"

"You wonder what, Smith?"

"I wonder if he could possibly be an ally, of the Doctor's!"

I stared at him in amazement.

"If we are to attach any importance to the incident at all," I said, "we must remember that the boy's impression--and Karamaneh's-- was that Fu-Manchu was present in person."

"I DO attach importance to the incident, Petrie; they are naturally sensitive to such impressions. But I doubt if even the abnormal organization of Aziz could distinguish between the hidden presence of a creature of the Doctor's and that of the Doctor himself. I shall make a point of calling upon Professor Jenner Monde."

But Fate had ordained that much should happen ere Smith made his proposed call upon the Professor.

Karamaneh and her brother safely lodged in their hotel (which was watched night and day by four men under Smith's orders), we returned to my quiet suburban rooms.

"First," said Smith, "let us see what we can find out respecting Professor Monde."

He went to the telephone and called up New Scotland Yard. There followed some little delay before the requisite information was obtained. Finally, however, we learned that the Professor was something of a recluse, having few acquaintances, and fewer friends.

He lived alone in chambers in New Inn Court, Carey Street. A charwoman did such cleaning as was considered necessary by the Professor, who employed no regular domestic. When he was in London he might be seen fairly frequently at the British Museum, where his shabby figure was familiar to the officials. When he was not in London--that is, during the greater part of each year--no one knew where he went. He never left any address to which letters might be forwarded.

"How long has he been in London now?" asked Smith.

So far as could be ascertained from New Inn Court (replied Scotland Yard) roughly a week.

My friend left the telephone and began restlessly to pace the room. The charred briar was produced and stuffed with that broad cut Latakia mixture of which Nayland Smith consumed close upon a pound a week. He was one of those untidy smokers who leave tangled tufts hanging from the pipe-bowl and when they light up strew the floor with smoldering fragments.

A ringing came, and shortly afterwards a girl entered.

"Mr. James Weymouth to see you, sir."

"Hullo!" rapped Smith. "What's this?"

Weymouth entered, big and florid, and in some respects singularly like his brother, in others as singularly unlike. Now, in his black suit, he was a somber figure; and in the blue eyes I read a fear suppressed.

"Mr. Smith," he began, "there's something uncanny going on at Maple Cottage."

Smith wheeled the big arm-chair forward.

"Sit down, Mr. Weymouth," he said. "I am not entirely surprised. But you have my attention. What has occurred?"

Weymouth took a cigarette from the box which I proffered and poured out a peg of whisky. His hand was not quite steady.

"That knocking," he explained. "It came again the night after you were there, and Mrs. Weymouth--my wife, I mean-- felt that she couldn't spend another night there, alone" "Did she look out of the window?" I asked.

"No, Doctor; she was afraid. But I spent last night downstairs in the sitting-room--and I looked out!"

He took a gulp from his glass. Nayland Smith, seated on the edge of the table, his extinguished pipe in his hand, was watching him keenly.

"I'll admit I didn't look out at once," Weymouth resumed. "There was something so uncanny, gentlemen, in that knocking-- knocking--in the dead of the night. I thought"--his voice shook--"of poor Jack, lying somewhere amongst the slime of the river--and, oh, my God! it came to me that it was Jack who was knocking--and I dare not think what he--what it-- would look like!"

He leaned forward, his chin in his hand. For a few moments we were all silent.

"I know I funk'd," he continued huskily. "But when the wife came to the head of the stairs and whispered to me: 'There it is again. What in heaven's name can it be'--I started to unbolt the door. The knocking had stopped. Everything was very still. I heard Mary--HIS widow--sobbing, upstairs; that was all. I opened the door, a little bit at a time."

Pausing again, he cleared his throat, and went on:

"It was a bright night, and there was no one there--not a soul. But somewhere down the lane, as I looked out into the porch, I heard most awful groans! They got fainter and fainter. Then--I could have sworn I heard SOMEONE LAUGHING! My nerves cracked up at that; and I shut the door again."

The narration of his weird experience revived something of the natural fear which it had occasioned. He raised his glass, with unsteady hand, and drained it.

Smith struck a match and relighted his pipe. He began to pace the room again. His eyes were literally on fire.

"Would it be possible to get Mrs. Weymouth out of the house before to-night? Remove her to your place, for instance?" he asked abruptly.

Weymouth looked up in surprise.

"She seems to be in a very low state," he replied. He glanced at me. "Perhaps Dr. Petrie would give us an opinion?"

"I will come and see her," I said. "But what is your idea, Smith?"

"I want to hear that knocking!" he rapped. "But in what I may see fit to do I must not be handicapped by the presence of a sick woman."

"Her condition at any rate will admit of our administering an opiate," I suggested. "That would meet the situation?"

"Good!" cried Smith. He was intensely excited now. "I rely upon you to arrange something, Petrie. Mr. Weymouth"-- he turned to our visitor--"I shall be with you this evening not later than twelve o'clock."

Weymouth appeared to be greatly relieved. I asked him to wait whilst I prepared a draught for the patient. When he was gone:

"What do you think this knocking means, Smith?" I asked.

He tapped out his pipe on the side of the grate and began with nervous energy to refill it again from the dilapidated pouch.

"I dare not tell you what I hope, Petrie," he replied--"nor what I fear."