

CHAPTER 3

I sank into an arm-chair in my rooms and gulped down a strong peg of brandy.

"We have been followed here," I said. "Why did you make no attempt to throw the pursuers off the track, to have them intercepted?"

Smith laughed.

"Useless, in the first place. Wherever we went, HE would find us. And of what use to arrest his creatures? We could prove nothing against them. Further, it is evident that an attempt is to be made upon my life to-night-- and by the same means that proved so successful in the case of poor Sir Crichton."

His square jaw grew truculently prominent, and he leapt stormily to his feet, shaking his clenched fists towards the window.

"The villain!" he cried. "The fiendishly clever villain! I suspected that Sir Crichton was next, and I was right. But I came too late, Petrie! That hits me hard, old man. To think that I knew and yet failed to save him!"

He resumed his seat, smoking hard.

"Fu-Manchu has made the blunder common to all men of unusual genius," he said. "He has underrated his adversary. He has not given me credit for perceiving the meaning of the scented messages. He has thrown away one powerful weapon--to get such a message into my hands--and he thinks that once safe within doors, I shall sleep, unsuspecting, and die as Sir Crichton died. But without the indiscretion of your charming friend, I should have known what to expect when I receive her 'information'-- which by the way, consists of a blank sheet of paper."

"Smith," I broke in, "who is she?"

"She is either Fu-Manchu's daughter, his wife, or his slave. I am inclined to believe the last, for she has no will but his will, except"--with a quizzical glance--"in a certain instance."

"How can you jest with some awful thing--Heaven knows what-- hanging over your head? What is the meaning of these perfumed envelopes? How did Sir Crichton die?"

"He died of the Zayat Kiss. Ask me what that is and I reply 'I do not know.' The Zayats are the Burmese caravanserais, or rest-houses. Along a certain route--upon which I set eyes, for the first and only time, upon Dr. Fu-Manchu--travelers who use them sometimes die as Sir Crichton died, with nothing to show the cause of death but a little mark upon the neck, face, or limb, which has earned, in those parts, the title of the 'Zayat Kiss.' The rest-houses along that route are shunned now. I have my theory and I hope to prove it to-night, if I live. It will be one more broken weapon in his fiendish armory, and it is thus, and thus only, that I can hope to crush him. This was my principal reason for not enlightening Dr. Cleve. Even walls have ears where Fu-Manchu is concerned, so I feigned ignorance of the meaning of the mark, knowing that he would be almost certain to employ the same methods upon some other victim. I wanted an opportunity to study the Zayat Kiss in operation, and I shall have one."

"But the scented envelopes?"

"In the swampy forests of the district I have referred to a rare species of orchid, almost green, and with a peculiar scent, is sometimes met with. I recognized the heavy perfume at once. I take it that the thing which kills the traveler is attracted by this orchid. You will notice that the

perfume clings to whatever it touches. I doubt if it can be washed off in the ordinary way. After at least one unsuccessful attempt to kill Sir Crichton-- you recall that he thought there was something concealed in his study on a previous occasion?--Fu-Manchu hit upon the perfumed envelopes. He may have a supply of these green orchids in his possession-- possibly to feed the creature."

"What creature? How could any kind of creature have got into Sir Crichton's room tonight?"

"You no doubt observed that I examined the grate of the study. I found a fair quantity of fallen soot. I at once assumed, since it appeared to be the only means of entrance, that something has been dropped down; and I took it for granted that the thing, whatever it was, must still be concealed either in the study or in the library. But when I had obtained the evidence of the groom, Wills, I perceived that the cry from the lane or from the park was a signal. I noted that the movements of anyone seated at the study table were visible, in shadow, on the blind, and that the study occupied the corner of a two-storied wing and, therefore, had a short chimney. What did the signal mean? That Sir Crichton had leaped up from his chair, and either had received the Zayat Kiss or had seen the thing which someone on the roof had lowered down the straight chimney. It was the signal to withdraw that deadly thing. By means of the iron stairway at the rear of Major-General Platt-Houston's, I quite easily, gained access to the roof above Sir Crichton's study-- and I found this."

Out from his pocket Nayland Smith drew a tangled piece of silk, mixed up with which were a brass ring and a number of unusually large-sized split-shot, nipped on in the manner usual on a fishing-line.

"My theory proven," he resumed. "Not anticipating a search on the roof, they had been careless. This was to weight the line and to prevent the creature clinging to the walls of the chimney. Directly it had dropped in the grate, however, by means of this ring I assume that the weighted line was withdrawn, and the thing was only held by one slender thread, which sufficed, though, to draw it back again when it had done its work. It might have got tangled, of course, but they reckoned on its making straight up the carved leg of the writing-table for the prepared envelope. From there to the hand of Sir Crichton--which, from having touched the envelope, would also be scented with the perfume--was a certain move."

"My God! How horrible!" I exclaimed, and glanced apprehensively into the dusky shadows of the room. "What is your theory respecting this creature-- what shape, what color--?"

"It is something that moves rapidly and silently. I will venture no more at present, but I think it works in the dark. The study was dark, remember, save for the bright patch beneath the reading-lamp. I have observed that the rear of this house is ivy-covered right up to and above your bedroom. Let us make ostentatious preparations to retire, and I think we may rely upon Fu-Manchu's servants to attempt my removal, at any rate--if not yours."

"But, my dear fellow, it is a climb of thirty-five feet at the very least."

"You remember the cry in the back lane? It suggested something to me, and I tested my idea--successfully. It was the cry of a dacoit. Oh, dacoity, though quiescent, is by no means extinct. Fu-Manchu has dacoits in his train, and probably it is one who operates the Zayat Kiss, since it was a dacoit who watched the window of the study this evening. To such a man an ivy-covered wall is a grand staircase."

The horrible events that followed are punctuated, in my mind, by the striking of a distant clock. It is singular how trivialities thus assert themselves in moments of high tension. I will proceed, then, by these punctuations, to the coming of the horror that it was written we should encounter.

The clock across the common struck two.

Having removed all traces of the scent of the orchid from our hands with a solution of ammonia Smith and I had followed the programme laid down. It was an easy matter to reach the rear of the house, by simply climbing a fence, and we did not doubt that seeing the light go out in the front, our unseen watcher would proceed to the back.

The room was a large one, and we had made up my camp-bed at one end, stuffing odds and ends under the clothes to lend the appearance of a sleeper, which device we also had adopted in the case of the larger bed. The perfumed envelope lay upon a little coffee table in the center of the floor, and Smith, with an electric pocket lamp, a revolver, and a brassey beside him, sat on cushions in the shadow of the wardrobe. I occupied a post between the windows.

No unusual sound, so far, had disturbed the stillness of the night. Save for the muffled throb of the rare all-night cars passing the front of the house, our vigil had been a silent one. The full moon had painted about the floor weird shadows of the clustering ivy, spreading the design gradually from the door, across the room, past the little table where the envelope lay, and finally to the foot of the bed.

The distant clock struck a quarter-past two.

A slight breeze stirred the ivy, and a new shadow added itself to the extreme edge of the moon's design.

Something rose, inch by inch, above the sill of the westerly window. I could see only its shadow, but a sharp, sibilant breath from Smith told me that he, from his post, could see the cause of the shadow.

Every nerve in my body seemed to be strung tensely. I was icy cold, expectant, and prepared for whatever horror was upon us.

The shadow became stationary. The dacoit was studying the interior of the room.

Then it suddenly lengthened, and, craning my head to the left, I saw a lithe, black-clad form, surmounted by a Yellow face, sketchy in the moonlight, pressed against the window-panes!

One thin, brown hand appeared over the edge of the lowered sash, which it grasped--and then another. The man made absolutely no sound whatever. The second hand disappeared--and reappeared. It held a small, square box. There was a very faint CLICK.

The dacoit swung himself below the window with the agility of an ape, as, with a dull, muffled thud, SOMETHING dropped upon the carpet!

"Stand still, for your life!" came Smith's voice, high-pitched.

A beam of white leaped out across the room and played full upon the coffee-table in the center.

Prepared as I was for something horrible, I know that I paled at sight of the thing that was running round the edge of the envelope.

It was an insect, full six inches long, and of a vivid, venomous, red color! It had something of the appearance of a great ant, with its long, quivering antennae and its febrile, horrible vitality; but it was proportionately longer of body and smaller of head, and had

numberless rapidly moving legs. In short, it was a giant centipede, apparently of the scolopendra group, but of a form quite new to me.

These things I realized in one breathless instant; in the next-- Smith had dashed the thing's poisonous life out with one straight, true blow of the golf club!

I leaped to the window and threw it widely open, feeling a silk thread brush my hand as I did so. A black shape was dropping, with incredible agility from branch to branch of the ivy, and, without once offering a mark for a revolver-shot, it merged into the shadows beneath the trees of the garden. As I turned and switched on the light Nayland Smith dropped limply into a chair, leaning his head upon his hands. Even that grim courage had been tried sorely.

"Never mind the dacoit, Petrie," he said. "Nemesis will know where to find him. We know now what causes the mark of the Zayat Kiss. Therefore science is richer for our first brush with the enemy, and the enemy is poorer--unless he has any more unclassified centipedes. I understand now something that has been puzzling me since I heard of it-- Sir Crichton's stifled cry. When we remember that he was almost past speech, it is reasonable to suppose that his cry was not 'The red hand!' but 'The red ANT! Petrie, to think that I failed, by less than an hour, to save him from such an end!'"

CHAPTER 4

"The body of a lascar, dressed in the manner usual on the P. & O. boats, was recovered from the Thames off Tilbury by the river police at six A.M. this morning. It is supposed that the man met with an accident in leaving his ship."

Nayland Smith passed me the evening paper and pointed to the above paragraph. "For 'lascar' read 'dacoit,'" he said. "Our visitor, who came by way of the ivy, fortunately for us, failed to follow his instructions. Also, he lost the centipede and left a clew behind him. Dr. Fu-Manchu does not overlook such lapses."

It was a sidelight upon the character of the awful being with whom we had to deal. My very soul recoiled from bare consideration of the fate that would be ours if ever we fell into his hands.

The telephone bell rang. I went out and found that Inspector Weymouth of New Scotland Yard had called us up.

"Will Mr. Nayland Smith please come to the Wapping River Police Station at once," was the message.

Peaceful interludes were few enough throughout that wild pursuit.

"It is certainly something important," said my friend; "and, if Fu-Manchu is at the bottom of it--as we must presume him to be-- probably something ghastly."

A brief survey of the time-tables showed us that there were no trains to serve our haste. We accordingly chartered a cab and proceeded east.

Smith, throughout the journey, talked entertainingly about his work in Burma. Of intent, I think, he avoided any reference to the circumstances which first had brought him in contact with the sinister genius of the Yellow Movement. His talk was rather of the sunshine of the East than of its shadows.

But the drive concluded--and all too soon. In a silence which neither of us seemed disposed to break, we entered the police depot, and followed an officer who received us into the room where Weymouth waited.

The inspector greeted us briefly, nodding toward the table.

"Poor Cadby, the most promising lad at the Yard," he said; and his usually gruff voice had softened strangely.

Smith struck his right fist into the palm of his left hand and swore under his breath, striding up and down the neat little room. No one spoke for a moment, and in the silence I could hear the whispering of the Thames outside--of the Thames which had so many strange secrets to tell, and now was burdened with another.

The body lay prone upon the deal table--this latest of the river's dead-- dressed in rough sailor garb, and, to all outward seeming, a seaman of nondescript nationality--such as is no stranger in Wapping and Shadwell. His dark, curly hair clung clammily about the brown forehead; his skin was stained, they told me. He wore a gold ring in one ear, and three fingers of the left hand were missing.

"It was almost the same with Mason." The river police inspector was speaking. "A week ago, on a Wednesday, he went off in his own time on some funny business down St. George's way--and Thursday night the ten-o'clock boat got the grapnel on him off Hanover Hole. His first two fingers on the right hand were clean gone, and his left hand was mutilated frightfully."

He paused and glanced at Smith.

"That lascar, too," he continued, "that you came down to see, sir; you remember his hands?"

Smith nodded.

"He was not a lascar," he said shortly. "He was a dacoit."

Silence fell again.

I turned to the array of objects lying on the table--those which had been found in Cadby's clothing. None of them were noteworthy, except that which had been found thrust into the loose neck of his shirt. This last it was which had led the police to send for Nayland Smith, for it constituted the first clew which had come to light pointing to the authors of these mysterious tragedies.

It was a Chinese pigtail. That alone was sufficiently remarkable; but it was rendered more so by the fact that the plaited queue was a false one being attached to a most ingenious bald wig.

"You're sure it wasn't part of a Chinese make-up?" questioned Weymouth, his eye on the strange relic. "Cadby was clever at disguise."

Smith snatched the wig from my hands with a certain irritation, and tried to fit it on the dead detective.

"Too small by inches!" he jerked. "And look how it's padded in the crown. This thing was made for a most abnormal head."

He threw it down, and fell to pacing the room again.

"Where did you find him--exactly?" he asked.

"Limehouse Reach--under Commercial Dock Pier--exactly an hour ago."

"And you last saw him at eight o'clock last night?"--to Weymouth.

"Eight to a quarter past."

"You think he has been dead nearly twenty-four hours, Petrie?"

"Roughly, twenty-four hours," I replied.

"Then, we know that he was on the track of the Fu-Manchu group, that he followed up some clew which led him to the neighborhood of old Ratcliff Highway, and that he died the same night. You are sure that is where he was going?"

"Yes," said Weymouth; "He was jealous of giving anything away, poor chap; it meant a big lift for him if he pulled the case off. But he gave me to understand that he expected to spend last night in that district. He left the Yard about eight, as I've said, to go to his rooms, and dress for the job."

"Did he keep any record of his cases?"

"Of course! He was most particular. Cadby was a man with ambitions, sir! You'll want to see his book. Wait while I get his address; it's somewhere in Brixton."

He went to the telephone, and Inspector Ryman covered up the dead man's face.

Nayland Smith was palpably excited.

"He almost succeeded where we have failed, Petrie," he said. "There is no doubt in my mind that he was hot on the track of Fu-Manchu! Poor Mason had probably blundered on the scent, too, and he met with a similar fate. Without other evidence, the fact that they both died in the same way as the dacoit would be conclusive, for we know that Fu-Manchu killed the dacoit!"

"What is the meaning of the mutilated hands, Smith?"

"God knows! Cadby's death was from drowning, you say?"

"There are no other marks of violence."

"But he was a very strong swimmer, Doctor," interrupted Inspector Ryman. "Why, he pulled off the quarter-mile championship at the Crystal Palace last year! Cadby wasn't a man easy to drown. And as for Mason, he was an R.N.R., and like a fish in the water!"

Smith shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Let us hope that one day we shall know how they died," he said simply.

Weymouth returned from the telephone.

"The address is No.--Cold Harbor Lane," he reported. "I shall not be able to come along, but you can't miss it; it's close by the Brixton Police Station. There's no family, fortunately; he was quite alone in the world. His case-book isn't in the American desk, which you'll find in his sitting-room; it's in the cupboard in the corner--top shelf. Here are his keys, all intact. I think this is the cupboard key."

Smith nodded.

"Come on, Petrie," he said. "We haven't a second to waste."

Our cab was waiting, and in a few seconds we were speeding along Wapping High Street. We had gone no more than a few hundred yards, I think, when Smith suddenly slapped his open hand down on his knee.

"That pigtail!" he cried. "I have left it behind! We must have it, Petrie! Stop! Stop!"

The cab was pulled up, and Smith alighted.

"Don't wait for me," he directed hurriedly. "Here, take Weymouth's card. Remember where he said the book was? It's all we want. Come straight on to Scotland Yard and meet me there."

"But Smith," I protested, "a few minutes can make no difference!"

"Can't it!" he snapped. "Do you suppose Fu-Manchu is going to leave evidence like that lying about? It's a thousand to one he has it already, but there is just a bare chance."

It was a new aspect of the situation and one that afforded no room for comment; and so lost in thought did I become that the cab was outside the house for which I was bound ere I realized that we had quitted the purlieu of Wapping. Yet I had had leisure to review the whole troop of events which had crowded my life since the return of Nayland Smith from Burma. Mentally, I had looked again upon the dead Sir Crichton Davey, and with Smith had waited in the dark for the dreadful thing that had killed him. Now, with those remorseless memories jostling in my mind, I was entering the house of Fu-Manchu's last victim, and the shadow of that giant evil seemed to be upon it like a palpable cloud.

Cadby's old landlady greeted me with a queer mixture of fear and embarrassment in her manner.

"I am Dr. Petrie," I said, "and I regret that I bring bad news respecting Mr. Cadby."

"Oh, sir!" she cried. "Don't tell me that anything has happened to him!" And divining something of the mission on which I was come, for such sad duty often falls to the lot of the medical man: "Oh, the poor, brave lad!"

Indeed, I respected the dead man's memory more than ever from that hour, since the sorrow of the worthy old soul was quite pathetic, and spoke eloquently for the unhappy cause of it.

"There was a terrible wailing at the back of the house last night, Doctor, and I heard it again to-night, a second before you knocked. Poor lad! It was the same when his mother died."

At the moment I paid little attention to her words, for such beliefs are common, unfortunately; but when she was sufficiently composed I went on to explain what I thought necessary. And now the old lady's embarrassment took precedence of her sorrow, and presently the truth came out:

"There's a--young lady--in his rooms, sir."

I started. This might mean little or might mean much.

"She came and waited for him last night, Doctor--from ten until half-past-- and this morning again. She came the third time about an hour ago, and has been upstairs since."

"Do you know her, Mrs. Dolan?"

Mrs. Dolan grew embarrassed again.

"Well, Doctor," she said, wiping her eyes the while, "I DO. And God knows he was a good lad, and I like a mother to him; but she is not the girl I should have liked a son of mine to take up with."

At any other time, this would have been amusing; now, it might be serious. Mrs. Dolan's account of the wailing became suddenly significant, for perhaps it meant that one of Fu-Manchu's dacoit followers was watching the house, to give warning of any stranger's approach! Warning to whom? It was unlikely that I should forget the dark eyes of another of Fu-Manchu's servants. Was that lure of men even now in the house, completing her evil work?

"I should never have allowed her in his rooms--" began Mrs. Dolan again. Then there was an interruption.

A soft rustling retched my ears--intimately feminine. The girl was stealing down!

I leaped out into the hall, and she turned and fled blindly before me-- back up the stairs! Taking three steps at a time, I followed her, bounded into the room above almost at her heels, and stood with my back to the door.

She cowered against the desk by the window, a slim figure in a clinging silk gown, which alone explained Mrs. Dolan's distrust. The gaslight was turned very low, and her hat shadowed her face, but could not hide its startling, beauty, could not mar the brilliancy of the skin, nor dim the wonderful eyes of this modern Delilah. For it was she!

"So I came in time" I said grimly, and turned the key in the lock.

"Oh!" she panted at that, and stood facing me, leaning back with her jewel-laden hands clutching the desk edge.

"Give me whatever you have removed from here," I said sternly, "and then prepare to accompany me."

She took a step forward, her eyes wide with fear, her lips parted.

"I have taken nothing," she said. her breast was heaving tumultuously. "Oh, let me go! Please, let me go!" And impulsively she threw herself forward, pressing clasped hands against my shoulder and looking up into my face with passionate, pleading eyes.

It is with some shame that I confess how her charm enveloped me like a magic cloud. Unfamiliar with the complex Oriental temperament, I had laughed at Nayland Smith when he had spoken of this girl's infatuation. "Love in the East," he had said, "is like the conjurer's mango-tree; it is born, grows and flowers at the touch of a hand." Now, in those pleading eyes I read confirmation of his words. Her clothes or her hair exhaled a faint perfume. Like all Fu-Manchu's servants, she was perfectly chosen for her peculiar duties. Her beauty was wholly intoxicating.

But I thrust her away.

"You have no claim to mercy," I said. "Do not count upon any. What have you taken from here?"

She grasped the lapels of my coat.

"I will tell you all I can--all I dare," she panted eagerly, fearfully. "I should know how to deal with your friend, but with you I am lost! If you could only understand you would not be so cruel." Her slight accent added charm to the musical voice. "I am not free, as your English women are. What I do I must do, for it is the will of my master, and I am only a slave. Ah, you are not a man if you can give me to the police. You have no heart if you can forget that I tried to save you once."

I had feared that plea, for, in her own Oriental fashion, she certainly had tried to save me from a deadly peril once--at the expense of my friend. But I had feared the plea, for I did not know how to meet it. How could I give her up, perhaps to stand her trial for murder? And now I fell silent, and she saw why I was silent.

"I may deserve no mercy; I may be even as bad as you think; but what have YOU to do with the police? It is not your work to hound a woman to death. Could you ever look another woman in the eyes--one that you loved, and know that she trusted you--if you had done such a thing? Ah, I have no friend in all the world, or I should not be here. Do not be my enemy, my judge, and make me worse than I am; be my friend, and save me--from HIM." The tremulous lips were close to mine, her breath fanned my cheek. "Have mercy on me."

At that moment I honestly would have given half of my worldly possessions to have been spared the decision which I knew I must come to. After all, what proof had I that she was a willing accomplice of Dr. Fu-Manchu? Furthermore, she was an Oriental, and her code must necessarily be different from mine. Irreconcilable as the thing may be with Western ideas, Nayland Smith had really told me that he believed the girl to be a slave. Then there remained that other reason why I loathed the idea of becoming her captor. It was almost tantamount to betrayal! Must I soil my hands with such work?

Thus--I suppose--her seductive beauty argued against my sense of right. The jeweled fingers grasped my shoulders nervously, and her slim body quivered against mine as she watched me, with all her soul in her eyes, in an abandonment of pleading despair. Then I remembered the fate of the man in whose room we stood.

"You lured Cadby to his death," I said, and shook her off.

"No, no!" she cried wildly, clutching at me. "No, I swear by the holy name I did not! I did not! I watched him, spied upon him--yes! But, listen: it was because he would not be

warned that he met his death. I could not save him! Ah, I am not so bad as that. I will tell you. I have taken his notebook and torn out the last pages and burnt them. Look! in the grate. The book was too big to steal away. I came twice and could not find it. There, will you let me go?"

"If you will tell me where and how to seize Dr. Fu-Manchu--yes."

Her hands dropped and she took a backward step. A new terror was to be read in her face.

"I dare not! I dare not!"

"Then you would--if you dared?"

She was watching me intently.

"Not if YOU would go to find him," she said.

And, with all that I thought her to be, the stern servant of justice that I would have had myself, I felt the hot blood leap to my cheek at all which the words implied. She grasped my arm.

Could you hide me from him if I came to you, and told you all I know?

"The authorities--"

"Ah!" Her expression changed. "They can put me on the rack if they choose, but never one word would I speak--never one little word."

She threw up her head scornfully. Then the proud glance softened again.

"But I will speak for you."

Closer she came, and closer, until she could whisper in my ear.

"Hide me from your police, from HIM, from everybody, and I will no longer be his slave."

My heart was beating with painful rapidity. I had not counted on this warring with a woman; moreover, it was harder than I could have dreamt of. For some time I had been aware that by the charm of her personality and the art of her pleading she had brought me down from my judgment seat-- had made it all but impossible for me to give her up to justice. Now, I was disarmed--but in a quandary. What should I do? What COULD I do? I turned away from her and walked to the hearth, in which some paper ash lay and yet emitted a faint smell.

Not more than ten seconds elapsed, I am confident, from the time that I stepped across the room until I glanced back. But she had gone!

As I leapt to the door the key turned gently from the outside.

"Ma 'alesh!" came her soft whisper; "but I am afraid to trust you--yet. Be comforted, for there is one near who would have killed you had I wished it. Remember, I will come to you whenever you will take me and hide me."

Light footsteps pattered down the stairs. I heard a stifled cry from Mrs. Dolan as the mysterious visitor ran past her. The front door opened and closed.