

Chinese Magic

By Algernon Blackwood

Dr. Owen Francis felt a sudden wave of pleasure and admiration sweep over him as he saw her enter the room. He was in the act of going out; in fact, he had already said goodbye to his hostess, glad to make his escape from the chattering throng, when the tall and graceful young woman glided past him. Her carriage was superb; she had black eyes with a twinkling happiness in them; her mouth was exquisite. Round her neck, in spite of the warm afternoon, she wore a soft thing of fur or feathers; and as she brushed by to shake the hand he had just shaken himself, the tail of this touched his very cheek. Their eyes met fair and square. He felt as though her eyes also touched him.

Changing his mind, he lingered another ten minutes, chatting with various ladies he did not in the least remember, but who remembered him. He did not, of course, desire to exchange banalities with these other ladies, yet did so gallantly enough. If they found him absent-minded, they excused him since he was the famous mental specialist whom everybody was proud to know. And all the time his eyes never left the tall graceful figure that allured him almost to the point of casting a spell upon him.

His first impression deepened as he watched. He was aware of excitement, curiosity, longing; there was a touch even of exaltation in him; yet he took no steps to seek the introduction which was easily enough procurable. He checked himself, if with an effort. Several times their eyes met across the crowded room; he dared to believe—he felt instinctively—that his interest was returned. Indeed, it was more than instinct, for she was certainly aware of his presence, and he even caught her indicating him to a woman she spoke with, and evidently asking who he was. Once he half bowed, and once, in spite of himself, he went so far as to smile, and there came, he was sure, a faint, delicious brightening of the eyes in answer. There was he fancied, a look of yearning in the face. The young woman charmed him inexpressibly; the very way she moved delighted him. Yet at last he slipped out the room without a word, without an introduction, without even knowing her name. He chose his moment when her back was turned. It was characteristic of him.

For Owen Francis had ever regarded marriage, for himself at least, as a disaster that could be avoided. He was in love with his work, and his work was necessary to humanity. Others might perpetuate the race, but he must heal it. He had come to regard love as the bait wherewith Nature lays her trap to fulfil her own ends. A man in love was a man enjoying a delusion, a deluded man. In his case, and he was nearing forty-five, the theory had worked admirably, and the dangerous exception that proved it had as yet not troubled him.

‘It’s come at last—I do believe,’ he thought to himself, as he walked home, a new tumultuous emotion in his blood; ‘the exception, quite possibly, has come at last. I wonder...’

And it seemed he said it to the tall graceful figure by his side, who turned up dark eyes smilingly to meet his own, and whose lips repeated softly his last two words ‘I wonder...’

The experience, being new to him, was baffling. A part of his nature, long dormant, received the authentic thrill that pertains actually to youth. He was a man of chaste, abstemious custom. The reaction was vehement. That dormant part of him became obstreperous. He thought of his age, his appearance, his prospects; he looked thirty-eight, he was not unhandsome, his position was secure, even remarkable. That gorgeous young woman—he called her gorgeous—haunted

him. Never could he forget that face, those eyes. It was extraordinary—he had left her there unspoken to, unknown, when an introduction would have been the simplest thing in the world.

‘But it still is,’ he reflected. And the reflection filled his being with a flood of joy.

He checked himself again. Not so easily is established habit routed. He felt instinctively that, at last, he had met his mate; if he followed it up, he was a man in love, a lost man enjoying a delusion, a deluded man. But the way she had looked at him I That air of intuitive invitation which not even the sweetest modesty could conceal! He felt an immense confidence in himself; also he felt oddly sure of her.

The presence of that following figure, already precious, came with him into his house, even into his study at the back where he sat over a number of letters by the open window. The pathetic little London garden showed its pitiful patch. The lilac had faded, but a smell of roses entered. The sun was just behind the buildings opposite, and the garden lay soft and warm in summer shadows.

He read and tossed aside the letters; one only interested him, from Edward Farque, whose journey to China had interrupted a friendship of long standing. Edward Farque’s work on Eastern art and philosophy, on Chinese painting and Chinese thought in particular, had made its mark. He was an authority. He was to be back about this time, and his friend smiled with pleasure. “‘Dear old impractical dreamer,’” as I used to call him,’ he mused. ‘He’s a success, anyhow!’ And as he mused the presence that sat beside him came a little closer, yet at the same time faded. Not that he forgot her—that was impossible—but that just before opening the letter from his friend he had come to a decision. He had definitely made up his mind to seek acquaintance. The reality replaced the remembered substitute.

‘As the newspapers may have warned you’ [ran the familiar and kinky writing], ‘I am back in England after what the scribes term my ten years of exile in Cathay. I have taken a little house in Hampstead for six months, and am just settling in. Come to us to-morrow night and let me prove it to you. Come to dinner. We shall have much to say; we both are ten years wiser. You know how glad I shall be to see my old-time critic and disparager, but let me add frankly that I want to ask you a few professional, or, rather, technical, questions. So prepare yourself to come as doctor and as friend. I am writing, as the papers said truthfully, a treatise on Chinese thought. But—don’t shy!—it is about Chinese Magic that I want your technical advice’ [the last two words were substituted for “professional wisdom”, which had been crossed out] ‘and the benefit of your vast experience. So come, old friend, come quickly, and come hungry! I’ll feed your body as you shall feed my mind.

Yours,
EDWARD FARQUE

‘P.S.—The coming of a friend from a far-off land—is not this true joy?’

Dr. Francis laid down the letter with a pleased anticipatory chuckle, and it was the touch in the final sentence that amused him. In spite of being an authority, Farque was dearly the same fanciful, poetic dreamer as of old. He quoted Confucius as in other days. The firm but kinky writing had not altered either. The only sign of novelty he noticed was the use of scented paper, for a faint and pungent aroma clung to the big quarto sheet.

‘A Chinese habit, doubtless,’ he decided, sniffing it with a puzzled air of disapproval. Yet it had nothing in common with the scented sachets some ladies use too lavishly, so that even the air

of the street is polluted by their passing for a dozen yards. He was familiar with every kind of perfumed note-paper used in London, Paris, and Constantinople. This one was different. It was delicate and penetrating for all its faintness, pleasurable too. He rather liked it, and while annoyed that he could not name it, he sniffed at the letter several times, as though it were a flower.

‘I’ll go,’ he decided at once, and wrote an acceptance then and there. He went out and posted it. He meant to prolong his walk into the Park, taking his chief preoccupation, the face, the eyes, the figure, with him. Already he was composing the note of inquiry to Mrs. Malleson, his hostess of the tea-party, the note whose willing answer should give him the name, the address, the means of introduction he had now determined to secure. He visualized that note of inquiry, seeing it in his mind’s eye; only, for some odd reason, he saw the kinky writing of Farque instead of his own more elegant script. Association of ideas and emotions readily explained this. Two new and unexpected interests had entered his life on the same day, and within half an hour of each other. What he could not so readily explain, however, was that two words in his friend’s ridiculous letter, and in that kinky writing, stood out sharply from the rest. As he slipped his envelope into the mouth of the red pillar-box they shone vividly in his mind. These two words were ‘Chinese Magic.’

II

It was the warmth of his friend's invitation as much as his own state of inward excitement that decided him suddenly to anticipate his visit by twenty-four hours. It would clear his judgment and help his mind if he spent the evening at Hampstead rather than alone with his own thoughts. 'A dose of China,' he thought, with a smile, 'will do me good. Edward won't mind. I'll telephone.'

He left the Park soon after six o'clock and acted upon his impulse. The connexion was bad, the wire buzzed and popped and crackled; talk was difficult; he did not hear properly. The Professor had not yet come in, apparently. Francis said he would come up anyhow on the chance.

'Velly pleased,' said the voice in his ear, as he rang off.

Going into his study, he drafted the note that should result in the introduction that was now, it appeared, the chief object of his life. The way this woman with the black, twinkling eyes obsessed him was—he admitted it with joy—extraordinary. The draft he put in his pocket, intending to rewrite it next morning, and all the way up to Hampstead Heath the gracious figure glided silently beside him, the eyes were ever present, his cheek still glowed where the feather boa had touched his skin. Edward Farque remained in the background. In fact, it was on the very door-step, having rung the bell, that Francis realised he must pull himself together. 'I've come to see old Farque,' he reminded himself, with a smile. 'I've got to be interested in him and his, and, probably, for an hour or two, to talk Chinese—' when the door opened noiselessly, and he saw facing him, with a grin of celestial welcome on his yellow face, a Chinaman.

'Oh!' he said, with a start. He had not expected a Chinese servant.

'Velly pleased,' the man bowed him in.

Dr Francis stared round him with astonishment he could not conceal. A great golden idol faced him in the hall, its gleaming visage blazing out of a sort of miniature golden palanquin, with a grin, half dignified, half cruel. Fully double human size, it blocked the way, looking so life-like that it might have moved to meet him without too great a shock to what seemed possible. It rested on a throne with four massive legs, carved, the doctor saw, with serpents, dragons, and mythical monsters generally. Round it on every side were other things in keeping. Name them he could not, describe them he did not try. He summed them up in one word—China: pictures, weapons, cloths and tapestries, bells, gongs, and figures of every sort and kind imaginable.

Being ignorant of Chinese matters, Dr. Francis stood and looked about him in a mental state of some confusion. He had the feeling that he had entered a Chinese temple, for there was a faint smell of incense hanging about the house that was, to say the least, un-English. Nothing English, in fact, was visible at all. The matting on the floor, the swinging curtains of bamboo beads that replaced the customary doors, the silk draperies and pictured cushions, the bronze and ivory, the screens hung with fantastic embroideries, everything was Chinese. Hampstead vanished from his thoughts. The very lamps were in keeping, the ancient lacquered furniture as well. The value of what he saw, an expert could have told him, was considerable.

'You likee?' queried the voice at his side.

He had forgotten the servant. He turned sharply.

'Very much; it's wonderfully done,' he said. 'Makes you feel at home, John, eh?' he added tactfully, with a smile, and was going to ask how long all this preparation had taken, when a voice sounded on the stairs beyond. It was a voice he knew, a note of hearty welcome in its deep

tones.

‘The coming of a friend from a far-off land, even from Harley Street—is not this true joy?’ he heard, and the next minute was shaking the hand of his old and valued friend. The intimacy between them had always been of the truest.

‘I almost expected a pigtail,’ observed Francis, looking him affectionately up and down, ‘but, really—why, you’ve hardly changed at all!’

‘Outwardly, not as much, perhaps, as Time expects,’ was the happy reply, ‘but inwardly—!’ He scanned appreciatively the burly figure of the doctor in his turn. ‘And I can say the same of you,’ he declared, still holding his hand tight. ‘This is a real pleasure, Owen,’ he went on in his deep voice; ‘to see you again is a joy to me. Old friends meeting again—there’s nothing like it in life, I believe, nothing.’ He gave the hand another squeeze before he let it go. ‘And we,’ he added, leading the way into a room across the hall, ‘neither of us is a fugitive from life. We take what we can, I mean.’

The doctor smiled as he noted the un-English turn of language, and together they entered a sitting-room that was, again, more like some inner chamber of a Chinese temple than a back room in a rented Hampstead house.

‘I only knew ten minutes ago that you were coming, my dear fellow,’ the scholar was saying, as his friend gazed round him with increased astonishment, ‘or I would have prepared more suitably for your reception. I was out till late. All this’—he waved his hand—‘surprises you, of course, but the fact is I have been home some days already, and most of what you see was arranged for me in advance of my arrival. Hence its apparent completion. I say “apparent,” because, actually, it is far from faithfully carried out. Yet to exceed,’ he added, ‘is as bad as to fall short.’

The doctor watched him while he listened to a somewhat lengthy explanation of the various articles surrounding them. The speaker—he confirmed his first impression—had changed little during the long interval; the same enthusiasm was in him as before, the same fire and dreaminess alternately in the fine grey eyes, the same humour and passion about the mouth, the same free gestures, and the same big voice. Only the lines had deepened on the forehead, and on the fine face the air of thoughtfulness was also deeper. It was Edward Farque as of old, scholar, poet, dreamer and enthusiast, despiser of Western civilisation, contemptuous of money, generous and upright, a type of value, an individual.

‘You’ve done well, done splendidly, Edward, old man,’ said his friend presently, after hearing of Chinese wonders that took him somewhat beyond his depth perhaps. ‘No one is more pleased than I. I’ve watched your books. You haven’t regretted England, I’ll be bound?’ he asked.

‘The philosopher has no country, in any case,’ was the reply, steadily given. ‘But out there I confess I’ve found my home.’ He leaned forward, a deeper earnestness in his tone and expression. And into his face, as he spoke, came a glow of happiness. ‘My heart,’ he said softly, ‘is in China.’

‘I see it is, I see it is,’ put in the other, conscious that he could not honestly share his friend’s enthusiasm. ‘And you’re fortunate to be free to live where your treasure is,’ he added after a moment’s pause. ‘You must be a happy man. Your passion amounts to nostalgia, I suspect. Already yearning to get back there, probably?’

Farque gazed at him for some seconds with shining eyes. ‘You remember the Persian saying, I’m sure,’ he said. “‘You see a man drink, but you do not see his thirst.’” Well,’ he added, laughing happily, ‘you may see me off in six months’ time, but you will not see my happiness.’

While he went on talking the doctor glanced round the room, marvelling still at the exquisite taste of everything, the neat arrangement, the perfect matching of form and colour. A woman might have done this thing, occurred to him, as the haunting figure shifted deliciously into the foreground of his mind again. The thought of her had been momentarily replaced by all he heard and saw. She now returned, filling him with joy, anticipation, and enthusiasm. Presently, when it was his turn to talk, he would tell his friend about this new, unimagined happiness that had burst upon him like a sunrise. Presently, but not just yet. He remembered, too, with a passing twinge of possible boredom to come, that there must be some delay before his own heart could unburden itself in its turn. Farque wanted to ask some professional questions, of course. He had for the moment forgotten that part of the letter in his general interest and astonishment.

‘Happiness, yes...’ he murmured, aware that his thoughts had wandered and catching at the last word he remembered hearing. ‘As you said just now in your own queer way—you haven’t changed a bit, let me tell you, in your picturesqueness of quotation Edward!—one must not be fugitive from life; one must seize happiness when and where it offers’.

He said it lightly enough, hugging internally his own sweet secret; but he was a little surprised at the earnestness of his friend’s rejoinder: ‘Both of us, I see,’ came the deep voice, backed by the flash of the far-seeing grey eyes, ‘have made some progress in the doctrine of life and death.’ He paused, gazing at the other with sight that was obviously turned inwards upon his own thoughts. ‘Beauty,’ he went on presently, his tone even more serious, ‘has been my lure; yours, Reality....’

‘You don’t flatter either of us, Edward. That’s too exclusive a statement,’ put in the doctor. He was becoming every minute more and more interested in the workings of his friend’s mind. Something about the signs offered eluded his understanding. ‘Explain yourself, old scholar-poet. I’m a dull, practical mind, remember, and can’t keep pace with Chinese subtleties.’

‘*You’ve* left out Beauty,’ was the quiet rejoinder, ‘while *I* left out Reality. That’s neither Chinese nor subtle. It’s simply true.’

‘A bit wholesale, isn’t it?’ laughed Francis. ‘A big generalisation, rather.’

A bright light seemed to illuminate the scholar’s face. It was as though an inner lamp was suddenly lit. At the same moment the sound of a soft gong floated in from the hall outside, so soft that the actual strokes were not distinguishable in the wave of musical vibration that reached the ear.

Farque rose to lead the way in to dinner.

‘What if I—’ he whispered, ‘have combined the two?’ And upon his face was a look of joy that reached down into the other’s own full heart with its unexpectedness and wonder. It was the last remark in the world he had looked for. He wondered for a moment whether he interpreted it correctly.

‘By Jove...!’ he exclaimed. ‘Edward, what d’you mean?’

‘You shall hear—after dinner,’ said Farque, his voice mysterious, his eyes still shining with his inner joy. ‘I told you I have some questions to ask you—professionally.’ And they took their seats round an ancient, marvellous table, lit by two swinging lamps of soft green jade, while the Chinese servant waited on them with the silent movements and deft neatness of his imperturbable celestial race.

III

To say that he was bored during the meal were an over-statement of Dr. Francis's mental condition, but to say that he was half-bored seemed the literal truth; for one half of him, while he ate his steak and savoury and watched Farque manipulating *chou chop suey* and *chou om dong* most cleverly with chop-sticks, was too preoccupied with his own new romance to allow the other half to give its full attention to the conversation.

He had entered the room, however, with a distinct quickening of what may be termed his instinctive and infallible sense of diagnosis. That last remark of his friend's had stimulated him. He was aware of surprise, curiosity, and impatience. Willy-nilly, he began automatically to study him with a profounder interest. Something, he gathered, was not quite as it should be in Edward Farque's mental composition. There was what might be called an elusive emotional disturbance. He began to wonder and to watch.

They talked, naturally, of China and of things Chinese, for the scholar responded to little else, and Francis listened with what sympathy and patience he could muster. Of art and beauty he had hitherto known little, his mind was practical and utilitarian. He now learned that all art was derived from China, where a high, fine, subtle culture had reigned since time immemorial. Older than Egypt was their wisdom. When the Western races were eating one another, before Greece was even heard of, the Chinese had reached a level of knowledge and achievement that few realised. Never had they, even in earliest times, been deluded by anthropomorphic conceptions of the Deity, but perceived in everything the expressions of a single whole whose vast activities they reverently worshipped. Their contempt for the Western scurry after knowledge, wealth, machinery, was justified, if Farque was worthy of belief. He seemed saturated with Chinese thought, art, philosophy, and his natural bias toward the celestial race had hardened into an attitude to life that had now become ineradicable.

'They deal, as it were, in essences,' he declared, 'they discern the essence of everything, leaving out the superfluous, the unessential, the trivial. Their pictures alone prove it. Come with me,' he concluded, 'and see the *Earthly Paradise*, now in the British Museum. It is like Botticelli, but better than anything Botticelli ever did. It was painted'—he paused for emphasis—'600 years B. C.'

The wonder of this quiet, ancient civilization, a sense of its depth, its wisdom, grew upon his listener as the enthusiastic poet described its charm and influence upon himself. He willingly allowed the enchantment of the other's Paradise to steal upon his own awakened heart. There was a good deal Francis might have offered by way of criticism and objection, but he preferred on the whole to keep his own views to himself, and to let his friend wander unhindered through the mazes of his passionate evocation. All men, he well knew, needed a dream to carry them through life's disappointments, a dream that they could enter at will and find peace, contentment, happiness. Farque's dream was China. Why not? It was as good as another, and a man like Farque was entitled to what dream he pleased.

'And their women?' he inquired at last, letting both halves of his mind speak together for the first time.

But he was not prepared for the expression that leaped upon his friend's face at the simple question. Nor for his method of reply. It was no reply, in point of fact. It was simply an attack upon all other types of woman, and upon the white, the English, in particular—their emptiness, their triviality, their want of intuitive imagination, of spiritual grace, of everything, in a word,

that should constitute woman a meet companion for man, and a little higher than the angels into the bargain. The doctor listened spellbound. Too humorous to be shocked, he was, at any rate, disturbed by what he heard, displeased a little, too. It threatened too directly his own new tender dream.

Only with the utmost self-restraint did he keep his temper under, and prevent hot words he would have regretted later from tearing his friend's absurd claim into ragged shreds. He was wounded personally as well. Never now could he bring himself to tell his own secret to him. The outburst chilled and disappointed him. But it had another effect—it cooled his judgment. His sense of diagnosis quickened. He divined an *idée fixe*, a mania possibly. His interest deepened abruptly. He watched. He began to look about him with more wary eyes, and a sense of uneasiness, once the anger passed, stirred in his friendly and affectionate heart.

They had been sitting alone over their port for some considerable time, the servant having long since left the room. The doctor had sought to change the subject many times without much success, when suddenly Farque changed it for him.

'Now,' he announced, 'I'll tell you something,' and Francis guessed that the professional questions were on the way at last. 'We must pity the living, remember, and part with the dead. Have you forgotten old Shan-Yu?'

The forgotten name came back to him, the picturesque East End dealer of many years ago. 'The old merchant who taught you your first Chinese? I do recall him dimly, now you mention it. You made quite a friend of him, didn't you? He thought very highly of you—ah, it comes back to me now—he offered something or other very wonderful in his gratitude, unless my memory fails me.'

'His most valuable possession,' Farque went on, a strange look deepening on his face, an expression of mysterious rapture, as it were, and one that Francis recognised and swiftly pigeonholed in his now attentive mind.

'Which was?' he asked sympathetically. 'You told me once, but so long ago that really it's slipped my mind. Something magical, wasn't it?' He watched closely for his friend's reply.

Farque lowered his voice to a whisper almost devotional:

'The Perfume of the Garden of Happiness,' he murmured, with an expression in his eyes as though the mere recollection gave him joy. "'Burn it," he told me, "in a brazier; then inhale. You will enter the Valley of a Thousand Temples wherein lies the Garden of Happiness, and there you will meet your Love. You will have seven years of happiness with your Love before the Waters of Separation flow between you. I give this to you who alone of men here have appreciated the wisdom of my land. Follow my body toward the Sunrise. You, an Eastern soul in a barbarian body, will meet your Destiny.'"

The doctor's attention, such is the power of self-interest, quickened amazingly as he heard. His own romance flamed up with power. His friend—it dawned upon him suddenly—loved a woman.

'Come,' said Farque, rising quietly, 'we will go into the other room, and I will show you what I have shown to but one other in the world before. You are a doctor,' he continued, as he led the way to the silk-covered divan where golden dragons swallowed crimson suns, and wonderful jade horses hovered near. 'You understand the mind and nerves. States of consciousness you also can explain, and the effect of drugs is, doubtless, known to you.' He swung to the heavy curtains that took the place of a door, handed a lacquered box of cigarettes to his friend, and lit one himself. 'Perfumes, too,' he added, 'you probably have studied, with their extraordinary evocative power.' He stood in the middle of the room, the green light falling on his

interesting and thoughtful face, and for a passing second Francis, watching keenly, observed a change flit over it and vanish. The eyes grew narrow and slid tilted upward, the skin wore a shade of yellow underneath the green from the lamp of jade, the nose slipped back a little, the cheek-bones forward.

‘Perfumes,’ said the doctor, ‘no. Of perfumes I know nothing, beyond their interesting effect upon the memory. I cannot help you there. But you, I suspect,’ and he looked up with an inviting sympathy that concealed the close observation underneath, ‘you yourself, I feel sure, can tell me something of value about them?’

‘Perhaps,’ was the calm reply, ‘perhaps, for I have smelt the Perfume of the Garden of Happiness, and I have been in the Valley of a Thousand Temples.’ He spoke with a glow of joy and reverence almost devotional.

The doctor waited in some suspense, while his friend moved toward an inlaid cabinet across the room. More than broad-minded, he was that much rarer thing, an open-minded man, ready at a moment’s notice to discard all preconceived ideas, provided new knowledge that necessitated the holocaust were shown to him. At present, none the less, he held very definite views of his own. ‘Please ask me any questions you like,’ he added. ‘All I know is entirely yours, as always.’ He was aware of suppressed excitement in his friend that betrayed itself in every word and look and gesture, an excitement intense, and not as yet explained by anything he had seen or heard.

The scholar, meanwhile, had opened a drawer in the cabinet and taken from it a neat little packet tied up with purple silk.

He held it with tender, almost loving care, as he came and sat down on the divan beside his friend.

‘This,’ he said, in a tone, again, of something between reverence and worship, ‘contains what I have to show you first.’ He slowly unrolled it, disclosing a yet smaller silken bag within, coloured a deep rich orange. There were two vertical columns of writing on it, painted in Chinese characters. The doctor leaned forward to examine them. His friend translated:

‘The Perfume of the Garden of Happiness,’ he read aloud, tracing the letters of the first column with his finger. ‘The Destroyer of Honourable Homes,’ he finished, passing to the second, and then proceeded to unwrap the little silken bag. Before it was actually open, however, and the pale shredded material resembling coloured chaff visible to the eyes, the doctor’s nostrils had recognised the strange aroma he had first noticed about his friend’s letter received earlier in the day. The same soft, penetrating odour, sharply piercing, sweet and delicate, rose to his brain. It stirred at once a deep emotional pleasure in him. Having come to him first when he was aglow with his own unexpected romance, his mind and heart full of the woman he had just left, that delicious, torturing state revived in him quite naturally. The evocative power of perfume with regard to memory is compelling. A livelier sympathy toward his friend, and toward what he was about to hear, awoke in him spontaneously.

He did not mention the letter, however. He merely leaned over to smell the fragrant perfume more easily.

Farque drew back the open packet instantly, at the same time holding out a warning hand. ‘Careful,’ he said gravely, ‘be careful, my old friend—unless you desire to share the rapture and the risk that have been mine. To enjoy its full effect, true, this dust must be burned in a brazier and its smoke inhaled; but even sniffed, as you now would sniff it, and you are in danger—’

‘Of what?’ asked Francis, impressed by the other’s extraordinary intensity of voice and manner.

‘Of Heaven; but, possibly, of Heaven before your time.’

IV

The tale that Farque unfolded then had certainly a strange celestial flavour, a glory not of this dull world; and as his friend listened, his interest deepened with every minute, while his bewilderment increased. He watched closely, expert that he was, for clues that might guide his deductions aright, but for all his keen observation and experience he could detect no inconsistency, no weakness, nothing that betrayed the smallest mental aberration. The origin and nature of what he already decided was an *idée fixe*, a mania, evaded him entirely. This evasion piqued and vexed him; he had heard a thousand tales of similar type before; that this one in particular should baffle his unusual skill touched his pride. Yet he faced the position honestly; he confessed himself baffled until the end of the evening. When he went away, however, he went away satisfied, even forgetful—because a new problem of yet more poignant interest had replaced the first.

‘It was after three years out there,’ said Farque, ‘that a sense of my loneliness first came upon me. It came upon me bitterly. My work had not then been recognised; obstacles and difficulties had increased; I felt a failure; I had accomplished nothing. And it seemed to me I had misjudged my capacities, taken a wrong direction, and wasted my life accordingly. For my move to China, remember, was a radical move, and my boats were burnt behind me. This sense of loneliness was really devastating.’

Francis, already fidgeting, put up his hand.

‘One question, if I may,’ he said, ‘and I’ll not interrupt again.’

‘By all means,’ said the other patiently. ‘What is it?’

‘Were you—we are such old friend’s—he apologised—‘were you still celibate as ever?’

Farque looked surprised, then smiled. ‘My habits had not changed,’ he replied. ‘I was, as always, celibate.’

‘Ah!’ murmured the doctor, and settled down to listen.

‘And I think now,’ his friend went on, ‘that it was the lack of companionship that first turned my thoughts toward conscious disappointment. However that may be, it was one evening, as I walked homeward to my little house, that I caught my imagination lingering upon English memories, though chiefly, I admit, upon my old Chinese tutor, the dead Shan-Yu.’

‘It was dusk, the stars were coming out in the pale evening air, and the orchards, as I passed them, stood like wavering ghosts of unbelievable beauty. The effect of thousands upon thousands of these trees, flooding the twilight of a spring evening with their sea of blossom, is almost unearthly. They seem transparencies, their colour hangs sheets upon the very sky. I crossed a small wooden bridge that joined two of these orchards above a stream, and in the dark water I watched a moment the mingled reflection of stars and flowering branches on the quiet surface. It seemed too exquisite to belong to earth, this fairy garden of stars and blossoms, shining faintly in the crystal depths, and my thought, as I gazed, dived suddenly down the little avenue that memory opened into former days. I remembered Shan-Yu’s present, given to me when he died. His very words came back to me: The Garden of Happiness in the Valley of the Thousand Temples, with its promise of love, of seven years of happiness, and the prophecy that I should follow his body toward the Sunrise and meet my destiny.’

‘This memory I took home with me into my lonely little one-story house upon the hill. My servants did not sleep there. There was no one near. I sat by the open window with my thoughts,

and you may easily guess that before very long I had unearthed the long-forgotten packet from among my things, spread a portion of its contents on a metal tray above a lighted brazier, and was comfortably seated before it, inhaling the light blue smoke with its exquisite and fragrant perfume.

‘A light air entered through the window, the distant orchards below me trembled, rose, and floated through the dusk, and I found myself, almost at once, in a pavilion of flowers; a blue river lay shining in the sun before me, as it wandered through a lovely valley where I saw groves of flowering trees among a thousand scattered temples. Drenched in light and colour, the Valley lay dreaming amid a peaceful loveliness that woke what seemed impossible, unrealisable, longings in my heart. I yearned toward its groves and temples; I would bathe my soul in that flood of tender light and my body in the blue coolness of that winding river. In a thousand temples must I worship. Yet these impossible yearnings instantly were satisfied. I found myself there at once... and the time that passed over my head you may reckon in centuries, if not in ages. I was in the Garden of Happiness, and its marvellous perfume banished time and sorrow; there was no end to chill the soul, nor any beginning, which is its foolish counterpart.

‘Nor was there loneliness.’ The speaker clasped his thin hands, and closed his eyes a moment in what was evidently an ecstasy of the sweetest memory man may ever know. A slight trembling ran through his frame, communicating itself to his friend upon the divan beside him—this understanding, listening, sympathetic friend, whose eyes had never once yet withdrawn their attentive gaze from the narrator’s face.

‘I was not alone,’ the scholar resumed, opening his eyes again, and smiling out of some deep inner joy. ‘Shan-Yu came down the steps of the first temple and took my hand, while the great golden figures in the dim interior turned their splendid shining heads to watch. Then, breathing the soul of his ancient wisdom in my ear, he led me through all the perfumed ways of that enchanted Garden, worshipping with me at a hundred deathless shrines; led me, I tell you, to the sound of soft gongs and gentle bells, by fragrant groves and sparkling streams, mid a million gorgeous flowers, until beneath that unsetting sun, we reached the heart of the Valley, where the source of the river gushed forth beneath the lighted mountains. He stopped and pointed across the narrow waters. I saw the woman—’

‘*The woman,*’ his listener murmured beneath his breath, though Farque seemed unaware of interruption.

‘She smiled at me and held her hands out, and while she did so, even before I could express my joy and wonder in response, Shan-Yu, I saw, had crossed the narrow stream and stood beside her. I made to follow them, my heart burning with inexpressible delight. But Shan-Yu held up his hand, as they began to move down the flowered bank together, making a sign that I should keep pace with them, though on my own side.

‘Thus, side by side, yet with the blue, sparkling stream between us, we followed back along its winding course, through the heart of that enchanted Valley, my hands stretched out toward the radiant figure of my Love, and hers stretched out toward me. They did not touch, but our eyes, our smiles, our thoughts, these met and mingled in a sweet union of unimagined bliss, so that the absence of physical contact was unnoticed and laid no injury on our marvellous joy. It was a spirit union, and our kiss a spirit kiss. Therein lay the subtlety and glory of the Chinese wonder, for it was our *essences* that met, and for such union there is no satiety and, equally, no possible end. The Perfume of the Garden of Happiness is an essence. We were in Eternity.

‘The stream, meanwhile, widened between us, and as it widened, my Love grew farther from me in space, smaller, less visibly defined, yet ever essentially more perfect, and never once with

a sense of distance that made our union less divinely close. Across the widening reaches of blue, sunlit water I still knew her smile, her eyes, the gestures of her radiant being; I saw her exquisite reflection in the stream; and, mid the music of those soft gongs and gentle bells, the voice of Shan-Yu came like a melody to my ears:

“You have followed me into the Sunrise, and have found your Destiny. Behold now your Love. In this Valley of a Thousand Temples you have known the Garden of Happiness, and its Perfume your soul now inhales.”

“I am bathed,” I answered, “in a happiness divine. It is for ever.”

“The Waters of Separation,” his answer floated like a bell, “lie widening between you.”

‘I moved nearer to the bank, impelled by the pain in his words to take my Love and hold her to my breast.

“But I would cross to her,” I cried, and saw that, as I moved, Shan-Yu and my Love came likewise closer to the water’s edge across the widening river. They both obeyed, I was aware, my slightest wish.

“Seven years of happiness you may know,” sang his gentle tones across the brimming flood, “if you would cross to her. Yet the Destroyer of Honourable Homes lies in the shadows that you must cast outside.”

‘I heard his words, I noticed for the first time that in the blaze of this radiant sunshine we cast no shadows on the sea of flowers at our feet, and—I stretched out my arms toward my Love across the river.

“I accept my destiny,” I cried, “I will have my seven years of bliss,” and stepped forward into the running flood. As the cool water took my feet, my Love’s hands stretched out both to hold me and to bid me stay. There was acceptance in her gesture, but there was warning too.

‘I did not falter. I advanced until the water bathed my knees, and my Love, too, came to meet me, the stream already to her waist, while our arms stretched forth above the running flood toward each other.

‘The change came suddenly. Shan-Yu first faded behind her advancing figure into air; there stole a chill upon the sunlight; a cool mist rose from the water, hiding the Garden and the hills beyond; our fingers touched, I gazed into her eyes, our lips lay level with the water—and the room was dark and cold about me. The brazier stood extinguished at my side. The dust had burnt out, and no smoke rose. I slowly left my chair and closed the window, for the air was chill.’

It was difficult at first to return to Hampstead and the details of ordinary life about him. Francis looked round him slowly, freeing himself gradually from the spell his friend's words had laid even upon his analytical temperament. The transition was helped, however, by the details that everywhere met his eye. The Chinese atmosphere remained. More, its effect had gained, if anything. The embroideries of yellow gold, the pictures, the lacquered stools and inlaid cabinets—above all, the exquisite figures in green jade upon the shelf beside him—all this, in the shimmering pale olive light the lamps shed everywhere, helped his puzzled mind to bridge the gulf from the Garden of Happiness into the decorated villa upon Hampstead Heath.

There was silence between the two men for several minutes. Far was it from the doctor's desire to injure his old friend's delightful fantasy. For he called it fantasy, although something in him doubted. He remained, therefore, silent. Truth to tell, perhaps, he knew not exactly what to say.

Farque broke the silence himself. He had not moved since the story ended; he sat motionless, his hands tightly clasped, his eyes alight with the memory of his strange imagined joy, his face rapt and almost luminous, as though he still wandered through the groves of the enchanted Garden and inhaled the perfume of its perfect happiness in the Valley of the Thousand Temples.

'It was two days later,' he went on suddenly in his quiet voice, 'only two days afterwards, that I met her.'

'You met her? You met the woman of your dream?' Francis's eyes opened very wide.

'In that little harbour town,' repeated Farque calmly, 'I met her in the flesh. She had just landed in a steamer from up the coast. The details are of no particular interest. She knew me, of course, at once. And, naturally, I knew her.'

The doctor's tongue refused to act as he heard. It dawned upon him suddenly that his friend was married. He remembered the woman's touch about the house; he recalled, too, for the first time that the letter of invitation to dinner had said 'come to *us*'. He was full of a bewildered astonishment.

The reaction upon himself was odd, perhaps, yet wholly natural. His heart warmed toward his imaginative friend. He could now tell him his own new strange romance. The woman who haunted him crept back into the room and sat between them. He found his tongue.

'You married her, Edward?' he exclaimed.

'She is my wife,' was the reply, in a gentle, happy voice.

'A Ch—' he could not bring himself to say the word. 'A foreigner?'

'My wife is a Chinese woman,' Farque helped him easily, with a delighted smile.

So great was the other's absorption in the actual moment that he had not heard the step in the passage that his host had heard. The latter stood up suddenly.

'I hear her now,' he said. 'I'm glad she's come back before you left.' He stepped toward the door.

But before he reached it, the door was opened and in came the woman herself. Francis tried to rise, but something had happened to him. His heart missed a beat. Something, it seemed, broke in him. He faced a tall, graceful young Englishwoman with black eyes of sparkling happiness, the woman of his own romance. She still wore the feather boa round her neck. She was no more Chinese than he was.

‘My wife,’ he heard Farque introducing them, as he struggled to his feet, searching feverishly for words of congratulation, normal, everyday words he ought to use. ‘I’m so pleased, oh, so pleased,’ Farque was saying—he heard the sound from a distance, his sight was blurred as well—‘my two best friends in the world, my English comrade and my Chinese wife.’ His voice was absolutely sincere with conviction and belief.

‘But we have already met,’ came the woman’s delightful voice, her eyes full upon his face with smiling pleasure. ‘I saw you at Mrs. Malleson’s tea only this afternoon.’

And Francis remembered suddenly that the Mallesons were old acquaintances of Farque’s as well as of himself. ‘And I even dared to ask who you were,’ the voice went on, floating from some other space, it seemed, to his ears. ‘I had you pointed out to me. I had heard of you from Edward, of course. But you vanished before I could be introduced.’

The doctor mumbled something or other polite and, he hoped, adequate. But the truth had flashed upon him with remorseless suddenness. She had ‘heard of’ him—the famous mental specialist. Her interest in him was cruelly explained, cruelly both for himself and for his friend. Farque’s delusion lay clear before his eyes. An awakening to reality might involve dislocation of the mind. *She*, too moreover, knew the truth. She was involved as well. And her interest in himself was—consultation.

‘Seven years we’ve been married, just seven years to-day,’ Farque was saying thoughtfully, as he looked at them. ‘Curious, rather, isn’t it?’

‘Very,’ said Francis, turning his regard from the black eyes to the grey.

Thus it was that Owen Francis left the house a little later with a mind in a measure satisfied, yet in a measure forgetful too—forgetful of his own deep problem, because another of even greater interest had replaced it.

‘Why undeceive him?’ ran his thought. ‘He need never know. It’s harmless, anyhow—I can tell her that.’

But side by side with this reflection ran another that was oddly haunting, considering his type of mind: ‘Destroyer of Honourable Homes,’ was the form of words it took. And with a sigh he added, ‘Chinese Magic.’